

Performing Masculinities: The Impact of Racialization, Space, and Cultural Practices on  
Hmong Immigrant Youth

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## **Dedication**

To Michael Baynes (1957–2012), a man who listened to and believed the stories of the countless young men he mentored, advised, and taught. And to my son, Gabriel, the boy who stole MB's heart.

## **Abstract**

Although several research studies have been conducted on second generation Hmong youth and families, little is known about the latest wave of Hmong immigrants, the Wat Tham Krabok (WTK) Hmong, who arrived in the U.S. between 2004–2006. In addition, literature on the Hmong still relies heavily on model minority tropes steeped in meritocracy narratives. This research examines the experiences of WTK Hmong youth who live in predominately African American urban neighborhoods and are bussed to predominately white suburban schools. Three years of ethnographic fieldwork in multiple sites was conducted between 2009-2011 and 2012-2013.

The research examines ways that WTK Hmong males, in particular, have been racialized in spaces of institutions which has significantly impacted their relationships with families, attitudes about schooling, and perceptions about their futures. Although youth have experienced vast amounts of parent-child conflict, these experiences are not simplified as intergenerational familial conflict; rather, a complex, dynamic, and critical representation of youths' lives is illuminated through their insights and perspectives told from their point of view. In addition, youths' experiences are analyzed within larger structural structures and processes.

Emphasis is given to the everyday violence that Hmong males have experienced in schools. The research problematizes the ways school officials use no tolerance “race neutral” policies which allow violence and misunderstandings to fester between Hmong youth and their African American peers. A significant finding in the research is that WTK Hmong male youth are ignored, unprotected, and experience intensive social

isolation in schools and in many cases, their families. In response, youth resist by creating protective spaces which involve alternative masculinities and built-in peer support networks through cultural practices.

The analysis extends conventional scholarship of masculinities by exploring how racialized masculinities are a site for discipline and disempowerment of WTK Hmong youth while providing spaces for provisionally empowering forms of agency and resistance through cultural practices. Youth must have access to cultural practices through out-of-school programs as they have the potential to create social capital that connect them to academic success and social integration, offering them opportunities to engage with their families and schools in meaningful ways.



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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

*“Before the kite plunges down into the wood  
and this line goes useless  
take in your two hands, boys, and feel  
the strumming, rooted, long-tailed pull of grief.  
You were born fit for it  
Stand in here in front of me  
and take the strain.”*

-Seamus Heaney (1984), *A Kite for Michael and Christopher*

I recall the first time I heard about Kue Lee<sup>1</sup>. His life story, which according to a local journalist, had *begun* in the U.S. when he arrived with his family in 2004 from a refugee camp in Thailand, had been written about in a local newspaper. A hand drawn photograph of an Asian teenager, supposedly Kue, wrapped in a U.S. flag, took up the entire front cover of the newspaper. The news story began and ended with Kue who had overcome great odds to win a full scholarship to an elite, K-12 prep school. Kent, which costs over \$25,000 annually in tuition and fees, had never admitted a Hmong student before Kue, the teenaged boy wrapped in a U.S. flag, with a stoic look on his face.

What was striking about this story then, as it still is now, is that his younger brother, Kong, had not been as fortunate to attend Kent, but was the first Hmong student accepted to a predominately white suburban junior high (SJH) through a school choice program. The only plausible reason the news reporter gave for this was that Kong, unlike his older brother, was “painfully shy” and not as academically sophisticated. According

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<sup>1</sup> All first names and surnames of individuals and families are pseudonyms unless noted. Similarly, all names of places and institutions in the U.S. are pseudonyms. I have changed some details to protect the anonymity of participants.

to the reporter, Kong still felt fortunate to be able to attend SJH because even though it wasn't Kent, it was a good school where he was finally learning English.

The reporter described Mark, a neighborhood organizer who had helped Kong and Kue through the admissions processes of both schools, as a father figure who eventually assisted several more Wat Tham Krabok (WTK)<sup>2</sup> Hmong families through the extensive application process for admission to SJH through the school choice program. However, the reporter emphasized at the end of the article how special Kue was because after all, how many Hmong students are there who have attended Kent alongside the children of high profile politicians and executives of Fortune 500 corporations? The answer of course, is none. What I took away from this article is that although Kong's story is compelling, it is not awe-inspiring in the same way that Kue's story is. In other words, Kong is a model minority, but not an exceptional one.

### **May 27, 2010: An Introduction to the Lee Family**

My request for an interview with Kong and Kue Lee's parents was granted and I sat in their home on a warm, spring day on a black leather sofa next to their mother, Houa. Sitting across from us on a matching black leather chair was Teng, a Hmong American<sup>3</sup> neighborhood organizer, who offered to interpret. Without him, I would never have been invited into the Lee's home and without him, I could not communicate with

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<sup>2</sup> The Lee's are Wat Tham Krabok (WTK) Hmong, the latest wave of Hmong immigrants. Approximately 15,000 WTK Hmong were resettled in the U.S. between 2004–2006 from Thailand. WTK is the actual name of the Buddhist monastery grounds where they lived. They have distinct experiences that differ from Hmong Americans who arrived to the U.S. in earlier waves of migration. This will be explained in detail in Chapter two.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout the dissertation, I use "Hmong American" to refer to second generation Hmong American youth as this is how they routinely refer to themselves and how WTK Hmong youth refer to them.

Houa because I cannot speak Hmong. In other homes where interviews have been conducted, the father of the home usually did all or the majority of the talking, but Houa talked to me herself as her husband was at work. She was the only parent who requested that I not audio record our interview.

Houa was soft spoken and her home was meticulously clean and well-organized. Besides a Hmong altar off to the side in the living room, the freshly painted white walls were bare. It was vastly different than other homes I had been in where kids' artwork were taped in random places on living rooms walls or colorful post-it-notes were stuck to windows, walls, and wood molding. There was no TV blaring in the Lee's living room, nor any young children playing nearby. The environment in the home felt incredibly controlled. I learned that this was the Lee's second home since their arrival to the U.S. in 2004. Their first home had been deemed unlivable by the city when a fire raged through and forced the family into homelessness. When parents at Kent, the private school that Kue attended at the time, learned of the fire, not only did they help the family financially by renting an apartment that all seven of them lived in for four months, but they bought them brand new clothes, weekly groceries, helped them find a new house to rent, and donated all of the furniture as well as a brand new computer, printer, and TV for the home. In fact, the sofa that I sat on alongside Houa, had been donated by Kent parents.

Halfway through our interview, Houa's second born son, Kong, walked into the living room and sat on the floor across from his mother and me. He listened quietly with a thoughtful look on his face as his mother discussed SJH that his two younger siblings are bussed to daily. I had been hearing about this family, particularly the two eldest sons,

Kong and Kue, from Mark, the neighborhood organizer who requested that researchers from the local university study the phenomenon of success that newly arrived immigrant Hmong families have had at SJH.

Ever since I had met Mark, a middle aged white man and Teng's supervisor, he retold the story about a chance meeting with Kue, a Hmong Thai,<sup>4</sup> in the spring of 2005 at a drinking fountain at a community center in their neighborhood. Kue had wanted to practice his English with Mark which led to a conversation about how horrendous he and his bother Kong's experiences had been at their neighborhood public school since they had arrived to the U.S. in 2004. When Mark learned about the school choice option, he assisted the boys' parents in filling out the applications, but during this process believed that Kue was gifted academically and helped him write a personal statement to Kent.

At times, I asked Kong for his opinion directly and other times he offered it freely, moving easily in and out of what became more of a fluid conversation between Houa and myself instead of a formal interview. Houa appeared to have no problem with her son interjecting his opinion and I gathered this was because she freely expressed hers as well. There appeared to be warmth and closeness between Houa and Kong who would soon complete tenth grade at Suburban Senior High (SSH) in the same district as SJH. He said there were several more Hmong students from his neighborhood at SJH compared to when he was the first and only student to attend in 2007.

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<sup>4</sup> Mark referred to the WTK Hmong as 'Hmong Thai'.

Three years later, on a January evening in 2013, I visited the Lee home again to ask Houa and her husband, Thao, permission to interview their younger sons who are under the age of 18. When I arrived, one of their daughters was visiting with her husband, also from WTK, and their three young sons who were born in the U.S. They had just finished eating dinner and were preparing to leave for a long drive home. After she left, I took a seat on the same black sofa I sat on the last time I was in their house, next to Houa who immediately told me that I look Hmong. She looked at Thao who nodded his head in agreement. “She says that you remind her of her sister back in Laos.” Her son, Kong said, who had recently finished his first semester, of his first year, in college. He had volunteered to interpret for us when I apologized to the Lee family that my interpreter was unable to accompany me as planned. “She says you can come here anytime.” Kong told me. I looked at Thao who nodded his head in agreement again as the corners of his lips formed a half smile.

Houa, who did all of the talking, let me lead the conversation. I asked her for an update on her children and she told me that her oldest daughter, Mee, age 26, lives in Thailand with her husband and son; Kao, age 24, is the daughter who I had just met and lives with her husband and children; Kue, age 22, is the eldest son and a junior at a highly selective four-year liberal arts college far from home; Kong, age 20, is the second eldest son and a freshman at a public university where he lives on campus; Xue, age 18, is the youngest daughter and a senior at SSH; Chai, age 16, is the third eldest son and a sophomore at SSH; and Fong, age 14, is the youngest son and in the eighth grade at SJH. The three youngest children lived at home at the time with their parents and had their own bedrooms. Houa mentioned that she and Thao don’t really know how old they are.

This is common amongst many Hmong adults I have spoken to because birth records were often not kept in Laos where both of them were born and raised (see Appendix A for pseudonym matrix).

Less than a week after my visit to the Lee home, I happened to catch the local news and saw Houa, Thao, Chai, and Fong being interviewed by a local news reporter about the need to continue transportation funding for the school choice program. Thao was sitting in the same chair by the computer and Houa was sitting on the same black sofa. Chai and Fong were sitting at the kitchen table quietly doing their homework. The boys had obviously been interpreting for the reporter. Filtered through the lens of an “objective” reporter were Hmong parents who appeared to live in a nice, well-kept house, cared about their children enough to make sure they receive a top notch education, and were actively raising highly motivated sons.

The reporter painted a picture of grand meritocracy around the Lee parents who value education and came to the U.S. for a second chance at life for their children. Because of “Hmong family values” and a “good school” in the suburbs, the Lee children had the chance to bypass a life of poverty, crime, and gangs. In fact, the Lee family were no longer refugees who required the state’s support and sponsorship; they were *American immigrants*, filled with “liberty, boot straps, and pluck”, an entrepreneurial family who had traveled “across the world to make good and to secure a piece of our American dream” (Ogden, 2008, p. 10).



## **The Evolution of a Research Study**

Many scholars have identified a general pattern that is consistent with the national trend: Immigrant females tend to outperform immigrant males in schools (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Although there has yet to be a large-scale, empirical comparative study that concentrates specifically on gender differences in immigrant youths' educational achievement and attainment, several studies confirm the national trend that immigrant males lag behind immigrant females across racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. (Barajas & Pierce, 2001; Cammarota, 2004; Gibson, 1988; S. Lee, 2001; Lei, 2003; Lopez, 2003; Noguera, 2008; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Qin-Hilliard, 2003; Suarez-Orozco & Qin-Hilliard, 2004; Waters, 1996).

S. Lee (2001), was the first to conduct a qualitative study in a predominately white high school to understand the ways that teachers' perceptions, parental influences, and peer influences impact the ways that Hmong females are perceived and treated differently than Hmong males in schools as well as the ways in which these different perceptions and attitudes greatly influenced their educational trajectories. Vue (2012), conducted the first qualitative study that analyzed the ways that two cultural practices, import car racing and hip-hop, impacted Hmong American males' assimilation into U.S. society. Vue's (2012) study gave Hmong American male youth opportunities to express how and why their cultural practices, performed with peers, greatly influence all aspects of their lives.

As a former English as a second language educator who had observed immigrant males at the secondary and college levels struggling academically, and as a doctoral

student who has read literature on immigrant males' educational struggles, I initially set out to understand why Hmong male youth appeared to be struggling in and out of school. I wanted to conduct compelling and innovate qualitative research like Vue's (2012) who not only valued the insights and perceptions of his male youth participants, but got to participate in cultural practices with them. For example, Vue attended a weekly community-based, out-of-school workshop led by a Hmong American activist who empowers youth to work as agents of social change within the Hmong community while finding their social conscience through hip-hop. The archaic trope in the literature of impoverished refugees turned immigrant successes had been replaced by socially conscious Hmong American youths filled with agency and resistance. I wanted to conduct research similar to this.

When I first began interviewing WTK Hmong parents and talking to youth in 2010, the first assumption I made about them is that they would not be interesting. To begin with, these youth were not interested in hip-hop, import car racing, or anything else that Hmong American youth in S. Lee (2001) and Vue's (2012) studies were engaged in. In addition, since I had first met Mark in 2009, he used model minority narratives to describe them: small, short, adorable, non-English speaking, hard-working, Hmong Thai refugees who had escaped war and came to the U.S. for a better life. Mark spoke about them as victims who, unlike African Americans in their inner city neighborhoods, were actively pulling themselves up by their boot straps, but through no fault of their own, had been thrown into decaying and deserted neighborhood public schools. They deserved better and eventually, thanks to Mark's help, they received it.

When I discussed WTK youth with scholars from a variety of disciplines and universities, many encouraged me to conduct a comparative study with the more established Hmong American youth to document the ways that the two generations' cultural practices were similar and different, but ultimately to investigate how WTK youth compared themselves to Hmong American youth. Some suggested that WTK youths' cultural practices were a hybridity of the first and second generation. What I came to understand is that WTK youths' cultural practices, as well as their experiences in their neighborhoods and schools, are unique to the Hmong experience specifically because all of them had been born in Thailand and raised in WTK which had never been an official refugee camp.

Mark and Teng talked often about the Hmong boys'<sup>5</sup> soccer teams that they coach in the boys' neighborhoods. One of the reasons they started the teams was to give boys a safe space in their predominately African American neighborhoods where they felt comfortable sharing what was really happening to them at school, on busses, and in their neighborhoods. But even after the majority of the boys left their neighborhood schools for SJH or Hmong charter schools, the soccer teams continued. As I learned about Hmong parents' concerns, interviewed teachers at SJH, and lead focus groups with Hmong youth, it *appeared* that boys were struggling academically as well as socially. Given this information about soccer, and all that had been written prior in the literature about the impact of cultural practices on youth in general in and out of school, I realized that soccer was a cultural practice that I could use as a medium to have a better

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout the dissertation I use "boys" and "males" as well as "girls" and "females" interchangeably.

understanding of their family and school experiences as well as their identities that appeared to be produced through their gender performances via soccer.

Like many qualitative researchers who are open to what they encounter and learn in the field, I soon realized that there was far more to these simple, feel-good, immigrant success stories. The first generation Hmong youth in this research study are not only extraordinarily interesting, but aspects of their lives are as complex as they are contradictory and heartbreakingly unimaginable as they are innocent. A case in point: Kong and Kue Lee.

### **Research that Breaks my Heart**

Ruth Behar (1996) writes, “Anthropology that doesn’t break your heart just isn’t worth doing” (p. 177). I agree with this sentiment, but add that this kind of anthropology often has its costs. This is not the dissertation I sought to write nor the one I wanted to write. The level of violence and social isolation in both Kong and Kue’s lives has been profound and has become a major focus of this research. At a certain point, I wondered if I could write this dissertation. Was it responsible for a non-Hmong researcher to tell these boys’ stories? Was it irresponsible for me not to?

In 2013, I found myself in an African American church not far from where the boys and their families live listening to Thandeka Tutu-Gxashe, one of Reverend Desmond Tutu’s daughters. She relayed one of her father’s stories about a young South American woman who had been detained in prison and tortured for a crime she said she had not committed. When Reverend Tutu asked her what was the one thing she wished for while in prison, she said that it was simply to have someone listen to her story and

believe her. “Listening” to and “believing” people’s stories is what we can offer individuals who are brave enough to share their stories with us, Thandeka urged a crowd of captivated listeners. Upon hearing these words, I realized that Kong and Kue are at the heart of this dissertation. After all, this story began with Kue who walked up to Mark, a complete stranger, at a drinking fountain one warm spring day in 2005, and said “hello”.

### **Significance of the Research**

Too often in research with immigrant families, “intergenerational conflict” is used to describe *all* challenges between immigrant parents and their children, as if: 1) All conflict in the family began in the U.S.; and 2) Children are solely responsible for the conflict because they are assimilating into the American mainstream and no longer have respect for their parents or their culture. In general, social science research has relied heavily on information from parents to come to conclusions about youth. As Harris (2009) so astutely observes, our obsession with the influence of parents on their children, due in part to Freud’s theories of parental influence and our misguided belief that they hold all of the cards in children’s lives, has made us unable to recognize or acknowledge the influential role that peers and others have on youth. In addition, research indicates that in comparison to African American and Latino boys from low-income families, Asian American boys, also from low-income families, rarely share personal or confidential issues with their parents, explaining that open communication with their parents is not appropriate (Jeffries, 2004).

Rather than simplify the challenges between youth and their parents as one-dimensional intergenerational conflict, I wanted to try and make sense of Kong and Kue’s parents’ decisions based on larger structural systems they had been living in before they

arrived in the U.S. Listening to Kong and Kue's perspectives are invaluable because although they point to intensive amounts of parent-child conflict, they deviate from typical narratives that focus solely on the parents' point of view to explain the reasons for the conflict. Also, by having an understanding of the family dynamics in the Lee family prior to arriving in the U.S., we can begin to understand how complex the relationships between Kong, Kue, and their parents actually are.

As I share the stories of Kong, Kue, and other youth who I had opportunities to get to know while in the field, I carry Thandeka's words with me. Throughout this ethnography, I have attempted to illuminate broader social structures and processes that affect the everyday lives of Kong and Kue. Like Bettie's (2003) research on teenaged girls, I offer a complex, dynamic, and critical representation of these boys' lives from their perspectives, instead of their parents and other adults.

My analysis extends conventional scholarship of masculinities by exploring how racialized masculinities are a site for the discipline and disempowerment of Hmong males while simultaneously providing a potential space for provisionally empowering forms of agency and resistance. These racialized sites are found at SJH where teachers and staff use model minority narratives to discuss Hmong girls and an ideological "blackening" connected to the negative associations of the term "refugee" (Ong, 2003) to describe Hmong boys. Furthermore, I examine the ways that refugee exceptionalism (Tang, 2000) exempts the Hmong from African American underclass status giving them the title of "deserving poor", but argue that this exceptional status, tied intimately with the model minority myth, does not serve Hmong individuals or their families well.

What this ethnography is *not* is a celebratory, multicultural feel-good story that contributes to the overly-present effacement of Asian American youth in critical race studies that uses a pervasive white/black framework to analyze race. Nor does this ethnography add to an existing body of literature on Asian American immigrants told through meritocracy and model minority narratives. Although this research includes analysis of Kong, Kue, and other WTK Hmong boys as well as their female counterparts, it is by no means a definitive study about Hmong youth, Hmong culture, or Hmong families. I offer perspectives through my interpretations that I hope will offer new insights and dynamic ways to think about Hmong boys and their families' lives that began in Wat Tham Krabok and have *continued* in the United States.

### **Overview of Chapters**

A central aim of this research is to analyze the ways that WTK Hmong youth, particularly males, are racialized in the spaces of institutions which have had a major impact on their everyday lives both in WTK and in the U.S. Although the focus is on the lived experiences of WTK Hmong youth, Kong and Kue Lee in particular, I position their individual experiences into larger structural forces and processes throughout this dissertation. In the chapter that follows, I provide a review of relevant literature and theoretical frameworks that I utilize to examine major themes throughout this work. I also give detailed information about who the WTK Hmong are and historical information about WTK, a Buddhist monastery in Thailand.

In Chapter 3, I explore the methodological underpinnings of the study and explain my approach to ethnography. I introduce readers to participants and explain how I use

ethnography as both a theoretical tool and a method. I also explain the ways that community engaged research practices have been instrumental in the research design and data collection. In the first half of Chapter 4, I discuss the ways that teachers at a predominately white suburban school apply different racialized and gendered stereotypes to female and male Hmong students which greatly impacts perceptions of students' academic aspirations, achievement, and persistence. In the second half of the chapter, I detail the ways that Hmong males and females' vastly different experiences in WTK have shaped their relationships with families and their outlook on the future.

Chapter 5 takes place entirely in WTK where I focus on Kong's experiences with his family, friends, and schooling that continue to influence his life today. I analyze the decisions Kong and Kue's parents made in WTK that have changed their family dynamics in drastic ways and continue to impact the relationships that they have with their two sons. In Chapter 6, I interrogate the everyday violence that Hmong youth, particularly males, experience in unmonitored areas of the suburban school that they attend and the ways that school officials use race-neutral policies that allow the violence and misunderstandings to fester. I invite readers in Chapter 7 to consider different interpretations and narratives to reflect on a traumatic experience that Kong experienced in his neighborhood when he was almost beaten to death. Ultimately, however, I give him the final say in how he wishes to interpret this experience.

In Chapter 8, I explore the ways that social and cultural capital have impacted Hmong youth and their families in suburban schools. I examine the ways Kue has used different forms of social capital, in particular, to achieve success at the elite, prep school



he attended. The ways this success has created ongoing conflict between himself and his parents is also analyzed. In this chapter, I also argue that Hmong male and female youth resist and respond to racialization, racism, and violence by creating protective spaces which involve alternative masculinities and/or a built-in peer support network through the cultural practices of soccer and badminton.

And finally, in Chapter 9, I reflect on significant findings in the study and outline specific areas as a call to action to address the challenging issues that WTK Hmong youth face. I examine the ways that Hmong youths' cultural practices can be cultivated through organized activities in out-of-school programs that have the potential to create social capital that connect them to academic success and social integration, while at the same time, allows them to engage with their parents in meaningful ways.

## Chapter 2

### Contexts, Sites, and Racialized Space: Situating the Study

*“Southeast Asian refugees are among the most invisible groups in the North American consciousness.”*

-Aihwa Ong (2003), *Buddha is Hiding*

#### Missing Hmong Families

According to 2010 U.S. Census data, Asian Americans were the fastest growing racial group in the U.S. with a 46% growth rate between 2000–2010 (Asian Pacific American Legal Center and Asian American Justice Center, 2011). Even so, little research on Asian American families exists, has progressed at a slow rate, and knowledge about Asian American families is disproportionately small compared to scholarly research available on other minority families in the social sciences in general and family sciences in particular (Fang, McDowell, Goldfarb, MacDonald & Perumbilly, 2008).

The Hmong also saw a major increase in population growth at 40% between 2000–2010 (Asian Pacific American Legal Center and Asian American Justice Center, 2011), but studies on Hmong families remain virtually non-existent in peer reviewed journals in the family sciences. Herther’s (2009) findings show that none of the top peer reviewed journals in the Web of Science library database with Hmong articles published between 1975 through 2008 were included in family science journals. In Fang et al.’s (2008) comprehensive review of 5001 articles published in eight peer-reviewed family-based journals during 1992 – 2006, only 39 articles focused on Asian-American families. The majority of these studies used culture clash narratives and intergenerational conflict in the analysis; immigration status was often used as an indicator of an individual’s cultural

orientation (Fang et al. 2008). In studies using quantitative methodologies, Asian Americans were most often included under the category “other” (Fang et al. 2008).

Survey-based techniques, according to Way (2011), continue to dominate the method used by researchers who study adolescents and youth. In addition, surveys, which focus on assessing the frequency of an experience or event, are often used as the sole method by researchers who conduct studies with immigrant families in human development disciplines and areas of study (Marks & Abo-Zena, 2013). As Lopez (2003) argues, although surveys may produce representative samples of a population and give glimpses of participants’ lives, they lack experiential depth, force individuals to choose responses from categories pre-determined by the researcher, and do not produce data that analyzes “the texture, range, and meanings embedded in an individual’s life course” (p. 7).<sup>6</sup>

According to Marks & Abo-Zena (2013), this technique severely limits researchers’ ability to analyze complex and “dynamic person-environment interactions” as these interactions require focus not only on “capturing persons’ characteristics and developmental processes, but also to measuring the social and environmental characteristics interacting therein” (p. 285). In response to this, Marks and Abo-Zena recently edited a special issue in the journal, *Research in Human Development*, which

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<sup>6</sup> A note on writing style: Throughout the dissertation, I often use active, present tense form when discussing research that has been conducted in order to acknowledge scholars’ research as relevant today. Ethnographers such as Fabian (2002), recommend using present tense forms in order not to deny *coevalness*, a “persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse” (p. 31). According to Fabian (2002), a “denial of coevalness is a political act, not just a discursive fact” (p. 153-154).

includes four studies on immigrant families where scholars used qualitative and mixed methodologies not typically employed.

When the Hmong and other Asian American ethnic groups are included in family studies research, particularly quantitative studies, they are often lumped together in the generalizable racial category “Asian American” (Fang et al. 2008). This is troublesome as there are not only vast differences between the Hmong and other Asian American ethnic groups, but differences within the Hmong population itself. Scholars who have included heterogeneity in samples of Hmong individuals argue that there is great diversity within the Hmong population based on gender, age, length of residence in the U.S., socioeconomic status, educational attainment, English proficiency, and clan membership (Hein, 2000). Yet, in many research studies that currently exist on the Hmong, they are still portrayed as monolithic, culturally deficient refugees who have little to no variation in their histories, culture, or language. (DePouw, 2012).

Hmong individuals whose primary identity does not revolve around being Hmong, for example, or who have a complicated relationship with being Hmong, and/or a complex relationship with their parents that go beyond simplistic and one-sided intergenerational conflict and culture clash narratives are rarely analyzed in scholarly research. With the exception of S. Lee (2005) and Vue’s (2012) qualitative research studies with Hmong youth, few qualitative investigations exist that get beyond these simplistic narratives. Vue (2012) writes, “As a second generation Hmong male growing up in the United States, I never felt that I was fully Hmong, Asian, or American. Sure, both my parents are Hmong (which I guess makes my family members of the Asian

*race*), but relating to them and to our culture has been difficult for me for as long as I can remember” (p. 1).

Just as Hmong culture is dynamic and changing (Lee, 2005), Hmong families are also dynamic and changing as they are defined and redefined by each generation through their acculturation experiences (Mirayes, 1997). Given this, it seems that family science studies lends itself to research studies that employ a critical lens in understanding Hmong families and their changing social worlds. Fang et al. (2008) describe family science as a field that builds on “multidisciplinary knowledge with an emphasis on multilevel and reciprocal contextual influences on individuals, families, and communities. Therefore, research in this discipline provides a unique lens for contextual analysis of how forces such as immigration and acculturation affect gender roles, parent-child relationships, marital patterns, and other family dynamics” (p. 34). In addition, Marks and Zbo-Zena (2013) argue that growing the research base on immigrant families in several human development disciplines may best be conducted by “deeply listening to and watching the immigrant families themselves” (p. 287).

### **Diversity within the Hmong Diaspora: Wat Tham Krabok Hmong Families**

Between 2006–2007, I taught an undergraduate course with a service learning component at a community based organization that brings immigrant families, community members, and college students together to engage in learning and public work. At the time, my undergraduate students worked with youth who were recent immigrants from Somalia and Mexico, but I was surprised to learn that the majority of recent immigrants who participated in programming were Hmong and that they were junior high and high school youth struggling to learn English.

The first wave of Hmong refugees in the U.S. occurred in the late-1970s and additional larger waves, as well as secondary migration, continued throughout the 1980s and mid-1990s right up until the largest refugee camp in Thailand, Ban Vinai, officially closed in 1995 (C. Vang, 2010). By 2006, the majority of Hmong students I taught at the secondary and college levels were second generation and not in need of traditional ESL coursework. Like many non-Hmong individuals I continue to meet, I too was surprised to learn that a new wave of Hmong immigrants, approximately 15,000, had arrived in the U.S. between 2004–2006. Out of this 15,000, almost 5,000 resettled in the state where the families in my study live and 29% of these individuals moved into the neighborhoods where they currently reside (Grigoleit, 2006). Although the Wat Tham Krabok (WTK) Hmong are routinely referred to as “refugees” and WTK itself is often referred to as a former “refugee camp”, the actual history for these 15,000 WTK Hmong is unique in the Hmong diaspora.

According to Grigoleit (2006), who arrived in WTK at the time Hmong families were being processed as “refugees”, it is estimated that 35,000 to 40,000 Hmong individuals lived in WTK, a Buddhist monastery and drug rehabilitation center located in central Thailand. By 2003, the 93 acres that Hmong families lived on functioned like a small city with Hmong markets and cultural celebrations such as Hmong New Year. This small city had been steadily growing since the first two Hmong men arrived to WTK in 1997. Tong, a public relations monk that I interviewed at WTK in the summer of 2012,<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> One of my dissertation committee members as well as a doctoral student from another U.S. university were also present during this interview. Fluent in Thai, they interpreted for me and added their own questions and insights. Because of this, the interview was much more of a fluid and dynamic conversation amongst us. Tong also shared many archival photographs and documents, including many

confirmed this and added that at one point as many as 60,000 Hmong could have been living on the 93 acres Thai monks had given them on their monastery grounds (see Appendix B for photograph of Wat Tham Krabok). Tong was present the day the first two Hmong men appeared on their doorstep seeking shelter up until the time the very last Hmong family were processed as refugees and left for the U.S. and other countries around the world with large, well-established Hmong enclaves.

Many non-Hmong and even some Hmong American individuals I have spoken to, do not realize that Hmong adults who arrived in WTK in 1997, also came from Laos, and lost family members during the Secret War (Lor, 2009). Previously in 1975, when U.S. troops began leaving Laos, the U.S. broke their promise to the Hmong and only airlifted a few thousand of them to safety in Thailand, while the rest were left behind in dire predicaments as they had become targets of Lao communist regime (C. Vang, 2010). The majority of Hmong who reside in the U.S. today, including WTK Hmong, are those who escaped communist regime in Laos, made it to Thailand on foot, and found shelter in refugee camps located in Thailand<sup>8</sup>.

During their resettlement period in refugee camps throughout Thailand, many Hmong chose the U.S., Canada, France, and Australia, but just as many decided to stay behind and settled into various locations throughout Northern Thailand, or in the case of the WTK Hmong, came to reside in WTK under the patronage of the late female Abbott,

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pictures of WTK Hmong families' homes and the monks' interaction with families, especially early on during their resettlement.

<sup>8</sup> According to 2007 Census data, well over 3,168,000 Hmong reside in China—the largest Hmong enclave in the world. The majority of these Hmong did not experience the Secret War in Laos nor were refugees in Thailand (C. Vang, 2010).

Chamroom Parnchand (Lor, 2009). For the purpose of my research study, it is important to know that between 1997–2006, the majority of Hmong who lived in WTK (52%) were under the age of 14 (Grigoleit, 2006). Although their grandparents and parents had a “traditional” refugee experience, many of my participants were born in WTK and all of them were raised there.

In my conversations with WTK Hmong participants in my study, as well as conversations with individuals at WTK during my field site visit in 2012, I learned that WTK is spread out amongst 133 acres that are divided into three sections which include the drug rehabilitation residences (16 acres), monastery (24 acres), and former Hmong residences (93 acres).<sup>9</sup> When Hmong families resided in these 93 acres between 1997–2006, the majority of adults were refugees from Laos who had lived in at least one refugee camp in Thailand. Amongst these adults were men who had served alongside U.S. troops during the Secret War in Laos. In Thailand, WTK Hmong were considered noncitizens and illegal migrant workers and thus quality of life varied between family to family and not clan to clan; in addition, the majority of adults were uneducated and illiterate in both Hmong and Thai (Grigoleit, 2006).

The 93 acres of land were divided into four neighborhoods and were densely populated. The doctoral student from another U.S. university who made it possible for me to talk to monks at WTK, had conducted fieldwork for a prolonged period of time at

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<sup>9</sup> Tong, as well as several participants in my study, said that Hmong families did not have to pay the monastery to live on the land, but were responsible for building and maintaining their homes. As I will discuss in a future chapter, the materials they used depended solely on their financial status. There was little uniformity amongst homes on the 93 acres. One of my participants said that before they left for the U.S., her father and male relatives disassembled their house and sold the materials for money to bring to the U.S.



WTK between 2012–2013. He explained that the creation of these neighborhoods had not been clan based, but seemed to have been decisive and political in terms of the ways that Hmong families chose the neighborhoods they lived in. Although it is not entirely clear how these neighborhoods were formed, it has been confirmed by several sources that the Abbott and the monks at WTK did not make any decisions for Hmong adults' living arrangements in the neighborhoods that they chose to raise their families in. The majority of monks gave Hmong families autonomy, did not manage their lives, nor attempted to convert them to Buddhism.<sup>10</sup>

According to Grigoleit (2006), life for WTK Hmong families drastically changed in 2003 when the Thai government sent in military, police, and government officials to WTK. Grigoleit (2006) and others I have talked to at WTK, discussed how this was in response to Thai citizens' concerns about the growing number of Hmong living in WTK who they perceived as taking away their jobs as well as unfounded rumors that drug smuggling was taking place within the 93 acres that also served as a meeting ground for resistance fighters and insurgents in Laos. The Thai military immediately fenced off the 93 acres with barbed-wire, cutting WTK Hmong families off from the monastery. A militarized zone with heavy surveillance by Thai soldiers and police quickly ensued. According to Tong, the Thai military put spies into schools that Hmong children attended

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<sup>10</sup> During my time at WTK, I learned that monks were designated to help Hmong families with specific tasks. For example, one monk helped build infrastructure on the 93 acres. The water towers that still exist today, for example, are a result of this development. If Hmong men were picked up and detained by Thai police while working outside of WTK as illegal migrants, another monk acted as the intermediary between Hmong individuals and Thai police, and brought Hmong men back to WTK.

to try and get information about parents' involvement in the insurgency against the Lao government.

The quality of life for Hmong families quickly deteriorated and a sense of hopelessness overcame many adults (Grigoleit, 2003). Because WTK had never been an "official refugee camp", Hmong families were provided no aide or other services like they'd had prior in refugee camps. In 2003, U.S. government officials and teams of medical doctors began arriving to assess WTK Hmong individuals' health to see if they were eligible for resettlement to the U.S., sponsored by the Family Reunification Program.<sup>11</sup> In my conversations with youth participants who were old enough to remember this time, they said that they had mixed feelings about leaving the only home they had ever known, but because of the deterioration in their families' quality of life, they were excited to join their families in the U.S. who had emigrated in earlier waves.

Unlike their grandparents, and to some extent their parents who were fluent in Hmong and Lao, the majority of youth were fluent in Hmong, but able to speak some Thai and could sing and play Thai music—thanks to Thai popular culture. However, the majority of youth had not received a quality education as Hmong in Thailand, nor a consistent one, and could not read or write in Hmong or Thai. Because of this, WTK Hmong school-aged youth faced major challenges when they arrived in the U.S. Service providers and school officials became overwhelmed quickly as they had not been

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<sup>11</sup>Although Hmong individuals were assessed by U.S. physicians as fairly healthy, I was told that there was a high instance of tuberculosis (TB) due to the daily burning of firewood (mainly for cooking) in homes that had little ventilation. Individuals were given medicine, but some never recovered as they built a resistance to the drug. If this were the case, the individual's name was taken off the list and was not eligible for refugee status. Some individual's stayed behind in Thailand and their families left for the U.S. and other countries, but in many cases, the entire family stayed behind in Thailand.

prepared to serve such a large influx of “refugees” with no prior education or literacy in any language (Grigoleit, 2006).

Unlike previous waves of Hmong migration and resettlement, government officials strategically resettled WTK Hmong in locations around the world with large Hmong enclaves. In a U.S. city with a large, well-established Hmong population, the public school system had intensely prepared for WTK Hmong students’ arrival. This included creating new ELL programs to address newcomers’ specific language and academic needs, hiring additional teachers and staff, and putting family support systems in place. In contrast, the public schools that WTK Hmong youth participants in my study first attended, had done little to prepare for their arrival.

From the perspective of Mark and Teng, this particular urban district purposefully “dumped” WTK Hmong youth into deserted, low-performing schools, in high poverty neighborhoods as one last attempt to keep their doors open for business. Due to reported acts of physical violence towards WTK Hmong students by African American peers as well as stagnant academic progress in English, WTK Hmong parents, with the assistance and guidance of Mark, began sending their children to Hmong charter schools as well as to predominately white suburban schools through a school choice program beginning in 2005 (Demko, 2007).

### **The Achievement Gap and School Choice**

Informal and formal conversations about the achievement gap (i.e. disparities in standardized test scores and academic performance between whites and other racial and ethnic minorities), in U.S. schools is currently one of the most widely discussed issues amongst politicians, government and nonprofit organizations, philanthropic foundations,

educators, scholars, and parents of school-aged children. In many of these conversations, I have observed that the achievement gap is often discussed as if it is solely a product of low-performing schools in high poverty neighborhoods. Because of this, teachers, school administrators, students, and their parents are often blamed for the achievement gap. Often missing in these conversations is the fact that achievement gaps are connected to, and deeply embedded in, larger systems where low-performing *and* high-performing schools exist.

Ladson-Billings (2006) argues that instead of focusing solely on the achievement gap, we must turn our attention to what she calls an “education debt” that has accumulated over extended periods of time in the U.S. This debt, much like generational financial debt, is comprised of “historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral components” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 3). Focusing solely on the achievement gap in schools allows us to continue to ignore the fact that these gaps are a part of a larger system with several components.

The state that WTK Hmong families in my study live in has one of the highest achievement gaps in the U.S., however, this mirrors other disparities in a state with some of the highest racial and economic disparities in the U.S. As Kolnick (2013) argues, the achievement gap simply cannot be addressed or resolved by isolating it from the state’s larger institutional struggles. “Depending on how you count the data,” Kolnick (2013) argues, “we may be the most racist state in the union” (p. 3).

Although achievement gap discussions and analysis may seem like a new phenomenon to some, they have existed for decades, and there have been many theories

throughout the decades as to why it exists. For example, the 1966 Coleman Report, “Equality of Educational Opportunity” (Coleman et al., 1966), argues that students should be placed into racially integrated schools as the primary way to close the achievement gap. Ladson-Billings (2006), who has analyzed the report, says:

They argued that, more than material resources alone, a combination of factors was heavily correlated with academic achievement. Their work indicated that the composition of a school (who attends it), the students' sense of control of the environments and their futures, the teachers' verbal skills, and their students' family background all contribute to student achievement. Unfortunately, it was the last factor—family background—that became the primary point of interest for many school and social policies. (p. 4)

Putting sole responsibility on the family as a unit was deeply connected to cultural deficit theories that became the new theoretical lens in the 1960s to explain why non-white students were victims of their families' cultures which hindered their ability to succeed academically (Deutsch, 1963; Lewis, 1966). During the same year that the Coleman Report was released, Lewis (1966) published his infamous “Culture of Poverty” thesis which, through his analysis of Latino families' poverty, hypothesized that families in poverty perpetuate components of their cultures, which is how poverty is reproduced in each generation. “Family values”, Bettie (2003) argues, is a reincarnation of The Culture of Poverty thesis, interpreted as “the need to change the values of the poor, rather than to change the social organization that causes poverty” (p. 119). Many decades later, the Culture of Poverty thesis is still used to rationalize why low-income and/or children of color are positioned at the low end of the achievement gap.

**School choice and racial integration.** Although my study is not a school integration study per se, I am providing relevant information about the school choice program that WTK Hmong families have actively been a part of since 2007. Sixty years

ago in 1954, the Supreme Court ruled, in the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, that desegregated schools would lead to increased educational achievement for African American students. Since then, many studies have examined school desegregation as well as school integration efforts, particularly focused on the educational outcomes for African American students and in some cases, Latino students.

The school choice program that many WTK Hmong families have elected into is the result of a 2000 settlement when their city's NAACP sued the state alleging that African American students were being denied an adequate education in the state's largest urban public district (Kraus, 2008). Through this targeted racial and socioeconomic integration program, any student, regardless of race or ethnicity, can apply to enroll in nine suburban school districts that include the district that SJH is located in.<sup>12</sup> The only two criteria are that the student qualifies for free and reduced lunch and can prove that s/he lives in a specific area of the city with some of the highest poverty rates in the state. Each time a student attends one of these suburban schools, the urban district loses money, as that money follows the student to the suburban district.

The application process for this program has been described by Mark and Teng as complicated for newly arrived immigrants as the written application itself is long and the process is bureaucratic. It is not possible that any WTK Hmong families would have been able to fill out the application on their own, especially early on in their resettlement. Kong Lee's success at SJH during the 2007–2008 school year spread quickly throughout

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<sup>12</sup> Many public schools use “free and reduced lunch” percentages to explain diversity amongst their student populations.

the WTK Hmong community who lives in this area of the city. According to Mark, by the 2008–2009 school year, a total of 46 WTK Hmong students' applications were accepted to attend SJH and other schools in the district that year.<sup>13</sup> All WTK Hmong students who attend SJH are bussed to the predominately white suburb that the school is located in along with African American students from their neighborhoods who also attend SJH through the school choice program. In total, these students are on densely populated school busses for over two-hours each school day.

The suburb that SJH is located in has been historically white as well as middle to upper class. Interviews with teachers and staff at SJH indicate that the school has become increasingly diverse racially and socioeconomically within the last five years and is reflected somewhat in general population data between 2008–2012. For example, data from the 2010 U.S. Census and the 2012 U.S. Census American Community Survey show that the median household income of families who live in the suburb where the school is located was \$78,391 compared to \$38,355 in the neighborhoods where my participants live. In addition, the median home price was \$296,400 compared to \$135,831.

During the time data was collected at SJH (2009–2011), 1,850 students in grades 7-9 were enrolled. When giving demographic information about race and socio-economic status, percentages were not available by school, but by the entire K-12 district which enrolled a total of 7,678 students. Students of color made up 30% of the total population

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<sup>13</sup> These numbers have steadily climbed each year, however, in 2012, due to incidents that occurred at SJH to Hmong students, parents began applying for enrollment (with Mark's help) to other school districts through the choice program.

and ELL students made up 6% of the total population. Students who qualified for free and reduced lunch made up 18% of the total population in the district. In contrast, 66% of the total population in the urban district where WTK Hmong students first attended schools, qualified for free and reduced lunch. However, 96% of students at the actual school WTK Hmong students attended prior to attending SJH, qualified for free and reduced lunch.

**“The black part of town.”** Many people who live in the city and its surrounding suburbs suddenly appear tongue tied when attempting to explain why they would never consider living in the area of the city that WTK Hmong youth in my study live in. This includes many liberals I have spoken to over the years who have never actually been to any of these neighborhoods before. According to 2010 U.S. Census Data, 43% of residents in this part of the city are African American, 30% are white, 13% are Asian, the majority of whom are Hmong, and 8% are Latino.

Although I do not consider this study to be an urban ethnography like scholars such as Anderson (1999) have produced through ground-breaking research on every day, inner-city life of African Americans in Philadelphia, it is important to understand that my participants live in what is considered by many in the state to be “the worst”, “most dangerous”, “blackest” and “poorest” area of the city in this particular metropolitan area. Throughout the chapters that follow, I attempt to describe the neighborhoods that WTK Hmong youth and their families live in “not primarily in terms of a locality, but as the field of *practices* and *relations* that are significant to the people involved in the study” (Tomforde, 2006, p. 46). This provides context when explaining the ways Hmong youth



are often perceived in predominately African American spaces where simplistic narratives are used to explain why they inevitably become delinquent and join gangs. As Cacho (2012) explains, the “inner city” is naturalized as:

an inherently violent space while representing refugees as out-of-place, hapless victims unfairly deposited in someone else’s space. In this narrative, Asian racial difference in black residential space is described as the reason why Southeast Asian youth experience violence and the reason why they become violent themselves. Partly a consequence of simplifying race and processes of racialization to a black/white binary, such research reveals that some policy-makers and analysts cannot envision criminality without referencing black racial difference. (Cacho, p. 77)

Throughout this dissertation, I do not name this city because I gave my word to Kue that I would do everything possible to protect his identity. His family, like all of the WTK Hmong families I met, chose to live in this area of the city because of the affordable housing, but many *stayed* so that their children could continue to attend suburban schools through the school choice program. They liked that they could afford to rent houses with a minimum of three bedrooms and two bathrooms, instead of living in large, government subsidized apartment complexes.

With that said, WTK Hmong parents expressed often how terrified they were of their neighborhoods—the reason why they did not let their children, particularly daughters, outside of their homes for anything but school. Teng described these neighborhoods as, “beautiful during the day, but at night, it's chaos.” In my observations conducting fieldwork in these neighborhoods, as well as visiting some of my father’s relatives at their homes in the same neighborhoods when I was younger, there are many well-kept homes and yards, tree-lined streets, and several well-maintained parks for children to play in. There are also several community centers for individuals of all ages. One of the public

high schools with a high Hmong American student population, offers advanced placement courses, an International Baccalaureate program, and many extracurricular and after-school activities.

However, other areas, particularly main streets that divide the residential neighborhoods, do not look well-maintained. There are no major grocery store chains or food co-ops like there are in other areas of the same city, but there are vast numbers of fast-food restaurants. When I conducted a focus group at a *McDonalds*, two police officers sat inside of the restaurant and one sat outside in his squad car, in the parking lot, on a summer evening around 5pm. The officers inside of the restaurant looked at me and the female participants in my focus group and then paid little attention to us the remainder of the evening. An hour after we had arrived, one of the officer's ran out of the men's restroom with his hand on his gun, sticking out of its holster, sprinted out the door past the booth where I was conducting the focus group, jumped into his police car, turned on the sirens, and sped out of the parking lot. Nobody in the restaurant, including the participants in the focus group, and several young black children eating dinner at a table nearby, paid any attention to him.

I had asked my research assistant, Lia, if she wanted a ride to the focus group, but she said that her father wanted to drop her off and pick her up. I knew this was not convenient for him as they live miles away from this area of the city, but she insisted. What I hadn't realized is that her dad had waited for her in a booth, near the front of the restaurant, by the cashiers. Not knowing it was her father, I had walked past him to grab more sodas for my participants and noticed him because he was the only non-black

person in the restaurant besides the police officers, my participants, Teng, Lia, and myself. When I mentioned this to Lia, she told me that the man was her father and he was nervous about her being in this neighborhood. I asked if she wanted me to talk to him about any of his concerns, but she said it was unnecessary.

### **Hmong Educational Debt and the Power of the Model Minority Myth**

Since the first wave of Hmong migration to the U.S. in the late 1970s, Hmong families' adjustment in the U.S. has been similar to other refugee populations who have experienced high levels of poverty *before* their arrival, were not formally educated, and whose children either had no prior or uninterrupted schooling due to war and relocation (C. Vang, 2010). In addition to the economic disparities that the Hmong experience (26% currently live below the poverty line—a rate that exceeds African Americans and Latinos), their educational achievement is the lowest among Asian American groups in the U.S. (Asian Pacific American Legal Center & Asian American Justice Center, 2011). Contrary to popular belief, the Hmong and other Southeast Asians in the U.S. comprise the largest per capita race or ethnic group receiving public assistance (P. Ong & Blumenberg, 1993). The Hmong are often, as Vue (2012) argues, “racialized like Asian Americans, but stratified like poor African-Americans” (p. 13).

According to the 2008–2010 U.S. Census American Community Survey, the median age of the Hmong population in the state where my participants live is 19.9 (versus age 37 in the total U.S. population) with 45.8% within the age range of 0-17. In addition, 63.6% of Hmong individuals in this state have earned a high school diploma

compared to 93.8% of whites. Less than 59% of school aged Hmong children are proficient in reading and only 40% in math.

**The bells and whistles of the model minority myth.** The data I have just discussed clearly shows that many Hmong families, the majority of whom migrated in earlier waves than WTK Hmong families, are struggling, particularly in their educational achievement. Even so, pervasive model minority narratives are regularly used to explain high levels of academic achievement and income levels in *all* Asian American families. This raises serious questions as to whether or not Hmong students' needs are being taken seriously by school officials.

Schools are spaces where the model minority myth often masks Asian American students' profound academic and social needs. Noguera (2008) describes a study in a Northern California high school where the perception of students and teachers was that Asians were the "smartest kids" but that the average grade point average for Asians at the school was only 1.8. In reality, many Asian students were struggling academically and socially, but because the model minority narrative is so powerful, "students and teachers at the school were more likely to regard the majority of Asian students as the exceptions, and the smaller numbers who were successful as the norm" (p. 11).

Legal scholar, Wu (2002), explains that the model minority myth was developed during the civil rights movement, shortly after federal laws were passed against racial discrimination. Six months after the Watts riots, *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* printed an article entitled, "Success Story, Japanese American Style." As Osajima (2000) argues, the intentional ways in which Asian Americans were publicized for their success

was a direct attack against African Americans who publicly fought for equality in the 1960s and was also used to question and critique the existence of institutional and structural racism. In other words, if Asian Americans could pull themselves up by their bootstraps, then African Americans could, too.

In fact, some of the most destructive components of the model minority myth, connected to American meritocracy and Lewis' Culture of Poverty thesis, are the statements it carries about African Americans' ability and motivation to pull themselves out of poverty and others forms of disparity while at the same time it allows individuals *and* institutions to deny that Asian Americans experience racial discrimination (Wu, 2002). As Park (2008) argues:

The model minority myth wholly endorses the American Dream of meritocracy and democracy with the notion that anyone regardless of race, class, or gender has an equal opportunity to work hard and consequently is justly rewarded for their labor through economic upward mobility. Intrinsic to this myth is the fact that a model minority is a minority nonetheless; racial minorities can only pull their bootstraps so far—tokens notwithstanding. (p. 135)

Not only does the model minority myth mask many dire needs amongst Asian Americans, it also masks the disparities amongst Asian American groups. As S. Lee (1996) argues, the model minority myth is used as a “hegemonic device” that gives permission to look past a troubling history of race relations in the U.S.; this is played out daily in schools across the U.S. particularly between Asian American and African Americans. In Lei's (2003) study on Southeast Asian males and S. Lee's (2005) study on Hmong males, both researchers discuss how model minority and “forever foreigner” (Tuan, 1988) representations are interconnected and put male youth in vulnerable racial

positions in schools where they are excluded from white peers and are in conflict with African American peers (Ng et al. 2007).

“Refugee exceptionalism” coined by Tang (2000), is vital in underscoring the ways that Southeast Asians such as the Hmong are often compared to African Americans in the spaces that they share. Like Lewis’ Culture of Poverty thesis, the model minority myth not only gets reproduced, but also reinforces a logic based on culture and cultural norms to rationalize why so many “hard-working” Hmong families who take “personal responsibility”, are able to, within one generation, pull themselves up by their boot straps and move out of the neighborhoods they were dropped into, when so many African Americans, part of America’s underclass, do not. Tang (2000) argues that despite statistical evidence that shows vast similarities between Southeast Asian poverty and poverty often used to describe the African American underclass, an “Asian culture of poverty thesis works to quickly remove Southeast Asians from this decidedly black underclass status. Such a move not only renders Southeast Asians as the deserving poor, but simultaneously posits a theory of exceptionalism in an effort to neatly explain refugee poverty” (p. 63).<sup>14</sup>

The forever foreigner (Tuan, 1988) representation is also a casualty of the model minority myth. When Asian Americans fail at living up to the unspoken requirements of the model minority myth, they are often viewed as so profoundly different from a culture

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<sup>14</sup> Tang (2000) argues that Ruben Rumbaut, in particular, published several studies on the adaptation of Southeast Asian refugees beginning in the 1980s where he argued that an “Asian underclass” was impossible. Tang notes that Rumbaut (and others) used components of the Culture of Poverty thesis to argue that Southeast Asian refugee youth, in particular, would enter gainful employment and avoid welfare dependency (like the African American underclass) based on their adaptation, kinship ties, density of networks, ability to assimilate, etc.

standpoint, that there is a belief that they cannot assimilate into the white, middle-class, mainstream (Ng et al. 2007). Fadiman's (1997) book is an example of this as it offered a white, U.S. journalist's, first-hand account of a newly arrived Hmong immigrant family's attempts to work within the Western medical system while continuing to use their own traditional healing practices to cure their terminally ill child. As many of the book's critics have pointed out, Fadiman used culturally deficient narratives that pathologized this family—a family who required several white, middle-class intermediaries to help them, as they were unable to help themselves.

**Everyday bullying and peer victimization in junior high spaces.** 54% of Asian American boys are bullied and harassed in U.S. schools—rates that exceed their white, African American, and Latino peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). In my study, I found extraordinarily high levels of bullying, harassment, and violence committed towards Hmong boys in unmonitored areas of their schools, busses, and neighborhoods, but because of the pervasiveness of the model minority myth, many of these boys' everyday experiences were over looked. In the rare instances when Hmong boys reported incidents to school officials or their parents, these incidents continued to be over looked and/or the racist nature of the incidents were watered down or considered harmless individual acts of teasing, based on individual misunderstandings.

Before my involvement in this study, I was not aware that there are higher levels of bullying, harassment, and peer victimization in junior highs in the U.S. compared to high schools. Several recent empirical studies including three in particular by Bettencourt and Farrell (2013), Elsaesser, Gorman-Smith, and Henry (2013), and Goldweber, Waasdorp and Bradshaw (2013) focus on the high prevalence of peer victimization and

bullying specifically in the junior high context in the U.S. Earlier research suggests that youth involvement in peer victimization and bullying as either a victim, perpetrator, or both peaks in junior high (Pellegrini, 2002). For example, Messerschmidt (1999) discovered boys' peak years of assaultive violence through gang involvement occurred between the ages of 12 and 15.

Social hierarchies created amongst youth are also most unstable during this transitional period in youths' lives which is why this age group in particular competes for higher-ranking positions by victimizing peers (Goldweber et al. 2013). It is important to note that in these and other studies on peer victimization and bullying in junior high and high school contexts, immigrant students are not included in the primary analysis; rather, studies focus almost entirely on white, middle-class participants.

For reasons that often involve researcher access as well as the maturity levels of participants, the majority of research studies conducted with youth in schools have been in high schools. In addition, the few studies that have been conducted on immigrant students have not been solely conducted in junior highs or in the U.S. context and indicate that immigrant students are not only differentially affected, but are most likely to feel unsafe at school (Peguero, 2008), targeted specifically based on their race and ethnic group (Verkuyten & Thjis, 2002). Little is still known about how students of color in general and immigrant students in particular, experience peer victimization and bullying at school and especially outside of school (Goldweber et al. 2013) amongst peers in their neighborhoods and in other non-school contexts.



## **The Significance of Gender in Educational Aspirations and Achievement**

Although much has been written about educational achievement amongst immigrant students, less is known about the significant role that gender plays not only in achievement, but also in educational aspirations. In Portes and Rumbaut's (2001) seminal study on the educational aspirations of over 5,000 immigrant youth, they found that Hmong youth had the lowest educational aspirations of any ethnic or racial group. This finding is significant as the Hmong currently have some of the lowest educational achievement outcomes of any ethnic or minority group in the U.S. and the lowest outcomes of any Asian ethnic group (Asian Pacific American Legal Center & Asian American Justice Center, 2011).

**Gender.** In seminal studies conducted on educational outcomes, Sewell and Hauser (1980) and Sewell and Shah (1967) argue that educational aspirations are the most significant variable with explicit effects on youths' educational achievement outcomes in connection to their family background (Teachman & Paasch, 1998). This and other early research conducted on educational aspirations was based on white male youth and later included white female and African American youth (Kao & Tienda, 1998). Nichols, Kotchick, McNamara & Haskins (2010) argue that ethnic and racial differences in educational aspirations must be given further attention as educational aspirations have been documented to predict educational outcomes.

As discussed in Chapter one, several studies confirm the national trend that male youth lag behind female youth across racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. (Gibson, 1988; S. Lee, 2005; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suarez-Orozco & Qin-Hilliard, 2004; Waters, 1996). Researchers have long focused on parental monitoring in immigrant families as a

way to explain why this phenomenon exists and many studies show that immigrant parents are less likely to monitor male children compared to female children (S. Lee, 2004; Lopez, 2002; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Z.B. Xiong & Huang, 2012; Z.B. Xiong, Rettig, & Tuicomepee, 2006; Zhou & Bankston, 2001).

Research on educational aspirations and achievement based on gender amongst immigrant youth has focused heavily on the impact that parental monitoring has on female youth which researchers argue leads to higher levels of educational aspirations and attainment for females (S. Lee, 2001; Lopez, 2002, Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Zhou & Bankston, 2001). In addition, Feliciano and Rumbaut (2005) discovered that immigrant females not only expect to succeed in school, but aspire to traditionally high-status, male-dominated professions.

S. Lee (2005) discovered that first and second generation Hmong female youth excelled in school compared to their Hmong male counterparts due to teachers' perceptions of them based on gender, but also due to intense parental monitoring at home. R. Lee, Jung, Siu, Tran & Bahrassa (2008) also discovered that Hmong parents monitor their daughters more closely than their sons which they argue often leads to less supervision and more leniency for Hmong male youth. Given these findings, little research exists that details the reasons why Hmong male youth have always had higher levels of educational achievement than Hmong female youth.

### **Educational achievement vs. educational persistence for Hmong youth.**

Educational achievement is of utmost importance to Hmong families. Unlike mainstream families in the U.S. where the educational achievement of a child is often seen as an individual endeavor, a Hmong child's educational achievement, particularly the

attainment of advanced degrees, can increase his/her entire family's reputation in the Hmong community in the form of high status and respect (P.N. Yang & Solheim, 2007). It is significant that the Hmong community, as well as many non-Hmong individuals who work with Hmong youth, share the widely-held belief that Hmong females have higher levels of educational attainment in secondary and higher education than Hmong males; however, Hmong females actually lag behind Hmong males in actual educational attainment (S. Lee, 2005; K. Yang & Pfeifer, 2004; H. Vang, 2004).

In fact, the infamous line spoken by a female Hmong character in the 2008 Hollywood produced film *Gran Torino*, "the girls go to school, the boys go to jail," is extraordinarily fabricated. Y.S. Xiong (2012) analyzed data on the educational achievement of Hmong youth by gender in the 1990, 2000, and 2010 U.S. Census reports and found that historically, there has been a wide gap between Hmong female and Hmong male's educational attainment, but that this gap has decreased with each decade.

For example, in the 1990 U.S. Census, Y.S. Xiong found that only 19 percent of Hmong females obtained a high school diploma or higher (Associate or Bachelors degree) compared to 44 percent of Hmong men who had done so. Twenty years later, Hmong females still lag behind Hmong males in educational attainment in the 2010 U.S. Census, but only by about six percentage points (63.5% compared to 69.8%). Y.S. Xiong predicts that because of the great strides Hmong females have made, that they will catch up to Hmong males in their educational attainment. It must be stressed that even though these data from the U.S. Census exist, there is still a *perception* that Hmong females are far more successful in their educational attainment compared to Hmong males. S. Lee (2005) notes:

Although the census data and the perceptions of the Hmong community may appear to be at odds, I would suggest otherwise. The census data reflects the fact that Hmong men are more likely to persist in school... Educational persistence, however, is not the same thing as high achievement, and it is possible that the Hmong community has observed women to be the highest achievers. (p. 100-101).

In the 2014 documentary film, *American Promise*, two middle-class, African American boys' lives are recorded from kindergarten through senior high at an elite, predominately white, prep school on New York City's Upper East Side. When asked about the differences in school experiences between African American boys compared to African American girls, an African American graduate of an all-boys prep school interviewed in the documentary says:

Some difference does exist. Boys and girls learn differently and have different social interactions. And they enjoy things in different ways, whether that's a biological or a socialization process. What is more important is the fact that both men and women struggle in the same ways—but I think it *looks* different. (Ohikuare, 2013, p. 5).

How these differences “look” amongst male and female Hmong youth, have not been explored in much depth. Archer & Yamashita (2003) discovered that using traditional academic strategies in school classrooms have had little impact on increasing immigrant males' identification or engagement with formal learning practices (especially compared to immigrant females) as they do not typically address males' strong attachments to non-school identities and relationships with peers. More research is needed to explore the non-school worlds of Hmong immigrant youth with peers in order to understand the impact these worlds have on their educational aspirations and achievement (Goto, 1997). Through an exploration of Hmong male youths' cultural practices, Vue (2012) argues that peer relationships connected to cultural practices are essential in furthering our understanding of Hmong male youths' aspirations in general.

## **Moving Beyond the American Dream: Social and Cultural Capital in Racialized Spaces**

As discussed in Chapter one, the local media has used model minority narratives connected to meritocracy to describe the Lee family as taking full advantage of what the American Dream has to offer through the pursuit of an outstanding education for their children. Like many immigrants who arrived before them, the Lee family is “proof” that no obstacle is too great as long as one is willing to work hard. According to McNamee and Miller (2014), these tenets of meritocracy are steeped into the American consciousness that emphasizes individual merit, rooted in the economic, religious, political, and cultural experiences of America as a nation of immigrants:

Most Americans believe that meritocracy is not only the way the system *should* work but the way it *does* work. Together, the tenets of the American Dream make up an ideology of inequality. Ideologies provide socially acceptable explanations for the kind and extent of inequality within society. Ideologies are ultimately based on persuasion as a form of social power. (p. 3)

Ideologies are powerful because they shape the way we perceive individuals’ successes and failures. The model minority myth and the American Dream are ideologies people use to explain successful immigrant families like the Lee’s whereas the forever foreigner and Culture of Poverty narratives are ideologies used to explain families who have failed at the American Dream. Ideologies are also dangerous because they facilitate “collective domination” in ways that make inequalities understandable and even acceptable to us (Lewis, 2004).

American schools are viewed by many as neutral sites of learning instead of spaces where an existing social hierarchy is reproduced (Giroux, 1983). In school spaces, ideologies of meritocracy, based on the belief that students succeed based on their own

individual merit, allow teachers and staff to rationalize why some students excel and others fail (Apple, 1990). Ideologies are extraordinarily pervasive because most of us are unaware of them in our daily lives; they work as “common sense” notions that we take for granted about the way things simply operate (Hall, 1990). Common sense notions are descriptive statements about the ways a society functions and make socially constructed ideas about people appear natural (Lewis, 2004). For example, Asian Americans excel at math and science, African Americans excel at basketball, and Hmong families value education, are all common sense notions.<sup>15</sup>

As I will discuss in the chapters that follow, a widely held belief by teachers at SJH is that Hmong families value education. However, none of the teachers said this about the African American families whose children are also bussed to SJH through the school choice program. DePouw (2006) argues that when family is named as the essential reason for Hmong students’ success, responsibility for this success is placed outside the realm of public policy, making it individualized and personal.

Steeped in meritocracy, the model minority myth, and the Culture of Poverty thesis, it makes “common sense” that just as families are the sole reason for Hmong students’ success, the families of less successful students, such as African Americans, are the cause of their failure. As DePouw (2006) explains, these ideologies about Hmong families can have disastrous consequences from a public policy standpoint when Hmong families are perceived as not needing financial or other types of intervention because they are able to fully nurture their children from the “natural wealth” of their culture. As I will

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<sup>15</sup> These ideologies are also based on racialized social structures which I will explain later.

discuss in chapters that follow, I also found that Hmong students' needs went unmet based on pervasive ideologies that teachers and school staff at SJH held about them.

**Why social and cultural capital matter.** Lareau's (2011) research investigated the ways that poor and working-class parents practiced, what she coined, "accomplishment of natural growth" while middle-class parents practiced "concerted cultivation" when raising their children. Although she noted that there are pros and cons to both practices, she argues that the concerted cultivation strategies used by middle-class parents are highly valued and rewarded by educators and other professionals. "Whereas middle-class children are often treated as a project to be developed," argues Lareau (2011), "working-class children are given boundaries for their behavior and then allowed to grow" (p. 67).

For example, Lareau (2011) explains that childrearing practices by working-class and poor parents who practice accomplishment of natural growth, allow their children to grow naturally. This often involves many hours of unstructured, free play with friends and cousins inside their homes and in their neighborhoods throughout the week. In these homes, children rarely question or challenge their parents and generally accept directives. Lareau (2011) gives several examples of "authoritative parenting" that she observed throughout her research with working-class and poor parents.

According to Lareau (2011), the childrearing practices by middle class parents who practice concerted cultivation look vastly different as these parents actively foster and assess their children's talents and skills. When children have leisure activities, they are orchestrated by their parents. Extended negotiations between parents and children are

a daily occurrence and children often contest the directives their parents give them.

Because of these differences in parenting based on social class, Lareau claims that outcomes for these children look very different. Working class and poor children, Lareau says, are raised with a developing sense of constraint, whereas middle-class children are raised with a developing sense of entitlement. Writes Lareau (2011):

Social group membership structures life opportunities. The chances of attaining key and widely sought goals—high scores on standardized tests such as the SAT, graduation from college, professional jobs, and sustained employment—are not equal for all the infants whose births are celebrated by their families. It turns out that the family into which we are born, an event over which we have no control, matters quite a lot. It matters in part because the system of institutions is selective, building on some cultural patterns more than on others. (p. 256)<sup>16</sup>

Lareau (2011) makes it clear that there are many positive factors about the accomplishment of natural growth as children are given much more freedom to have new experiences and to develop social competencies on their own. Like WTK Hmong girls in my study, Lareau argues that girls learn how to manage their own time and how to strategize. And like WTK Hmong boys, Lareau claims that boys learn how to defend themselves physically and are given more opportunities to play and hang out with their friends away from home. Although Lareau (2011) does not promote one style of parenting over another, she makes it clear that the different types of “cultural training” within families is given unequal value in most institutions, including schools, because of the “close compatibility between the standards of child reading in privileged homes and the (arbitrary) standards proposed by these institutions” (p. 362).

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<sup>16</sup> It is important to point out the significant contributions Bourdieu has made on the ways that cultural capital acquired and used by individuals affects their social positions—ones that are often not a result of personal attributes such as effort or hard work. Based on his concept of *habitus*, he has shown how individuals use various skills, social connections, educational opportunities, and other cultural resources which are privileged forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Lareau, 2011).



Lareau's (2011) research has made a major contribution in the ways that we view families based on the differences that social class makes in the child rearing practices of parents. Although families in her research were white and African American, she routinely argues that differences in social class took precedence in families' everyday lives. For example, Lareau analyzed a racist incident that an African American boy experienced in school by describing the way that his middle-class parents dealt with it through their middle class agency in making requests and demands to school officials. When discussing my research findings in future chapters, I interrogate the ways that racialized spaces impact the participants in my study because it allows me to show the ways that race, ethnicity *and* social class intersect in Hmong youths' everyday lives.

**Racialization.** In order to explain racialization, I begin with Omi and Winant's (1994) definition of race: "a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies" (p. 55). As Omi and Winant (1994) explain, this definition of race moves beyond an individual's phenotype and shows how "race" plays a fundamental role in "structuring and representing the social world." Omi and Winant (1994) view race as a component of social structure, one that has no fixed meaning, but is "constructed and transformed sociohistorically" (p. 71).

Omi and Winant's (1994) ideas about race inform their theoretical approach to racialization, which they describe as a "sociohistorical process by which racial categories are "created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (p. 55). Understanding the ways that racialization operates allows us to see how racial meanings get assigned to individuals in their everyday lives, particularly through institutional practices. For example, the

majority of participants in Lopez's (2003) study were Caribbean immigrants with what she calls, a "discernible African phenotype" that defined them in U.S. spaces as "black". Lopez argues that the *racialization* of her immigrant participants as "black" and in many cases "African American", has been an "enduring and unique stigmatized status, which did not simply evaporate across the generations" (p. 37).

Omi and Winant (1994) argue that racialization allows us to differentiate between race and racism—concepts that they believe should not be used interchangeably. Racism, according to Omi and Winant (1994):

creates or reproduce structures of domination based on essentialist categories of race. Such a definition recognizes the importance of locating racism within a fluid and contested history of racially based social structures and discourses. Thus there can be no timeless and absolute standard for what constitutes racism, for social structures change and discourses are subject to rearticulation. Our definition therefore focuses instead on the "work" essentialism does for domination, and the "need" domination displays to essentialize the subordinated. (p. 71)

A central component of this discussion is the fact that whiteness has been historically racialized as the unstated norm, a "natural state from which all "others" are racialized against" (Brandzel & Desai, 2013, p. 79). Whiteness is, "the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, Whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations" (Lipsitz, 1998, p. 1). "Whiteness," argues De Genova (2005):

can consequently never be extricated from its historicity as a social category that operates in categorical opposition to blackness. Thus, those racialized as neither white nor Black, to the extent that they come to be incorporated *within* the space between these two poles, are inevitably relegated to racial locations that become socially meaningful only with reference to both. (p. 187)

For example, as Brandzel & Desai (2013) astutely note, Asian Americans are "ostracized due to their supposed unassimilability and essentialized foreignness (as opposed to

whites and African Americans), while embraced in terms of their abilities to be civilized and educated (like-whites and, therefore, non-Black, as in the “model minority” construct” (p. 82). Ng et al. (2007) argues, Asian Americans have always been compared to whites and African Americans, rather than understood as racialized in their own distinct ways. For example, Vue (2012) argues that while Hmong American youth think of themselves as consumers and performers of hip-hop, they are stratified by larger cultural forces that attempt to fit them someplace in between blackness and whiteness. Brandzel and Desai (2013) argue, “rather than seeing Black and white as stable racial formations that are applied to Asian Americans, it may be productive to see how Black and white are constituted through Asian Americanness” (p. 81).

Racialization is vital to my analysis because it gives me opportunities to describe the ways that Hmong youth experience institutions in their own distinct ways. It allows me to as Brandzel & Desai (2013) strive in their approach, to demonstrate Asian American racial formations’ “fluidity and indeterminacy” by analyzing how these racial formations “continue to be inside–within the binary–and outside– transnational, alien, and unassimilated” (p. 82). It also allows me to move beyond assimilation frameworks, commonly used to analyze the trajectory of Hmong youth and other immigrants, which ultimately makes them personally responsible for their ability (or inability) to achieve the American Dream solely through assimilation. Thinking through the ways that Lopez (2003) structured her research study with Caribbean American youth using a race-gender framework, instead of asking a much more common research question: how are first generation Hmong immigrant youth assimilating into the American mainstream? I ask:

how, and in what ways, are these youth racialized in the institutions that are a part of their everyday lives?

“Culture clash”, commonly used in research studies to essentialize and simplify the experiences of Southeast Asian immigrants, notoriously avoids analysis of racialization as well as racism and blames Hmong individuals by implying that their culture is the cause of their incompetence (DePouw, 2012) while at the same time suggests that the maintenance of traditional Hmong culture can protect them (S. Lee, 2004). As Cacho (2012) observes, “when cultural difference is represented as an obstacle to rational action, Southeast Asians can only gain agency through assimilation, Americanization, and the unconditional acceptance of the U.S. “rule of law” (p. 88). In addition, when cultural difference is represented as an obstacle, blame is assigned to Hmong culture in general and Hmong families in particular. Therefore, the assimilation process for immigrants like the Hmong is a, “modernizing and progressive evolution, the teleology of which is presumably inevitable and inexorable” (De Genova, 2007, p. 80).

Although multiculturalism, taught often in schools, is perceived as fairly harmless and innocuous—in many cases a welcome addition to a school curriculum—it also leaves the inequalities that Hmong youth experience, unchallenged. As Lewis (2004) explains, traditional multiculturalism was developed to improve the school experiences of students of color by assimilating non-white students into the mainstream culture of schools or to increase the racial sensitivity of white students with the ultimate goal of helping all students get along. At SJH, teachers and staff did not use multicultural language to describe the changes they had attempted to make when Hmong and African American

students began arriving, but many used assimilationist language regularly to describe the academic success and failures of Hmong students.

**Racialized space.** In my research, I use “space” and “racialized space” as theoretical concepts. I build off of Sheehy and Leander's (2004) explanation of space as both a "product and process of socially dynamic relations" (p. 1). These spaces are found in Hmong youths' homes, neighborhoods, schools, and in the sites where they perform cultural practices. I also use Bourdieu's (1977) explanation to demonstrate that space is not only physical and/or material, but it possesses symbolic forms that are embodied. In this way, bodies regularly interact with one another, boundaries are drawn, and identities are created. As Certeau (1988) says, “space is a practiced place” (p. 117). In my analysis, I use Barajas and Ronnkvist's (2007) working definition of racialized space, where:

racial meanings that are perceived by social actors as "common sense" interpretations of racial meanings connect what race means in discursive practice and in the ways "social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized" (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 55 cited by Barajas & Ronnkvist, 2007, p. 1521).

Ultimately, Barajas and Ronnkvist (2007) argue that spaces are racialized and are about relationships and power: "If power provides a supportive, reflective relationship, then racialization is likely to serve as a mechanism of awareness rather than a mechanism for hiding differences in neutral assumptions" (p. 1521). There are many examples of racialized spaces that reflect the "supportive, reflective relationship" that Barajas and Ronnkvist discuss. For example, Asian American youth have historically created spaces of their own within the constraints of time. These sites included clubs, beauty pageants, and consumer culture where, out of necessity and survival, Asian American youth negotiated their own spaces within the frameworks of mainstream culture (Lim, 2008).

Kwon (2004) and Vue (2012) describe how popular youth car subculture, referred to as the “import scene”, were originally formed in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a small oppositional Asian American male youth car subculture in the streets of Los Angeles. Import car shows are racialized spaces where youth construct and affirm a pan-Asian ethnic identity that is shared, and to some degree celebrated, through this cultural practice (Kwon, 2004). This pan-Asian consciousness and identity is exhibited in the ways that Asian American male youth participate in the import scene by the Japanese made cars they modify as well as in the ways they interact with other Asian American youth in a socially constructed “Asian American” space (Kwon, 2004). Cultural citizenship is enacted here, giving youth opportunities for belonging, agency, and solidarity through a common identity (Benmayor, 1992).<sup>17</sup> In addition, Shimakawa (2002) argues, what characterizes Asian “Americanness” is performed, one that is:

constantly shifting relation to Americanness, a movement between visibility and invisibility, foreignness and domestication/assimilation; it is that *movement between* enacted by and on Asian Americans, I argue, that marks the boundaries of Asian American cultural (and sometimes legal) citizenship. (p. 3)

However, racialized spaces can also be spaces where Barajas and Ronnkvist (2007) argue that racialization hides "differences in neutral assumptions." At SJH, I found what impacted Hmong youth most, particularly males, was a zero-tolerance policy used to suspend, and in some cases, expel "any student" involved in fighting, regardless of their race or justification for the fights. Not only did this race-neutral policy punish Hmong students instead of getting at deeper issues they experienced daily in school, it allowed

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<sup>17</sup> Much has been written about cultural citizenship and scholars define it in a number of ways. Although I do not use cultural citizenship in detail in my analysis, I appreciate Benmayor's (1992) explanation of it as the way “cultural phenomena” has the ability to build emerging identities as well as a social consciousness for individuals in immigrant groups.

school officials to deny the pervasive role that race played in all of their conflicts with African American students. As Brandzel and Desai (2013) explain:

while there are certainly limits and detriments to seeing racism and racializations “too much”, it is far too dangerous to see too little... This is to say that the inarticulations of racism and racializations are a critical cog in the wheel of colorblindness that continues to turn the U.S. nation-state into a “postracial” nation of white privilege and white normativity. (p. 80)

### **Youth Cultural Practices**

Youth culture has been heavily influenced by the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, also referred to as the Birmingham School, where cultural studies scholars Dick Hebdige, Paul Willis, and Stuart Hall came together in the late 1960s to document the experiences of white, working-class, British youth (Hall & Jefferson, 1976). The work produced by the Birmingham School was, and still is, revolutionary because it critically analyzed and interpreted the role of social class connected to hegemonic social structures which gave scholars new ways to discuss and reflect on youth subcultures and cultural practices. Since the 1980s, research has moved away from a sole class-based interpretation of youth culture and currently emphasizes the ways that social class as well as race, ethnicity, gender, social location, symbols, and activities impact youth (Zhou & J. Lee, 2004).

The Birmingham school theorists argued that youth belong to a “subculture” when there is a set of social rituals that underpin their collective identity and define them as a group instead of simply a collection of individuals (Clarke, et al., 1976). Bettie (2003) describes subculture as a shared group aesthetic or preferred style that includes dress, accessories, speech, and demeanor. Brake (1985) defines subcultures as, “modes of expression or lifestyles developed by groups in subordinate structural positions in

response to dominant meaning systems, and which reflect their attempt to solve structural contradictions from the wider societal context” (p. 8).

Using these definitions, neighborhood soccer leagues that WTK Hmong boys in my study participate in and hip-hop that Hmong American youth in Vue’s (2012) study consume and perform, are both considered subcultures. As I discussed in the previous section, these subcultures, which are also considered cultural practices, are racialized. Although historically subcultures have been perceived as having negative influences on youth, these and many other subcultures formed and performed by youth of color and immigrant youth in the U.S. have had a positive influence in their lives.

For example, hip-hop, which includes rap, graffiti, and break dancing, is an example of a subculture that emerged out of the social dislocations amongst African American youth (Martinez, 1997). As Rose (1994) explains, hip-hop as a culture represents, “voices from the margins”. Hip-hop’s roots originated in the Bronx, New York in the 1970s and is a subculture that includes elements of African diaspora, African American poetry, and protest (Chang, 2005; Rose, 1994). Although hip-hop is originally a product of an urban, African American, “underclass”, it has become part of the U.S. mainstream that is consumed and practiced by youth of many ethnic, racial, and social class backgrounds. Obviously youths’ reasons for consuming and performing hip-hop vary considerably. For example, the Hmong American male youth in Vue’s (2012) study revealed that those who practice hip-hop not only rely on Hmong culture and identity as a part of their hip-hop practice, but are engaged in activism to uplift their community.



Vue's findings are significant because they demonstrate how hip-hop (and import car racing) is a vibrant, positive cultural practice amongst Hmong American male youth. For example, Hmong hip-hop artists rap about their families, economics, and racial and ethnic experiences that bring Hmong American male youth together to express their feelings in a supportive environment with their peers. Vue discovered that both the consumption and performance of this cultural practice empowered male youth participants to improve the conditions of their individual, family, and communities' lives.

As Moje (2008) argues, youths' cultural practices are never entirely separate from their elders' cultural practices. Though youth are regularly portrayed as resisting their families' cultural values, Moje's research suggests that they are consciously and unconsciously interweaving these familial cultural practices into their own practices. For example, Bays (1996) discovered that Hmong American youth reworked the cultural practices of their families, but always filtered these practices through a "regional multi-ethnic, multi-mediated, rocked, rapped, and hip-hopped kid culture that they were also busy shaping" (p. 10).

For the purposes of this study, I focus on the ways that cultural practices that Hmong youth produce and perform are reflective of societal values and beliefs within a particular space and can be used to analyze broader social forces that construct and influence youths' cultural practices (Lipsitz, 1990). In addition, I analyze the ways these cultural practices are imbued with racial meanings and consequences for Hmong youth. According to Vue (2012), Hmong parents and elders view hip-hop as a pathway into poverty and the African American underclass, while import car racing represents a

connection to materially successful Asian American groups such as Chinese and Japanese Americans.

Through Vue's numerous interventions in his research with Hmong American males, he reminds us that although youths' engagement with cultural practices are always racialized, that within the context of this racialization, male youth actively enact and perform "racial resistance." In this way, cultural practices are powerful because they demonstrate the ways that Hmong youth create agency and resistance that, contrary to the belief of many of their parents and elders, has the potential to connect them in significant ways to their families and communities. Their involvement in these cultural practices also allows them to form deep friendships with their male peers which has many positive influences in male youths' lives (Way, 2011).

### **Racialized Masculinities and the Pervasive (Hmong) Boy Crisis**

In the last decade, there has been a major increase in popular press books and documentaries focused on the "boy crisis" and the "secret life of boys" in the U.S. These books, as Way (2011) explains, are often written by clinicians and therapists who explore white, middle and upper class boys' biology and the ways in which "mainstream culture" has distorted their true nature, the negative impact masculinity has on their development, and/or the undeniable crisis they are experiencing in America's schools. Simplistic interpretations for the underlying issues that have created a "boy crisis" in schools, for example, point to a lack of male teachers and role models, male-oriented reading materials, and lack of recess time, but rarely offer deeper explanations as to why any of these patterns exist (Way, 2011).

Glaringly absent from the pages of these books on the “boy crisis” is the fastest growing population under the age of 20 in the U.S. – that of non-white, poor and working-class boys who live in urban cities (U.S. Census, 2010). In fact, by the year 2020, non-white teenagers under the age of 20, will most likely represent the majority of teenagers in the U.S. (Way, 2011). In schools, these boys are often referred to as youth who are on the lower end of the achievement gap, are the reason it exists in the first place, or are discussed as some combination of both. Regardless of how these boys are portrayed, they are almost always viewed through a lens of cultural deficit.

For example, Lor and Chu (2002) label Hmong boys as the “problem” from the perspective of parents and other adults only. Rarely do studies such as these take into account the complex inner-workings, dimensions, and dynamics of the entire family system to understand how the system as a whole contributes to intergenerational family conflict. In 1891, the psychologist who coined the concept “adolescence”, Granville Stanley Hall, notes that “confidences are shared with those of equal age and withheld from parents, especially by boys, to an extent probably little suspected by parents” (Hall, 1891, p. 206). Understanding this, it is imperative that researchers look to boys for their perspectives.

A growing concern amongst Hmong parents and Hmong community leaders are the delinquent behaviors and gang involvement that Hmong male youth are participating in outside of school at so-called alarming rates (S. Lee, 2005; Vue, 2012; Z.B. Xiong & Huang, 2012). For example, Lor and Chu’s (2002) study examines the correlation between Hmong parent-child relationships and delinquency from the perspective of

Hmong parents only. “Hmong gangs and delinquency,” Lor and Chu (2002) argue, “have created fear, not only within the Hmong community but also in the mainstream community” (p. 48). This statement, which has been said many times about African American and Latino male youth, includes no analysis of the lives of youth (Rios, 2011) or the racialized spaces and institutions that they interact with daily.

Key findings in qualitative studies conducted by S. Lee (2005) and Vue (2012), indicate that several Hmong males who were labeled deviant or delinquent, had never actually carried out delinquent acts at all. For example, S. Lee (2005) discovered that some Hmong American male high school youth were purposefully truant or not attending school as a *response* to feeling inadequate and/or believing that education will never lead to greater social mobility for themselves or their families. Rather than reaching out to these youth, teachers and staff at their high school quickly labeled them potential “gang members” which only alienated them further from school (S. Lee, 2005). Unfortunately, this is a common story in research with young, poor, and working-class males of color. They are criminalized before they have even done anything to deserve a label.<sup>18</sup>

**Masculinities.** The literature on masculinities is as broad as it is complex. In this section, I highlight major historical points and then focus on literature that pertains to my research in what is still a new area of study with a growing body of literature. In my research, I think of gender as structured action and a social process that changes based on individuals’ interactions with specific types of institutions—institutions that shape the

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<sup>18</sup> Rios (2011) argues that being criminalized from a young age, regardless if they were committed of a crime, has had devastating consequences for the Latino and African American boys in his study.

development of various types of masculinities (Messerschmidt, 2009; Rios, 2011; West & Fernstermaker, 1995). Because my research focuses on what bodies “do” and represent, I use gender to show how the body is a non-neutral, agent of social practice (Messerschmidt, 2009). “Becoming gendered”, argues Pascoe (2007), is a process. Like all social categories, masculinity is not homogenous, neutral, or something that a boy possesses simply for being male. Masculinity is a “configuration of practices and discourses that different youths (boys and girls) may embody in different ways and to different degrees” (Pascoe, 2007, p. 5).<sup>19</sup>

The origins of masculinities research began in the late 1970s and early 1980s and were pioneered by scholars such as Connell, Mac an Ghail, and Willis that focused on white, working-class males in Australia and England. Connell (1995) argues that there are multiple masculinities which men perform and embody depending on their social positions within a hierarchy; for example, *hegemonic masculinity*, which Connell coined, is the gender practice at the top of this hierarchy and describes the culturally idealized form of masculinity in a given historical place and social setting. Hegemonic masculinity is “the dominant form of masculinity in a given milieu to which other types of masculinities are subordinated or opposed” (Messerschmidt, 1999, p. 218). Connell’s model of multiple masculinities is regarded as one of the most influential perspectives on

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<sup>19</sup> I use “gender” to analyze the identities and performances that my participants enact through cultural practices in racialized spaces. Queer theorists such as Judith Butler (1993a), have explained explicitly for over two decades, how queer theory, as a theoretical model, has worked to destabilize the assumption that gender and sexuality are synonymous. This debate is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but I note it because it is important that researchers are intentional about the terms and definitions they choose to associate their work with, as these terms are often laden with political history and meaning.

masculinities because it allows research to investigate the ways males “do” masculinity differently in a wide range of social institutions such as schools, families, and sports (Pascoe, 2007).

The literature on male of color masculinities in general and Asian American males in particular remain limited (Chu & Fujino, 1999; Liu, 2002; Shek, 2006). In addition, Asian American masculinity is a concept that continues to be externally defined (Espiritu, 1997). Like other frameworks on Asian American males, they are again viewed through a binary lens as either brainy, wimpy, non-sexual model minorities or as silent, martial-arts, Kung-Fu fighting foreigners (Tajima, 1989). Chua and Fujino (1999) argue that all these portrayals really do is “recycle age-old stereotypes in contemporary roles through humor and horror” (p. 3).

For men who are marginalized, “the claim to power that is central in hegemonic masculinity is constantly negated” (Connell, 1995, p. 116). Within the framework of hegemonic masculinity, Asian American masculinities are often subordinated (Shek, 2006). In addition, it is not clear how Asian American males negotiate issues of masculinity because they are often simply compared with the hegemonic masculinity ideal (Liu, 2002; Lowe, 1996). However, as Tengan (2008) argues, hegemonic masculinities as well as masculinities that are considered subordinate should not be seen as “homogenous, discrete productions” separated by impenetrable boundaries (p. 15).

To better understand Asian American masculinities, or more specifically, Hmong masculinities, the complexity of Hmong males’ experiences as a product of masculine and racial intersections must be analyzed (Liu, 2002). For example, the “import scene”,

in many spaces around the U.S., is a marked Asian American male space (Kwon, 2004; Vue, 2012). In these spaces, Asian American male youth contest a mainstream perception by representing themselves with a “cool” and “tough” masculinity (Kwon, 2004).

Approaches that takes into account historical as well as current sociocultural environments can provide more complete understandings of Asian American males’ narratives (Shek, 2006). In this work, it must be acknowledged that “gendered social actors are complexly situated, located, and positioned in multiple settings and historical contexts” (Tengan, 2008, p. 15). This approach, argues Tengan, allows for more complexity, to explore the ways that males *and* females who are situated in multiple contexts, draw upon hegemonic constructs.

**The importance of the body.** In 1987, West and Zimmerman published “Doing Gender” during a critical shift in feminist social science work. Central to this framework is that individuals participate in self-regulating conduct where they monitor their own and others’ embodied social actions (Messerschmidt, 2004). As Messerschmidt (2009) argues, most scholarship on gender ignores the body, but bodies are always concerned with more than doing gender and they are also always non-neutral agents of social practice. In other words, doing gender is experienced in and through the body as it is through bodies that the social world is experienced (Crossley, 2001).

Shimakawa (2002), explains the ways that the bodies of Chinese men, referred to commonly using the racist term *Chinamen* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were historically marked as fundamentally different from, and inferior to, the white, mainstream norm, which marked a process of (racialized) abjection, “an attempt to circumscribe and radically

differentiate something that, although deemed repulsively other is, paradoxically, at some fundamental level, an undifferentiable part of the whole” (p. 2). Butler (1993b) describes how certain bodies come to matter in mainstream discourse, whereas other bodies do not. Gender is “constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subjects, an abjected outside, which is, after all, ‘inside’ the subjects as its own founding repudiation” (Butler, 1993b, p. 3).

The Asian American male position is an abject one, but positioned differently than other abject masculinities such as the African American male position whose masculinity is often viewed as hypermasculine, characterized as an aggressive, misogynistic, hyper-sexualized, and “savage other” (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Messner, 2000; Tengan, 2008). Both of these abject positions are viewed as subordinate forms of masculinity (compared to the hegemonic position). Brandzel and Desai (2013) suggest that “with assimilation and normalization, the Asian immigrant is thought to move from Black abjection asymptotically toward assimilation as an off-white ethnic American” (p. 81). It must be recognized that all “gendered social actors are situated within larger sociocultural systems and structures of knowledge and power, which both shape and constrain the possibilities for action, as well as provide resources which individuals use to reproduce, negotiate, and transform those very systems” (Tengan, 2008, p. 34).

As Messerschmidt (2004) emphasizes in his research, the construction of gender must be seen as a “situated social, interactional and embodied accomplishment. In other words, gender grows out of embodied social practices in specific social structural settings and serves to inform such practices in reciprocal relation” (p. 36). Moving forward, this and other arguments I have highlighted in this section will allow me to analyze Hmong



male youth as social actors who produce agency and resistance through their cultural practices with peers, instead of rendering them passive victims unable to push back on the abject positions in which they are often situated.

## Chapter 3

### Doing Critical Ethnography

#### (Mis)reading Hmong Youth

It was a warm summer evening in 2009 when I conducted my first focus group at a local park with two Hmong girls and two Hmong boys between the ages of 13 and 15 who had arrived to the U.S. from Wat Tham Krabok within the last four to five years. During the previous school year, I had observed all four of them in their classes, the hallways, and the lunchroom of SJH, but this was the first time I had actually gotten to talk to them. Eager to get to know them, I worked off of my focus group protocol asking them typical questions about classes, their favorite teachers, and their aspirations after junior high. Both teenaged boys were quiet. At times, the quieter of the two rested his head on his arm that lay on the table and stared off into nowhere. The teenaged girls, however, were easy to talk to, engaging, and bursting with energy. They seemed eager to talk to me, especially one of the girls who within minutes of our conversation, had already given me three compliments on what I was wearing.

At the time, I was a doctoral student immersed in qualitative research coursework. I also was an experienced teacher with years of pedagogical experience and what I thought at the time to be savvy book-knowledge in qualitative interviewing. And yet, I could not get two teenaged boys to talk to me. Eventually the quietest boy, who would not make eye contact with me, drifted off to sleep mid-way through our conversation. I was struck by this because he was sitting to my left on the park bench and made no attempts to hide his sleeping. The other boy talked a bit more while his friend slept, but

only when I asked for his opinion directly. The two teenaged girls had no trouble freely contributing to the discussion. Towards the end of the interview, I asked them if they would like to talk to me again. The boys said nothing, but the girls smiled widely. One of them said enthusiastically, “We could have a picnic and bring food!” The girl who had complimented me on what I was wearing three times exclaimed, “I want to see *you* again and again and again!” I looked at the quiet boy hunched painfully over the picnic table. He looked at me with a kind smile on his face, but said nothing. His friend, who was emerging from his nap, looked as if he wanted to disappear completely.

After my first focus group with WTK Hmong youth had ended, my Hmong American research assistant, Lia, who had accompanied me to assist with interpreting and note taking pulled me aside and said, “If you can get into these guys’ worlds, they’re going to have a lot to tell you.” I realized that it had been a novice mistake to interview Hmong boys and girls together which both Lia and Teng confirmed in our debriefing session. As Maira (2009) writes about her research with South Asian Muslim youth, “While I had ideally hoped for a gender balance among interviewees, I realized that some of the boys were a bit uncomfortable talking to girls and women outside their family circle, which is generally true of adolescent males, as I know from previous research, and was particularly true for these immigrant youth” (p. 291).

As I reflected on my future dissertation study, I considered focusing on the girls because I assumed data collection would be easier and more enjoyable as we shared rapport as females and they were so forthcoming at our first meeting. In their research with mostly white male youth, Laberge and Albert (2000) argue that it is challenging to

get boys to articulate their feelings or opinions in face-to-face interviews as they are “often reticent to express themselves, either because they are afraid that they might give a wrong answer, or because they feel uncomfortable in this artificial form of interaction” (p. 198). In her research with Hmong high school students, S. Lee (2005), a female researcher, had an easier time developing relationships with girls than boys, a fact that she attributed to the “relatively gender segregated nature of Hmong culture” (p. 19). I considered all of these issues and what I would do to address them for future focus groups, but there was still something nagging away at me about the boys. Later that evening, I sat in my car and hand wrote nearly five pages of single-spaced field notes detailing the interactions I had witnessed and thoughts swirling in my mind about them.

A few years later in 2013, I met with my dissertation committee to discuss my research prospectus and talked specifically about this first focus group interaction. I noted all of the hypothetical reasons why these two teenaged boys, particularly the boy who fell asleep, would not engage with me or with one another. I noted various arguments in qualitative research methodology that included my outsider status as an adult female who is Asian American, but not Hmong. One of my dissertation committee members said that she saw the boy’s silence and sleeping as an act of purposeful agency. I realized that at the time of the focus group, I had missed this completely.

I re-read the five pages of hand-written field notes where I mentioned that the boy “sitting *next* to me” who had fallen asleep, made a point to look at me out of the corner of his right eye when he was supposedly sleeping. When I looked at him, he kept his right eye open as if he wanted me to know that he was awake. What I had read at the time as

passive withdrawal from the focus group conversation, is what I now believe was active resistance on his part. “You can’t make me talk to you” is what he may have well said to me, with his middle finger up.

Another misreading on my part was that the rapport and “trust” I felt I had established early on with the girls in the focus group would lead to an easier time entering their worlds than the boys. However, as Duneier (2004) warns, establishing trust and rapport is not a “precondition” for carrying out successful fieldwork; in fact, it is presumptuous to “believe that you have trust or even special rapport with the people you are trying to write about, even when it seems you do” (p. 209). Conducting a study about Hmong girls may have seemed easier and more enjoyable, but it certainly would not have yielded richer or more complete results.

After reflecting on various qualitative methodologies that would allow me to get into these “guys’ worlds”, I realized I needed to utilize one where I did not have to rely on focus groups or face-to-face interviews in order to gather information. Insightful observations about interviewing immigrant youth from Maira (2009) and other qualitative researchers, my debriefing sessions with Hmong cultural insiders, Lia and Teng, and my own experiences working with immigrant youth, led me to critical ethnography.

### **The Accidental Research Study**

Before diving into a detailed discussion about the research study, I will first describe how I was introduced to this study and ultimately decided to pursue it for my dissertation research. In Spring 2009, Mark, a neighborhood organizer, and Dr. Anderson, the principal of SJH at the time, expressed interest in documenting what they

considered an educational success story; Hmong students bussed in from inner city neighborhoods through a school “choice” program had been thriving academically and the number of enrollment applications was growing with each application cycle at SJH. Mark approached a professor at the local university to lead a research project on this success story. As Principal Investigator (PI), she invited me to be her research assistant on this project. After receiving Institutional Review Board approval on August 19, 2009, we began the data collection phase which lasted approximately two-years. Our primary research goal was to gain a better understanding of the success of Hmong students who are bussed to SJH. The following research questions were explored: How do urban Hmong students and their families define and negotiate success in a suburban school? And how do teachers and staff at the school define and negotiate success for Hmong students in comparison with the rest of the school’s population?

At the same time data were being collected, coded, analyzed, and discussed, I was conducting literature searches noting gaps in research conducted with Hmong youth. A glaring gap is the lack of qualitative research on Hmong male youth. With the exception of S. Lee (2001) and Vue’s (2012) studies, little research exists. As my familiarity with the literature developed, I knew I wanted to learn more about Hmong male youth as so little is known about them both anecdotally and in social science research.

### **A Community Engaged Approach: Research Design, Data Collection, and Analysis**

This research is a critical ethnography that incorporated multiple strategies and sites for data collection as well as time periods when data was collected. As Denzin (1978) and Lewis (2004) argue, not only is this an effective way to reinforce validity, but

the combination of several data-collections methods, along with comparison sites, provided ways of looking at issues that impact participants' lives across several different contexts. The following matrix indicates when data sources were collected in the original study and in my dissertation study.

**Table 1. Data Collection Matrix**

<b>Data Sources</b>	<b>Original Study (2009-2011)</b>	<b>Data Collected for dissertation (2012-2013)</b>
<b>Focus groups with youth</b>	Three focus groups: 1. Two girls; two boys. 2. Four boys. 3. Four girls. (12 total)	
<b>Ongoing participant-observations and numerous informal conversations</b>	Girls' volleyball games, boys' soccer scrimmages, after-school tutoring, SJH, community events in their neighborhoods.	Boys' neighborhoods: soccer practices & matches, swimming at local beach, boys' bands, cultural celebrations, boys' colleges, several meals, tutoring sessions, "hanging out" in all of these places with several Hmong boys who I never interviewed formally. <u>Thailand:</u> Hmong village (family life, recreational activities, shaman ceremonies, internet cafes), Wat Tham Krabok.
<b>Formal interviews with adults</b> <b>Formal interviews with boys</b>	Three interviews with three sets of parents in their homes. (5 total)	Buddhist monk in Wat Tham Krabok, two Hmong women and one Hmong clan leader in Hmong village. (3 total). Four boys. Two of these boys were interviewed more than once. (4 total)
<b>Formal interviews and informal conversations with neighborhood organizers &amp; cultural insiders.</b>	Interviews with: one neighborhood organizer and one Hmong leader.  Numerous informal conversations with neighborhood organizers and soccer coaches.	Interview with: one neighborhood organizer. (1 total)  Numerous informal conversations with Hmong American females (one was my research assistant)

**Interviews and informal conversations (including email exchanges) with teachers and staff at SJH**

17 teachers, one principal, and one associate principal. (19 total)

Ongoing informal conversations with a former teacher in the same district as SJH, but at a different school, email exchanges with a teacher at SJH, and email exchanges with the current principal and associate principal at SJH.

**Getting in: Community engaged research practices.** In both the original study and in my dissertation study, community engagement was used throughout the study, and will be described in detail throughout this chapter. Unlike many research studies that have been conducted where researchers from a university contact a school and/or district administrators to gain entry, the PI of the research was asked directly by Mark who already had established relationships with WTK Hmong families as well as Dr. Anderson.

A central component of successful engaged research practice is respecting and building trust with community partners. This sounds easier than it often times is. There is no reason why community partners and/or neighborhood organizers should automatically trust the intentions of university researchers or want to work with them. Teng said most of his experiences with university researchers had not been positive, “They come to us and tell us their agenda and how they want us to help them,” he said, which is actually more common in research practice. Just because Mark had contacted a university researcher, did not mean he planned to go out of his way to engage with us, and why should he? Like all institutions, neighborhoods operate by their own set of rules. It took a long time for Mark, in particular, to trust my intentions. I think he also wanted to see if



there was anything I would do for WTK youth (i.e. provide mentorship, volunteer my time to tutor, etc). When he saw me showing up at events and observed the ways that kids interacted with me, he began to say more than one word to me.

We gained access with WTK Hmong families and SJH *only* because of the established relationship Mark and Teng already had in place with families and the principal of the school. Parents were willing to be interviewed and allowed us to interview their children because they trusted Mark and Teng. Furthermore, because their kids' education is such a priority, they were okay with me spending time with their kids as they believed their spending time with me would ultimately help them with their schooling. No matter how many times and ways I reminded them that I was working on a "research study" or how I explained what that meant, parents were always okay with me spending time with their kids.

Even with this access, the data collection process took an unusually long time. Any sense of control we thought we might have had was given up immediately for the sake of working within a community engaged model. Getting consent from parents, for example, was a three-step process according to Teng. He did not simply present IRB forms to Hmong parents to sign, but had three separate conversations with them to facilitate this process. When parents signed consent forms, Teng would often call or text me the evening before or the day of an interview with a time and address to a family's home. He was present at all of the interviews and focus groups to be certain that families were comfortable and to assist with interpretation and explanation if necessary. Throughout the data collection period, I was in regular contact with Teng to ask

questions, run ideas by him, and be certain that I was working respectfully with participants in my dissertation study. This is an example of a community engaged approach to research in action. As Barajas, Smalkoski, Kaplan, and Yang (2012) note, “At the center of this innovation is the benefit of partnership and reciprocity—innovation that is not a precursor to research activities, but rather an essential part of the discovery process” (p. 8-9).

**Sampling.** Snowball sampling was purposefully not used out of respect for parents and the relationships that Mark and Teng already had established with them. At the onset of the original study, Mark and Teng contacted all WTK Hmong families whose children attended SJH and then helped us set up interviews with those who expressed interest in talking with us. It could be argued that we had a convenience sample as we interacted with families who already had established relationships with Mark and Teng and whose children attended SJH. However, our primary objective was creating and maintaining mutual respect with the families in our study, an essential goal of engaged research practice. The interviews with teachers and staff were set up by Dr. Anderson. When the PI and I met with her at the start of the original study, she offered to contact teachers individually who she knew had WTK Hmong students in their classes. Within a month, she sent me a list of names of teachers and staff who were willing to be interviewed and I set up interviews with each teacher or staff person via email, their preferred method of communication.

**Engagement with cultural insiders.** Throughout the data collection phase, I consulted regularly with Hmong leaders in the area of the city where my participants live. The leader who I consulted with most regularly, Laj, is a Hmong American man. Having

a cultural insider whose home and work life is located in the neighborhoods that the boys in my study live in and play soccer in, has been invaluable. Working *with* the Hmong community as an engaged research practice not only gave me access with WTK Hmong families, many of whom remain isolated in their neighborhoods, but gave me opportunities to interact with them in respectful ways. A skeptic of any outsider coming in to do “research” on the Hmong community, Laj relayed that he is appreciative of the ways in which the study was conducted by two non-Hmong researchers.

**Interpretation and transcription.** Interpretation is a complex process that needs to be well thought out with adjustments made along the way. Because of hierarchies in the Hmong community between elders and youth, I knew that asking an elder to interpret interviews for me would be problematic because anything they interpreted would be processed through their own lens based on their social position. Because this study is focused on youth, I was always more interested in youths’ perspectives with the awareness that these perspectives would be understood through my own interpretations based on who I am and my own social position.

Using a community engaged approach to mentorship within a research project, we utilized the large Hmong American undergraduate population at the university by including them as research assistants. Through a grant, we compensated five junior and senior undergraduates who worked primarily as cultural insiders, interpreters, and transcribers. I met with and/or had conversations with all five research assistants regularly to provide training and supervision. I reviewed all of their transcriptions to check for accuracy. Throughout this process, I explained to them that they would

interpret for Hmong parents who only speak Hmong, but occasionally they would interpret for Hmong youth who primarily spoke English with me, but Hmong with each other.

One of these five research assistants was Lia who I invited to be my research assistant for the dissertation data collection phase. I asked Lia because she was the most fluent in Hmong, which was confirmed by two of the other research assistants as well as Teng who commented on her, “old school native speaker” fluency. She also was the most connected to Hmong cultural practices, which was confirmed when elders in her clan told her that spirits called her to be the next shaman at the young age of 19. Because of Lia’s keen understanding of traditional Hmong cultural practices, her insights were invaluable to me as well as her written and oral fluency in both Hmong and English.

I also asked Lia to be my research assistant because of her ability to grasp nuances. As S. Lee (2005) notes, many Hmong youth in her study spoke only Hmong to one another when discussing sensitive topics. Lia picked up on this in focus groups that were conducted in 2009 and transcribed all of the Hmong, even if it was never interpreted in English. She transcribed all of the interviews for my dissertation and accompanied me to community events where she observed group dynamics and took many notes, all of which she shared with me. I provided her with additional training in transcription, supervised her work, and was able to continue compensating her through a grant.

Working with research assistants from the Hmong community produced many mutual benefits—a key component of community engaged practices. For example, the PI included them in academic conference presentations and provided ongoing mentorship and academic research training, while they shared their insights with us about Hmong

families from the perspective of young, Hmong American women. Before joining our study, none of them had ever met a Hmong individual from WTK, but they were all curious about them. Lia, for example, said that being a part of the research made her think about her own parents' immigration experiences from Laos (Lia was born in the U.S.) and that she had begun having conversations with her parents and paternal grandparents about their experiences before arriving to the U.S.

### **Data Collection Strategies**

**Focus groups with Hmong youth.** It had been explained to me by the PI that focus groups would be an important first step in getting to know participants, especially considering their young ages, and gaining insights about them while they were amongst their peers in a fairly nonthreatening environment. According to Krueger and Casey (2009), focus groups allow qualitative researchers to identify trends and patterns in participants' perceptions followed with systematic analysis of the discussions to gain insights about the group. In addition, Krueger and Casey find that this type of group interviewing tends to be useful when participants are adolescents and youth who may feel more comfortable talking in a group with their peers.

The purpose of the focus groups, which were semi-structured using a protocol, was to get to know Hmong youth who attend or had recently attended SJH and to hear what issues they brought up and found relevant in their lives (see Appendix C for sample focus group protocol). I conducted three separate focus groups with male and female Hmong youth between the ages of 13–16 years of age. Teng brought youth by van to

focus group locations (outdoor parks and a *McDonalds* restaurant in their neighborhoods) and stayed for each focus group.

In addition, each focus group was transcribed by Hmong research assistants. One research assistant always accompanied me to a focus group to assist with interpreting and to take notes. The systematic analysis that Krueger and Casey (2009) recommends occurred after each focus group with research assistants and the PI in several follow-up conversations. These insights helped us identify participants we wanted to interview or observe later on in more depth. Unfortunately, putting Hmong boys and girls together in the first focus group had not been ideal, but I was still able to gather useful information, especially in regards to the boys' silence.

**Interviews and informal conversations.** Interview methods that give youth opportunities to freely respond to questions, are a way for us to understand meaning in rich ways (Way, 2011). To get at this experiential depth, we conducted interviews in the original study with three sets of Hmong parents, all of whom had children at SJH at the time. Almost all interviews were conducted with Hmong interpreters present and recorded with interviewees' permission. We also conducted formal, face-to-face interviews with 19 teachers and staff at SJH, as well as Mark and Laj. For my dissertation study, I conducted additional face-to-face, semi-structured interviews<sup>20</sup> with four male

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<sup>20</sup> The interview protocols that I used served as basic templates, but were not useful with any of the male youth participants. Informal conversations and observations provided far more insights, particularly given the age of most of the participants who were uncomfortable with face-to-face, formal interviewing procedures. For example, when trying to assess a family's poverty, I asked participants in informal conversations at various non-school sites, to talk about their family meals both in WTK and the U.S., to describe a typical day for themselves and their family members, or to discuss how it felt physically to walk so far to school when they lived in Thailand.

youth between the ages of 14–22<sup>21</sup> (see Appendix D, E, and F for sample protocols). I also interviewed Teng. Interviews with Kong and Kue, discussed in the previous chapter, were the richest and most in-depth. I believe this is partly due to their ability to reflect on their life experiences. It is worth noting that ethnographers purposefully limit their sample size because we constantly ask questions, listen, observe, take notes, and join participants in their daily activities which require extensive time in the field (Lareau, 2011). In fact, a common approach in ethnography is to focus on one fieldsite or even one family (Small, 2009).

In addition, I have had numerous informal conversations with the same four Hmong males (including Kong and Kue), as well as Teng, Mark, Laj, and four additional Hmong males between the ages of 14–20 who showed no interest in being formally interviewed or seemed uncomfortable when I brought up the idea. I also had many informal conversations for extended periods of time with several WTK Hmong girls who attended SJH. Girls' insights were invaluable and will be included in the findings. Many qualitative researchers use informal conversations with youth participants as a way of getting rich data that is often difficult to get in formal, non-natural forms of interaction (Bettie, 2003; Pascoe, 2007; Rios, 2011; Vue, 2012). As the PI relayed to me, “hallway interviews” are the conversations we have after formal interviews have been completed that help us really understand participants' perspectives and enrich our insights.

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<sup>21</sup> Although some of the participants in this study are siblings, this is not a sibling study. My intention has never been to analyze sibling relationships, but rather to analyze data about individuals who happen to be siblings.

In the summer of 2012, I gathered additional data in Thailand where all of the participants in my study were born and raised. The majority of my time was spent conducting participant-observations and having numerous informal conversations with Hmong individuals in a Hmong village in Northern Thailand where I stayed with a Hmong clan for over one week. While there, I also conducted one formal interview each with a clan leader, parent, and Hmong American. In Wat Tham Krabok, in central Thailand, where all of the participants in my study were raised, I interviewed a Buddhist monk. Although brief, the addition of this international fieldwork experience added depth and enriched my study as I have a better understanding of many aspects of Hmong family life as well as the history and experiences of the Hmong who lived in Wat Tham Krabok.

As discussed earlier, I had planned to interview parents and include them as participants in my study, but this proved challenging especially as boys shared more information with me about their strained relationships with their parents. After consulting with my dissertation committee members, I made the decision not to include parents in my study because I am certain that it would have changed my relationships with their sons and had the potential to break their trust with me. I also made the decision early on not to conduct interviews or observe youth in their schools for the dissertation collection phase. For example, Eckert (1989), concerned that her participants would raise questions about her allegiances to them, purposefully avoided school classrooms so she would not be associated with the official functions of the school or with the authority of teachers or administrators. Therefore, my interactions with participants mainly took place on soccer fields, in a recreational gym, at a local park where they swam in the summertime, at out-of-school activities planned by Mark and Teng, and occasionally at a Hmong family



celebration. This prolonged engagement with my participants was vital. It provided me with opportunities to continue to build relationships and demonstrate to the boys that their confidences would not be used against them and their anonymity would be honored (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Finally, I was always cognizant of the fact that I am neither Hmong nor male. I knew this would influence the ways that boys interacted with me, but more importantly, I wondered if they would open up and talk to me about what was happening in their lives. In Way's (2011) study on boys' friendships, almost all of her male participants said they felt more comfortable being interviewed by a woman. Male interviewers often, "unintentionally, discouraged boys from being vulnerable as they wanted to be seen by the teenagers as "cool" and thus "manly"" (p. 80). In addition, Way (2011) found that instead of ethnicity or race being the common denominator between interviewer and interviewee, the quality of the interview was determined "almost entirely by the extent to which the interviewer created a safe space in which the teenager could talk openly. And the ability to create such a space safe was determined by the interpersonal skills, sensitivity, and curiosity of the interviewer" (p. 80).

On the other hand, setting out to explore their cultural practices didn't always work as soccer is such a socially engrained male space for Hmong youth. Whereas Foley (1990), a white male researcher, spent much of his time playing basketball with male youth participants, some of the older Hmong boys in my study never let their guard down around me on the soccer field and sometimes didn't pass the ball to me because they worried they would kick the ball too hard and hit me.

**Participant-observations and the significance of field notes.** Duneier (1999) argues that the best ethnographies have been doctoral dissertations because of the vast amount of hours doctoral students are able to immerse themselves into fieldwork is vital in order to establish rapport with participants and to develop deep insights. In order to get at this depth, many ethnographers consider participant-observation to be their most significant method of collecting data. Lareau (2011) initially planned to conduct an interview study, but did not find the data she was collecting rich or complex. After asking a parent if she could hang out with her, she realized that more intensive fieldwork was possible as well as much-needed in order to understand the richness and complexity of family life. As Lareau (2011) argues, “The entire point of ethnography is to catch people in the routines of daily life, to reveal taken-for-granted aspects of their experience, and to make the background foreground” (p. 332). In addition, it is important to study not just what individuals say, but what they do in everyday contexts (Lewis, 2004).

In addition, participant-observation is an effective way to get at the nuances of a culture. As Yangisako and Delaney (1995) argue, every culture believes their way is the right way; therefore, ethnographers must pay careful attention to a culture’s local patterns of meaning in people’s every day practices. To get at these meanings, several ethnographers have relied heavily on participant-observation with teenaged and young adult participants. Rosas (2012) spent the majority of his time with undocumented Mexican youth in his ethnography informally playing basketball, having meals, and hanging out with them while they worked, literally, in the streets washing windshields of cars or selling gum to tourists.

A. Goffman (2014) conducted ethnographic fieldwork for six years with a group of young African American men in Philadelphia, but never conducted formal interviews or used an audio recorder when she was with her participants. Instead, her data were derived by observations she made or conversations she heard. In the informal conversations she had with participants, she rarely asked them direct questions. A. Goffman uses a technique where she weaves among conversations around her focusing on one for a few seconds and then moving on to another and then another in a circle. The point of this technique is to, “practice valuing what you hear around you, not just what people tell you” (Parry, 2013, p. 5).

I found this technique invaluable, particularly when trying to understand the things boys valued enough to talk to one another about, but not me. Of course, many of these conversations were in Hmong, and it would have been awkward to ask one of the boys to stop what he was doing to interpret for me. Therefore, I often had to rely on their body language, interactions with one another, and their masculinity performances that varied depending on the spaces we were in. The nuances that I witnessed were some of the most influential pieces of data in this study and helped me get to know certain participants on multiple levels. It also helped me get to know quieter participants and/or those who had trouble articulating their thoughts because of their age. I found that 14 year olds, for example, were the most reticent. Instead of relying on formal interviews with them, I observed them with their peers. All of them had a “best friend” who they confided in the most. I found that although these boys didn’t have much to say to me (even in casual, informal situations), they had plenty to say to one another, disrupting the

gendered stereotype that boys, particularly teenaged boys, don't talk. The fact is teenaged boys *do* talk; they are just selective about who they talk to.

In ethnography, participant-observation is an active form of acquiring data, but like any form of data collection, it must be done purposefully. Argues E. Goffman (1989):

I feel that the way this is done is to not, of course, just listen to what they talk about, but to pick up on their minor grunts and groans as they respond to their situation... You are in a position to note their gestural, visual, bodily response to what's going on around them and you're empathetic enough—because you've been taking the same crap they've been taking—to sense what it is that they're responding to. To me, that's the core of observation. If you don't get yourself in that situation, I don't think you can do a piece of serious work. (p. 125-126)

Early in the original study, the PI stressed the need to “hang out” at youths’ events so that they would become more familiar with us and vice versa. We learned quickly that parents in our study restricted their children from leaving home unless it was for school, a school related activity, or an activity with Mark or Teng. Therefore, we conducted many observations in the suburban school they attended which made sense as the original study sought to understand their school success and we had not yet been invited to their homes or had met their parents. Besides obvious places such as classrooms, hallways, and the school cafeteria, I also took the opportunity before and after interviews with teachers and staff to conduct observations at the school.

“Hanging out” provides insights that are an integral part of a qualitative study, particularly an ethnography. The participant-observation component of my data collection, which took place over the course of three years, is central to my study as it allowed me to have an understanding of boys’ lives that were sometimes impossible to

access through face-to-face conversation. Participant-observation gave me opportunities to pay attention to *when* and *where* youth said things. In addition, instead of asking boys about their relationships with peers, I was able to observe them *interacting* with their peers, which gave me vast insights about how meaningful these relationships are to boys in their everyday lives.

Although many of the older boys were unwilling to open up to me while we played soccer together and it was impossible to listen-in on their conversations because Hmong was only spoken on the soccer field, some of our most thoughtful conversations happened before, during, and after soccer practices when we were all off of the actual field, but still at the park. Sometimes boys just kicked a ball around while I sat on the grass or stood leaning up against a tree, having a conversation with them about soccer. Bettie (2003), a sociologist studying the identity performances of teenaged girls, also hung out regularly with girls in her study; they spent most of their time “talking more than doing” whereas I spent more time with boys “doing more than talking.” As Bettie (2003) notes, “my connection with girls was not mediated by a physical activity that would enable us to interact casually without much personal dialogue” (p. 29).

With that said, I would not call anything that I did a form of action research, rather, another form of participant-observation where I participated to write (Emerson, et al. 1995) and another way to hang out with boys. I found that with time, certain boys felt more comfortable around me after seeing me on the soccer field or in the indoor gym and as a result, opened up and talked to me in ways they never did in face-to-face interviews. As Teng once said to me, “You’ve earned your ‘street cred’ with these guys.” There was never any discussion amongst us about what I was wearing, my personal life, or

emotional bonding that often takes place amongst girls, coined “girl talk”, when the boys discussed aspects of their lives with me. Gaines (1990), who conducted an ethnography on suburban teens, writes:

Rule is, the street belongs to the boys. They are more public in orientation—they’ll talk to anybody about anything... But the girls are a little different. They’re insular; they mostly hang out in pairs, rarely more than trios. They won’t let you penetrate unless they see you every day, and then it’s just friendly and polite. You have to be a best friend to get really close. Their conversations tend to be more local, personal, private. The girls are a subculture within a subculture. (p. 63)

**Field notes.** Writing field notes includes a management process like any other form of data collection. It is recommended that ethnographers spend 2-3 hours daily writing and organizing field notes which include writing jottings, methodological notes, and keeping a diary (Bernard, 2011). Jottings or scratch notes are the notes taken quickly while in the field to return to later, whereas methodological notes deal with the actual technique in collecting data. Keeping a diary is also an essential part of this process. Whereas field notes are more of a public record, the diary is personal and can help articulate how one feels while in the field. Bernard (2011) argues, “You absolutely need a diary in any ethnographic project. It will help you deal with loneliness, fear, and other emotions that make fieldwork difficult” (p. 294).

During or shortly after all of my observations I wrote copious amounts of jottings and more extensive field notes using pen and paper which I then word processed on my computer within 24-hours after having taken them. I did this so that it would be easier to code field notes later on with the rest of my data. I also kept a diary where I wrote additional notes of observations and feelings I had about what I observed and experienced. I argue that field notes, particularly in a critical ethnography, are a core

element of data collection as they are an interpretive process and provide opportunities to textualize an ethnographic experience (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). Furthermore, Wolcott (2005) argues that field notes provide a space to “identify biases and prejudices in such a way that we deal with them explicitly at the outset of an inquiry, rather than having to fight them off as we go along” (p. 192).

As Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2000) argue, ethnographic inquiry is based on “description rather than prediction, induction rather than deduction, generation rather than verification of theory, construction rather than enumeration, and subjectivities rather than objective knowledge” (p. 139). Because I relied so heavily on participant-observation, my field notes became essential pieces of data. I enjoyed writing field notes and took the “more is better” approach, knowing that there were so many details I would forget if I did not get them on paper. As E. Goffman (1989) reminds:

Write your [fieldnotes] as lushly as you can, as loosely as you can, as long as you put yourself in it, where you say, “I felt that.” (Though not to too great a degree.) And as loose as that lush adverbialized prose is, it’s still a richer matrix to start from than stuff that gets reduced into a few words of “sensible sentences.” I’m now not [supporting] unscientific [practices] or anything like that. I’m just saying that to be scientific in this area, you’ve got to start by trusting yourself and writing as fully and as lushly as you can. (p. 131).

**Analytical procedures: Coding and analysis.** As Miles and Huberman (1994) argue, qualitative data analysis is an ongoing process; focusing data, organizing it, and drawing and verifying conclusions are procedures that are “interwoven before, during, and after data collection in parallel form” (pp. 11-12). The ways in which I coded and analyzed my data went through several systematic phases, which I will briefly summarize in this section. After additional data were collected for my dissertation study, I analyzed data from the individual perspectives of youth participants, parents, cultural insiders,

neighborhood organizers, as well as teachers and school officials.<sup>22</sup> Ethnographic field researchers often select core themes by giving priority to topics where extensive amounts of data have been collected that reflect recurrent or underlying patterns of activities in the field site(s) and give priority to what seems significant to their participants (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995). Understanding this, I searched for patterns of behavior, individual and group ways of thinking, words, phrases, and events that repeated themselves or stood out in significant ways (Bogdau & Bikleu, 1998). I connected specific events and observations to more general analytic categories and issues and drew on emergent/emic codes (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995) related broadly to family, gender, schools, cultural practices, WTK Hmong community, etc.

Bernard (2011) argues that coding is supposed to be “data reduction, not data proliferation”; even though I had large amounts of data from various sites and sources, I was less concerned about which coding scheme to use, and more focused on coding consistently (p. 303). I used comparative analysis strategies to systematically examine all of my data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This strategy involved a process of “focused coding” where I coded based on themes that had emerged in the first stage of coding. Again, I focused on specific themes, patterns, issues, and concepts across these data (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995). Throughout this process, triangulation of data through interviews, informal conversations, and participant-observation also emerged.

I loosely followed Bogdau and Bikleu’s (1998) method of developing coding categories. This included coding major and minor codes. For example, a major code, was

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<sup>22</sup> I included data from the original study and additional data for my dissertation, but had a separate coding process, with different codes, based on my research focus and questions.



“cultural practices”, whereas a minor code was, “soccer.” The process of breaking down field notes and other data sources into different levels of codes allowed me to discover new themes and topics as well as new relationships between them (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). Since I relied so heavily on participant-observation, I paid particular attention to the ways that I coded my field notes. According to Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), this type of coding does *not* involve:

putting labels on bits and pieces of data so that what “goes together” can be collected in a single category; the ethnographer is indeed interested in categories, but less as a way to sort data than as a way to name, distinguish, and identify the conceptual import and significance of particular observations. (p. 151)

After a conversation with one of my dissertation committee members about the importance of coding “what is missing” from my interactions with youth participants (i.e. “catch phrase” nuances about the things that they never actually said), I wrote numerous analytic memos to myself (well over 100) about the emerging themes and patterns in major and minor codes. In doing this, I made sure that these “missing” pieces were included as much as possible so that I could later interpret them. Writing memos also allowed me to take specific field notes and explore their theoretical implications in more depth.

**A note about theoretical analysis.** Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) describe in detail how ethnography differs from other qualitative methods which often proceed deductively with a theory that explains a phenomena and then attempt to find examples in the data that explain or challenge it. Coding and analysis, according to Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, is not a neutral process; rather, it is filled with bias based on the researcher’s interests, goals, and perspectives. These biases not only shape the coding and analysis

process, but the ways that “social events” are perceived and written as data. I was aware of these arguments not only at the coding and analysis phase, but also the data collection phase of my research. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) argue:

The goal in fieldwork, then, is to generate theory that grows out of or is directly relevant to activities occurring in the setting under study. This contrasts not only with those who practice deduction from received theory but with proponents of grounded theory. Grounded theorists focus on the “discovery” and modification of theory through the close examination of qualitative data. But such an approach dichotomizes data and theory as two separate and distinct entities; it avoids seeing theory as inherent in the notion of data in the first place... Data are never pure; they are ripe with meanings and always products of prior interpretative and conceptual decisions. (p. 167)

### **Focusing on Youths’ Perspectives**

It has been noted by the cultural insiders I interacted with, that the perspectives of children in Hmong families are often represented by adults or elders in their clan. In November 2013, myself and several others who work in Hmong studies scholarship received an email from a Hmong leader who was upset about the ways in which Hmong scholars had portrayed the Hmong community at a university sponsored event (not at a university I am affiliated with). In part of his email he wrote,

You all have heard me many times before stating that if ever the American media or an outside source comes to interview you about Hmong families and Hmong culture, and Hmong issues to always, always direct them to an elder or to an expert. Many of our younger generation are naive and seek attention, they provide false information and unclear descriptions to the media only to portray Hmong as barbarians, uncivilized and unequal people. (Email communication, November 13, 2013)

Although his views likely do not reflect all Hmong leaders, it is his opinion of the “younger generation” that struck me. If a Hmong leader perceives the “younger generation” in this way, it is even more imperative that we hear youths’ perspectives directly from them. Too many times we rely on the “expertise” of parents, teachers, and

other adults to tell us the “truth” about youth, instead of allowing youth to tell us their own truths. Readers may consider the accounts of Hmong boys in my study to be one-sided, but like Rios (2011), “I urge readers to eradicate a dichotomous, either/or, perspective and instead focus on how young people come to understand their social world” (p. 9). When youths’ perceptions are examined critically in research, the insights and analysis presented often demonstrate the importance of listening to and employing their understandings as central to the study, not as a compliment to the opinions of the adult researcher (Loutzenheiser, 2007).

As for Hmong teenagers, a Hmong American scholar said to me quite pointedly, “You can’t interview Hmong kids in their homes, especially in front of their parents. They won’t tell you anything!” When she said this, I immediately reflected on the only interview I had conducted with Houa, in the Lee home, on May 27, 2010. When I asked her and Kong, who had joined our conversation, to discuss the problems they faced in their former public schools, Houa focused entirely on her sons’ inability to learn English and make any academic progress.

When I asked her to discuss what she liked about SJH, she only had positive things to say about the ways her kids were learning English and making academic progress. She said there was nothing that she didn’t like about SJH. When I asked Kong for his opinion, he nodded in agreement with his mother. Clearly, this one example illustrates why the need for more in-depth qualitative work, in a variety of comparison sites, with a variety of data collection strategies, is necessary in order to get beyond the surface. In addition, I didn’t need to interview parents to get “the full story” as if getting

“the fully story” can ever be accomplished in any research study. More importantly, I knew that the boys in my study might feel betrayed if they shared personal insights with me, then saw me talking to and/or hanging out with their parents. Early on in my own data collection process, I made the decision that my research focus would shift entirely to the perspective of Hmong youth.

### **Putting the “Critical” in Ethnography**

In the classic period in anthropology from about 1921 to 1971, Rosaldo (1993) argues that, “norms of distanced normalizing description gained a monopoly on objectivity. Their authority appeared so self-evident that they became the one and only legitimate form for telling the literal truth about other cultures” (p. 106). This mostly pre-1968 period in anthropology that Rosaldo refers to was ripe with problematic views of culture and ethnographic authority. Yon (2000) argues, “Postmodern theorizing asks us to consider the poetics of writing, the significance of representations, and the ways by which participants, authors and readers are all implicated in the production and reception of the text” (p. 22). Thanks largely to Clifford’s (1986) infamous essay on Balinese cockfighting written in 1972, we know that ethnographic *truths* are always partial and incomplete. However, it is still the researcher who has the last say—the one who gets to interpret the stories of her participants.

Many scholars from various disciplines have raised important concerns regarding the ethical and political issues surrounding ethnographic representation. This issue of representation is particularly complicated when researching communities vulnerable due to ethnic, racial and/or social inequalities (Twine, 2000) such as the Hmong. Critical

ethnography addresses many of these issues as it involves “studies which use an anthropological, qualitative, participant-observer methodology, but which rely on their theoretical formulation for a body of theory that comes from critical sociology and philosophy” (Apple cited by Masemann, 1982). While this form of ethnography had a strong start in the United Kingdom in the early 1970s, it was not until the 1980s that it began to build momentum in North America (Quantz, 1992). According to Quantz (1992), the critical ethnographer asks: How are marginalized participants positioned in material and symbolic relations, how do they participate in these relations, and how can our understanding work toward the restructuring of these relations?

Critical ethnography intersects with post-structuralism and feminism allowing the researcher to reject definitions of “truth” (Villenas, 2000). The problem is not that the ethnographer authenticates a particular truth, rather, “the ethnographer traces, but not without argument, the circulation of competing regimes of truth” (Britzman, 2000, p. 36). As Fine (1994) reminds us, we must create occasions for researchers and informants “to discuss what is, and is not “happening between” within the negotiated relations of whose story is being told, why, to whom, with what interpretation, and whose story is being shadowed, why, for whom, and with what consequence” (p. 72).

Britzman (2000) reminds us that, first, ethnography is not only a process, but a product; second, good ethnographies tell stories that contain qualities of a novel; and third, they “reveal the cultural knowledge working in a particular place and time as it is lived through the subjectivities of its inhabitants” (p. 27). Critical ethnographers are less interested in producing “holistic, universalizing portraits of entire cultures”, and more

focused on producing theory driven ethnographies of social institutions and their subgroups (Foley, Levinson, and Hurtig, 2000, p. 42). I utilize critical ethnography because it requires me to place Hmong families into a wider discourse of history and power (Quantz, 1992), moving “beneath surface appearances”, and bringing to light “underlying and obscure operations of power and control” (Madison, 2005, p. 5).

That each ethnographer produces a unique portrait of the people studied is a fact; however, the tradition of telling-it-like-it-is downplays the importance of the ethnographer’s responsibility to position her subjects in larger systems and social contexts (Ramos, 1987). Like De Genova’s (2005) study on transnational Mexican migrant workers in Chicago, this critical ethnography does not pretend to be an all-encompassing study or authoritative representation of Hmong families. Critical ethnographers such as Yon (2000), do not attempt to represent participants as being part of a “realist ethnography”, but instead analyze and question the various narratives that are produced in participants’ conversations.

### **Interpretations and (mis)interpretations by a Non-Hmong Researcher**

I align myself with Rosaldo’s (1989) thinking, that “all interpretations are provisional; they are made by positioned subjects who are prepared to know certain things and not others.” (p. 8). The ways in which I interpreted data as well as the lens I used to collect data were informed by my social location and life-experiences as an adopted Korean woman, raised in an affluent white family. The text I write is “situated knowledge” (Haraway, 1988); my interpretations and perceptions are not a “view from nowhere” as many post-structuralists have argued, does not exist.

From the conceptualization of my study to the final revisions, it is vital that I not only consider, but scrutinize my research positionality, (Behar, 1996; Wolcott, 1995). The impact of post-structuralist scholars has greatly impacted the ways that I approach the “critical” and the “political” in ethnographic research and writing (Behar, 1996). Given the work of this “post” scholarship, I share in this section how the *place* from which I am speaking (Bettie, 2003) has been developed and influenced. Throughout the research process and the writing of this dissertation, I have continued to ask myself how I am interpreting and representing my participants’ lives. Bettie (2003) argues:

Reflexive ethnography demands that as ethnographers we point to our own subjectivity, acknowledge that it undoubtedly shapes the story we tell, and—most importantly—recognize the fact of the power we wield, the power of interpretation. The text is not simply the result of an even negotiation between ethnographer and subject, because in the end authority literally remains with the ethnographer, as *author* of that text. (p. 22-23)

I was adopted from South Korea as a five-month old infant in the early 1970s, during the third decade (1970-1979) of Korean adoption to the U.S. During this time, white parents were told to assimilate their adopted Korean children as quickly as possible. I am told that the social workers at the mandatory classes that parents attended at adoption agencies and other social service agencies recommended that, in the best interest of the child, parents not teach their children about their Korean heritage or give them Korean names. Many of the parents who adopted during this time were politically and often times religiously conservative.

I was raised in an affluent, politically conservative family in the suburbs. Our family home was located next to the golf course where my parents were members of the country club. As the eldest child of three, it was my responsibility to entertain my dad’s

friends (read: colleagues) on weekend afternoons, making sure their drinks were always filled and they had someone to converse with if my dad was not readily available. By the age of 13, I could make just about any mixed drink consumed by white men in their forties and fifties and hold an adult conversation with them.

I regularly observed the ways that other men (read: white men) talked to and treated my dad wherever we went, as if they were all part of an unspoken club, even though they were complete strangers. I understood at an early age the ways that social and cultural capital worked amongst upper level business executives and their families. I was keenly aware of the automatic privilege that my dad held as he embodied a rare hegemonic masculinity ideal. My peers were the children of my dad's colleagues and our family "vacations" revolved around social networking events for our parents.

Although my dad was successful professionally before he officially retired in his mid-fifties, he was not born into privilege. In fact, he was born and raised in the same part of the city where the participants in my study live. His grandparents—my great-grandparents—were Polish immigrants who, like Hmong youths' parents in my study never received formal education nor learned to speak English, and worked non-unionized factory jobs or were paid under the table for menial labor. My dad's family was not working class, they were poor. To help support his family, my dad began working at the age of nine before school, after school, and on weekends. I have been told that it was not unusual in the early 1950s to see poor children working out in public in the U.S.

My dad made the decision to raise his own children with the same working-class principles that he still values. If I asked my dad for money, whether it was to buy a pair



of jeans or a car, he told me to “get a job.” If I already had a job, he told me to “get a second job.” In the late 1990s, my dad was a participant in my friend’s M.B.A. thesis research when she conducted interviews with corporate executive officers and presidents of successful companies. After her research was conducted she told me that my dad “is a good ol’ boy to the core”, and that she felt sorry for me because he believes that *everyone* can pull themselves up by their bootstraps, like he did.

Like most Asian Americans who were raised in the U.S., I have experienced everything from “Your English is so good, how long have you lived in our country?” to blatant, racist hostility. When these things happened to me, my parents not only refused to acknowledge them as racist events, but would not discuss them in relation to me. Like many young people of color, college was a profound time for me to think through issues of identity. After having been introduced to, and inspired by, the writing and work of the late Chicana feminist, Gloria Anzaldua, I proclaimed that I was a “person of color.” In response, my dad said, “You’re not *really* Asian Kari, you were just born in Korea.”

My family embraces meritocracy to its core. I am the only person in my family who believes that not everyone can pull themselves up by their bootstraps. I have had to go beyond my family to gain critical insights about race and social class as well as the ways that institutional structures and social structural locations have benefited my family in numerous ways. Obviously, not every adopted Korean adult in the U.S. shares my perspectives or has had my experiences. I have spent a lifetime reflecting on these issues as a non-white, Asian American, woman—an identity that I fully embrace now—but one I whole-heartedly rejected as an adolescent and teenager.

A. Goffman (2014) writes, “The act of doing fieldwork is a humbling one, particularly when you’re trying to understand a community or a job or a life that’s far away from who you are and what you know” (p. 229). This was a reality for me as well, only that many individual’s often believed that I already possessed knowledge because they assumed that I was Hmong. This happened at Leej Moua’s wedding<sup>23</sup>, the first Hmong wedding I had ever attended. As I walked into the Moua home, I was quickly sent to the kitchen with Leej’s female family members where I remained for over six hours assisting with cooking, serving Hmong males, and other duties assigned only to women during Hmong ceremonies.<sup>24</sup>

During this time, I had to take many directives. I assumed that I looked incompetent precisely because I looked like I should have known what I was doing. Occasionally, an older Hmong woman looked at me as if I were a hopeless case, but Leej’s two sisters were very kind and forgiving, saying things in Hmong to the older women in their family when I did something incorrectly. As an adult, I had never been in a position where I had to serve males and initially had an internal warfare within myself about it. After a few minutes, I told myself to get over it and just enjoy the event. Because I do not speak Hmong, I listened in to bits and pieces of several conversations happening at once, which were sometimes informally interpreted for me by Leej’s sisters. Most of all, I observed the body language of women and how they related to one another.

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<sup>23</sup> Leej Moua is a male participant in my study who married his 14 year old girlfriend when he was 17. This will be discussed in more detail in future chapters.

<sup>24</sup> In contrast, while in Thailand, I had been invited, as a non-Hmong guest, to sit at the table with several Hmong men in the village after a shaman ceremony had been performed. The women served us and then after the men and I were finished eating, they sat down and ate. The women would not let me help them clean or wash dishes after they had finished eating, even when I insisted several times.

What I realized is that events like these were opportunities for Hmong women to share the most pertinent issues happening in their lives and to receive advice and support from each other, away from men who stayed in the living room where ceremonies took place.

I appreciate the ways ethnographers document the complex ways their identities shape their research when they are members of the communities they have engaged with and also when they are non-members. Throughout my fieldwork, Hmong adults often spoke Hmong to me and when I could not speak Hmong back, they looked confused until someone explained that I was not Hmong. An older Hmong man in Thailand would not accept that I was anything but Hmong and asked me in frustration, through an interpreter, why I refused to admit that I was Hmong. I had similar experiences the summer of 2012 with Thai adults in Thailand and Japanese adults in Japan.

I did not take any of this personally, however, I found it fascinating that WTK Hmong youth (and Hmong children in Thailand) always knew I was not Hmong. I attribute this to several things, one of which is that children and youth are sublime observers and spend a great deal of time studying people. As Bourdieu (1977) notes, our social class and how our own cultures are shaped are engraved on our bodies in ways that we ourselves are often unaware. Initially, spending time with anyone in the Hmong community was *not* comfortable for me. In contrast, I was comfortable immediately at the predominately white suburban school that WTK Hmong youth attended because it reminded me somewhat of schools I had attended and because I am a former teacher.

## **Crossing Borders**

All researchers, no matter who they or their participants are, will cross borders in their work (Giroux, 1992) hopefully aware of the possibilities as well as limitations along the way (Dimitriadis, 2001). Even those who appear *not* to be border crossers always are. Vue (2012) is an example of this. He assumed he would have automatic insider status with the Hmong American males in his dissertation study. After all, he is Hmong *and* male and at one time had been active in the import car racing scene himself. However, he learned quickly that the young men in his study did not view him as they viewed themselves, rather, they perceived him as an academic and with suspicion. They wondered who he would talk to in their communities about activities that they did not talk in detail with their families about. For Vue, “getting in” was simply not based on shared race, ethnicity, or gender. It took time to build trust amongst his participants, much longer, he believes, than it may have for a non-Hmong researcher.

Islam (2000) argues that we are not automatically considered insiders in our respective ethnic communities and both insider and outsider status holds specific meanings as well as consequences. Furthermore, shared ethnicity and/or race between interviewer and participant does not guarantee more “accurate” data, nor is it a reason for the researcher *not* to engage with issues of power, representation, and control (Archer, 2002). Ispa-Landa (2013), a white female researcher whose participants were African American youth argues, “I do not believe that my cultural, geographic, and racial background invalidate my data. Rather, I think they influenced my interactions in the field and what participants shared with me” (2013, p. 6).

Qualitative researchers who are considered ethnic insiders with the communities that they conduct research with argue that the insider versus outsider binary is a myth that is as situational as it is relational (Brayboy, 2000; Islam, 2000). In my research, I move beyond insider versus outsider binaries to focus more on social position and location. Duneier (2004) warns researchers to “begin research with a humble commitment to being surprised by the things you learn in the field, and a constant awareness that your social position likely makes you blind to the very phenomena that might be useful to explain” (p. 212). I have reflected and re-reflected on how this applies to the choices I made while in the field as I know there were significant points I missed as well as significant points I likely focused too much on based on my social position.

In Duneier’s (2004) ethnography of African American street vendors in New York City, he often observed men urinating on the sides of buildings or in cups, but that this male behavior he has taken for granted throughout his life hardly seemed noteworthy. “But why” Duneier (2004) poses the question, “if I had been working out on the street every day and night with these men, had I not *understood* this to be a problem? How was it that while working with the housed and unhoused vendors I had not noticed this basic aspect of their lives, let alone conceived of it as a research issue?” (p. 212).

Bourgois (1996), a white researcher who conducted an ethnography of drug dealers and addicts in New York City’s Spanish Harlem, argues that it is not just taken for granted behaviors that go unnoticed, but that participant observation that many ethnographers rely on encourages researchers to “overlook negative dynamics because they need to be empathetically engaged with the people they study and must also have

their permission to live with them. This leads to an unconscious self-censorship that shapes the research settings and subjects anthropologists choose to study” (p. 14). Ipsa-Landa (2013) acknowledges that her social position and background caused her to misinterpret and sometimes miss altogether the intentions behind her participants’ words or actions, but believes her position as an outsider was ultimately beneficial to her research. During the course of her data collection, she said to participants,

“You know, I’m sorry, it’s hard for me to understand this—I grew up really differently....Can you clue me in?” Responses to such questions were frequently vivid. Participants enjoyed “teaching” me about their lives, and did so with great detail and interest. Thus, the ways that my own perceived or real status influenced the data I gathered does not seem to fall into any easy pattern (Ipsa-Landa, 2013, p. 7)

What I have reflected on throughout this study is how, as an outsider to the Hmong community, who “appears” at times to be an insider, am I interpreting and portraying the lives of Hmong boys and their families? Rios (2011), a Latino researcher who was raised in some of the same neighborhoods that the Latino and black participants in his study live in, chose to “normalize “dangerous settings” and instead discussed what happens on a routine basis—people living life, striving for dignity—and not what happens during extreme moments: people victimizing one another, often in response to marginalization” (p. 14). He wanted to avoid portraying a false reality of marginalized populations that could potentially confirm stereotypes and ignorance about the Latino and black boys in his study that readers may already have. As somewhat of a counter-argument, Bourgois (1996) argues:

Ethnographers never want to make the people they study look ugly. This imperative to sanitize the vulnerable is particularly strong in the United States, where survival-of-the-fittest, blame-the-victim-theories of individual action constitute a popular “common sense.” The result, as I have noted, is that ethnographic presentations of social marginalization are almost guaranteed to be

misread by the general public through a conservative, unforgiving lens. This has seriously limited the ability of intellectuals to debate issues of poverty, ethnic discrimination, and immigration. They are traumatized by the general public's obsession with personal worth and racial determinism. (p. 15)

Bourgois' (1996) developed an alternative, critical understanding of the U.S. inner city by presenting the lives and conversations of his participants in ways that emphasized the interface between structural oppression and individual action.

Because so little has been written about the Hmong in general and Hmong families in particular, I refuse to portray the lives of Hmong boys in ways that will pathologize or denigrate them based on their "culture", but *will* analyze the ways in which social structures and institutions have created major barriers for them and distressing consequences that have effected their lives. However, at the same time, "I refuse to ignore or minimize the social misery I witnessed, because that would make me complicit with oppression" (Bourgois, 2000, p. 207).

Prasit Leepreecha, a Hmong anthropologist at Chiang Mai University in Thailand, gave a keynote address at an international Hmong Studies conference in 2013, where he argued that non-Hmong scholars will always struggle in their research with Hmong communities because we do not have a deep enough knowledge of Hmong language and culture which is often historically expressed through oral language and traditional song, played through the qeej.<sup>25</sup> However, Leepreecha also discussed great challenges of being an insider in the Hmong community when conducting research. Ultimately, he urged, we

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<sup>25</sup> It has been explained to me by Hmong scholars that the qeej is more than an instrument to the Hmong because stories of history and culture are expressed through the playing of this instrument. Every day while in the Hmong village in Northern Thailand, I saw older men sitting outside of their doorsteps to their homes, playing the qeej.

have a responsibility in the scholarly community not to reproduce negative stereotypes, and instead make contributions that will move beyond causes and contexts. Community engaged research practices, he argued, and prolonged engagement in Hmong communities throughout the diaspora, will ultimately lend itself to this.



## Chapter 4

### Successful Immigrants, Refugee Failures: Racialized Gender Narratives in Family and School Spaces

When I first interviewed Kong in January 2013, he had just turned 20 years old and had begun his second semester as a freshman in college. Dressed in a long sleeved hoodie with the name of his former high school on it, jeans and white tennis shoes, he walked quickly into the meeting room I had reserved for us on his university campus drinking a can of soda. He had a short, spikey hair cut, characteristic of all of the WTK Hmong boys I came to know—a “HTT”<sup>26</sup> haircut, according to Teng. He had an iPod that he used to text with his girlfriend, but did not carry a cell phone or a smart phone like most undergraduates I had observed on his university campus. Through glass windows, I had watched him walk to the meeting room with an Asian American looking woman who left before he entered the room. Later on I learned that she is his girlfriend, a Hmong American woman, Amanda, who was born and raised in the U.S.

After he sat down at a table across from me, he turned his iPod off and put it in a pocket in his backpack. When he spoke, a smile appeared periodically, but disappeared just as quickly. He had several scars on his face, reminiscent of someone who had once had a bad case of chicken pox. He did not engage in small talk with me and at times I wasn't actually sure he wanted to be there. I asked him several times if he wanted to take

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<sup>26</sup> HTT stands for Hmong Tai Teb (*Hmong Thailand*). It is the acronym that Hmong American youth use to describe WTK Hmong youth. It is similar to FOB (Fresh off the Boat) that has been historically used by second generation Asian American youth to describe newly arrived Asian immigrant youth. In a chapter that follows, I discuss the reasons why youth in my study, particularly girls, “hate” being called HTT.

a break or perhaps end our interview early, but he always said he was fine and continued to talk. Unlike his mother, he was okay with being audio recorded. When I asked him to describe his first year at SJH in 2007, he immediately described the one-hour bus ride to school:

Kong: Well, every kid on the bus was black. And on the bus it was very, very crowded. I was the last one on the bus, so I usually had to stand on the bus.

Kari: So there weren't enough seats on the bus or the black kids wouldn't let you sit with them?

Kong: I sometimes asked if they will let me sit next to them and they always said no... I just stood on the bus for one whole year.

Kari: And the bus driver said nothing?

Kong: No.

Kari: What?

Kong: And because I cannot speak any English then, too.

Kari: Did you say anything to your parents or your teachers that 'hey, I'm standing on the bus for an entire hour while the bus is moving.'

Kong: No because at that time, we don't know anything about the school system or how the school works.

Kari: Where did you stand on the bus? By the bus driver?

Kong: Just like the second row near the bus driver.

Kari: And the bus driver never said anything? He just let you stand there the entire time?

Kong: Yes.

Kari: I can't even begin to imagine how that felt.

Kong: It was a very, very long ride.

While Kong described standing on the bus every day of school, for one-hour, for an entire year, he reported it matter-of-factly as if it were simply another memory about his schooling. He did not appear angry, resentful, or even sad, but I was horrified and told

him so. To date, I had never heard of a child being forced to stand on a moving school bus with no intervention by a bus driver.<sup>27</sup> To make matters worse, Kong could not speak English which is the reason he gave for not being able to tell any of his teachers what was happening to him. Sadly, he did not want to burden his parents who had never been formally educated in Laos or Thailand with a problem he believed they would not be able to solve let alone respond to.

Dr. Anderson summed up Kong's first year at SJH as "wonderful" and noted his "sweet smile" often. In fact, nobody who I spoke to, including Mark or Teng, understood at the time just how isolated Kong was at SJH. "There were weeks when I didn't talk to anybody," he said, and then described what it felt like to sit in the back of his classes silently, eat lunch alone every day in the cafeteria, and to walk through the hallways without recognizing a single face. He wanted to talk, but couldn't find any English words. Unlike the prolific newspaper article written by a journalist that described Kong as "painfully shy" and not as savvy or academically sophisticated as his older brother, Kue. What I came to understand about Kong throughout my study is that he was not painfully shy or antisocial. Kong Lee simply could not communicate with anybody. And based on his previous schooling experiences that began in Thailand, everything about SJH terrified him.

### **Doing School**

The girls are extremely driven, very conscious. I have a girl who is always keeping me on task, and if there is any down time she is doing her homework... The organization and determination is what I see makes them successful. Junior high teachers know what is the ticket and they respond to that so if a student

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<sup>27</sup> Because of the location of the suburban school, the bus route included freeways where the average speed is 60 mph.

comes to them and is asking for help, that is more admirable really than just turning your work in. (Reading teacher at SJH, Grades 7-9)

I have more girls in the group and they do appear to be more studious and a little more hardworking... The Hmong boys, I have a harder time setting up a relationship with them and I am sure if I was a male teacher it would be as hard with them. I think the Hmong males don't know quite how to have a relationship with a teacher. (Study tutor at SJH, Grades 7-9)

When the PI and I first visited SJH at the start of the original study, we both noted how different this suburban school was compared to the urban schools in the neighborhoods where WTK Hmong students live. Unlike these schools, SJH did not greet us with metal detectors, security guards and/or other types of security apparatus' at the front doors checking visitors in. The main office of the school was located near the main entrance and all visitors were asked to sign in at the front desk and wear a visitor's badge. The school was bright, clean and welcoming with student artwork and murals hanging on walls throughout the building. The majority of classrooms were equipped with the latest learning technologies including interactive white boards and rows of white Macintosh computers. There was an Olympic sized pool in the building as well as a rock climbing gym outfitted with all of the latest equipment.

Junior highs are often discussed by educators as odd spaces as well as an odd time in students' lives. In my own informal conversations with parents and educators, some even refer to junior high as a "no mans land" or an "inbetween space" referring to the more influential elementary and high school experiences that occur in students' lives. However, I argue that there is much to be learned in junior high schools with students who are at fascinating stages in their emotional and physical development. In addition, every teacher interviewed at SJH said they loved teaching junior high students and had

chosen to work with this age group. If given the opportunity to work at an elementary or high school, none of the teachers said they would leave SJH.

Between January, 2010–April, 2010, the PI and I interviewed 17 teachers at SJH<sup>28</sup>. Although teachers had really only had groups of Hmong students in their classes for 1.5 years, the PI and I were impressed at how much effort they put into accommodating Hmong students. In fact, we had never been in a school quite like SJH where teachers and staff welcomed us, were happy to have us observe their classes and seemed to genuinely care about all of their students—including Hmong students. We often joked that this idyllic school had to have some cracks in it and that they would eventually be exposed, but during the 2009–2010 year, the teachers and staff continued to exceed our expectations.

The minimum length of time most teachers had been at SJH was eight years and many of them talked about SJH as their dream school with exceptional teachers and a highly supportive principal, Dr. Anderson. All of the teachers said if it were up to them, they would retire at SJH. The PI and I never got the sense that they were just saying this for our benefit. They were a group of enthusiastic, highly skilled, highly educated, caring teachers who chose to be at SJH<sup>29</sup>. With the exception of an English teacher who prided herself on tackling difficult issues related to “race” in her women’s studies and film

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<sup>28</sup> Teachers had been contacted personally by Dr. Anderson if they’d had Hmong students in their classes and encouraged to be interviewed. If interested, they filled out a form (created by me) and put it in a box I had provided them that sat in the staff mailing room. 19 teachers filled out the forms and I contacted each one to set up an interview. Interviews with two teachers fell through, but the other 17 teachers all made time in their day to talk to us.

<sup>29</sup> 16 out of 17 teachers were white females. The only male teacher interviewed was a science teacher and the only non-white teacher interviewed was a female ELL teacher originally from West Africa.

studies classes, but then confused an adopted Korean student with a Hmong student throughout my interview with her, teachers knew who Hmong students were in their classes.

Teachers gave Hmong students, all of whom were ELL students, extra time on exams, options for modified exams as well as extra time outside of class to help them with homework. They went out of their way to help Hmong students with their class assignments even if it cut into their prep time. Some said they understood that Hmong students could not stay after school for tutoring due to transportation issues, so they went out of their way to provide 1:1 tutoring for them. Teachers were very understanding; they never blamed Hmong students for their ELL needs, nor did they put sole responsibility on ELL teachers to “fix” students’ problems. Content teachers saw it as their responsibility to work with ELL teachers to address students’ needs throughout the academic year.<sup>30</sup> Hmong students spent an hour a day in ELL class and an additional hour in ELL study time, but the rest of their day was spent in mainstream content courses with peers who were not Hmong.<sup>31</sup>

By 2009, it was evident when the annual standardized testing results arrived that Hmong students were struggling in science and social studies courses. In response to this, Dr. Anderson, a charismatic, white woman described by every teacher as a well-liked, strong, and supportive leader, allocated funds in her budget to support a highly expensive,

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<sup>30</sup> S. Lee (2005) found that all of the mainstream teachers in a school similar to SJH made ELL teachers solely responsible for Hmong students’ ELL needs. This is much more common.

<sup>31</sup> When teachers are competent in their content areas and open to working with diverse learners such as ELL students, this non-sheltered ELL model has been proven to be most effective to address ELL learners’ academic needs.

innovative model that gives ELL teachers the opportunity to teach paired ELL courses with content teachers in science and social studies.<sup>32</sup> She also allocated funds to support professional development in the areas of culturally relevant pedagogy and teaching diverse learners for all teachers in the school. Although Hmong students said science and social studies were their least favorite classes because of how difficult they were, only the girls said the reason their favorite teacher was a certain science teacher was because he “still pushes you so that you can reach the same level as the Americans<sup>33</sup> and the other races.” All of the social studies, civics, and science teachers we interviewed discussed the multiple benefits of this model stating that it made their assignments better and their pedagogy stronger for all of their students, not just their Hmong students.

The majority of students who chose the school choice option were Hmong girls. When I asked Mark and Teng for an explanation, they attributed it to the fact that girls were more motivated and had higher educational aspirations than their brothers and cousins. In fact, they had nicknamed the cohort of Hmong girls that arrived together to SJH during the academic year of 2009–2010, Totally Awesome Girls (TAG). S. Lee (2001) also found that Hmong girls who attended a school similar to SJH had far higher educational aspirations, persistence, and achievement than their Hmong male counterparts in part as a response to cultural norms regarding gender in Hmong families (Donnelly, 1994; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988). However, as I discussed in detail in Chapter two, contrary to popular belief amongst many in the Hmong community, Hmong females

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<sup>32</sup> As a former ELL professional, I not only know how rare it is for a principal to support this model because of the high cost, but also how successful the paired course model is in raising students' grades in content courses. It also builds more understanding between ELL and content teachers which creates collegiality that ultimately benefits ELL students.

<sup>33</sup>“Americans” was always used by WTK Hmong youth and their parents to refer to whites.

actually lag behind Hmong males in actual educational attainment in the U.S. (S. Lee, 2001; K. Yang & Pfeifer, 2004; H. Vang, 2004).

The girls, who were all members of the TAG group, lamented the fact that they could not stay after school to participate in tutoring sessions or after-school programs aimed at high school preparation because their parents wanted them to come home right after school. Therefore, girls often worked in pairs or in small groups at study hour, or on bus rides home helping each other with assignments and homework. Like Barajas and Pierce (2001) discovered with Latinas who were academically successful, Hmong girls sought protective relationships with one another and supported one another academically. Several teachers pointed out this trend amongst the girls and spoke about their supportive relationships positively. Not one teacher said it bothered them when girls spoke Hmong to one another to discuss assignments. When I asked about the boys, teachers noted that Hmong girls sometimes scolded them in class for not working hard enough; Hmong boys, who often sat alone, seemed to perceive school work as an individual pursuit.

Although teachers did not call Hmong girls TAG, they discussed them much differently than the girls' brothers and male cousins. In fact, the most common word teachers used to describe boys was "quiet." Girls were also described as quiet, but in connection to being good students. In fact, several teachers said verbatim, Hmong girls just "know how to do school." In the literature, *doing school* has been coined and that many teachers at SJH used these definitions when applying *doing school* to Hmong girls. Writes Pope (2002):

They realize that they are caught in a system where achievement depends more on "doing" – going through the correct motion—than learning and engaging with the



curriculum. Instead of thinking deeply about the content of their courses and delving into projects and assignments, the students focus on managing the work load and honing strategies that will help them to achieve high grades. They learn to raise their hands even when they don't know the answers to the teachers' questions in order to appear interested. They understand the importance of forming alliances and classroom treaties to win favors from teachers and administrators. (p. 4)

The students Pope (2012) studied were mostly white, upper middle and upper class students who *chose to do school*, arguing that they did not go to school to get good grades, but to get into good colleges (read: Selective four-year liberal arts and Ivy League institutions). In contrast, Hmong girls adapt *doing school* strategies because they are fully aware that they lack the academic background, social and cultural capital, and academic English literacy that they need in order to be truly academically successful in a predominately white suburban institution. *Doing school* gets teachers to pay closer attention to girls and gives them an incentive to want to help them because girls are perceived as highly motivated.

Girls used common *doing school* strategies by keeping their work organized in three-ring binders, occupying the two front rows in the classroom, raising their hands in class, asking teachers for help or to clarify an assignment after class, paying attention in class and being respectful to teachers and classmates. Teachers also described girls as being focused on school rather than social issues that distracted them. A civics teacher said emphatically that Hmong girls “are totally driven to succeed academically and they aren't at all doing any kind of socializing or goofing around.”

Hmong boys, who were always compared to Hmong girls, were described as having less literary skills in English by almost every teacher we spoke to. They were also

described as less articulate, having a heavier accent, and being “slow” academically as well as socially. One teacher even questioned if a Hmong boy in her class had a learning disability when she compared him to a highly motivated female Hmong student. There was only one Hmong boy, Leej Moua, who teachers described as “outstanding”, but again, when I pushed for concrete information about what made him such a high achiever, teachers struggled to articulate any concrete details. A civics teacher explained what many teachers also observed about Leej:

He is a delight, just a sparkle. He clearly has been here for a long time. He has only occasionally asked me for clarification of what the heck were you saying in English. Repeat it again, walk me through it so that I can understand it; restate it a couple of times. He’s clearly goofing around with other students in a positive social light.

Like several teachers, this civics teacher referred to Leej as “highly motivated” but again focused on his ability to *do school* and his social skills that she saw as much more developed than other boys his age. This teacher assumed Leej had lived in the U.S. for a longer time when in actuality, he had arrived in the U.S. the same time as other boys his age. I never got the sense that teachers were particularly concerned about Hmong boys; In fact, some teachers were annoyed by what they perceived to be boys’ lack of motivation. A conversation with an eighth grade earth science teacher represented several of the teachers’ attitudes towards Hmong girls and boys:

Science teacher: I’m thinking of Mai and Tou. She’s an outstanding student. She works so hard. She always gets all of her homework done and she does very well. And I think of Tou who struggles with homework. He doesn’t do it. He doesn’t ask any questions, he doesn’t participate in class and he doesn’t do well on the tests. They’re so different from one another and they’re in the same class.

Kari: What do you think is going on with Tou?

Science teacher: Honest? I think he’s lazy.

Hmong boys were described as either lacking the English literacy skills that their female counterparts possessed or lacking motivation. Some teachers believed that school just wasn't valued as much by Hmong boys as it was with Hmong girls. When the PI or I asked teachers why they held these beliefs about boys, many struggled to find a response and admitted so. However, when we asked them why they held these beliefs about Hmong girls, almost every teacher said it was due to "Hmong culture" and "Hmong families" noting that they "value" education. A reading teacher said:

I think they are taking up a huge role. They have to be. My Hmong students [female] are coming to me with the idea that education is valued, and you need to take advantage of it and you need to do your best at all times. I would love to say, well it's because of me, but they came to me with that strong work ethic and that strong value of education.

Prior to teaching WTK Hmong students, none of the teachers had any experience with Hmong students or families and admitted not knowing much about Hmong history or culture. Still, most teachers were adamant that "Hmong culture" was the sole reason behind Hmong girls' high levels of motivation. Some teachers used standardized test scores and grades to prove their points. When I analyzed these scores and grades, I did find that the majority of girls performed slightly higher than boys in science, math and reading. However, using achievement data to prove that Hmong girls are performing at a higher level than Hmong boys does not begin to give an accurate picture of their academic abilities, because: 1) The majority of Hmong students at SJH are girls; and 2) Although Hmong girls' standardized test scores improved steadily, particularly in areas where teachers targeted academic content that was challenging, teachers relayed that these scores were still below average at SJH.

The fact that WTK Hmong students are still catching up academically to the majority white population in their school is understandable as they arrived in the U.S. with their families between 2004 and 2006. Only five years later, when observations and interviews were conducted at SJH, both Hmong girls and boys were making great strides, particularly girls, but they were still struggling academically. It has been well documented in second language acquisition literature that formal schooling in a student's first language is a significant predictor of academic success; an uninterrupted education as well as acquiring literacy through *formal* means is vital (Bosher & Rowekamp, 1998; Thomas & Collier, 1997). However, while living in WTK, the majority of Hmong children and their parents were not exposed consistently to academic literacy in Hmong, Thai or English which is why many youth struggle with academic English much longer than those who have had consistent formal education prior to their arrival in the U.S. (Scarcella, 2003).

The reasons for Hmong girls' higher levels of academic performance could be, in part, their response to Hmong cultural norms. S. Lee (1997) discovered that Hmong female college students believed that men in their families could gain respect with or without education, but education was the only way for women to gain "freedom". In fact, one of the girls said to me about Hmong boys, "The guys are free, like they can do whatever they want." In addition, Hmong girls' ability to *do school* gave them more individual time with teachers which then gave them more opportunities to practice and develop their literacy in academic English. Because the majority of boys did not *do school*, it was easy for teachers to ignore boys and focus their attention on girls.

Statz (2014) argues that schooling is “good citizenship” as it distinguishes individuals’ predisposition for “hard work, cooperation, responsibility, and rationality” (p. 7). SJH is a school that prides itself on academic excellence and high standards for all students. Bearing this in mind, I make two central arguments in my analysis about the ways that Hmong girls and Hmong boys were viewed and consequently perceived, or in Hmong boys’ cases, ignored, at SJH by well-intentioned junior high teachers.

First, the “forever foreigner” stereotype was cast upon Hmong boys at SJH. This status is often times connected inexorably to refugees; it is the “ideological blackening” that Ong (2003) contrasts to the “whitening” of more “assimilate-able” (read: white American, middle class, upwardly mobile) Asian Americans, or in the case of SJH, Hmong girls. Hmong boys ultimately failed at being model minorities like their female counterparts which implies a “moral shortcoming due to their own individual failure, but also separates them from the American norm, thereby reinforcing their foreigner status” (Park, 2008, p. 136).

Teachers viewed Hmong boys like Kong Lee as “quiet” with a “heavy accent”, inept “socially”, “lazy” or in extreme cases, “learning disabled”. Most teachers believed Hmong boys were incapable of having relationships with teachers in the same ways Hmong girls could. The model minority narratives that teachers associated with “Hmong culture” were so strongly applied to Hmong girls, they failed to get at the deeper reasons why Hmong boys struggled and instead blamed it on their motivation. This is another example of how “forever foreigner” narratives that teachers ascribed to Hmong boys are dangerous. Teachers and other staff, including the bus driver that drove him to school

every morning, ignored Kong because it was easy to do so. Ogden (2008), who theorizes the existence of “refugee utopias” in his research, argues:

Refugees will, simply put, never fit in. Their highest objective is constrained by their appellation: to seek refuge. Once refuge is secured, they simply exist as best as possible without any clear progressive outcome beyond merely continuing to live and breathe. As the quintessential “perpetual foreigner,” the refugee is at particular risk to achieve, within the racialized and materialist American sociocultural and socioeconomic hierarchy, a permanent position at the bottom. (p. 9)

Second, I argue that although it appeared that Hmong girls were at a significant advantage at SJH because of the ways that teachers perceived them through successful immigrant, model minority, and meritocracy narratives compared to Hmong boys who had been positioned as “perpetual foreigners” or as I suggest “perpetual refugees”, it was easy for Hmong teachers to miss the struggles of Hmong girls. This is not to say that teachers did not go out of their way to work intensely with Hmong girls or that the school principal did not support learning and innovative pedagogical strategies that targeted second language learners. In fact, I have never seen a school address ELL students’ needs as well as SJH and these teachers and principal should be applauded. What I am pointing out are the ways in which these narratives were applied solely to Hmong girls which factored into teachers’ perceptions of girls doing much better than they actually were.

In addition, because teachers who were largely white, female, and middle class believed they knew Hmong girls well (compared to Hmong boys) and felt a shared camaraderie with them (again, compared to Hmong boys), they bought into meritocracy narratives that Hmong girls were actively pulling themselves up by their boot straps and were entirely self-sufficient. Hmong girls were no longer refugees like their brothers and

cousins; they were immigrants now, doing things the right way, “emphasizing their participation in the legacy of American immigration” (Ogden, 2008, p. 12).

Absent from teachers’ explanations about Hmong girls’ academic abilities were the sophisticated, critical, academic work that is necessary for honors, advanced placement, or international baccalaureate programs in high school that are a direct track to four-year degree granting institutions. The *doing school* strategy might indeed work for white, middle class students at SJH who are residents of the suburb where the school is located and have been tracked into high achieving programs since elementary school, but it will never be enough for WTK Hmong girls.

### **Doing Family**

#### Fieldnote. February 13, 2010

There are 14 kids here, ten girls and four boys at the college admissions workshop. The girls are chatting with one another in Hmong while the boys sit silently with their usual deer caught in the headlights look. The two university staff who have volunteered their time to run this workshop specifically for WTK Hmong kids hand out slick looking university folders and pens and begin to review requirements for admission. The girls’ hands all shoot up and they ask questions about requirements for nursing school. None of the boys ask questions until much later when a boy raises his hand and asks, “What if I want to do auto mechanics? What classes should I take for that?” Do these kids not have guidance counselors? Some of them are seniors in high school and still have no idea what classes to take. This guy is being tracked into vocational school. Does he know this?

With the exception of this guy, the rest remain quiet as the girls’ hands keep shooting up asking questions about nursing: What classes should I take? Should I do the health sciences track? (Note: I’m worried that the health sciences track is a vocational track, not what they need for a four-year degree in nursing). Should I take all A.P. classes? Should I do three years of science? Two years of chemistry? One year of physics? The girls are taking notes and re-reading the handouts in the folders whereas only one boy has even opened his folder. I lean over to get [Teng’s] attention, and notice that he’s on *Facebook*, messaging with someone. I kick his chair and he also looks at me with that deer caught in the headlights look. We both laugh.

After the event, the kids begin walking to the 15-passenger van that [Teng] is driving to drop everyone off at home. The kids are all laughing and taking photographs of one another with one of their flip phones. As we are walking, a girl from one of the focus

groups I conducted earlier in the summer catches up to me. “I remember you from last summer,” she says and then talks to me like we’ve been talking to one another every day since last summer.

“It’s so hard,” she says, “my life is so hard. All I do is work and go to school.” She is part of the Totally Awesome Girl’s group. She talks to me like I’m an older sister. She walks super close to me and at one point loops her arm through mine. She looks at me intensely and says, “I’m so tired. Just so, so tired. I don’t know what to do. What do you think I should do?” I can’t think of what to say to her. What could I possibly say? As we approach the van, [Teng] says, “You riding shot gun, Smalkoski?” As I climb into the front passenger seat, the girl I’ve been talking to disappears into a back row.

Li was a 15-year old sophomore at SSH when she shared with me how desperate she had become to change her current life situation. In the focus group she had participated in, she had explained that she lived with her grandmother, a Hmong shaman, and spent her weekends helping her prepare for ceremonies. This included intensive amounts of cooking and cleaning as well as killing, cleaning and preparing chickens. She had no time to study or do homework on weekends so she had to fit all of her school responsibilities in on weekdays along with her regular household responsibilities that included cleaning, cooking, and helping her grandmother run errands and interpreting for her at appointments. She said that she averaged four to five hours of sleep on school nights.

Like Li, many of the Hmong girls I came to know were perpetually exhausted. They spent their days taking care of household responsibilities while both of their parents worked outside of the home. I observed the ways they multitasked throughout their day as if they had been doing it their entire lives and after making this observation to them, they shared with me that they actually had been doing it their entire lives, in Wat Tham Krabok. In the section that follows, I will discuss the ways that family spaces are occupied differently by boys than girls based on their lives that *began* in WTK and have *continued* in the U.S.



**Family spaces.** I recall a lengthy lunch conversation with Leej and Kiab Moua on a Saturday in September, 2013 that solidified for me that life truly began in WTK for Leej, Kiab, and many of the youth in my study. When I arrived to the Moua home, their parents were not there and Kiab, who was 20 years old at the time, had prepared lunch. She set the table and served her younger brother and me vast amounts of home cooked Hmong food that would have taken me over a day to prepare let alone conceptualize. I was at the Moua home to help Kiab with her resume and job applications. Leej happened to be home and joined us for lunch, carrying his infant daughter in his arms. Their younger brother, Kai, who was 15 at the time and had just begun the tenth grade at SSH, ran downstairs in his soccer uniform while we sat around the large dining room table waiting to eat. He waved at me, smiled and kept running out the back door to get to the nearby park for practice. The battery in the home's fire alarm had died and the alarm beeped loudly every five minutes. I wrote in my field notes that this alarm has been beeping since I first visited almost eight months ago, but nobody has replaced the battery nor seems to notice when it beeps anymore.

Unlike the Lee's home that always appears well-organized and well-maintained, the Moua's home is always messy, mainly due to and Kiab and Leej's five-year old sister who has a habit of writing all over the walls with crayons and markers. However, the house is so clean, that it always smells like industrial strength bleach. Leej, who was 18 at the time of my visit, had experienced three major life-events in a short amount of time. In January 2013, he married his then 14-year old girlfriend; later in June, he graduated from high school at SSH; and less than a month ago, his wife gave birth to a girl.

Leej sat at the dining room table holding his infant daughter in his arms as Kiab grabbed us bottled water in the kitchen. His wife, who was 15 at the time and a sophomore at SSH, was upstairs in the bedroom they share across the hall from his parents' bedroom. "Does she want to eat with us?" I asked. "Nah, I think she already ate or something," Leej said and then asked if I wanted to hold the baby who he and his wife named "Eclipse". As I held her, I thought about an interview I had conducted with Laj a couple of years ago. Vehemently opposed to early marriage in the Hmong community overall, which he says affects over 50% of underage girls. He said he would not hesitate to call the county on any Hmong person who engages in early marriage practices.<sup>34</sup> "It is the only way to end this," he said, arguing that as long as Hmong people say it is part of their culture, and the elders allow it to continue, nothing will change.

I also recalled all of the positive things Leej's teachers at SJH had said about him—that he was the only boy who they thought would matriculate with ease to college because he was highly motivated unlike most of the other Hmong boys. Earlier in February, when I last interviewed him, he told me that the acceptance letters and scholarships from state universities had begun to arrive in the mail, but he was unsure which college he would attend. Now he is faced with the realization that he may never go

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<sup>34</sup> Early marriage is a major issue in the Hmong community and individuals and community leaders alike hold a wide range of viewpoints about the ways it impacts individuals, families, and the larger Hmong community. Early marriage is beyond the scope of this research study; an in-depth study on early marriage practices within the WTK Hmong community has not yet been conducted. I encourage readers to think through the decisions youth must make when they are involved in early marriage rather than making assumptions and judgments about youth in this predicament.

to college as he planned.<sup>35</sup> “She really makes life complicated,” Leej said, as he looked at his daughter sleeping soundly in my arms.

Leej had just secured a full-time job, Monday through Friday, at a factory in a nearby suburb and planned to drive there with only a driver’s permit until he got a driver’s license. The entire family is keeping the baby a secret and are worried about putting her into daycare in case anyone reports them to the county; to remedy this situation, Leej’s mom<sup>36</sup>, who is only ten years older than him, quit her job to take care of the baby full-time at home. When the baby woke crying, Kiab grabbed a bottle of formula and handed it to Leej who took the baby from my arms to feed her. “Is your wife breastfeeding?” I asked. “No. She can’t get enough of this stuff,” Leej said, as he put the bottle into her tiny mouth.

As we ate the delicious lunch Kiab had prepared, I asked them to describe family meals in WTK. I had posed this question to get a better sense of the Leej home space and learned that their house had concrete walls and floors with indoor plumbing. Hearing this made me realize the Moua’s were financially stable in WTK compared to other families who lived in houses with dirt floors and walls made of bamboo with no indoor plumbing.<sup>37</sup> As Grigoleit (2006) explains, because WTK was never an official refugee camp, families’ quality of life varied as relief from the government was not provided.

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<sup>35</sup> Many researchers have focused on the ways that early marriage practices affect Hmong girls, but little has been conducted on how it affects Hmong boys.

<sup>36</sup> Even though the kids call her “mom”, she is actually their step-mom. She was their father’s second wife in WTK. Shortly after they all arrived in the U.S., their dad divorced their mother. They rarely see her as she has since remarried and has two children who they have no relationship with.

<sup>37</sup> This is similar to the ways that Hmong villages in Northern Thailand currently function. While conducting fieldwork in 2012, I stayed with a clan who were refugees from Laos and considered poor. Their houses were small with dirt floors, bamboo walls, and no indoor plumbing. Only a few blocks away, another clan, who has lived in Thailand three generations, owned lychee farms and lived in large, modern

Access to water, food, shelter, sanitation, and wood, and basic services such as medical care or removal of garbage, were generally met for those who had adequate sources of income... Some families lived relatively well in houses with solid walls made of steel and cement and could afford consumer goods such as mobile phones, motorcycles, televisions sets, and VCRs. But at the same time there was a subsistence group at the camp which was exceedingly poor and depended heavily on their relatives from outside WTK for sheer survival. (Grigoleit, 2006, p. 5-6)

In 2012, when I visited WTK, it was explained to me by Tong that the 93 acres that they had given to WTK families to live on were vibrant and functioned like a small city.

According to Grigoleit (2006) and the Tong, there were daily markets, many stores and small restaurants within the 93 acres the WTK Hmong occupied. Every day Leej played traditional Hmong games as well as volleyball, soccer, and badminton with his male friends. Hearing men play qeej throughout WTK was not uncommon. These cultural practices were performed daily in WTK, but mainly by Hmong males as girls often occupied the home space with their grandmothers and mothers. Because of this arrangement, many girls gained skills from managing and working in small family owned businesses in WTK.

Both Leej and Kiab had been born in Thailand and raised in WTK, but their parents and grandparents were refugees from Laos who had previously lived in more than one Thai refugee camp. Clearly these older generations of Hmong had different experiences in WTK than their children.<sup>38</sup> It is significant that WTK Hmong youth were never actually refugees. Leej described WTK as the “best time of my life” because he had “complete freedom” to do “whatever I wanted.” As Kiab explained, Leej and the rest of

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houses with walls and floors made of cement and steel and had many creature comforts including indoor plumbing, wifi, and smartphones.

<sup>38</sup> The experiences of the older adults are currently being documented by a doctoral student and his advisor at a different U.S. university than the one I am affiliated with.

the boys in her neighborhood played all day while she and other girls worked alongside their mothers and grandmothers sewing *Paj ntaub* (patterns on traditional Hmong clothing worn at cultural celebrations).

While in Northern Thailand, I interviewed a Hmong woman in July, 2012 whose family was part of the first Hmong migration to Thailand and who proudly referred to herself as “Hmong Thai”.<sup>39</sup> She explained to me, through an interpreter, that only girls listen to their parents. They learn *Paj ntaub* and stay at home to help their mothers. Boys on the other hand don’t listen to their parents and spend all day gaming in one of the six Internet cafes in the village. She described having close relationships with her daughters, but a strained one with her son:

Parents have had meetings in the village to try and stop their boys from gaming. They don’t even eat; they just grab money from home and go to the cafes. It is affecting their school work. It has gotten so bad that someone even tried to set fire to one of the cafes. Before the cafes came into the village, the boys would buy fish and look at their fish tanks, feed pigs, play soccer, make papaya salad...

Even so, she admitted to dropping her elementary school-aged son off on weekend mornings at the Internet cafes and letting him stay all day with his friends. “I stop by to check on him to make sure he’s eating,” she said. It was as if she knew it was wrong, but felt she couldn’t stop him from doing what he wanted.

**Schooling in Thailand for WTK Hmong youth.** Kiab, Leej, and other WTK Hmong youth had walked over an hour to get to a Thai school with many other Hmong children from WTK, but summed up the experience as “a joke.” 98% of the children were

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<sup>39</sup> The “Hmong Thai” I met are not refugees from Laos. They came from fairly wealthy clans who owned farms in Northern Thailand. The few Hmong Thai I spoke to used meritocracy narratives to describe the Hmong Lao, accusing them of being lazy and responsible for their poverty. “Anti-Thai-government Hmong Lao” were described by her as refugees from Laos, including WTK Hmong and all Hmong living in the U.S., who had followed General Vang Pao.

Hmong and the Thai teachers refused to teach them anything. “One of the male teachers made the girls give him massages and a female teacher made kids pick grey hairs out of her head,” Kiab said, as Leej nodded in agreement. “And the kids got hit by sticks,” he added. Leej explained that teachers told kids to gather sticks on their walk to school and then they used the sticks to hit kids all day for misbehaving. “The worst part is that families had to pay money to send their kids there—it was not free.” Several other kids that I spoke to, whose parents had enough money to send them to school, also described school as “a joke”, but that there was little their parents could do because they were undocumented in Thailand. Leej recalled a friend of his who had gotten beaten badly by a teacher, but his parents just blamed him. “They said he probably did something to deserve it.”

Kiab dropped out of school in the fourth grade, but Leej continued to go. Their parents decided Kiab, the eldest and a girl, would stay home and help her grandmother and mother sew *Paj ntaub* which had become a fairly lucrative family business. Grigoleit (2006) notes that if a family was large enough and several individuals were willing to work hard, there could be enough money to make a decent income. Part of Kiab’s responsibilities included walking to the post office with her grandmother and mother to mail *Paj ntaub* to family members in the U.S. who sold it at Hmong markets. It was during this time when Kiab learned how to deal with transaction fees and had to communicate in Thai with adults at the post office. In addition, when Kiab turned eleven, she began helping her grandparents manage the family store in WTK. Kiab and several other Hmong girls in WTK were getting a different kind of schooling within their

families than they did in Thai schools; amongst many skillsets they gained were the ability to multitask and carry out adult responsibilities and relationships through work.

Because of the labor Kiab did, which most likely exceeded 40-hours a week by the time she was eleven years old, she has never described WTK as a place where she had freedom to do whatever she wanted like her brother, Leej. However, she misses WTK because it was the only time in her life when she had opportunities to spend quality, uninterrupted time, with her grandmother and mother—time she never had again after they moved to the U.S. where life quickly became “complicated.” In fact, Kiab often described her life in the U.S. as “too much” as she is responsible for two younger siblings in elementary school, housework, and helping her parents regularly with phone calls, paying bills, and all of their interpretation needs. When she arrived to college as a freshman at a public university, these responsibilities continued. In addition, her father relegated her to the family home saying that he did not “trust” her outside of it even though she had never given him any reasons either in the U.S. or in WTK not to trust her. Park (2005) uses the terms “premature adulthood” and “prolonged childhood”<sup>40</sup> to analyze the complex lived experiences of young adults like Kiab:

The importance of both phenomena lies in the fact that they are out of synch with the larger, socially determined concept of adulthood and childhood. From the point of view of the individual in these situations, she/he is treated inappropriately in that, as a child, she/he is obligated to perform but is not rewarded for performing adult-like roles. And later, as an adult, she/he feels belittled by performing the same roles played during childhood and therefore being treated like a child by the parents. (p. 66-67)

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<sup>40</sup> According to Park (2005), who studied second generation children of Asian immigrant entrepreneurs, premature adulthood is “the placement of an individual who is socially considered a child (as indicated by age and developmental level) in adult-like roles with adult responsibilities. Conversely, then, a prolonged childhood is the placement of an individual who is socially considered an adult in child-like roles with child-like responsibilities” (p. 66).

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the ways in which teachers at SJH viewed Hmong boys as “quiet” with a “heavy accent”, inept “socially”, “lazy” or in extreme cases, “learning disabled”. They believed Hmong boys were incapable of having relationships with teachers in the same ways Hmong girls could. I argue that the experiences that Hmong girls like Kiab had in WTK and that continued in the U.S. contribute to the reasons why girls are more fluent in English as well as sophisticated socially than their brothers and other male counterparts. By the age of ten, many of these girls were working more than full-time in small family businesses which required them to be responsible for business transactions as well as dealing with individuals outside of their families (including Thais who, according to Tong, were often overtly hostile towards the WTK Hmong).

Researchers who study bilingualism amongst second generation immigrants have found that females are more likely to be fully bilingual than males because they spend more time in their homes interacting with adult relatives (Lopez, 2003), and in the case of WTK Hmong girls, are responsible for interpreting for their parents in the U.S.

Gender also plays a crucial role in the ways parents treat daughters differently than sons. Although all of the girls I spoke to had similar experiences as Kiab in WTK, they said similar things about the ways their parents treat them in the U.S. “Our parents don’t trust us that much. They’re always worried what people will do to us,” and “we have to stay home all day,” were common sentiments amongst girls. In WTK, girls could not get out of responsibilities at home because living spaces were much smaller than they are in the U.S. and because the majority of girls either never went to school or stopped going before they completed elementary school. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the U.S., WTK Hmong girls view school as a reprieve from multiple obligations at home. S.



Lee (2005) and Park (2005) discovered that second generation Asian American youth who had multiple “adult-like” responsibilities outside of school also viewed school as a reprieve.

Some of the TAG girls<sup>41</sup> called school and homework “freedom” admitting that they sometimes pretended to do homework in their rooms after school so they could get out of responsibilities at home. “If my parents think what I’m doing has to do with school, they’ll always let me do it,” admitted one girl. “My parents say school comes first... Go to college before you get married. Don’t check out boys a lot, just study hard for school.” When I asked her what she did in her room when she wasn’t really studying, she replied “sleep” and “relax” as a few other girls nodded their heads in agreement. In fact, using homework to get out of household responsibilities was a coping mechanism used by many Hmong girls I spoke to who were too exhausted to fit everything in, in one day.

**A dual frame of reference for Hmong girls.** A common theme in research conducted with second generation Asian American youth is the disconnect that lies between themselves and their first generation parents who often do not share with their children what occurred in their lives prior to emigration to the U.S. It is an absence of information from immigrant parents who “divulge as little as possible and in strategic ways. The children, then, string together bits and pieces of their memories to create a familiar story of immigrant struggle” (Park, 2008, p. 138). A narrative that is commonly

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<sup>41</sup> Kiab was not a part of the TAG cohort.

used amongst many second generation youth is how hard their parents have worked and sacrificed to give their children a better life in the U.S.

A significant finding in my research is that none of the WTK youth used this narrative because there was no mystery about what their grandparents and parents lives had been like in WTK. These youth experienced hardship alongside their parents as the children of undocumented migrants. Kids who attended school in Thailand experienced vast discrimination by Thai teachers. For Kiab and several other girls, education was cut short because parents needed them to help earn an income for the family. Grandparents and parents spoke openly, usually in the form of family story telling with their children, particularly their daughters, about what they had experienced in Laos and in Thai refugee camps prior to WTK. When they arrived in the U.S., they were all first generation immigrants, struggling together.

In my analysis, I argue that gender played a significant and unique role for WTK youth as it determined not only their responsibilities in families, but the *relationships* they formed with family members while in WTK. In addition, these relationships have heavily impacted and influenced their educational aspirations in the U.S. In other words, Hmong girls' understanding of the ways their grandmothers and mothers struggled in Laos and Thailand have been instrumental to girls' educational aspirations. Unlike her brothers and other boys who had daily unstructured time outside of the home, Kiab said that making *Paj ntaub* alongside her grandmother and mother, alone together in their house, allowed her to empathize with women in her family who had been denied formal

education; it was where her educational aspirations and persistence were developed and solidified, *not* in the U.S. as it is commonly believed with immigrant youth.

Gandara (1995) argues that in telling these stories to their children, mothers help create attitudes toward schooling and the future that functions as cultural capital for their children. These family stories represent “the creation of a history that would break the links between the parents’ current occupational status and their children’s future academic attainment” (Gandara, 1995, p. 55). Because of this, girls like Kiab developed a positive dual frame of reference<sup>42</sup> towards their grandmothers and mothers. Lopez (2003) also found this to be the case with second generation Caribbean females arguing that, “through assessing their mothers’ situations, women were able to evaluate their options regarding marriage, education, family, and career plans. Women’s views about the role of education in their lives were intimately tied to their status as women” (p. 119).

Leej, on the other hand, developed no dual frame of reference with his grandmother or mother. I argue this is, in part, because he had no responsibilities in the home in WTK. He never made *Paj ntaub* or worked in his grandparents’ store. He spent most of his days outside of the home playing with boys his age and engaging in Hmong cultural practices while Kiab spent her days inside of the home or inside of her grandparents’ store working alongside her grandparents and mother. In the U.S., Leej has never had any responsibilities in the home except for occasional duties such as taking out the garbage. As a new father, he was intensely occupied with the ways the baby had

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<sup>42</sup> Coined by Ogbu (1987), a positive dual frame of reference is when immigrants compare their opportunities and situations in the U.S. with those in their native countries and conclude that their lives can be better in the U.S.

interfered with his life-plans, not how she had disrupted his wife's life or his mother's life who had quit her full-time job to take care of the baby at home.

Even when their parents were not present, Kiab had served her younger brother a large meal and then cleared off all of the dishes from the table, including his. It took over five minutes for me to convince her to let me help her wash dishes and even then she seemed uncomfortable when I began putting food and dishes away. While we were alone in the kitchen doing dishes, Kiab shook her head and said, "Leej is so smart. It makes me so upset that he's not going to college." I noted that her parents must be disappointed as well. "Not really," she said, handing me a clean dish to dry, "My dad likes that his oldest son has a baby because he can control him now."

I asked Kiab how she thought her life would have been different if WTK had never been closed by the Thai government. It did not take her long to say, "I would be married and have kids—maybe three by now. I would still be making *Paj ntaub* all day." She admitted that she was consumed with these thoughts often and that they assisted her in making deliberate decisions in her daily life to make college a priority. Seeing the way a new baby was affecting the daily lives of her brother and sister-in-law solidified this even more for her. In fact, she had recently broken up with her boyfriend, a Hmong American who she had met at a Hmong New Year celebration. He had wanted to marry her this year, but she wanted to finish college first. When she told him she was not willing to negotiate, he told her he would begin seeing other women. "He just cares about himself," she said. "And I guess I just have to care about myself, too."

Lopez (2003) argues that because second generation Caribbean males did not have any adult responsibilities imposed on them like their sisters, they never developed a dual frame of reference:

Because mothers excused their sons from the responsibilities automatically assigned to their daughters, young men growing up in these households did not personally identify with their mothers' struggles... In essence, men's lived experiences with the gendered division of labor in Caribbean households did not provide them with a dual frame of reference from which to evaluate their choices about marriage, education, and career, as it did for women. The gender(ing) that took place within Caribbean homes reinforced men's traditional views on gender roles and family ideologies. (p. 132)

In the case of Kiab and many of the boys I came to know in my study, they described their relationships with their mothers as strained or nonexistent. However, this is not to say that as they grew older, they did not want closer relationships with their mothers. In fact, for Kong and Kue, this was one of the central themes in their young adult lives: both young men longed to be loved by their mother. Although I will likely never know their mother's perspective, Kong told me that he believed that his mother had never loved him, whereas Kue felt certain that his mother stopped loving him when he began high school at Kent.

## Chapter 5

### The Everyday Lives of Wat Tham Krabok Hmong Youth and Families

*“The city is a huge monastery,” said Erasmus. Perspective vision and prospective vision constitute the twofold projection of an opaque past and an uncertain future onto a surface that can be dealt with.”*

-Michel de Certeau (1988), *The Practice of Everyday Life*

Since the first large waves of Hmong families’ arrival to the U.S., outsiders to their community have described them using pathological narratives focused on their deficient cultures that make them inherently susceptible to poverty, early marriage, and gangs. In 1987, U.S. Senator Alan Simpson, then a member of the Senate Subcommittee on Immigration and Refugee Affairs, described the Hmong as the “most indigestible group in society” (Adler, 2011, p. 13). Certainly Simpson’s sentiments were fueled by what he perceived to be Hmong *refugees* with assimilation problems and a reliance on the welfare state which ultimately pointed to their “impairment and instability – both of which function as threats to social, cultural, and economic wellbeing of the nation of resettlement” (Ogden, 2008, p. 8).

Bearing this in mind, I strive in areas of my research that have the possibility to paint a large brushstroke on an entire community as deficient, to share youths’ stories through “thick” interpretation with an emphasis on *cultural meanings* instead of cultural explanations (Geertz, 1973). Those who describe the Hmong using cultural explanations often naturalize these explanations so literally that they present fixed facts on who the Hmong are. “Culture” in these arguments is often described as static and homogenous (Balibar, 1991). As Bourgois (1996) argues, “Cultures are never good or bad; they simply

have an internal logic” (p. 15). In the pages that follow, I attempt to situate Hmong youths’ everyday experiences, as well as their parents’ responses, in macro level systems.

**The invisibility of WTK Hmong youth.** When Kong and Kue Lee first arrived in the U.S. in 2004, they attended the same public school together in their neighborhood. Kong was just on the cusp of turning 12, Kue was 14, and they rode the bus to school together. They had never ridden a school bus before and also had never had any experiences with African Americans. Kong described the school they attended as a place where teachers didn’t care about them and the kids, 98% of whom were African American, did not like them. In many ways, Kong was protected in the bus because his older brother, Kue, was with him, but Kue suffered in immeasurable ways.

As Kong described to me in a face-to-face interview in January 2013, “one day an African American kid brought a bag of poop on the bus and he poured it on my brother.” I asked him several times to clarify because I had never heard anything like it before. Each time he responded matter-of-factly, “Yes, they poured poop on my brother.” But that was not all they did to Kue Lee. While the boy who had brought a bag of poop on the bus “poured” poop all over him, three other boys jumped on top of him and held him down in a seat so he could not move. The bus driver, who Kong knows saw the attack, never intervened or reported it to school officials. Kong said, “I just felt very, very bad. I mean, I wanted to fight back, like I wanted to punch them, but my parents told us to never fight in school, to just leave it.” I used words such as *humiliated*, *attacked*, and *tortured*, to describe what had happened to Kue, but Kong continued to describe the event as if he were reporting a list of facts.

When Kue arrived at school, all of his clothes were soiled in poop and he walked with Kong to their ELL class where they told their Hmong American teacher what had happened. The teacher assumed Kue had done something to provoke the attack and sent him to the principal who was not sympathetic to him, nor did he reprimand the boys who had violently attacked him. “This is why we don’t like teachers,” Kong said. The principal told Kue he could call his parents to have them pick him up from school to go home and change his clothes, but both of his parents were working, so Kue walked home alone. When his parents came home later that evening, they were upset with Kue that he had left school early. They did not contact anyone at the school or the district. They told Kue not to fight back or to say anything. Essentially, they told Kue to pretend it had never happened. Obviously the principal at the school and the bus driver of the bus took a similar stance.<sup>43</sup>

Kong talked a long time about what had happened in his body when he witnessed what happened to his brother on the bus. He did not describe the feelings he experienced as paralyzing, rather, he said that he felt a charge go through his body like “lightening”, like “anger” that had “nowhere to go.” He wanted to attack all of the boys. He wanted to hurt them. He wanted to do whatever it took to make them stop, but he held back. “I could have made them stop. I learned how to fight in Wat Tham Krabok,” he said, “I was a different person there.”

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<sup>43</sup> School busses are notoriously unsafe spaces for youth. School policies often do not extend to school busses because although incidents occur amongst students, they do not occur on school property. I am not justifying the teacher, principal, or bus driver’s lack of response to this vicious and inhumane attack on Kue, only pointing out that school officials often do not deal with students’ behaviors on school busses in formal ways.



## **Wat Tham Krabok: Where Kong and Kue's Lives Began**

When youth discussed Wat Tham Krabok, time was often spoken about in fragments, as time often is when there are no calendars in the home or schedules that families follow. Youth who held the most vivid memories were those who had schooling in WTK as a point of reference. In 2012–2013 when formal interviews took place, youth like Kue (22), Kong (20), Kiab (20), and to some extent, Leej (18), were older. In fact, these were the youth who had the most concrete memories from WTK in terms of major life events and the ways in which they carried out their days.

Kong's parents had submitted admission applications for him to attend Thai school, but they were rejected for two years. "They told me I'm not good at learning... I felt it was personal," Kong told me, "I see some other students, they are younger than me and they accepted them, but just not me." When Kong turned nine, he was finally accepted into a Thai school and was put into the first grade. For two and a half years, he attended school in Thailand.<sup>44</sup> He recalled the challenges of carrying a heavy backpack and always being hungry. "We just never had enough to eat," he said. Through this discussion about walking to school, it became apparent to me that Kong's family was one of the families in the subsistence group at WTK that lived in poverty. They relied heavily on money that family in the U.S. sent them and unlike the Moua's, only ate one or two meals a day.

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<sup>44</sup> Although it is possible that Kong and Kiab attended the same school, they were in different grades because Kiab was accepted immediately into the first grade when she was six. They do not have any recollection of one another during this time.

Unlike Kong, Kue was accepted immediately into the first grade when he was six, but did not attend the same Thai school that the majority of children in WTK attended. Like many Hmong families, the Lee's viewed the education of their sons as a long-term investment for their family (S. Lee, 2005). Because Kue is the eldest son and was accepted into school immediately at the age of six, Houa and Thao made a deliberate decision to finance Kue's education as a strategy out of poverty. Having this information is significant because the ways in which they invested so heavily in Kue continues to impact the Lee family tremendously. When this decision was made, WTK had not yet been occupied by the Thai government and the Lee's had no plans in the foreseeable future to leave Thailand.

Kue attended a school in Thailand where he received a far better education than any of the youth I came to know in this study. Not only did he learn how to read and write in Thai, he learned English which was unheard of for WTK Hmong kids at the time.<sup>45</sup> When Kue left WTK, he had completed almost nine grades of uninterrupted formal schooling which is why he arrived in the U.S. with academic skills that his brother and many of the other WTK youth did not possess. In other words, Kue's first experience with private education had not begun in the U.S. at Kent as the newspaper articles boast, but at a private school in Thailand.

Kong does not recall interacting with his older brother in WTK in any significant ways as Kue spent the majority of his time at school. Their parents worked alongside

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<sup>45</sup> The Hmong family I stayed with in Northern Thailand spent a large portion of their income to have their only child, a daughter, bussed to a fairly expensive Thai school. The father had left the Hmong village to work in South Korea for two years as a migrant worker to finance his daughter's education and to build a house with indoor plumbing.

each other in their home making silver necklaces that they mailed to the U.S. to relatives to be sold at Hmong markets for cultural celebrations. WTK was unique in that it was a space where Hmong men worked alongside Hmong women sewing *Paj ntaub* or in the Lee parents' case, making silver jewelry together. Kong recalled that even though his parents were always at home working, he rarely interacted with them. If he wasn't in school, he was out with his friends and men in his neighborhood. At first, he tried to partake in the cultural practices that Leej Moua described being consumed with as a child in WTK. However, because of the family's poverty, Kong was unable to participate in many of them.

As Willis (1977) and Kondo (1990) argue in their ethnographic work, societies often reproduce themselves; no matter what individuals do, they seem to always create a capitalist system. As more Hmong families resettled into WTK and the four neighborhoods grew on the 93 acres that WTK monks had given them, Hmong families and to some extent, Thai individuals, set up businesses for profit. Playing badminton, for example, was not something that kids could simply do freely with one another near their homes. Kong explained that there was a store where all of the badminton equipment had to be rented and that the family who ran this store charged by the hour. Playing soccer could have been available to him, but boys seemed to create "teams" based on friends they went to school with. Because Kong was already nine when he began first grade, he had trouble making friends in school. These experiences that he and other youth had in WTK impacted their lives in innumerable ways. Their schooling experiences and lack thereof, not only impacted Kong educationally, but socially as well.

**Fighting as freedom.** Kong was nine when he first began fighting with other boys his age in WTK. As a 20-year old college student reflecting back on his adolescence, he described this time in his life as walking and running “freely” throughout the neighborhoods in WTK, “talking and having fun” with large groups of boys late in the evening. As discussed in chapter two, within these 93 acres, Hmong families lived in four distinct neighborhoods, which I asked Kong to draw for me while we were talking one afternoon. Kong was never entirely clear how the neighborhoods were formed, only that his family lived in the house his parents had built in neighborhood #3. The boys and young men that he hung out with all lived in the same neighborhood and looked for fights with guys who lived in the three other neighborhoods.

In our conversations about Kong’s gang involvement in WTK as an adolescent, he vacillated between saying, “it wasn’t really a gang” to “I learned how to fight in the gang.” Given his age at the time of his involvement, I think these are normal responses. In fact, between the ages of nine to eleven, it is difficult to say just how much of an “official” gang member Kong was. According to a Hmong American leader in the U.S. who I consulted with, “Lai” is the name used to describe gangs, but the Hmong community understand that many “Hmong gangs” are not organized, nor formed for the purposes of delinquency or crime. I purposefully avoid labeling Kong during this time as “criminal” or “delinquent” because they are not labels I believe describe what Kong knowingly participated in, or labels that should be affixed to him. Quite frankly, these labels are attached to Hmong males too quickly, without understanding the full context or their range of experiences.

I caution readers not to make assumptions about Kong's gang involvement, the level of gang activity in WTK, or to try and fill-in-the-gaps of the very obvious missing pieces. Other boys in my study, including Leej, acknowledged that gangs existed in WTK and that they knew boys who were involved in them, but were hesitant in sharing information with me about them. In several casual conversations in informal settings in parks or soccer fields, boys resisted in divulging information to me about what they knew. However, even if other boys, some of which do not know Kong or his brother Kue, personally had not acknowledged that gangs existed in WTK, I still would believe Kong's stories. What I urge readers to focus on is Kong's experiences and the ways in which they continue to impact him. As Thomas and Thomas (1928) note, if individuals define something as real, than it is real in its consequences. If men define situations as real they are real in their consequences.

Learning about gangs in WTK is a significant finding in my research. To date, nobody has documented gangs or their activities in WTK. There are arguably several reasons for this, but I believe it has to do, in part, with a widely-held belief that gangs amongst Southeast Asian males are strictly a U.S. phenomenon. Kodluboy (1996) argues:

No history of development or maintenance of modern youth gangs in these cultures has yet been documented. Many Asian youth gangs originally formed in American cities as protection or fighting gangs. The reasons for their formation in the absence of any historical or cultural basis include racial, geographic, economic and linguistic isolation as well as direct rejection by established community groups within the new communities where the recent immigrants settled. (p. 9)

Kodluboy's rationale of gang formation amongst Southeast Asian youth, like the Hmong, suggests that prior to arriving in the U.S., Southeast Asians were void of any "geographic", "economic", or "linguistic" isolation." In addition, social scientists such as

Hein (2000) argue that Asian refugees “become minorities” in the U.S. through a “process of resocialization”, with no awareness of racism or discrimination. Besides that fact that these rationales do not apply to WTK Hmong youth, they suggest that youth have no agency—that forming gangs in their inner city neighborhoods are simply a direct response to the violence inflicted upon them and their families by African Americans and other ethnic groups. These rationales are deeply problematic.

It is significant that Kong stressed in our conversations that he had not turned to a gang for protection, rather, he reflected on the time as “bonding” with groups of male peers, “having fun” and “feeling alive” late at night in the pitch dark. In fact, when Kong discussed this, it was one of the few times I have ever seen him become animated, using his hands and arms to gesture, leaning in towards me, and smiling in a way a young man might retell, for example, his first roller coaster ride as a child. Kong engaged in fighting with other male youth as a way to, as Karioris (2014) notes, feel close to other boys, as a type of “rite of passage and a sign and signifier of his friendship” (p. 108). Kong described this fighting as vicious, pointing to the scars on his face, but he also said that nobody intended to kill one another and that fighting never occurred in groups. “They just want to see who is the better fighter” he said, noting that the fighting between boys was never personal and that WTK was where he learned how to fight and to protect himself.

The fighting that Kong engaged in was a type of masculinity performance. He was performing masculinity, or “doing masculinity” described by Messerschmidt (1999) as “the social construction of different types of masculinities in their particular social

settings” (p. 199). Kong embodied a certain kind of masculinity when he ran with boys he described as friends. Like the Caribbean youth in Lopez’ (2003) study, Kong’s sisters were given private spaces in the home, but Kong and his brothers lacked similar private spaces in a house he described as over-crowded and uncomfortable for nine family members; as a result, Kong stayed inside the house as little as possible.

In addition, Kong described a very distant relationship with his parents during this time. Not only did they invest financially in his older brother, Kong, but they seemed to invest heavily emotionally in him as well. At school, Kong was double-marginalized as a Hmong student as well as an older boy in grade levels intended for children three years younger than him. In both institutions of family and school, Kong embodied a “subordinate masculinity” (Messerschmidt, 1999) that he accepted in many ways and which made him feel disregarded and hopeless. Running with his friends at night became a metaphor for freedom and gave him opportunities to embody and perform desirable types of masculinity.

As I discussed in Chapter two, the ways in which social processes and practices through which a body becomes meaningful to himself – how a body is experienced in everyday life – is often overlooked (Messerschmidt, 2004). Through Kong’s body, he experienced a social world in WTK which was deeply embodied (Crossley, 2001). In other words, Kong’s body had a certain appearance, behavior, and carried social meanings that were “publicly available” through his participation in social action (E. Goffman, 1963). When I asked him to recall how he felt during this time he used words such as “free” and always “moving”. He discussed “winning” most of the fights he

pursued even though he was aware that he was “small and skinny” due to a lack of nourishment. Even so, he still dominated the boys he fought. As Connell (1995) writes, this type of embodied masculinity translates into a “certain feel to the skin, certain muscular shapes and tensions, certain postures and ways of moving...” (p. 52-53). In Kong’s social world, his body was not passive or neutral, in fact, it was an “inescapable and material component of gender” (Messerschmidt, 2004, p. 22).

Often times while Kong described fights with other Hmong boys, I did not think he was an “official” gang member. At times, I wasn’t sure how “official” these gangs even were, but it was clear that there were designated “leaders” who were men with “wives and kids” in each neighborhood. Some leaders carried knives and swords with them. Once, Kong saw a man’s back sliced from top to bottom although he did not understand what the man had done to provoke such violence. The leader in neighborhood #3, eventually made Kong his drug runner (my words, not his). “His family didn’t use drugs, but they buy drugs, so I used to go with some of my friends to buy drugs,” Kong said about the role he had been given.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Thai narcotics officials suspected WTK was being used as a transport point for drugs from Northern Thailand and for Amphetamine pills from the Thai-Burmese border. In the Thai military’s search for drug activity, they seized approximately 15,000 Amphetamine pills. Other than this, there was no evidence found of large scale drug dealing in WTK. (Tannarat cited by Grigoleit, 2004, p. 7). The irony is that WTK is known internationally as a drug rehabilitation center, although this center and its residents are located on 16 separate acres on monastery land. Tong said that WTK Hmong and residents at the rehabilitation center did not interact.



Kong did not describe his participation in any formalized way, rather, he explained it as Hmong men “in the gang” giving him money and telling him where to go to buy drugs from other Hmong men:

Kong: I don't know, it was like marijuana, it's like very expensive for a small amount.

Kari: Like a pill?

Kong: Yeah. It was just like an orange pill.

Kari: Then what did you do with the drugs after you bought them?

Kong: We carried them in our hands... they used us kids to buy drugs. We just carried them in our hands and walked around and other people didn't know about it.

Kari: Because you guys were just little kids, so they wouldn't know. So then what were you guys told to do with the drugs?

Kong: Just to buy the drugs, hide them from other people, and then to come back.

Specific details were hazy for Kong. He was unclear how people got the money to purchase drugs or if they consumed the drugs or sold them outside of WTK. However, it was clear to him that drugs were being bought and sold between Hmong men in the village, but he did not really know who these men were because his family did not associate with them. I believe he was recruited because his body appeared “proficient”, “disciplined”, and “able”, necessary for social action that Giddens (1991) describes as “integral to the very nature both of agency and of being accepted (trusted) by others as competent” (p. 100). Furthermore, as Foucault (1977) writes:

Discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns it into an ‘aptitude’, a ‘capacity’, which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection. (p. 138).

Obviously, the men in Kong's neighborhood used him. They exploited him and put him intentionally in harms' way, but Kong felt powerful. He possessed agency in his ability to gather his friends to run with him through acres of WTK to buy drugs with money he had been trusted with by men and then to strategically figure out ways to hide the drugs in order to get them back to his neighborhood. Eventually, parents of one of the friends that Kong ran with found out about these activities, told his older brother, Kue, who in turn, told their parents. When I asked Kong how his parents responded, he said, "They just punished me."

The punishment Kong received took place over the course of one school week. When Kong returned home from school, his parents tied one of his ankles tightly with rope, knotted the rope to a bar in the ceiling of their house, and then left him hanging, face down, suspended by one ankle. He was unsure how long they left him there, perhaps several minutes, but definitely no more than a half hour. He remembers it as being extraordinarily painful. He said he cried and his body involuntarily shook while suspended. We talked about this for some time one afternoon and Kong was void of any emotion when he discussed it.

Kong said that even though they punished him like this, what I would compare to torture, he still snuck out of the house and continued drug running with his friends because he craved the freedom he experienced. "It's not like in America where you open the door and you go out. Everybody is kind of walking around and you just go with your

friends.”<sup>47</sup> Kong’s conscious choice to continue running with his friends and to pursue violent encounters with other boys was a “situational resource” where he could exert power, dominance, and masculinity through a continued embodied masculine practice; in these spaces he was never criticized or dejected through the emasculation (Messerschmidt, 2004) he often felt at home and at school.

I said pointedly, “Even after they tied you up like an animal to the ceiling, you didn’t stop going out?” Kong said *no*, still void of any emotion. I told him that if his parents had done this to him in the U.S., when he was under the age of 18, it would be considered illegal. I explained that in the U.S. this excessive form of punishment is considered child abuse and that he would have been removed from his home and his parents would have likely been convicted of a crime. Kong simply replied, “Hmong families are just different.” In fact, Kong described his parents as having a kind of “logic” to the “violence” (he did not use these two words) they inflicted upon him. Cintron (1997), whose ethnography examines the daily lives of immigrants in a Mexican American community, writes:

The logic of violence might also be understood as an ideology that explains real events, feelings, and social conditions. In this sense, the logic of violence represents a very tight knot of emotion, reality, and ideological interpretation. It makes sense of “the way things are” and are expected to be. In short, it functions as a kind of commonsense interpretation. (p. 152-153)

**“Hmong families are just different”.** As discussed earlier in Chapter two, the parents and grandparents of youth in my study, like Hmong adults in the U.S. who

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<sup>47</sup> I observed this while in the Hmong village in Northern Thailand. People’s lives routinely occurred outside the home in the day and evening because houses were small, often times with no windows or much ventilation, and the weather was always oppressively hot and humid. As discussed earlier, Kong’s desire to be outside of his house also had to do with the lack of privacy he was given based on his gender.

arrived in earlier waves, experienced the horror of the secret war in Laos. In a very short period of time, the Hmong lost over 17,000 Hmong men and boys – children – in a population estimated at only 350,000 before the war (Vang, 2010). In addition, when Hmong families began fleeing Laos, the majority on foot, there were many more deaths along the way. The trauma they experienced in Laos remained with them as refugees living in overcrowded refugee camps in Thailand. After the families in my study left these refugee camps, they were marked as illegal, undocumented migrants, not eligible for Thai citizenship or refugee status.

As the population of Hmong at WTK grew, so did resentment from many Thai citizens in the surrounding area. Tong said that while the Hmong were there, the economy thrived, particularly local banks and post offices. However, resentment grew amongst Thai individuals, some of whom stood on street corners holding up signs that read, “We don’t want people from Wat Tham Krabok” as the Hmong were, amongst many things, competition and rumored opium addicts. During this time, Hmong men who left WTK early in the morning, could not find labor and their families’ economic situations became dire. Tong stressed that even though the Hmong lived in WTK, they did not have an easy life. “They didn’t have citizenship. They couldn’t move around freely or have land. If the Hmong kids played badminton at school and won, they were disqualified because they didn’t have citizenship. If they graduated from school, they didn’t get a diploma because they didn’t have citizenship.”

Citizenship tied to a nation has long been problematic for the Hmong. Because of this, I have found the ways that scholars use different ideas around citizenship productive

in my own thinking through these issues. The tension between formalized, legal citizenship and the *cultural practices of membership* (my emphasis) in a nation-state are what drives the ideas behind cultural citizenship (Maira, 2009). In my research, I use A. Ong's (1996) framework that describes citizenship as a process that the state uses to discipline the Hmong through notions of an individual's worthiness for citizenship. A. Ong (2003), who conducted fieldwork with Cambodians experiencing citizenship in Northern California, writes:

I study the idea of citizenship not only in the idiom of rights articulated in the legal context, but also in the context of the ways in which a set of common (in this case American) values concerning family, health, social welfare, gender relations, and work and entrepreneurialism are elaborated in everyday lives. (p. xvii)

WTK Hmong understood that they were being monitored by the state and could be deported to Laos at any time. Althusser (1971) describes this constant threat through the theoretical concept of a repressive state apparatus, where the state, in this case the Thai government, sanctioned power and repression over the Hmong at WTK through legitimized forms of governmental control. The surveillance they embodied in their everyday lives *prior* to the Thai government's occupation of the 93 acres at WTK in 2003, was a type of social control. They were disciplined subjects who, in many ways, had become complicit to their own subjugation (Foucault, 1977).

The homes that WTK Hmong built, in neighborhoods they had formed, on 93 acres of borrowed land, surrounded by mountains, signified a place where Hmong families could maintain their sociocultural distinctiveness despite their illegal status, and many years of statelessness (Tomforde, 2006), as well as their subjugation. I reflect on their post-refugee/pre-resettled lives in the U.S. as suspended in a temporary space; one

which was highly organized and controlled, but that offered them protection from WTK monks. In the U.S., Kong would have been labeled “delinquent” and criminalized based on the activities he engaged in, but with the exception of a week-long session of abuse at the hands of his parents, supposed delinquent acts in WTK had no consequences for Kong. Likewise, the week-long session of abuse at the hands of his parents, had no consequences for his parents.

Male youth, in particular, experienced WTK far differently than their parents and grandparents. Unlike these adults in their lives, Kong and other boys I spoke to had never lived in Laos or in refugee camps. In WTK, they did not have the same relationship to surveillance or subjugation that their parents had brought with them, especially after having lived unprotected and stateless for a period of time after they left refugee camps and made their way to WTK. I argue that the forms of power that Foucault (1977) described in his vision of a Panopticon<sup>48</sup>, the permanence of surveillance that forces individuals to internalize their punishment and become disciplined, “docile bodies”, were in full effect with many of the parents who lived in WTK. However, these forms of internalized punishment and oppression did not have the same effects on young boys such as Leej. To them, WTK represented “freedom” in ways that the U.S. never has.

The systematic oppression and humiliation that adults had experienced for many years prior to WTK, became part of a backdrop amongst these mountains. As Cintron (1997) explains, “As a result, the numerous moments and events of everyday life were

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<sup>48</sup> The Panopticon is a prison designed architecturally so that prisoners can be observed without realizing it. The ultimate goal of this prison is to create self-discipline amongst prisoners through constant surveillance of their bodies. Foucault (1977) uses the Panopticon metaphorically to describe the ways discipline, punishment, and social control operate in modern societies in institutions such as schools.

rarely dramatically humiliating partly because individuals always had their own agency and a certain power over their emotional lives” (p. 159). Absent from the stories told by Hmong families about their time spent in WTK are grand narratives of refugee fight or flight survival, but rather long, drawn out forms of oppression and repression. Foucault (1977) imagined the Panopticon as a space that assured this:

So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to rend its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (p. 201)

Encased within the boundaries of these mountains were metaphorical inmates, parents such as Houa and Thao, whose growing anxiety about how their children could prosper in meaningful ways often overwhelmed them. Unlike the Moua family, who did not live in poverty in WTK, I believe that the Lee’s poverty overwhelmed and exhausted them daily. In a 2012 symposium on inequality at Yale University, A. Goffman described the extreme poverty she witnessed while conducting research in Detroit, Michigan, the kind where hunger never goes away: “Your fingers get slow, you know, your whole body slows down... Almost like you kind of fold into the floor. Like you’re just waiting it out” (Edsall, 2012, p. 1).

Under these predicaments, I imagine that Houa and Thao may have made decisions that to others, including other adults who lived at WTK, seem unconscionable. For example, their violent punishing of Kong could have been a protective strategy on their part to prevent him from a life of crime. I do not justify Houa and Thao’s violent punishing of Kong, or their lack of intervention after Kue was attacked on the first school

but he and Kue road together in the U.S. However, positioning their lives into a historical context as well as larger social institutions and theoretical structures, helps me understand how they possibly could have believed that what they did was necessary in order to secure Kong and Kue's opportunities for the long-term survival of their family. Boss (1992) observes that families "will not develop resources or act on them without a sense that their actions will make a difference" (p. 114).

As a survival strategy and perhaps out of desperation, Houa and Thao invested heavily in their eldest son Kue, unable to predict the long-term ramifications this would have on their younger son, Kong. As Rodriguez (1993) argues:

"Family" is a farce among the propertyless and disenfranchised. Too many families are wrenched apart, as even children are forced to supplement meager incomes. Family can only really exist among those who can afford one. In an increasing number of homeless, poor, and working poor families, the things that people must do to survive undermines most family structures. (p. 250)

In an interview, I asked Kong how his parents had not noticed the multiple, bloody scratches that he came home with on his face from fighting in WTK when he was only a boy, at which he replied, "They never really looked at me." The sadness on his face was palpable when he said this. I realized then, that it was in WTK, when Kong first believed his parents had never loved him.



## Chapter 6

### Racialized Spaces, Neutral Responses

Field note. February 1, 2013

Leej was talking to me earlier today about the place he lived in with his family several months in 2005. There were eight of them and they lived there twice. The first time they lived there for seven months and the second time they were there for three months. He smiled a lot when he remembered it, talking about “swimming in a pool”, “games”, “two rooms with bunk beds”, “lots of other Hmong kids to play with.” I thought his family was staying in a hotel, until he said everything was free and that the school bus picked him and his siblings and friends up in front of the building and dropped them off there in the afternoon.

When I realized that the family had been living in a homeless shelter, I was shocked, probably out of ignorance. I have heard so many Hmong Americans talk about how they pool their money together to provide resources for clan members who are struggling financially. How could this have happened? His older sister, Kiab, also had positive things to say about the homeless shelter, explaining that people were nice to them, the rooms were clean, it was safe, and there were so many Hmong families there from WTK between 2005–2007, that there were always kids to play with.

In 2004, the Moua family was one of the first WTK Hmong families to arrive in the U.S. Leej, Kiab, their younger brother, Kai, and younger sister, See, traveled with their mother to the state that they all currently reside in. Their father had stayed behind in WTK with his second wife and his parents. It was unclear when or if they would ever be reunited in the U.S. Like all WTK families who resettled in the U.S., they owed the U.S. government \$1,000 per family member for the cost of their plane tickets, which seemed like an overwhelming amount of money to earn, yet alone ever pay back. They also received a one time, small, lump sum of \$400 per family member from the U.S. government to help them resettle in the U.S. According to Laj, the Hmong call this, *nyaj poob teb chaws*, which translates into English as, “for people who have lost their country.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> It has been explained to me that the Moua’s, like most WTK Hmong families in the U.S., and Hmong immigrants who arrived in earlier waves, are on an installment plan where they pay for the cost of

Being a Hmong woman in the U.S. with no husband or in-laws, put Leej and Kiab's mother, as well as themselves and their siblings, in a precarious position. When their father finally arrived with his second wife and his parents, the entire family moved almost immediately into the homeless shelter, which is Catholic in denomination and has long served new immigrants in the community. When I relayed this information to two Hmong American male leaders in the area of the city where WTK Hmong live, one of which was Laj, they were equally as shocked. One of them said that this was unheard of when their families had first resettled in the U.S. in the 1980s. "Your family, your clan, they always helped," he said, still bewildered by their predicament. However, both agreed that the local Hmong mutual assistance associations (MAA) and nonprofits that serve Southeast Asian families had done little to help WTK Hmong families when they began arriving in large numbers in 2004, nor seemed particularly interested in reaching out to them, particularly with help in finding housing.<sup>50</sup>

Neither of the two Hmong leaders believe that MAA's or nonprofits have had any impact on Hmong youth of any generation in their neighborhoods. C. Vang (2010), a historian and Hmong scholar argues, "though funded to provide basic needs support and to help integrate the refugees into American society, in reality, they [MAA's] often become a means of political expression. They also foster competition between subgroups over leadership, funds, and representation" (p. 70). "At the end of the day, I think all of

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their one-way plane tickets from Bangkok, Thailand, every month in small increments. I note this because there is a perception that refugees literally receive a "free ride" to the U.S. This has never been the case.

<sup>50</sup> There is a widely held belief by the general public that public housing is accessible to all poor and low income families. This also has never been the case. According to Grigoleit (2006), when WTK Hmong arrived in this particular city, there was a massive public housing shortage. Waiting lists were extensive and required criteria such as the ability to provide rental history. Because of this, many WTK Hmong lived with Hmong American relatives or in homeless shelters until they were able to secure housing on their own.

these nonprofits are about putting money into their budget and not really thinking about the kids and what the kids' needs are... kids become numbers," one of the Hmong leaders said. Mark, who has never trusted the intentions of MAA's, said to me in an interview:

Ignoring and inflicting stuff on the Hmong Thai is a multicultural affair. You get some Hmong officials who really care passionately about their own people, but you also get some who do their own version of what [name of MAA] was doing which is 'I'm a gatekeeper and you need to come through me. I'm going to use that position to acquire power.' I get really annoyed and disgusted with organizations that assume that the Hmong Thai are going to be passive with language barriers and they're not going to complain.

Mark noted that when he finally got a commitment from one of the Hmong leaders of a nonprofit organization, who said that he and his organization would help WTK Hmong youth and their families who were experiencing multiple challenges in their neighborhood public schools, he "did it the Hmong way and I never heard back from him again, so I went ahead and took care of it." From Mark's perspective, he had done his due diligence in reaching out to MAA's and nonprofits as well as the public schools, but found that nobody, with the exception of a couple of sympathetic administrators in the schools, wanted to help WTK Hmong students.

This is around the time when Mark had learned about the school choice option. In a separate conversation with Laj, I asked him what he thought of how Mark had handled this situation:

Laj: Look, if it weren't for [Mark], there *still* wouldn't be anyone paying attention to these WTK Hmong kids or their parents.

Kari: Why do you think he works so hard for these kids?

Laj: Well, I don't think he has any ulterior motives, if that's what you're implying. I think he genuinely cares for them.

Kari: But he comes across like he knows what's best for them, like he's their white savior.

Laj: But in many ways he does. Look, if those Hmong leaders have a problem with how Mark did things, then they should step up and help these kids.

Grigoleit (2006) explains that when the U.S. State Department resettled 15,000 WTK Hmong strategically in states with established Hmong American communities, they assumed that these communities would not only welcome WTK Hmong families, but help them integrate into U.S. society. However, Grigoleit found that when WTK Hmong individuals actually arrived, they were overwhelmed by the diversity in the Hmong American community as Hmong families from different clans and backgrounds had spent many years living together in WTK which produced high levels of group cohesion amongst them. As Grigoleit (2006) notes:

Stereotypes and prejudices existed on both sides. The new refugees were often perceived by Hmong-Americans as backward, needy, and dependent on others by playing the victim's role in terms of being very vocal in expressing their needs and being critical when offered support. Hmong-Americans, in turn, were stereotyped as being too "white" and too "Americanized," neglecting core values of Hmong culture such as respect for elders, obedience, and a distinct sense of family and clan affiliation, thus following the hierarchical role and structure. Notions of what constituted Hmong behavior and culture differed greatly among these groups. (p. 19)

Throughout my time in the field, I had conversations with Hmong American individuals that made me realize their misperceptions about WTK Hmong were based on little knowledge that they possessed about their lives prior to arrival in the U.S. One Hmong American man relayed to me that elders in his clan believed that WTK Hmong had been "lazy" in WTK and purposefully did not work so that they could receive "handouts" from the Thai government and Hmong American relatives in the U.S. In addition, when I asked a Hmong leader if he knew of the existence of any archives in the U.S. on the WTK Hmong experience, he noted that he did not and that, in his opinion, the WTK

Hmong experience was not really a priority to anyone in the Hmong American community.

Hmong American youth I spoke to were aware of WTK Hmong youth and families, but had no regular contact with them. In October 2013, I spoke to approximately ten Hmong American undergraduate and graduate students who said that they knew little about WTK Hmong youths' experiences prior to arriving in the U.S. or their current experiences now that they were in the U.S. One Hmong female undergraduate said, "I feel bad—it seems like they're going through the same things our parents went through when they got here, but nobody is reaching out to them. Honestly? I don't even really know how to." I wrote what she had said in my field notebook because I recall that her sentiments were shared by the majority of the group. None of the students held negative feelings about WTK Hmong youth or families, they just didn't know any of them. S. Lee (2005) argues:

Hmong Americans are well aware of how they are characterized by the dominant society and have gone to considerable efforts to improve their position in U.S. society and to improve their public image. In fact, many within the Hmong American community now appear to define success in mainstream American ways. (p. 14)

I believe that the stereotypes some Hmong American individuals, particularly older male adults, hold about WTK Hmong are due, in part, to the ways they remind them of all that they have worked so hard to move beyond as a community in the last three decades (i.e. poverty, gangs, lack of education, familial violence, etc). WTK Hmong, perhaps, remind them of "the Otherness, the struggles of adaptation and assimilation, and the untranslatability of refugee life" (Ogden, 2008, p. 228). These tensions have caused many WTK Hmong individuals, including youth, to feel even more isolated, while many non-

Hmong individuals assume that Hmong Americans and WTK Hmong actively engage with one another simply because they are all Hmong, and therefore, completely homogenous as an ethnic group. Given this, I argue that it is vital, as Lowe (1996) argues, that we do not miss larger issues functioning in these spaces when Asian Americans, such as the Hmong, are reduced to the cultural politics of first and second generation struggles which, “displaces social differences into a privatized familial opposition. Such reductions contribute to the aestheticizing commodification of Asian American *cultural* differences, while denying the immigrant histories of material exclusion and differentiation” (p. 63)

### **Unequal Schooling for WTK Hmong Youth**

I begin this section by briefly revisiting what happened to WTK Hmong youth when they first arrived in the urban public schools in their neighborhoods. From the perspective of Mark, as well as their parents, students experienced three major problems at the elementary, middle, and high school levels: 1) They were put in sheltered ELL classes taught by teachers who had no credentials in ELL, and therefore let kids speak to one another in Hmong all day; 2) Youth were not allowed to take mainstream content courses and were not exposed to other teachers or peers which did not allow them to progress academically; 3) Youth were being regularly hit and called racist names by African American peers; and 4) Youth who lived within two miles from the high school were excluded from bus transportation.

Mark and Teng suspected that the district intentionally put WTK Hmong youth into low performing, high poverty schools as one last attempt to keep these schools open for business. After speaking to one of the few Hmong employees in this district, she

confirmed Mark and Teng's suspicions noting that Hmong youth and their parents had been, and continue to be, left out of all conversations "at every level in the district." Still, what remained absent from these insights were the perspectives of kids that were not filtered through Mark or their parents.

**Racialized narratives at Suburban Junior High.** As more WTK Hmong kids began getting accepted into SJH, parents, kids, and Mark remained hopeful. They had several reasons to be optimistic, one of which had to do with the principal at the time, Dr. Anderson. She welcomed WTK Hmong students to her school and made a point to connect to their parents. In collaboration with the district superintendent and the associate principal, Dr. Anderson provided information sessions, with interpretation, in spaces that parents could easily get to. She made sure that free cab rides were provided to parents so they could attend parent-teacher conferences where a Hmong interpreter was always present. Her attitude about Hmong kids and parents was that they were an integral part of the school; she went out of her way to make sure they had positive experiences at SJH.

When the PI and I first interviewed her in 2009, she said:

I'm intrigued by the study because I don't think what we do for our Hmong students we don't do for every child here... I tell people all the time that this is bar none the finest staff and school community I've ever had the privilege of working with and I mean that in my core. Now every day we get bumps in the road, but we work through our bumps, we don't disregard them, we don't make excuses. We work hard at taking very good care of kids academically, socially, physically... There is a very high expectation of excellence that our community has and that expectation includes virtually every student so I may well be living down the road here in a two million dollar home and my child will be here and I have very high expectations of that child and also for the child who lives in Section Eight housing. So the community expects a great deal for every child not just their own child.

Even Mark, who expressed outward disdain for every school administrator he had come into contact with at the urban schools WTK Hmong youth had attended, only had positive things to say about Dr. Anderson. He felt strongly that she was the reason why kids had been accepted to the school and accommodated in a variety of ways. Dr. Anderson's enthusiasm about WTK Hmong students was echoed by all 17 teachers we interviewed. "Ghetto schooling" (Anyon, 1997), was no longer a reality WTK Hmong youth at SJH, where school leaders and district officials invested vast amounts of dollars in their budgets to ensure WTK Hmong students' success.

However, as extraordinary as SJH has been in many ways for WTK Hmong youth, it has never been a color blind, neutral institution. No school in the U.S. is race-neutral, but I argue that teachers and staff at SJH always believed that it was. Many teachers that we interviewed made similar points as Dr. Anderson, "I don't think what we do for our Hmong students we don't do for every child here." As supportive and welcoming to students as Dr. Anderson was as the leader of SJH, she used a color-blind ideology that asserts that "when students enter the school doors, color (i.e. race) should not be an issue. All students, therefore, should be treated equally with the same opportunities regardless of race (Barajas & Ronkvist, 2007, p. 1518).

Although numerous studies have shown that race, class, and gender have significant influence over the conscious and unconscious perceptions that teachers hold about students, there is still an assumption made in U.S. schools that teachers treat all of their students the same (Noguera, 2008). SJH teachers had the best intentions in treating all students equally, and perceived themselves as color-blind in their classrooms, but I am confident that they were not perceived this way by all students. For example, a science



teacher lamented the fact that African American parents (whose kids are bussed to school from the inner city with Hmong kids) have no parental involvement:

So we've got this group of parents who probably didn't do well in school themselves. They don't trust us. We try to reach out. We do a lot of things to reach out to our black parents who aren't from our neighborhoods. You need to come see our black history month presentation... But our Hmong kids fill up our choice spots so we get these really great kids from really good solid families and we don't get problem kids whose parents are uninvolved. So they're changing it for the better. It sounds terrible, but that's what's happening. So we have less black students and more Hmong students.

This is only one example of a racialized narrative by a teacher in a space where race has been discussed as having little to no relevancy in the pursuit of academic achievement. It is also an example of how race *does* influence classroom and school practices and is part of the daily experiences of Hmong and African American students at SJH, even when the most well-intentioned teachers perpetuate inequity without any awareness that they are doing so (Lewis, 2004). As discussed previously in Chapter four, several teachers used “Hmong culture” to explain why Hmong students, particularly girls, were so motivated and successful academically. They discussed how Hmong girls showed up to school ready to learn because education is valued in Hmong homes. However, Lewis (2004), who studied the hidden ways that race plays out daily in schools, discovered that certain students' cultures were described by teachers as having a negative impact on students who were struggling academically:

A lot of it has to do with culture... Families that are primarily Spanish speaking have recently immigrated here and have sort of been in a struggle their whole lives and haven't been maybe through as much school themselves. I find that a lot of the Latino kids' parents in this class, their parents didn't go on to school past high school, if even to high school, so there's that, and maybe they just don't know how to support the kids. They don't have the language skills, they don't have the academic skills, or whatever; maybe both parents are working. (p. 174)

What is significant about the ways this teacher describes Latino parents is that, in reality, WTK Hmong parents share the same history and demographics. None of the parents of WTK youth had earned a high school diploma, in fact, most of them had never had any formal schooling in their lives, possessed no English literacy skills, and were rarely at home to help their kids with schoolwork. This points to just how powerful racialized narratives are. The science teacher at SJH believed that Hmong students are *great students* from *really good solid families* compared to African American students and their parents. Through this belief system, he could justify why Hmong students deserved a top notch, suburban public school education. The reality is that he and the majority of teachers and staff I spoke to at SJH did not really know who Hmong students were or what their lives were like outside of school. Although my study as well as the original study did not focus on African American students, I am certain that African American students felt these comparisons made between them and Hmong students which impacted their highly negative feelings towards the Hmong.

This particular science teacher and the other 16 teachers and two principals we interviewed understood that students from the city who were bussed into their school together were at a disadvantage because they did not live in the suburban community. However, they discussed generic multicultural events that they held annually, such as SJH's annual Black History Month, to make students feel more welcome and to do outreach to parents; they failed to consider other approaches that would integrate Hmong and African American students, in meaningful ways, into the internal fabric of their school, in other words, into the mainstream whiteness that they never named.

All of the teachers at SJH interviewed discussed student diversity positively, stating that having more non-white students was beneficial for their school which had been historically white and middle to upper class with students predominately from Christian and Jewish backgrounds. Several teachers also discussed the recent professional development they received on diversity and creating more inclusive classrooms as highly influential in their work with a more diverse student population. Teachers and staff did not frame student diversity based only in a white-black framework and spoke specifically about Hmong, African American, and Latino students. However, even though diversity was discussed positively, understanding the politics of difference that influences teacher and staff interactions with students remained unexamined except at superficial levels (Noguera, 2008).

Olneck (2004) argues that “immigrants do not enter undifferentiated ‘American’ schools. Rather they enter specific schools whose immediate contexts, histories, memories, and commitments shape their organization and practices” (p. 386). A regular practice that occurs in many schools, including SJH, is that teachers and staff emphasize students and parents’ attitudes and behaviors rather than explore how their own racialized school practices affect the daily lives of students as well as the ways they affect students’ relationships with each other (Pollock, 2006). Like many institutions, SJH had a heavy hand in reproducing racial and social inequalities within the spaces of their own building.

In fact, conflicts between WTK Hmong and African American kids from their neighborhoods never actually ended, they just migrated to SJH. All 17 teachers and staff

interviewed between 2009–2010 were not aware of any bullying or violence<sup>51</sup> happening to WTK Hmong kids. They repeatedly said that kids were either well-liked by their non-Hmong peers or they were too insular and therefore not on the radar of most non-Hmong peers. In their previous schools in their urban neighborhoods, WTK Hmong kids described being hit daily on the back of their heads and/or having food thrown at them by African American kids in public spaces such as the lunchroom, while teachers and staff looked the other way. Hein (2000) notes, “The absence of parental or even peer group support in coping with discrimination is compounded for Hmong Americans when an incident occurs early in their resettlement” (p. 418).

But it was not just one or two incidents that occurred to WTK Hmong youth. This was *systematic* harassment and violence that occurred to Hmong students, some of which was abhorrently violent, like the attack on Kue on the school bus when he was held down while poop was poured on him. These attacks involved almost exclusively boys, in hidden spaces of the school, or on the school bus that were never reported to school officials. Compounding the hidden nature of this systematic violence is the widely-held belief that the only barriers that newly arrived immigrant youth face in school have to do with learning English and assimilating into U.S. norms and culture; in fact, teachers and staff at SJH continually said that the English language was by far the biggest barrier that Hmong youth faced and was the cause for their social isolation with non-Hmong peers.

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<sup>51</sup> Bullying and school violence are often not used interchangeably; The U.S. Centers for Disease Control defines bullying as one set of behaviors that fall under a broad category of school violence.

In addition, there is a widely held perception that newly arrived immigrants not only experience a lower prevalence of bullying and peer violence, but that it tends to be a phenomenon that affects the second generation rather than the first because they have been in the U.S. for longer periods of time (Almeida, et al. 2011). Misperceptions such as these only mask what first immigrant youth have always encountered in U.S. schools. As Lei (2003) argues, “harassment, discrimination, and intolerance” will likely continue long after students master English proficiency because of the “nativist and anti-Asian racism that exist in U.S. society, where any sign of “foreign-ness” is not tolerated” (p. 172).

**Racist stereotypes.** “The black kids are always trying to mess with me”, Chai Lee, a younger brother of Kong and Kue Lee, told me in the summer of 2009. “Why?” I asked. “Because they think I know Kung Fu.” Responses like this were common from Hmong boys. It has been well documented in the literature on white boys and young men that “fag” is the most common sexualized insult used to harass and discipline them – regardless if they are gay or straight (Connell, 1995; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Messerschmidt, 1999; Pascoe, 2007). However, Hmong boys were always harassed based on racist stereotypes. None of the boys in my study were ever called fag.

Chai discussed the ways that African American kids “messed with” him and his friends “in life, and in school, and in the bus,” but that it was only in the hidden space of the boys’ locker room that he fought back because he knew he would not get caught. One of the startling things I learned at SJH is that the boys’ locker room at the time was an unmonitored space. The physical education teacher sat in his office, located just outside of the gymnasium, while boys changed in locker rooms together. Chai told me about a

fight that occurred when he was in the seventh grade. Two African American boys would not stop “punching” him “hard” in the locker room; he punched them back and then ran out of the locker room, “so the teacher won’t know.”<sup>52</sup> When Chai told me this, there were a couple of WTK Hmong girls present, part of the TAG group, who seemed surprised, noting in Hmong to one another that they had no idea things like this were happening to their brothers and male cousins at SJH.<sup>53</sup>

In an interview with Teng, he said that it was incidents like this that bothered him most; that Hmong boys were willing to accept these racist attacks, by African American boys, as a part of their everyday schooling experiences. He relayed a disturbing response by a Hmong boy who had been punched repeatedly by an African American boy one day on the school bus, “But it’s okay because I was wearing a big jacket so it didn’t hurt as much.” Teng looked at him and said, “That’s not the fucking point man, it’s that you got punched! It’s never, ever okay.” In one of the few qualitative studies conducted on Southeast Asian American males and African Americans’ racialized conflicts in school, Lei (2003) also discovered that Southeast Asian American males, many of whom were Hmong, felt a constant need to protect themselves from physical and verbal harassment from African American students which she also described as their everyday school experiences in a U.S. high school.

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<sup>52</sup> Because Chai was under the age of 18 at the time he shared this with us, the PI contacted the principal of the school to report this incident.

<sup>53</sup> This is just one example of why having Lia, a Hmong American college-aged interpreter and cultural insider, was instrumental. She noted everything that participants said to each other in Hmong that others may have missed as not important enough to interpret into English because participants were not speaking directly to me.

Understanding the deeper reasons why African American boys regularly harassed, bullied, hurled racist remarks at, and at times physically (and most likely, emotionally) injured Hmong boys, is beyond the scope of this dissertation. As part of a community engaged research study, the PI had been asked to examine the experiences of WTK Hmong youth and families at SJH. When I collected additional data for my dissertation, I had already established relationships with certain Hmong youth and Dr. Anderson, the principal of SJH who had welcomed the PI and myself to SJH, had already retired. Even so, the PI and I both agree that adding a comparative element with African American youth and their families who also took part in the school choice option, would have been ideal.

According to a former teacher, who was no longer employed at SJH at the time of our interview, the majority of students in SJH's Alternative Learning Center (ALC) were African American boys, several of whom were school choice students. ALC's are common in urban public schools and are meant to rehabilitate students who have lost their privileges to participate in mainstream classes for a variety of reasons. As two former secondary teachers once said to me in a graduate school course, ALC's are notorious in urban schools as spaces where African American kids go every day "instead of prison." In the urban high school I taught in, the ALC was in the school's basement, far removed from the main areas of the school (which is problematic in itself). The former teacher at SJH who I spoke to recalled that at the time she was employed at SJH, only one Hmong boy had been sent to the ALC, but only for a short period of time because it is impossible to address ELL needs in ALC classes (i.e. Schools tend to silo their learning spaces).

Dr. Anderson noted to the PI that she struggled with ways to support African American students who were bussed in from the city in the same ways she supported Hmong students, but she had one or two ideas that she hoped to implement. As the PI shared with me, there are obvious ways to address the needs of ELL students as they have language and other academic needs that appear clearly marked in terms of how to support them (i.e. hire additional ELL teachers, invest in pedagogical strategies that have been proven to address ELL language needs successfully). In my own teaching experience, I know it is “easier” to justify a financial need for these types of academic strategies because they are directly connected to raising standardized test scores. In addition, teachers at SJH were willing to go the extra mile to work with Hmong girls, in particular, who struggled academically, in part, because the *doing school* strategies they had adapted made them appear motivated and engaged. Some teachers’ perceptions about African American students and their parents’ low motivation and/or negative attitudes about schooling were overt to me, and therefore, I can only imagine how that felt for African American students in the spaces of SJH.

The ways in which African American students may have perceived differential treatment between themselves and Hmong students who lived in the same inner city neighborhoods, was likely felt and experienced at SJH. Obviously, I do not condone their behavior or their actions, but I caution readers not to jump to conclusions about the root causes of them without having African American students’ perspectives. African American students’ racial injuries in U.S. schools have a vast and arduous history compared to Hmong students, and as I discussed in Chapter two, African Americans



experiences in schools and neighborhoods differ widely based on a number of factors including the ways they are perceived.

**Violence in hidden spaces.** While these everyday schooling experiences continued for Hmong boys at SJH, two major attacks on several Hmong students actually came to the attention of school principals because of Mark and Teng who had learned about them, inadvertently, at the out-of-school tutoring they provide WTK Hmong kids. The first attack occurred in December 2010 when four African American girls attacked a Hmong girl, Mai, who was in the ninth grade at the time. The attack, which occurred in an unmonitored school gymnasium at SJH, was particularly vicious because Mai's arms and legs were pinned down by two girls while the other two kicked and punched her. When Teng first told me about this attack, I was shocked because the fight had involved a WTK Hmong *girl*, someone who I had never even heard of before. Why her? I asked. "Because she was having a lesbian relationship with another Hmong girl at the school," he said. "They wanted to teach her a lesson."

Two years later, in December 2012, the second attack occurred. Two WTK Hmong youth, who were a part of this attack, described the following series of events to me in separate interviews. Approximately nine Hmong boys, in eighth grade, were followed out the school door by six African American boys in seventh grade shouting racist names at them, telling them to "Get out of here, *Chinks!*" One of the Hmong boys yelled back at them. In response, one of the African American boys grabbed this particular Hmong boy and threw him, face first, on top of a parked car behind the school busses that were lined up on the curb at the end of the school day. All 15 boys began fighting until several older boys at SSH, the high school that shares a parking lot with

SJH, came sprinting down the street and began throwing African American boys off of Hmong boys, many of whom were their younger brothers.

SJH principals handled both attacks the same way: they suspended all of the students involved, including the Hmong students. This also included Mai, who had been attacked by four girls in the school gym. When Mark and Teng met with the principal at the time, Dr. Anderson, she told them that she too would have fought back if she were being attacked by four girls, but that she had no choice but to follow the school's zero-tolerance policy on fighting. It did not matter if Mai had defended herself, or if she had been beaten because of her sexual orientation.<sup>54</sup>

On December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2011, almost a year after the attack on Mai in the SJH gymnasium, I spoke on the phone with Dr. Anderson who had been retired for almost three months. No longer a leader of SJH or having any connection to the school district, she had a directness about her that had not been present when the PI and I had interviewed her approximately two years ago. For example, instead of describing the attack on Mai using a color-blind ideology, she stated, without any leading questions from me, that the attack had been racially motivated and based on "sexual identity." She also said that Mai never reported the attack to school staff and so the first time she and others were made aware of it was by Mark and Teng. This is even more disconcerting because Mark and Teng understood at the time that if they had not brought it to the school's attention, Mai would have never been suspended.

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<sup>54</sup> "Harming a student" and "Placing a student in reasonable fear or harm of his or her person or property" are two types of student conduct that fall under the school district's policy on bullying. Even so, Mai was suspended because she had punched one of the girls during the attack. As principals relayed to Teng, fighting, regardless of who is throwing the punches, trumps any violation of the policy on bullying.

Dr. Anderson said that in all of her years as principal at SJH, it did not feel right to suspend Mai,<sup>55</sup> and that she still struggled with this decision. While Mai served her one-week suspension, her family sent a Hmong shaman to cleanse the area in the gym where she had been viciously attacked. When she returned, teachers and staff monitored Mai intensely, in all areas of the school, concerned that the four African American girls who had also been suspended for one-week would retaliate against her. Dr. Anderson relayed to me that she tried very hard to repair relationships that had been broken between Hmong parents and SJH “personally and symbolically”,

During this time, Mark and Teng also attempted to talk to Dr. Anderson. When I spoke to Dr. Anderson about her recollection of these meetings, she said that Mark, “caused as many problems as he solved and in this particular case, he had no idea how to solve the problem.” From her perspective, Mark had brought along several Hmong kids with him to the district’s monthly school board meeting,<sup>56</sup> used them to make his points, much of which were based on misinformation, and completely disrupted the work that she and other school personnel were in the process of doing to repair relationships with Hmong parents and their kids. As a strong and collaborative leader at SJH, Dr. Anderson wanted to work with parents, students, teachers, and staff within SJH to work systematically at preventing future incidents from occurring.

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<sup>55</sup> I attempted several times to meet with Mai to get her perspective, but was unable to connect with her. When I heard she wanted to put the incident behind her, I respected her wishes and did not pursue contacting her further.

<sup>56</sup> According to Mark, after this board meeting, the superintendent of the district called his boss and said that Mark was never allowed to attend another board meeting and that his boss needed to “reign him in.”

According to Dr. Anderson, because of Mark's premature actions in going to the school board, her work came to a standstill when district administrators stopped communicating with her altogether and refused to let her move forward with some of the plans she had to make systematic changes. "Most of all," Dr. Anderson said to me via phone, "I just really wanted to thank each of the Hmong family members personally." At this point in our conversation she began to cry, feeling badly that she had let Hmong students and families down. Dr. Anderson said that had she not retired, she would have offered Teng a full-time position at SJH working with Hmong parents, students, teachers, and staff. From her perspective, it was Teng who was most effective in communicating with Hmong parents and students as well as staff and principals at SJH. "I think district leaders would have listened to him," Dr. Anderson said. "He would have been immensely helpful."

**New leadership in troubled times.** By the academic year of 2012–2013, new leadership was securely in place at SJH. I had exchanged emails with the new principal, Ms. Johnson, a white woman and former social studies teacher within the district. Dr. Anderson had copied her on our email correspondence related to an executive report that the PI and I had created, as promised, to share with SJH teachers and staff with our research findings from the original study. Since Dr. Anderson had recently retired, she pulled Ms. Johnson into the discussion and gave her background information on the study conducted at SJH between 2009–2011.

In Fall 2012, the PI and I met with Ms. Johnson. This meeting occurred before the second highly prolific fight broke out between Hmong and African American boys in December, 2012. We handed her a copy of the 34 page executive report that we had

written filled with our research findings and recommendations. Although retired, Dr. Anderson had read the report and told me during our phone conversation that it had impacted her deeply. “How could I have missed this?” she said regretfully about the conflicts between Hmong and African American students at SJH. She said that if she were still principal, she would have “used the findings to make systematic changes within the school.”

Ms. Johnson tossed our executive report nonchalantly aside on a large stack of papers on her desk and listened to us discuss our study and some of our most salient findings with little emotion on her face. As we were leaving, she voiced a concern about the escalation of violence she had witnessed between African American and Hmong students. She mentioned this to us because she wanted to know if there were any university experts we could recommend to come in and talk to teachers and staff about “gang violence” in schools.

She described how just recently a large group of Hmong boys had showed up to school dressed head-to-toe in black. They were accompanied by some of their older brothers at SSH, also dressed in black. This “large group” of Hmong boys went into one of the boys’ bathrooms together and disappeared. When a male teacher observed this, he called over another male teacher and they went into the bathroom to intervene. Ms. Johnson did not give details about what ensued, but said that they were all planning to fight African American students later that afternoon, and that she held them all accountable for their actions. What she said disturbed her most, was the “eerie silence and stares” that Hmong boys gave her when she met with them as a group, warning them of SJH’s policies on fighting and that if they were suspended twice for fighting, they

would be expelled from school permanently. The African American boys, she said, were vocal, loud, and angry, but the Hmong boys simply sat and stared at her which she found “unsettling.”

S. Lee (2005) and Lei (2003) discovered that two dominant representations of Hmong male youth played out in school contexts as either model minorities or blackened, “perpetual refugees.” In Lei’s study, Southeast Asian American males, many of whom were Hmong, who experienced harassment and violence from African Americans as part of their everyday schooling experiences, often walked around the school in groups as a way to gain support from their friends, “by being in a group”, Lei (2003) explains, “the Southeast Asian American males created a defense barrier that protected them from potential harassment. The same barrier, however, served to maintain a lack of communication and understanding between the Southeast Asian American male students and the rest of the school” (p. 176).

What is significant about this is that based on these racialized stereotypes, teachers in Lei’s (2003) study assumed that the groups that Southeast Asian American males walked around the school with, were a part of official gangs. These particular males, however, confirmed that they were “groups” of friends, not gangs. This was also the case for Hmong boys in my study who repeatedly told me that they were not in gangs, nor forming gangs as a result of their everyday schooling experiences; they just wanted to be left alone so that they could focus on school. Teng said, “These kids are just hiding in their little shell and hoping that they don’t get punched as they are walking to the bus.”

Earlier in Chapter two, I discussed the ways that male youth of color get labeled deviant or delinquent even when they have never carried out delinquent activities, nor are

members of gangs. Researchers such as S. Lee (2005), Rios (2011), and Vue (2012) have all found that many male youth are truant or not attending school as a *response* to feeling inadequate and/or believing that education will never lead to greater social mobility for themselves or their families. S. Lee and Vue, who have studied Hmong youth specifically, found that what happened to Hmong males *in* schools were what made them resistant to schooling and that these experiences were largely based on racialized, forever-foreigner stereotypes about them.

Like Lei (2003), I learned that WTK Hmong boys who actually were in official gangs were boys who had never expressed interest in attending SJH or had been suspended and/or expelled from SJH for fighting. Still, Ms. Johnson used pathological descriptions of the Hmong boys sitting in her office based on racialized, forever foreigner stereotypes to describe their behavior when in reality they were most likely worried about saying anything given their previous schooling experiences and were following the directions given to them by their parents.

**School suspensions.** Only a few months later, on a Friday afternoon in December 2012, the large fight between Hmong and African American boys broke out behind the school busses parked outside of SJH. Less than a month later, on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013, I interviewed Kai Moua, the younger brother of Kiab and Leej Moua, who was in the eighth grade at the time of the fight. He had been encouraged by Mark and Teng to meet with Mr. Sloane, a white man and the new associate principal at SJH, the following Monday. The reason why he had agreed to do this was because he and his friends were scared of retaliation from these particular African American boys. At this point, Mr.

Sloane was not aware of the fight that had occurred, but Mark and Teng knew that eventually he would find out, names would be given, and they wanted Kai to have the chance to tell Mr. Sloane his side of the story.

During this meeting, Kai explained the pattern of “bullying” that had been prevalent at SJH since he had started school there and made a point to tell him that the majority of the letime, he and his friends ignored the racist remarks from African American boys, but that this time they had pushed them too far. Mr. Sloane told Kai that he understood that it “hurts Hmong people when other people think they’re really Chinese” but that he had to follow the school’s policy and suspend him and his friends that had been involved. Not only did Mr. Sloane completely miss an opportunity to address the systematic violence and harassment based on racism and racist name calling that had been happening to Kai and other Hmong males for the past few years at SJH, but he made them responsible for what had happened.

In other words, Mr. Sloane focused on what he saw as an act of “misunderstanding”, while Kai was forced to “interpret and negotiate the experience of prejudice and discrimination” (Barajas & Ronnkvist, 2007, p. 1528). Instead of focusing on the pattern of violence, harassment, and racism that Kai began the meeting with and emphasized, Mr. Sloane immediately shifted the meeting’s focus on the racial epithet “chink”, that had been used against him and his friend, assuming that the entire fight had been about name calling (which he refused to call “racist”) and hurt feelings rather than exploring the racialized school practices at SJH that had allowed this type of harassment to fester and go unnoticed for the last few years. In addition, the model minority stereotype that impacts all Asian Americans in U.S. schools in powerful ways makes



many school officials unwilling to characterize harassment or violence towards Asian Americans as racially motivated, whereas incidents against African Americans are often quickly defined as such (Ng et al. 2007).

As a solution to what Mr. Sloane perceived as Hmong boys getting their feelings hurt by being called names, he required that all of the boys identified in the fight meet as a group with himself and the school's Director of Diversity, an African American man who had once worked for the district as the Director for Equity and Inclusion. In this meeting, the boys were told to shake hands, introduce themselves to one another, and talk about their hobbies, at which Mr. Sloane told them that they had more in common than they realized and they should focus on their commonalities rather than their differences. These "differences" Mr. Sloane noted, were creating conflict based on simple misunderstandings (i.e. believing that someone is Chinese when they are actually Hmong). The Director of Diversity made a point to tell the boys, all who are bussed in from their inner city neighborhoods, that SJH and SSH are two of the "best schools" in the state and that they should remember that if they are ever tempted to fight again.

I argue that in a grand gesture of multiculturalism, staff forced the boys in the room, who they deemed as the problem, to focus on their similarities, which allowed the staff to uphold SJH's status quo of academic excellence and to not address the true nature of these issues. As discussed earlier, it is much more common to blame individuals rather than attempt to do the challenging work in understanding larger systemic reasons why these issues persist. Barajas and Ronnkvist (2007), who studied the ways that whiteness is built into school spaces through informal and formal practices, argue that "individual prejudice simply cannot explain this happening to such a high percentage of this group.

However, we believe this commonly occurs not because of individual assumptions, but because the organizational logic in schools is racialized and delineates along lines of race” (p. 1530).

When I asked Kai what his parents’ response was, he said they were angry that he had been fighting in school. They told him that he should have just run away, but because he made the wrong decision, they took away his privileges to spend the night at his best friend, Bai Lee’s house (Kue and Kong Lee’s youngest brother), who also had been suspended due to fighting. When Teng found out that Kai and several other Hmong boys had been suspended as a result of meeting with Mr. Sloane, he requested a meeting with Mr. Sloane the following day.

During this meeting, Teng also explained the pattern of bullying, harassment, and physical violence that had been ongoing at SJH. He explained that the fight, like all fights between Hmong and African Americans, were about Hmong kids trying to protect themselves. Mr. Sloane stood behind the school’s policies and refused to lift the suspensions off of the Hmong boys. In addition, he blamed Kai and the other Hmong boys for not coming to talk to him sooner than Friday because he believed if he had known about the building tensions between these students that the fight could have been prevented from happening in the first place. Teng told him that by placing blame on Hmong students and suspending them, he was preventing them from ever going to him in the future to talk to them about their problems. Mr. Sloane responded that the school policy allowed him to “stay neutral”.

Although it may appear that Mr. Sloane and the Director of Diversity attempted to deal with the conflict by gathering the boys involved together for what I call a superficial

multicultural moment, they were unwilling to lift the suspension on the boys. Again, Foucault's (1977) Panopticon is useful here in understanding the ways that institutions reproduce social control through, in this case, disciplinary actions used as a strategy to perpetuate power and authority (Noguera, 2008). Foucault (1977) argues that maintaining power based on fear of public torture and hangings that were carried out in 19<sup>th</sup> century France has been replaced in modern societies by maintaining power through surveillance and discipline. School officials at SJH exercised this social control through disciplinary actions through school suspensions and eventually the school expulsions of two of the African American girls who beat Mai in the school gymnasium.

The conflicts occurring at SJH were between students of color, and in this case, students of color who were bussed in from the inner city. White students who lived in the district were never involved in these conflicts. I believe that these factors were both disconcerting as well as a relief by SJH officials. Being able to stand by zero-tolerance policies on fighting in school allowed Mr. Sloane and other school officials not only to stay neutral, but to put sole responsibility on the students involved in these conflicts as they were not white students who lived in the surrounding neighborhoods of the suburban school. Mr. Sloane and the school's Director of Diversity reinforced that the boys must be responsible for negotiating their relationships with one another in what they claim is a neutral space. Barajas and Ronnkvist (2007) argue:

The problem was that school decision makers (regardless of their racial make-up) approached schooling as a process that affected everyone the same way rather than as a racialized space working through a specific kind of organizational logic. School policy makers, using common-sensical notions as the neutral way the organizational logic of the school categorized and delineated by race, made choices under the assumption that the existing relationships were neutral, thereby making the application of policy in the organization race-neutral. (p. 1531)

In mid-February 2013, the PI and I wanted to give Ms. Johnson and Mr. Sloane an opportunity to discuss these incidences from their perspectives. I emailed them both and told them that we were following up on our research study, and wanted to give them an opportunity to share their thoughts with us as new leaders of the school. They both emailed back saying they were happy to meet with us. Approximately one week-later, both principals cancelled their meetings with us. Ms. Johnson wrote in an email, “I will need to review the original proposal before considering if our participation is still required or beneficial to the school.” Mr. Sloane wrote a slightly longer response:

Upon further examination of the document you sent, it would seem that the interview you are requesting today, in 2013-13, falls significantly later than the date of your original research. I do not believe that I will be able to provide you with reliable data in that I was not employed as a full time administrator during the 09-10 school year – at that time I was a Language Arts teacher with no regular classroom or administrative contact with our Hmong students. Hence, I voluntarily decline your offer for a follow-up interview.

I later learned from Teng, that during these email exchanges, Mr. Sloane had said to Teng, “I bet your [Mark] is going to go to the school board and tell them what an awful job we’re doing.” After Kai and the rest of the Hmong boys were suspended, Mark and Teng knew they had to address this issue institutionally, but they did not go right to the school board. After Mark had been, in his words, “banned from talking to principals at [SJH]”, they first attempted meeting with a Hmong American woman who had been appointed as a “Hmong district liaison” due to the influx of Hmong students through the school choice program. When they organized a large meeting with Hmong students and their parents to describe the incidents that had occurred with Hmong students, Teng said that she took her “usual approach” in two specific ways. First, she told a crowded room of Hmong students and parents that she could not say much about how SJH was handling

the situation due to privacy laws, but that she stood behind the district's policies. And second, she blamed WTK Hmong parents for not communicating to bus drivers or teachers and principals about what had been happening to their kids for so long at SJH.

Teng expressed his disappointment in her approach:

I expected her to come forward as a Hmong liaison and say as a person working with Hmong families, 'What can we do to help you guys out? What can we do together to help the Hmong parents out? I want to work with you from preventing this from happening again. Let's do something together, even going to the school board and even talking to the administration together. I will be your voice.' But instead she just said, 'You parents need to listen and talk to your kids about what is going on in school and really be parents.' She just serves as the Hmong liaison for the sole purpose of communicating bullshit to the parents and standing behind company policies.

From Mark's perspective, the past two violent incidents inflicted upon Hmong students had been so severe, he believed that if the district's Hmong liaison would not help Hmong families, that he needed to go straight to the top to get a response so that SJH and the district would take the incidents seriously. Still reeling from Mai's suspension, Mark gathered 65 signatures from WTK Hmong students as well as several statements about what they had been experiencing at SJH, to present to the school board. The statement says:<sup>57</sup>

We are [SJH] Hmong students and family. We like the education we get at [SJH] schools, but we have a problem. Some other students are saying racist and hateful things to us... They make fun of our accents and language, and mimic Hmong. They say things like: We're going to kick your Asian a\*\*. N\*\*\*\*\* f\*\*\* Asians. We'll slap you back to Thailand. All you Asians can suck on my d\*\*\*. Asians have small d\*\*\*\*, blacks have big d\*\*\*\*. They say these words when school staff aren't there. Sometimes on the school bus, more often in the halls, in the lunch rooms, and in the bathrooms...

Usually we try to stay quiet and ignore the racist words. Sometimes the racist words are followed by physical attacks. The attacks take place where school staff

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<sup>57</sup> This is a summary of key points from the statement. I am not including it as a document in the appendices because I was not given permission to do so.

don't see them. The attacks are racist, and they are hate crimes. In your Equity and Inclusion Statement, you state that [SJH] schools are committed to counteract racism and discrimination. Please stop the racism shown to us by other students, so we can focus on our studies.

Mark and Teng said that after this statement was presented to the school board, little follow up occurred, and all went back to "business as usual" at SJH. They knew that Hmong parents could have sued the school district for a civil rights violation if they could "prove" what had happened to their children in both incidents. However, school officials, particularly Ms. Johnson and Mr. Sloane, stood behind school and district policies to assure students (and their parents) that the school was actually addressing what had happened. Teng expressed his frustration with me:

If it had been black kids getting beat up, the NAACP and Urban League would've raised hell. And if a bunch of black girls had beaten a rich white girl from that suburb, a major crisis would have happened. Her parents would have hired an attorney and the district and school would have done everything to make things right. It's easy to just keep ignoring Hmong kids. Their parents don't have any power. They're not connected to anybody important in the district and they're not going to complain.

It was despairing that the statements that WTK Hmong youth had expressed about their experiences at SJH mirrored the statements they had made about their former experiences at their neighborhood public schools. In addition, a Hmong American man who works at the urban public school district in their neighborhoods relayed to me that district officials only have "white and African American kids on their radar" and that "when these kids' parents complain to the district, especially white middle class parents from [a predominately white, affluent area of the city], they do everything in their power to make them happy."

Still, Mark and Teng argued that WTK Hmong youth were better off at SJH because of the "world class" education they received that they still could not get at their

neighborhood schools in the urban public school district. In fact, soon after they brought Hmong youth with them to meet with the school board, they brought the same youth with them to the state capital to meet with state legislators to ask for continued bus funding for the school choice program so they could continue attending SJH. According to Mark, because of research results the PI and I had given him outlining the positive outcomes of attending SJH, as well as youths' ability to advocate for themselves with these state legislators, bus funding was granted.

What Mark did not share is that he had spent hours coaching Hmong youth to use meritocracy narratives about themselves with state legislators in order to increase the likelihood of receiving this continued funding. I agree with several Hmong individuals that without Mark's advocacy, WTK Hmong youth would most likely still be at their neighborhood public schools or enrolled in Hmong charter schools that have historically failed many students in the Hmong community. However, the ways in which he worked with Hmong youth and their families, as a white male, was problematic.

Relying on gendered Asian stereotypes that hyper-sexualize females, Mark often described Hmong girls as "totally adorable", noting that all they had to do was show up at the state capital, shake the hands of state senators, and get "whatever they wanted" based on how "small and cute" they were. With Hmong male youth, he used racialized narratives based on either-or-scenarios that he often used to predict their fates. For example, at a tutoring session I overheard him say to a group of Hmong males, "I want you guys to live on a five million dollar lot someday in the suburbs instead of joining gangs."

Regularly using narratives steeped in deficiency and meritocracy, the WTK Hmong were always described by Mark as “small, short, poor refugees” who came to the U.S. void of any English language skills, but because of their education at SJH, managed to go to college or become college-bound. I often witnessed the way he coached WTK Hmong youth, particularly females, to adapt this narrative when talking to state senators or newspaper reporters. As Ogden (2008) argues:

When a “refugee community” is referred to as such, it is often in the context of some perceived social, cultural, or economic deficiency of the same... Refugees are ultimately victims, although they are the surviving victims, who have escaped harrowing danger and brutal violence. They require support and sponsorship. The depravity of their experiences invites our patronage and our pity. (p. 9-10)

Regardless if Mark also bought into these racialized stereotypes, or he believed himself to be WTK Hmong youths’ white savior, he monopolized these narratives of the “refugee” to get what he needed as a successful neighborhood organizer. In addition, Mark also never publicly or privately acknowledged the highly instrumental and influential work that Teng, a Hmong American man, continued to do, and that without him, as Dr. Anderson astutely noted in our phone conversation, he could not do a significant amount of his work. But what I found most disheartening, once again, is that when Mark was around, Hmong youths’ voices were glaringly absent.

### **The Problem with Ideology**

As I discussed earlier in Chapter two, data from the U.S. Department of Education (2009) reveals that 54% of Asian American boys are bullied and harassed in U.S. schools – rates that exceed white, African American, and Latino male peers. The neighborhood public school that Kong and Kue attended when they first arrived in the U.S., which has since been closed, was in the largest urban public school district in the state. The



district's policy, entitled, "Bullying and Hazing Prohibition" loosely defines bullying as "Conduct that is: teasing, intimidating, defaming, threatening or terrorizing."

In a conversation with a white, senior administrator at the district, I learned that "bullying" is currently a buzz word that gets everyone's attention. To district administrators, bullying can mean anything from getting called a racist or gay slur, being harassed on social networking sites such as *Facebook*, or getting one's head repeatedly bashed into a locker every day. "If you want to get someone's attention at a school or at the district level, make sure "bullying" is a part of that language" this administrator told me.

First and second generation Asian youth in the U.S., including Kong and Kue, have all been subjected to racist name calling such as "chink", "gook", and "jap" that are offensive and demeaning to Asian youth regardless of their actual ethnicity. Considered "teasing", it is loosely connected to both the suburban and urban school districts' definitions of bullying. However, this type of bullying is not what happened to Kue Lee on the school bus. In fact, what happened to Kue on the bus does not fit into any of the categories in the "Bullying and Hazing Prohibition" policy that the urban public school district first adapted in 1997. Had Kue and/or his parents gone to the school or the district to report what had happened to him on the bus as an act of "bullying", the nature of what had actually happened to him, would have never been addressed.

Kue was violently attacked and humiliated by a group of four African American adolescents who held him down while one of them *poured poop* all over his body. This attack was pre-mediated and racially motivated. It was *not* bullying. In addition, the fact that nobody reported or documented this vicious attack means it will never be included in

a statistic on a U.S. Department of Education report or any other type of report that is disseminated widely to scholarly and non-scholarly audiences. Had Kue been filling out a survey on bullying and harassment, he would have likely not had an opportunity to share information about this attack given the nature of surveys' pre-determined questions.

In addition, the violent attacks that happened to several of the Hmong boys at SJH as well as the attack on Mai, the lone Hmong girl, received school and district official's attention because of Mark and Teng, but their school policy on bullying did nothing to protect these students. In fact, the school's other policy on fighting trumped their bully policy as these students' actions (i.e. defending themselves by fighting back) became more of a focal point to school administrators. When conversations occurred within SJH around what had happened to Mai, not one individual involved brought up the issue of sexuality that was a known factor in Mai's beating. Instead, they focused on the fact that she had punched and kicked one of the African American girls. It was only after Dr. Anderson retired that she acknowledged Mai was "in the process of coming out as a lesbian". What is deeply troubling about Mai's case is that not only did the school's bullying policy do nothing to protect her, but the outcome of the attack only punished her further, shutting her down and prohibiting her from having any conversations about her sexual identity or having school staff discuss, in meaningful ways, how they could support her.

As I discussed earlier in Chapter two, schools are often thought of as spaces where knowledge is communicated and taught—neutral institutions rather than cultural sites where an existing social order and hierarchy is reproduced (Giroux, 1983). SJH's

ideologies were a part of the organizational logic of a system (Barajas & Ronnkvist, 2007; Lewis, 2004). Hall (1990) argues that ideologies are most effective when, “our formulations seem to be simple descriptive statements about how things are, or what we can ‘take-for-granted’” (p. 10).

Cintron (1997) and Hall (1990) have described the ways that ideologies are dangerous because they are often not perceived as mere ideas, but become internalized and embodied as commonsense understandings and actual truths. SJH embraced an ideology of high levels of academic achievement and a “high expectation of excellence” based on meritocracy. Because of this, teachers and staff held Hmong girls up as literal models at SJH to aspire to. In contrast, the majority of Hmong boys, who were not perceived as high academic achievers, were practically invisible to teachers and staff who used racialized stereotypes that cast them as perpetual refugees. As discussed earlier, Hmong males who did not fit into the model minority ideology were blamed for this based on their own individual failures. (Lee, 2005; Lei, 2003; Park, 2008).

The power and pervasiveness of ideology that Althusser (1971) theorized played out daily at SJH in the ways that inequalities were masked as naturalized, commonsense realities that were simply a part of individuals’ everyday lives. For example, the conflicts between Hmong and African American boys were naturalized through ideology. Boys were held solely accountable for their “delinquent” actions as SJH is an academically rich institution, one of the “best schools in the state”, that gives equal opportunities to all students. School officials at SJH used race-neutral policies to protect this organizational logic and ideology of the school (Barajas & Ronnkvist, 2007). Just as it had been in WTK for parents and grandparents, Hmong boys, in particular, were under constant threat of a

“repressive state apparatus” at SJH where, based on these policies, they could be suspended and expelled from the suburban school district. As “targets of regulation and containment,” Hmong boys as well as one Hmong girl who did not fit the ideology of SJH, were “deemed deserving of discipline and punishment but not worthy of protection” (Cacho, 2012, p. 5).

## Chapter Seven

### Alternative Narratives in Spaces of Social Death

Field Note. February 8, 2013

In March, 2012, not even a year ago today, eight African American teenagers in [Kong's] neighborhood almost killed him. It happened just a couple of blocks away from his house. He was outside running to get exercise because his therapist said that it could help relieve his stress. He had stopped at a street corner to tie his shoe and saw them coming around a corner behind him. Before he could stand up, one of the guys took a large stick and hit him on the head with force knocking him to the ground.

[Kong] walked me through the details of this beating as if he were discussing something that had happened to some nameless person in another country, much like we have gotten used to seeing scenes of war on TV or in newspapers – the ways that bloodied bodies, most often brown bodies – sometimes those of children - lay in the middle of a street while mass chaos ensues around them. But these bodies are not connected to us in any way and so it is easy to carry on with our day – business as usual. This is the way [Kong] talked about what had happened to him. When he finished, I sat across from him crying. And then, I couldn't stop crying.

I have never cried while conducting an interview and I told [Kong] this. What he told me was devastating. I imagined him bloodied and vomiting, in the middle of the street, being beaten nearly to death by eight guys with large, wooden sticks because that's what happened to him less than a year ago. I know that intersection and it is always busy, especially at dusk. There had to have been many people who drove and walked by, but nobody stopped to call for help or intervene.

"I'm sorry." [Kong] told me, as I grabbed Kleenex out of my bag and struggled to talk. "What? No." I told him. "You don't need to apologize to me. You don't ever need to apologize for anything. I'm crying because what happened to you makes me feel sick to my stomach... I'm crying because it makes me so sad what happened to you..." [Kong's] face softened for the first time since he had spoken to me and he smiled—a very thoughtful smile—as if he appreciated my unrehearsed display of emotion. Then he just kept talking.

There are many ways to interpret the violence that Kong Lee experienced as well as the ways in which he responded to it. In this chapter, I discuss some of these interpretations, but give voice to the most important interpretation of all, that of Kong himself.

Kong had gone outside alone in his neighborhood to get exercise, something he rarely did, because the school psychologists at SSH had told him about the multiple benefits of outdoor exercise in relieving stress. In a health sciences class, Kong had been

asked to name three adults in his life who he could confide in. When he wrote on the assignment, “There are no adults in my life who I can confide in,” the teacher of the class referred him to the school psychologist. When Kong had nearly been beaten to death in March 2012, he was 19 years old, a senior at SSH, and had been seeing two school psychologists weekly at SSH for over one-year.

In general, Hmong individuals do not actively seek mental health services for a variety of legitimate reasons, and when they do, it is often not to discuss personal issues (Z.B. Xiong et al. 2006). Kong said that even though it hadn’t been his idea to see a therapist, nor did he have an opinion as to whether or not he really needed one, he always felt better after speaking to his therapists. He said that he was forthcoming with both of them about what was happening in his life. He said that the only other person he confided in was his girlfriend, Amanda, and it was his relationship with her, that began in 2010, which was causing conflict between him and his parents. As Kong described it, his parents had never liked Amanda because she came from a “bad family.” When he continued to see her, his mother kicked him out of the house, but after one week, arrived at Amanda’s mother’s apartment to pick Kong up and bring him home.

Kong claims that the conflict between him and his parents grew because of his relationship with Amanda, but that because of this conflict, he turned to Amanda for even more support, which made their bond even deeper. “I feel like without her,” Kong said referring to Amanda, “I have no person to talk to, like I don't have any friends. This is why I cannot leave her.” After the brutal attack that occurred, one which left him disoriented and bleeding from several different parts of his body, Kong said he walked

home and purposefully entered a backdoor to his house so that his parents would not hear him. He walked up stairs, shut the door behind him to his bedroom, and called Amanda, telling her what had happened. When I asked about her reaction, he said, “She just kept crying.” At school the next day, he talked to his male therapist about what had happened to him, only because he had an appointment already set up with him. His therapist urged him to report the incident to the police and to talk to his parents about it.

Kong followed the instructions of his therapist and said that after school he filed a report with the police at his neighborhood precinct who put up what he described as a “flier” with information written on it about the attack and taped it to a streetlight near the corner where it had happened. Kong said that when he told his parents, they expressed anger at him for going to the police before talking to them. (Note: He did not tell his parents he was seeing therapists at SSH). His parents blamed him for the attack and said that if he had just followed their repeated instructions never to go outside alone, it would have never happened to him in the first place. As a punishment, his parents made him do the majority of the housework and cook meals for the entire family. As a way to extend the punishment both literally and symbolically, his mother often sat at the dinner table and refused to eat the food he had cooked.

Kong said that his parents’ reaction did not surprise him, which is why he had chosen not to talk to them in the first place. Had his therapist not encouraged him to talk to his parents or to file a police report, Kong would have done neither of these two things. It is deeply frustrating that he *did* do both and neither institution of family or state, did anything to advocate for him or protect him. Like the well-intentioned teachers I

interviewed at SJH, it is more than likely that Kong's therapists had no experience with Hmong families nor had they ever been to the neighborhood where the Lee family lived. The therapist's advice for a student who comes from a family like the majority white, middle to upper class families at SSH, would have yielded drastically different results. I encourage readers to imagine the wide-spread outrage and panic that would ensue if a white, upper middle class high school student from a wealthy suburb was beat viciously by eight African American teenagers for no apparent reason and then left to die in the middle of a suburban street.

Social death is a systematic process in which individuals are denied their humanity; despite being physically alive, they are socially isolated, violated, and excluded in ways where their lives no longer bear social meaning (Cacho, 2012; Guenther, 2013; Patterson, 1982, Rios, 2011). It may seem extreme to apply social death to Kong, but I argue that ever since his life had begun in WTK, he had been told in a number of ways, and in several contexts, that his life was of no *social* value. In addition, it seemed that whenever he attempted to express what was happening to him in his everyday life, he was punished by parents and school officials. To make matters worse, he had never been given the same opportunities as his older brother, Kue, the star of the Lee family, and was compared to him constantly, as the younger brother who never measured up—who was never quite as exceptional.

*Homo sacer* is a term that Agamben (1998) employs from ancient Roman law which denotes a bare life that is depoliticized, governable, and excluded. As a present day example of *homo sacer*, WTK Hmong youth's lives, such as Kong's, are neither valued or protected, as they exist somewhere between exile and belonging. Rosas (2012)



describes the undocumented youth from Mexico in his study as “undocumented sacer... They are stripped bare, exposed to the multiple agents of sovereign power and its fissures” (p. 105). Guenther (2013) writes:

What makes social death different from milder forms of exclusion is its intensity, its pervasiveness, and its permanence... The social dead may be subject to explicit disregard and disrespect, but also to casual indifference; they may appear as abject others whose constant threat of pollution helps reinforce the boundaries of the social world, or they may not appear at all. This invisibility does not diminish the intensity of social death; rather, it may intensify it. (p. xxiii).

Kong is a young “man of no rights” who exposes “the fiction of the citizen” (Agamben, 1998, p. 133). Kong and other WTK Hmong youths’ bodies have endured systematic and at times, excessive punishment and violence in institutions in Thailand and in the U.S. In response, their parents and those in positions of authority, have either looked the other way or punished WTK youth further to uphold the ideology and status quo of an institution, including the institution of family. As Guenther (2013) reminds us, not everyone with family is guaranteed support, “Families can be abusive or overprotective. But the structure of natal alienation attacks the very *possibility* of mutual support among kin” (p. xxiii).

Many Americans who stand behind meritocracy believe that democracy will always prevail in the U.S., but for whom? As Cacho (2012) argues, “in the spaces of social death, the state makes no attempt to offer such promises. Without the expectation of rights and recognition, we start from the reality of social death rather than the promise of a better life” (p. 145). These spaces, as I have discussed in previous chapters, can never be neutral. The predominately African American neighborhood that Kong’s family lives in has always been naturalized as a violent space. In many research studies

conducted on Southeast Asian youth such as the Hmong, these “inner city” spaces routinely represent refugees, such as the Hmong, as victims of violence who have no choice but to turn to gangs for protection (Tang, 2000).

Unlike African American and Latino parents who are often blamed for their deficient familial structures (Cacho, 2012; Lopez, 2003; Rios, 2012), Hmong parents are often portrayed as helpless victims who are experiencing vast amounts of intergenerational conflict and culture clash with their 1.5 and second generation children. (Lor & Chu, 2002; Thao, 2003). In these neat and tidy one-sided narratives, Hmong parents are never held accountable for their actions that create conflict between themselves and their children. A breakdown in Hmong family structure is often attributed to the trauma they experienced as refugees of war (Rumbaut & Ima, 1987). What these narratives all have in common is that Hmong families are constructed as victims, but not as individuals who have the *ability* to contest their situations. In addition, Asian American male violence is often perceived as solely targeted toward familial units, whereas African American male violence is seen as directed at the public at large as well as their own communities (Brandzel & Desai, 2013).

It is significant that, as Cacho (2012) reminds us, spaces of social death are also “graced with hope, courage, and/or youthful idealism” (p. 145). I often reflect on the ways to interpret what happened to Kong and other WTK Hmong male youth in these spaces of social death. I have thought about the eight African American teenagers who together, almost killed Kong. It would be much easier, and perhaps at times more satisfying, to view Kong as a perpetual victim in need of rescue and the African American teenagers as inherently criminal, pathological offenders of senseless gang

violence, but I refuse to contribute to these overly present narratives on Hmong families or African American males as they have been unproductive in moving any meaningful conversations forward. I argue, like Cacho (2012), that “the most vulnerable populations in the United States are often represented as if they are the primary sources of the other’s social denigration. And because they are represented in this way, they are recruited to participate in their own and others’ devaluation” (p. 27).

Kong talked with me about his two cousins in gangs, one of whom is ten years older than him, and was in the same gang that Kong ran with in his neighborhood in WTK. This cousin had been released from prison shortly after Kong was attacked and told him that they could easily find the guys who did this to him. However, in this same conversation, Kong’s cousin told him not to let this incident detract him from staying on course. He told Kong that he had to graduate from high school, go to college, and be successful and that he would not allow Kong to follow in his footsteps. I asked Kong if he considered letting his cousin do this for him, to which he replied, “At first I wanted to go find them. The fighting. The revenge. It’s just not a good thing to do. So I just left it alone. I mean, at first I hated all black people, but... there are good and bad people in every culture.” As Cintron (1997) observes, “Vengeance, despite being typically characterized as a powerful emotion, was the result of a decision-making process that might be described as a kind of logic” (p. 146).

I argue that in this space of social death, with the support of a family member deemed a “criminal”, Kong enacted agency and resistance, and continued on his trajectory. After having been the first Hmong student to attend SJH through a school choice program, he graduated from SSH later in June of that same year and began his

first semester as a college freshman at a public university. This argument is not meant to detract from the senseless, unprovoked violence that Kong experienced, but rather to rewrite narratives, ones that push back on refugee exceptionalism (Tang, 2000) that are steeped in viewing the Hmong as victims and passive others, “that ultimately pathologize refugeeism, reinforcing that dominant discursive strand of tragic victimhood from which there is no apparent hope of recovery – the relentless continuation of the violent victimization that initiated and prolongs their status and existence as refugees” (Ogden, 2008, p. 228).

Although Kong’s parents, as well as Amanda, told him not to go outside again by himself in his neighborhood, Kong went anyway. In fact, shortly after the brutal beating occurred, he purposefully ran outside alone, at dusk, and stopped at the corner where he had almost died. He said that he bent down to tie his shoe, even if it was not untied, and waited for their return. “I wanted to see them again,” he told me.

Kari: Would you fight them? You have said several times that all of your life your parents have told you not to fight and that you want to be a different person now.

Kong: Yeah, but it changed my thinking after I got beat. Everybody here should have the same equal rights so if they hit me, I should be able to hit them back, so that’s why I go back there.

At the time, I did not understand why Kong did this. He had told me that at one point during the attack, he was certain that he would die soon when he became conscious and found himself laying in the middle of the street with eight guys surrounding him in a circle, still holding sticks. Kong recalled the fighting skills he had acquired in WTK and stood up, moved around in the middle of the circle until he managed to see a gap, and then quickly escaped. He said he knew he was bleeding, but did not feel pain, and as he was running side to side in the middle of the street, he saw a car coming at him.

It was then that he strategically bolted out of the street and the car almost hit several of the teenaged boys, still holding wooden sticks. The driver, an older African American man, got out of his car and yelled at all of the teenagers who dropped their sticks and ran. Kong did not think the driver had stopped to intervene on his behalf, as he got back into his car and sped away. I assumed that Kong, too, would run away quickly in the opposite direction, but instead he described methodically collecting all eight sticks in the middle of the road, walking slowly back to his house, and dumping the sticks in his backyard, where they still remain today. The sticks carried symbolic meaning for Kong who said that they represent his survival.

While protecting Kong's identity, I spoke to several individuals, all females, with my concerns about his safety. At the time, I believed that someone needed to intervene on his behalf. I spoke to my dissertation committee members, friends who are professionals in educational settings, and consulted with a therapist employed at the university where I was a graduate student at the time. Everyone I spoke to was horrified at what had happened to him, but made it clear that he was an adult participant in my research study who had made the decision to do this. I brought him a brochure from his university's counseling service because therapy had been a positive experience for him in high school and I hoped that he would be open to the idea of talking to another therapist as a freshman in college. Perhaps I believed that if someone was monitoring him from afar, it would keep him safe and accounted for in his everyday life.

He thanked me, but said that he was fine. "I always text Amanda before I go running over there," he said, although this did not assure me at all. At the time, he still

participated in out-of-school tutoring sessions and other activities with Mark and Teng, but chose not to share information about the attack with either of them. “Why?” I asked, knowing that if Mark knew what had happened, he would contact city officials, make certain that the media publicized the attack, and plan meetings with Hmong families in Kong’s neighborhood. “Because you know [Mark],” Kong responded, “He would be very mad at the people who did this to me, so he’s going to make it a really big deal. I don’t want to make it a big deal.” Mark would have made it a big deal and at the time, I wanted him to, so everyone would hear about the injustice that had happened to Kong. I wanted him to know that there were people willing to fight on his behalf.

It was not until I spoke to a male professor and scholar, who studies violence amongst men of color, that I began to understand that Kong needed none of these things. He said, “He needs to do this for himself. He needs to go there every night where those guys beat him down, and you need to step back and let him do it.” His words forced me to reflect on why I believed that Kong needed intervention. Another male professor and scholar, who is a licensed psychologist, relayed his thoughts to me in written correspondence that also pushed my thinking further:

If a culture, or person within a culture, sustains a wound such as this, but the culture is continually inundated by new or similar forms of oppression, then there is no safety to be found that can create space to take care of the wound... no protection both literally and figuratively. For some reason the family can't protect, which I would want to know more about, but the community and majority culture is creating continued oppression... If a main issue of the culture is a lack of protection, then the massive hopelessness that comes from that may have caused him to move into this self-destructive response. It's as if a contract of life itself has been broken – the innate expectation that we will be taken care of and protected.

Fred Ho, one of the only Asian American jazz musicians of his time, recalled how physically and mentally abusive his father had been his mother when he was growing up in the 1950s in Massachusetts:

He took it out on us – his anger, his frustrations – rather than fight the white establishment. So I learned a lesson, and it was to never internalize that stuff. So early on I became a fighter. A fighter both against the white establishment, white society, but also against our own kind that internalizes oppression. (Chow, 2014, p. 2)

Perhaps by returning to the site of his beating, Kong rid himself free of internalizing the event. He had acknowledged that he had been a fighter his entire life, but he had suppressed this side of himself since he had arrived in the U.S. His returning to the site could have been his way of pushing back on the internalized oppression and subjugation that his parents had succumbed to long ago. In addition, Kong refused to see himself as a victim of this event and he made it clear that he did not want me to view him as a victim, either. Therefore, I ask that readers of this text, also not view Kong as a victim.

Rosas (2012) adapts Judith Butler's approach to the gendered subject as a site of ambivalence, to struggle with what he calls, "pathological death-embracing agency", what I argue describes what Kong did every time he went back to the site where he had almost been killed, "Agency", Rosas (2012) says, "does not in itself sufficiently grasp the complexity that I am trying to address, but it represents my uncomfortable compromise with the available critical vocabulary in terms of subject effects, or how people are made subjects in relation to power" (p. 124).

Although "agency" and "resistance" will never fully explain what Kong addressed, or perhaps redressed, when he went back to that street corner every night, I believe it was what he needed to do for himself at the time, regardless if it was self-

destructive, a cry for help, or another label adults affix to youth in order to try and make sense of extraordinarily senseless events. Cacho (2012) argues:

Empowering narratives do not necessarily give us happy endings. Nor do they always leave us inspired. In the spaces of social death, empowerment is not contingent on taking power or securing small victories. Empowerment comes from deciding that the outcome of struggle doesn't matter as much as the decision to struggle. (p. 32).

I end this chapter purposefully with little closure and no happy endings. Instead, I invite readers to *struggle* with the various interpretations and alternative narratives that I have offered.



## Chapter 8

### **The Significance of Cultural Practices and Homegrown Capital in Family, School, and Neighborhood Spaces**

Field Note. July 19, 2013

I hung out with the boys at the park earlier today, playing soccer, but we mostly just sat on the grass underneath big trees, talking and laughing. All of a sudden [Teng] said something in Hmong and all seven boys, ages ten to sixteen, ran after him and jumped into the van. I followed them in my car to a beach, just outside of their neighborhood and watched as they all jumped out of the van and sprinted towards the small lake. Sans sunscreen, swimsuits, flip flops, or towels, they threw their donated soccer cleats off in the sand and jumped off of the dock into the water, some cannonball style, with their soccer shorts and shirts still on. One boy brought the soccer ball and they tossed it around like a beach ball. [Teng] left to take one of the kids home at which I said, “Are you going to leave them here?” [Teng] replied, “They’re tough. They can take care of themselves, if you need to leave.” I felt uneasy about this and decided to stay and watch them until he returned.

It was a hot day and the small lake was packed. I counted five white people, including the lifeguard, and only one was a kid. The rest of the kids in the lake or on the beach appeared to be black or Asian. Almost none of the kids, several who appeared to be as young as six or seven, were supervised by adults. I remember reading about an African American boy who drowned here last summer, but that didn’t stop kids from filling the lake, almost all unsupervised. The boys had so much fun together; they exuded uninhibited joy as they moved around the lake, not really swimming, still tossing their soccer ball up in the air. The youngest boy, a ten year old, was carried by his older brother in junior high, almost the entire time, especially when he was in the deeper part of the lake. He looked so happy in his older brother’s arms. Moments like these have been my favorite parts of this work—watching kids have fun, laugh until their stomachs hurt, and acting silly together.

Seeing the boys play in the lake reminded me of being in the Hmong village in Thailand. Other than school, kids didn’t have schedules or activities they went to. They played together outside every day and never seemed bored even though their time was unstructured. When [Teng] returned, we sat on the dock, watched the boys, and chatted. He mentioned that when the boys weren’t with him playing soccer or swimming at the lake, they were in their houses all day, playing videogames on the family computer. The girls, he said, who are not allowed to go to soccer or to the beach, rarely left their homes in the summertime. I am sure they would have loved to have been there, too.

Back in May 2010, when I first interviewed Kong and Kue’s mother, Houa, she told me that she and her husband were very happy that all of their school aged children were

being bussed out of the city into suburban schools. She admitted that if it were possible, all of her children would attend Kent, the elite prep school that her oldest son, Kue, had been attending since he was in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. She couldn't quite articulate all of the reasons why she thought Kent was far superior, only that she believed it was "the best" education for "Americans."

In Chapter two, I discussed Lareau's (2011) research which revealed the ways that social class influences parenting and the educational and social outcomes of children in white and African American families. Lareau's research investigated the ways that poor and working-class parents practiced, what she coined, "accomplishment of natural growth" while middle-class parents practiced "concerted cultivation" when raising their children. Although she noted that there are pros and cons to both practices, she argued that the concerted cultivation strategies used by middle-class parents are highly valued and rewarded by educators and other professionals. As I have discussed throughout this dissertation, the social aspects of Hmong youths' lives impact and influence them in exponential ways and must be given more consideration in research, particularly when attempting to understand their academic aspirations, persistence, and educational achievement. In this chapter, I analyze the ways that attending suburban schools where "concerted cultivation" is a highly valued norm, have impacted Hmong youth, and the ways that youth and their parents have responded to this, in a variety of ways.

### **Kue Lee: Concerted Cultivation Amongst the Elite**

When I met Kue, he was 22 years old and a junior at a selective, four-year, liberal arts college far from home. On March 3, 2013, I traveled to the college town he lives in

to interview him. When I first saw him in the distance, walking down a steep hill surrounded by large, beautiful trees, I knew it was him. It was not because he was one of the few Asian students on a predominately white campus, but because he and his younger brother Kong literally moved and took up physical space in the same ways. However, when I met him, all of the similarities between him and his younger brother came to a halt. Kue had an air of confidence that was pronounced. Unlike Kong who sometimes appeared aloof and at times nervous, Kue looked me in the eyes and said, “Thank you for traveling so far to interview me.”

As we walked together to find a quiet place to talk on a Sunday afternoon on his quaint college campus, Kue opened doors for me and had impeccable manners. He knew how to make small talk and asked me questions about my family that were not too personal, but personal enough to show that he was interested. Unlike the rest of the Hmong boys in my study, he was easy to talk to; there were never any periods of awkward silence between us. He was comfortable on his college campus and walked around as if he knew it well. Perhaps this was one of the things that made him so charismatic – he was comfortable *and* confident in his surroundings. Within five minutes of meeting him, it made sense to me why he had been the only one from WTK that approached Mark, a complete stranger, at a drinking fountain at a community center in his neighborhood, to say “hello.”

He reached for his wallet and asked if he could get me something to drink and if the meeting space he had chosen was okay. As he took a seat across from me at the table, I asked him how much time he had to talk with me. He took out a black, leather bound,

daily planner to see what else he had planned for the day and said that he did not need to be anywhere for another four hours. He wore a black leather jacket, faded jeans, white tennis shoes, and had the same short, spikey “HTT” hair cut that all of boys in my study had. However, when he took off his jacket, I noticed what appeared to be a \$300+ dollar, chocolate brown colored cashmere sweater.

“I like your sweater,” I said, as we sat across from each other at a table in what appeared to be a large study area. “Is it 100% cashmere?”

“I don’t know,” he said, “my mentor mom gave it to me.”

Kue had been assigned a “mentor mom” when he first arrived at Kent as a sophomore in high school. Although he had graduated over two years ago, she still contacted him every a month via email, sent him care packages in the mail to his dorm room, and even visited him a few times a year. When he had studied abroad in Thailand last year as a sophomore, she purchased an expensive camera for him and gave him spending money for the trip. Married to a high profile politician at the U.S. level, her daughter had attended Kent and had been in the same grade as Kue. When I asked how he felt about her, he said, “She’s more than a mom. She thinks what I do is important. She took me to visit a lot of places, and I don’t know, but I just feel warm and secure when I’m with her.”

Kue’s mentor mom, who he described as “more than a mom” to him, is a white woman who, at the time, lived in a modest home with her husband and daughter in comparison to his other friends’ homes that had indoor pools, movie theaters, and basketball courts. She had explained to him that she and her family strived to live a

simpler life, and according to Kue, she had taken a keen interest in his life ever since she had first met him. She was interested in hearing about his past and future and encouraged him to try and understand his parents' perspectives when he would confide in her about some of the things that were happening at home. He was able to have philosophical conversations with her about fascinating things he learned in school, his observations about the world he had begun to travel in, and the experiences he'd had attending growing up in Thailand and attending private school many miles away from WTK – stories from his past that he rarely shared with others.

Kue, like his younger brother Kong, had to repeat a grade in school to make up for the lost time he had experienced at his neighborhood public school, but this did not bother him as it gave him four years at Kent instead of three. During his first week of school, he was given a brand new Macintosh laptop computer to keep and was assigned a student mentor, the son of the president of a highly successful multinational corporation. "He was nice," Kue said of his student mentor. "During my freshman year, he went through my class schedule with me. I didn't really know what he was saying because I didn't understand it, but he was very nice to me." In Kong's former public school in his neighborhood, he had never been given a class schedule and had no idea how to interpret it. Instead of growing frustrated, he said his mentor and teachers went out of their way to help him and were patient with him until he could understand things.

He described a particular biology teacher who stayed late with him after school three days a week to help him with biology content and English terminology. He described all of his teachers, the majority who held doctorates in the disciplines they

taught, as the kind of teachers who spent extra time outside of class to work with him.

When comparing Kent to his former public school, Kue said:

I don't feel like I have to be scared of any people at [Kent]. Like I can leave my backpack at the table and I don't have to worry that anyone will come take my backpack or anything. I felt that nobody is going to come right at me and hit me on the head or throw food on my head—because I have had experiences like that. With the help of my mentor, they also have student events and he took me to introduce me to his other friends and my mentor mom's daughter, so that I got to know all the kids.

When I asked if his mentor and the other kids' friendships at Kent felt “genuine” – if they treated him like they treated one another, he replied, “I felt more welcome at [Kent] than any other school.” He also described having a group of friends who picked him up by car at his house every Saturday night to hang out socially, usually at their homes located in gated communities. They all played varsity soccer together and had developed what Kue considered close friendships. As I asked more questions about his experiences at Kent, all of which were academically rigorous and positive with teachers and peers, he described events that had been social networking opportunities for him, but that he had interpreted at the time as “meetings just to talk.”

For example, his student mentor's father invited him to his office when he was a junior in high school, “just to talk.” He focused the conversation on Kue's future prospects for college and offered not only to write him a letter of recommendation to the Ivy League college where he was an alumni, but offered him a summer internship in his office. Kue turned both offers down explaining that he did not think he would be able to find transportation for the summer internship and he had already identified the colleges he wished to attend as well as the individuals who had agreed to write letters of recommendation for him. According to Kue, this particular (Ivy League) college was not

on the “list” of colleges he wished to attend and he did not feel right saying “yes” to this person to write him a letter when he had already gotten commitments from others.<sup>58</sup>

I continued to ask Kue a variety of questions related to this and it was obvious that he still did not understand that this, and several other social networking opportunities via Kent, had been opportunities to join the exclusive upper strata of higher education by attending an Ivy League college. However, it was also apparent that it did not take him long to become comfortable in the spaces of Kent as well as the spaces that his friends and their family members occupied. He understood that he needed to do more than get good grades in order to be successful. By the time he was a junior at Kent, he volunteered at a local hospital, played on the varsity soccer team, and regularly participated in after school programming such as SAT prep. These activities took up large chunks of his time and also required transportation beyond the school bus which he often did not have. Even though all of the activities he participated in at Kent were covered 100% financially by his academic scholarship, his parents, who did not view any of these activities as a necessity, refused to give him rides, which is why he relied on friends and his mentor mom. Often times, however, he walked home alone in the dark.

Lareau (2011) found that kids’ participation in organized activities (i.e. extracurricular activities) were closely linked to families’ social class, but not to race. However, in the case of WTK Hmong families, I argue that race and ethnic identity have played significant roles, as Hmong cultural practices, especially for families who practice

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<sup>58</sup> Kue shared with me that he only applied to four year, highly selective, liberal arts colleges on the East Coast and Midwest. He was accepted to them all and offered academic scholarships to cover the full cost of his tuition as well as room and board. He chose the college he is currently enrolled in because they were the first to offer him a financial package.

traditional animism, are of great significance. In addition, as Grigoleit (2011) argues, due to their social marginalization along with constant threats from Thai police and military when they lived in WTK, Hmong cultural practices, traditions, and values were a response to this marginalization and surveillance which led to even greater homogeneity for WTK Hmong individuals. Hmong families had lived highly insular lives in WTK and they continued this way of life, not necessarily by choice, when they arrived in the U.S. Because of their unique experiences prior to arrival in the U.S., the WTK Hmong are a distinct cultural group within the larger Hmong diaspora. In Thailand, they are also referred to as “the Wat Tham Krabok Hmong.”

As Kue continued to have positive experiences at Kent and observed the ways his friends interacted with their parents, he began to question his own relationships with his parents as well as their family in general. “I started getting into a lot of arguments with my parents because I was the first person to attend high school and I wanted to play soccer at school...” he said. Kue had been the first person in his family to attend *high school*. Before attending Kent, he had regularly attended Hmong cultural ceremonies and played the qeej at funerals, but stopped participating in these ceremonies as the demands of work and school began to intensify. “They didn’t know how successful parents are,” Kue said, meaning, they didn’t understand how families at Kent function.

Bettie (2003) argues that social class is not a static demographic variable; it is a process that is always changing and in formation in families which makes it challenging to define. Because of this, social class status amongst family members may not be the same at any given time. While Kue had stopped participating in Hmong family cultural



events, his younger siblings still participated in them with their parents, and his brothers went to qeej practice at the community center, but they were not allowed to participate in organized school activities. Part of this had to do with bussing, but much of it had to do with the fact that their parents did not understand the ways that organized activities are connected to academic achievement for middle-class students. Kue was gaining upward mobility through organized activities and the social networks available to him *within* these activities, especially Varsity soccer.

Eckert (1989) discovered that for predominately white, middle class, popular, and high achieving high school students, school was simply a home away from home. This was demonstrated by the role in organized activities that they occupied at the school. Meanwhile, unpopular kids at the school were often invisible both physically and socially. Lareau (2011) found that all kids who came from middle-class homes were not only highly scheduled with weekly organized activities both in and out of school, but that these activities set the pace of their families' lives. In contrast, kids from working class and poor families were rarely involved in any scheduled activities, and when they were, they did not take center stage in families' lives who tended not to keep weekly schedules. Through multiple activities that middle-class children participate in throughout a 12-month calendar year, Lareau (2011) argues that children develop and value time management skills, an individual sense of self, the ability to handle defeat, and sophisticated ways to perform and present themselves.

Kue observed the ways his friends interacted with their parents, particularly in their homes. "More of a conversation," he said, where his friends openly expressed

themselves and negotiated with their parents regularly. In Kue's family, as with all of the WTK Hmong families I observed, children did not negotiate with their parents; they took directives from their parents. Lareau (2011) argues that because of this, poor and working-class children, "have little opportunity to practice negotiating with adults and little call to learn to summarize and present their own ideas, opinions, and excuses. The habit of not questioning adults also means that children in these homes are less likely to learn new vocabulary" (Lareau, 2011, p. 154). In addition, she argues, these negotiating skills are useful in various institutions when they are adults.

This example is significant because to WTK Hmong parents, having children express their opinions and negotiate with them is often viewed as a sign of disrespect, but these "skills" are encouraged and valued in middle and upper class families. As Kue was exposed to new family dynamics which he associated with warmth and closeness between his friends and their parents, he began to question the ways his own family operated. In fact, the closeness Kue observed between his friends and their parents was something he discussed at length with me. He described how it felt to see his parents' friends come to their soccer matches and then get into their family car together and go home after a match. He lamented the fact that his parents never visited Kent or attended any of his soccer matches:

My parents didn't come to my conferences, they didn't know much about my teachers. Whenever I asked them, they're busy on the weekend because they have to attend the funeral home or they have to go to a Hmong ceremony or they have to go visit other people... I started to do less with them and then I started to change. I started to question more about my culture. I started to question more about why do we have to spend \$50,000 on a funeral instead of giving it to your children to go to school and support them? Why give everything to the ceremony

when you don't have any money? My dad said that I'm too Americanized and I don't believe in anything in the Hmong culture anymore.<sup>59</sup>

Kue found his father's response, which intensified after he left for college, hurtful as he had intentionally chosen Thailand for his study abroad experience as a sophomore in college because of his investment in the Hmong community. During this trip in 2012, he had talked to many Hmong families and children who lived in poverty. Just as WTK Hmong youth had experienced schooling in Thailand, children were blatantly underserved in schools that discriminated against them. Still fluent in Thai, Kue was able to "pass" as a Thai citizen and get "realistic" information about the ways that Hmong families were perceived and treated in Thailand<sup>60</sup> as well as Laos, a country he also visited.

The trip made such an impact on him that he decided to become a medical doctor so that he could return to Thailand to help his community. He assumed that his parents would be proud of him when they heard this, especially since his family had been through the same situation and "we wanted people to help us," Kue recalled. His father's response surprised him: "Why not Korea, why not Japan, why not one of the modern schools?"

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<sup>59</sup>It has been explained to me that Hmong families see Hmong funerals and other ceremonies as life-long investments. For example, as Tomforde (2006) explains, "the past and the present are interconnected to form one dimension, mediated by the ancestors as vital actors both in the past and present" (p. 47). These intricate and complex cultural beliefs are beyond the scope of this dissertation, but it is important to remember that these practices hold great meaning for Hmong individuals—particularly older adults, which is why elders throughout the Hmong community are concerned about these practices not being continued by younger generations.

<sup>60</sup> Kue described several incidents in Thailand that expanded his social awareness and consciousness and strengthened his ethnic identity. For example, he discussed how it bothered him that his oldest sister and her husband, who are migrant workers in Bangkok, purposefully try and pass as Chinese expatriate workers so that they will not be treated poorly as Hmong people. He talked at length about how these and many other experiences he had in Thailand were life altering for him as a young, Hmong, man. Unlike many Hmong Americans who find spaces in college to explore and strengthen their ethnic identities through social empowerment, Kue found these spaces when he returned to Thailand, the country he considers his homeland.

Why did you go to Thailand and teach in a poor village and you get nothing out of it?"

Kue said that he tried to get his father to understand that for him it's not about money, it's about his passion to help their community:

Even though they've been through it, they didn't learn from it. They don't have the educational background; they don't see the passion in what I do. I can see that they want me to finish my education and to live in a better place and to just forget about the past. That's why I want to go to school and obtain the education that is necessary to help other people too. I feel that without education and without the necessary skills, we couldn't really do much. So that's why I really want to go to medical school and I really want to provide medical care and to provide necessary healthcare to my own community. Hopefully someday I will have enough money to buy books and help other people. That's why I have to get a better paying job.

Like many first generation immigrants, Kue did not refer to his chosen vocation as a "professional career", but rather a "job", to help the Hmong community in Thailand. As I have discussed in previous chapters, Kue was 14 years old when he arrived in the U.S. and the only child in his family to receive nine years of uninterrupted, formal schooling in Thailand. He was the only member of his family with strong ties to Thailand which he considered his homeland. He was able to speak, read, and write fluently in Thai – skills that he has maintained to this day.

Because of the response he received from his parents, Kue felt that he had to isolate himself from them and the rest of his family members. This, of course, has its costs. Mark, Teng, and Laj all made comments to me about Kue Lee, the star WTK Hmong boy who they had all helped get to where he is today, but who had turned his back on them and everyone in his family to focus on his own success and academic achievement at elite prep schools. Laj even made the comment, "He thinks he's better than us now." However to Kue, his passion in helping the Hmong community that lived

in poverty in his homeland, as he and his family had experienced, was his impetus for needing to isolate himself and focus on his goals in becoming a medical doctor.

Solorzano and Delgado (2001) describe transformational resistance as “behavior that illustrates both a critique of oppression and a desire for social justice (p. 309).

Through transformational resistance, individuals like Kue acquire skills and credentials for the empowerment and liberation of their ethnic communities (Cammarota, 2004; Solorzano and Delgado, 2001). Brayboy (2005), who researched the experiences of American Indian Ivy League college graduates, writes:

The notion of transformational resistance offers a different way of thinking about how students “do” school and life. The experiences of individuals discussed here show that schooling need not be solely about accolades and awards but can contribute to students’ home communities in ways that engage larger issues of social justice. However, for transformational resistance to contribute to social justice outcomes, there must be support from powerbrokers within an individual’s home community and the institutional setting... Although it is an ideal for those who examine and work toward social justice, transformational resistance is sometimes romanticized and is attended by often serious individual costs and consequences. (p. 196)

Kue did not use words such as “social justice” to describe his genuine passion and well-intentioned goals in helping his community. This was not a platform for him to self-promote himself as someone who wished to help those in his community less fortunate than himself. Since high school, he had been surrounded by educated, upper class, white individuals who often romanticized his goals, but also wholeheartedly supported him in accomplishing these goals. Receiving this support from individuals outside of his family and the Hmong community, which began when he became a student at Kent, created miscommunication and growing tension between him and many Hmong individuals, including his parents. Kue said:

My parents thought that I got brainwashed by white society or within the American society because I went to a predominantly white school and I acted more like an American teenager, I'm not sure. I don't want my parents to further misunderstand that I'm totally into white society or that I want to stay with a white family.

Kue described an incident between him and his mother towards the end of his junior year at Kent when he was 18 years old that changed the course of their relationship. The resentment she felt towards him had been growing for some time. She often yelled at him when he arrived home from soccer practice and other organized school activities for no particular reason. One evening, he said he “just lost it” and yelled back at her, something he had never done in his entire life, which resulted in a screaming match between them. In response, she threw all of his clothes out of his bedroom window, threatened to disown him, and then called the police.

After spending an evening in jail, he spent the rest of his summer living with his grandparents and paternal uncle, but eventually just became another mouth to feed and realized he could no longer stay with them. His uncle forced Kue's parents to come over and apologize to Kue and ask him back home, but when they arrived they would not say anything to their son. His uncle apologized on their behalf, and he went home with them, but knew that he was no longer welcome. Shortly after he returned home, his parents began depriving him of food. Because of this, he ate all of his meals at Kent and began taking extra food from the lunch lines to put into his backpack so that he would have something to eat in the evenings. He said that he felt immense shame in “stealing food” from school. He thought often about calling his mentor mom, knowing that she would let him stay at her house, but worried it would only cause more conflict between him and his mother.

Kue broke down crying during our interview especially when he discussed how his parents, nor anybody in his extended family, wanted him around. It was the kind of crying one might feel more comfortable doing in private, but he continued to talk to me through heaving sobs, lamenting about how unloved and uncared for he was by all of the adults in his family. He had attempted suicide during this time, but did not seek professional help, nor talked to anybody at Kent about what he was experiencing. He had never spoken to anyone about this dark time in his life, not even his mentor mom. This experience only compelled him to work harder to achieve his goals, not because he felt he could ever change his parents' attitudes, but because it was one of the only ways he felt he could escape such a desperately unhappy, conflict-ridden family life<sup>61</sup>.

The majority of literature on intergenerational conflict between children and their Asian immigrant parents focuses on the conflict that arises between second generation children based on their struggles to define their own culture in the U.S. (S. Lee, 2001; Ng et al. 2007; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Zhou & Bankson, 2001). Kue and other WTK Hmong youth demonstrate how these conflicts also arise between first generation immigrant children and their immigrants parents based on similar struggles, but with different historical underpinnings and contexts.

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<sup>61</sup> I purposefully summarize what happened between Kue and his parents during this time because he is not comfortable with me disclosing all of the details. He asked me turn the audio recorder off while he spoke about these events. I asked him several times if he wanted to take a break or end the interview early, but he wanted to share what had happened and continued to talk, crying the majority of the time.

## **The Individual Costs and Consequences of Attending a Suburban School**

**WTK Hmong Parents.** In Chapter two, I noted the 2014 documentary film, *American Promise*, about two African American boys' lives that are recorded from kindergarten through senior high at an elite prep school on New York City's Upper East Side. Their middle-class African American parents are filled with hope about their sons' opportunities via their schooling, but as the boys progress through school, their parents become less certain that the school can improve their sons' lives realizing that, as one of the mother's says, the school's "ticket to upward mobility" often comes at a severe cost to their boys' self-esteem and success (Ohikuare, 2013).

Unlike the middle class African American parents in *American Promise*, Hmong parents that the PI and I interviewed in the original study did not discuss issues related to their children's emotional wellbeing while attending predominately white suburban schools. All of the WTK Hmong parents interviewed said that they appreciated suburban schools for their children for the following reasons: 1) They were learning English with American students; 2) They were getting good grades in all of their classes; 3) They were safe; and 4) A bus picked them up in front of their homes. All parents wanted their kids to matriculate to college, including their daughters, who they advised to put off marriage until after they graduated from college<sup>62</sup>. Parents believed that a college degree would secure high paying jobs and a successful future for all of their children and in order to get

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<sup>62</sup> Like S. Lee (2005) and others have found with Hmong parents and their Hmong American daughters, Hmong parents believe that educational opportunities in the U.S. will provide upward mobility for their daughters in ways that they would have never had access to in Laos. The WTK Hmong girls who I spoke to all confirmed this.



to college, all their kids needed to do is go to a good school, learn English, and get good grades.

It was not entirely surprising that WTK Hmong parents did not feel connected to SJH, but it was surprising to learn that they did not feel connected to one another.

Through various Hmong clan networks, they knew which WTK Hmong kids attended SJH and other schools in the suburban district, but because of their busy lives focused on work, family, and Hmong cultural ceremonies, they did not connect with other WTK Hmong parents. One father expressed interest in a WTK Hmong parent group, but it was not something he knew how to initiate. The principals that were interviewed in 2010 both noted how outwardly appreciative Hmong parents were whenever they came to school for parent-teacher conferences. Both principals interpreted this to mean that Hmong parents were satisfied with how things had been going for their children at SJH.

Beyond parent-teacher conferences, there was no consistent, targeted outreach to Hmong parents at SJH throughout the school year. On the contrary, certain annual events made Hmong parents, and their children in particular, feel marginalized. Several Hmong girls discussed how “Parent Day” and “Career Day” made them feel each year. These school sponsored, annual events, gave parents the opportunity to accompany their children to school to discuss their professional careers and/or their lives as parents, in their children’s home base classes. The day also included eating school lunch with their children and attending a pep rally at the school.

Hmong parents never accompanied their children to these annual events because they felt self-conscious about their English, did not feel they had anything to contribute

as “career professionals”, and could not take time off of work. These annual events, sponsored by SJH’s Parent Teacher Association (PTA), were organized around the assumption that either one parent stayed at home and/or parents had professional careers with jobs that are flexible enough that they can take time off to accompany their children to school for the day. It is important to point out that from an outsider’s perspective, it could easily be perceived that Hmong parents have no interest in their children’s school or lack parent involvement, but as Lareau (2011) argues:

It is the specific ways that institutions function that ends up conveying advantages to middle-class children. In their standards, these situations also permit, and even demand, active parent involvement. In this way as well, middle-class children often gain an advantage. (p. 160)

As I have discussed previously, because Hmong parents regularly attended parent-teacher conferences, an assumption was made by SJH teachers that they were actively involved in their children’s learning at home, when in actuality they were rarely home to help their children with homework and/or lacked the experience to help them. Just as significant is that WTK Hmong parents believed that it was not their responsibility to guide their children with their everyday schooling or educational pursuits. Lareau (2011) discovered that working-class and poor parents believed that teachers were solely responsible to educate their children and that if their children needed intervention, teachers would contact them, not the other way around.

WTK Hmong parents also never advocated for their children or intervened on their behalf, even though there was an assumption held by SJH teachers and staff that they would if need be. As I have discussed in previous chapters, this largely had to do with previous experiences in Laos and Thailand which made WTK Hmong parents, all

new immigrants, unusually sensitive to surveillance of any kind. In fact, Lareau (2011) found that working-class and poor parents rarely challenged teachers and school staff because the school, as an institution, officially represented “the state”:

Working-class and poor parents typically are deferential rather than demanding toward school personnel; they seek guidance from educators rather than giving advice to them; and they try to maintain a separation between school and home rather than foster an interconnectedness. (p. 198)

Because of these beliefs by Hmong parents and teachers at SJH about one another, Hmong students’ deeper educational needs were often neglected at home and at school. In addition, when serious issues occurred to children in WTK Hmong families, parents often turned to their extended family members and clan members for support, rather than attempting to talk to individuals at institutions (Z.B. Xiong et al. 2006). For example, as I discussed earlier in Chapter three, I attended Leej Moua’s wedding in January 2013 and spent the evening in his mother’s kitchen with the women in his family. One of Leej’s cousins talked at length about having her youngest son taken away by Child Protective Services (CPS) a few days prior. She said that he had told a teacher that his father hit him, but she insisted this was untrue and that the teacher had misinterpreted what her son had told her. As the women in her family discussed different options, nobody mentioned meeting with the teacher who made the call to CPS, the principal, or any CPS staff. Although this mother was obviously in distress, she did not think that she or her husband could talk to any of these individuals directly.

Like all WTK Hmong parents, Kong and Kue’s parents did not understand how participating in activities out of school would benefit them academically, or get them into college. Kue described an evening when he had finished volunteering at the local hospital

and had begun to walk home. His parents, who still could not understand why he wasted his time working at a job where he was not compensated financially, refused, as usual, to pick him up. He said he began his 40-minute journey on foot carrying his laptop and several heavy biology and chemistry books in his backpack when the wind and snow got so heavy, that he couldn't walk anymore. Out of desperation, he returned to the hospital and called his mentor mom who was in the middle of a meeting, but left immediately to pick him up. After she dropped him off and he walked into his house, he described seeing his mom sitting in the living room, glaring at him. "All that time she'd been sitting there. She could have picked me up," he said.

Jeffries (2004) discovered that unlike the working-class and poor African American and Latino boys in her study, none of the Asian American boys, many of whom were recent immigrants living in low-income households, believed that their parents would be there for them when they needed them. The reasons for this were not entirely clear, but these findings point to why it is important to consider WTK Hmong family dynamics, as well as influences from their community, rather than generalizing that Kue's mother and Leej Moua's cousin's responses, were based solely on social class.

**WTK Hmong youths' perspectives.** Despite the violence and harassment that Hmong male youth in particular experienced at SJH, all of the Hmong youth I spoke to, wanted to be there. Much of this was due to comparisons they made to previous schools in their neighborhoods where they also experienced violence and harassment, but received *ghetto schooling* in the form of academics. Hmong girls in particular enjoyed

attending SJH because of the ways they were viewed positively by teachers and staff and the vast amounts of academic opportunities they received in school.

A few Hmong girls discussed their popularity at SJH amongst immigrant girls at school, which included largely Hmong, Latina, and African girls who they were in ELL classes with.<sup>63</sup> However, they clearly understood that their popularity was not the same as that of white, middle to upper class girls who lived in the suburban community where SJH is located. These were girls who, as Teng remarked, come to school dressed head to toe in *Abercrombie and Fitch*. Although they maintained friendly relationships with popular white girls in classes, they maintained distant relationships with them in the social spaces of school in regards to peer group affiliations. In fact, several teachers and staff remarked that if white students were even aware of Hmong students (i.e. they had classes with them), they were off of their radars completely as they had no contact with Hmong students in the social spaces of school that held the most meaning for them.

Obviously there are many other students who fill the halls of SJH, but I purposefully highlight popular white girls because they, along with their male counterparts, occupy the upper strata of the school and are the privileged, mainstream student population. In addition, during the time interviews were conducted with teachers and staff in 2010, Dr. Feldman, the associate principal at the time, seemed preoccupied

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<sup>63</sup> If I had observed classes and school spaces at SJH as part of my dissertation fieldwork, I would have investigated these relationships in more detail. Hmong students, particularly girls, had a 'we're all in this together' attitude about other non-Hmong, immigrant girls, but outside of the ELL space, immigrant girls primarily socialized with girls within their own ethnic groups. It is difficult to say if this occurred as a protective strategy in a predominately white, suburban school, or if it had more to do with their limited English abilities, or if there were other unknown factors.

with the idea that Hmong girls should at least attempt to join popular white girls in their organized activities. “Sometimes I’m afraid that right now they’re just comfortable doing badminton. What else can they do? Do they want or do they even know if they want something else?” Dr. Feldman asked, when we interviewed her. Like most assistant and associate principals in schools, Dr. Feldman was largely responsible for students, student issues, and students’ parents. She understood junior high as a space to affirm students’ “emerging sense of identity through the recognition of others and a sense of place in the social structure” (Eckert, 1989, p. 86).

For Dr. Feldman, student success was measured through organized school activities that students participated in and she believed that the most effective way for Hmong students to achieve success was through assimilation into the mainstream culture of SJH. She brought up normative activities such as student council and cheerleading for girls and “perhaps football and other athletics” for boys. Dr. Feldman repeatedly said that she wanted to see “Hmong faces” represented at “our school”, not “just badminton” which she was concerned made Hmong students feel like social outcasts. Dr. Feldman often referred to the mainstream culture of SJH using the pronoun “our” that shows possession, but whenever she discussed Hmong students, she did not include them:

**Our** teachers like **our** Hmong kids because they add a richness to **our** school and **our** culture and **our** community.

Like all of the teachers and staff interviewed at SJH, Dr. Feldman was well-intentioned, genuinely liked Hmong students, and wanted them to have positive school experiences. She understood that academic achievement was not the only factor in a student’s school success and that in junior high, peer groups and social status (no matter what the status)

matter a great deal. However, she did not understand the deeper reasons why Hmong students did not participate regularly in organized school activities and often attributed it to their shyness or lack of English ability. She talked at length about the ninth grade dance that occurs annually in the month of May:

I'll sell tickets in the lunchroom and my group of Hmong kids are sitting here and I see them talking and I see them looking at the kids lining up to buy the dance tickets and I'll walk over, "are you coming?" and it's always in May around Mother's Day on Friday and the 9<sup>th</sup> graders get all dressed up, not like prom, but sport coats and cute dresses and I'll say "are you coming to the dance?" and they smile, *no, no*. "Come to the dance. Everyone comes to the dance." And that it is true. It's a very multicultural representation of the 9<sup>th</sup> graders at the 9<sup>th</sup> grade dance. And [Mark] always goes and picks them up and I remember the boys coming last year, not sure if any of the girls came, but the boys came and they danced *every* dance! And I saw them dance with *not* Hmong girls—I saw them dance with my other girls. Other girls asked them. They didn't ask them and they had a ball. I mean I don't think they just had a ball because it wasn't just their little smile, polite smile that I get. It was that 15-year old boy smile out to here like, I just danced with these cute girls and I had so much fun and they won prizes and they won gift cards to *Target* and when [Mark] came for them at quarter to ten the dance was over with at ten, "No! No! No! We have 15 more minutes!" they said.

Dr. Feldman knew that Mark had encouraged all of the WTK Hmong students to attend the 9<sup>th</sup> grade dance, but she did not realize that the reason why their parents let them go was because Mark had talked to them about the 9<sup>th</sup> grade dance being a precursor to attending high school at SSH—akin to an educational requirement that *everyone* partakes in. He also provided transportation to and from the dance. Although Hmong parents let their sons attend the dance, they had not allowed their daughters to attend. The boys who attended did have a wonderful time, but it was one of the first times they had ever participated in a social event at SJH with white peers in the three years they had attended school. When school resumed the following week, none of the white students they had

interacted with at the dance, interacted with them, outside of this organized school activity.

Many teachers and staff commented on how much Hmong students isolated themselves from other students and that by doing this, they limited themselves in meeting other students and having more school experiences. However, teachers and staff never talked about the ways other students excluded Hmong students from their peer groups. Many of these teachers, as well as Dr. Feldman, failed to understand that peer groups at school, often organized around students' extracurricular activities, require different social class performances where students regularly engage in practices of exclusion (Foley, 1990). These activities include students with social determination and abilities who gain membership through their networking efforts with peers (Eckert, 1989). This is intensely connected to students' "cultural difference of class" which according to Bettie (2003), is challenging to define because it is not simply connected to a family's monetary status.

For example, due to cultural difference in class, Hmong parents did not understand how prohibiting their children in participating in organized activities, including activities such as school dances at SJH, affected the ways Hmong students were perceived by school staff and their non-Hmong peers. But even more importantly, Hmong parents did not understand that these organized activities, the majority of which happen after the school bell rings at the end of the day, create what Friedman (2013) calls "competitive kid capital" which make educational inequality even worse by distinguishing middle to upper class students from their working-class and poor peers that "determine their place in the socio-economic hierarchy as adults" (p. 2). Friedman defines these five Competitive Kid Capital Skills as: 1) The importance of winning; 2)



Learning from loss; 3) Time management; 4) Adaptability; and 5) Grace under pressure.

Kue Lee gained all of these Competitive Kid Capital Skills while at Kent, but in doing so, his relationship with his parents suffered in a number of profound ways.

It is significant that the perceptions that Dr. Feldman, as well as other teachers and staff held about Hmong students at SJH, students themselves did not share. I believe this was due, in part, to the fact that they were newly arrived immigrants and still remained fairly insular in their everyday social interactions in and out of school. For example, S. Lee (2005) found that when Hmong American youth compared themselves to their white peers at the predominately white, middle to upper class high school they attended, shameful feelings around their families' poverty intensified. This was not the experience of WTK Hmong youth who never compared themselves to white students at SJH (at least not around me) and expressed no shame or negative feelings about everything from living in a homeless shelter when they first arrived in the U.S. to not having parents who could afford to outfit them with *Abercrombie and Fitch* wardrobes.

Portes and Rumbaut (2001) discovered that Hmong American youth reported feeling the most embarrassed and ashamed of their parents compared to every other group of immigrant youth surveyed. However, being embarrassed or ashamed of one's parents was not a reality for WTK Hmong youth. These youth rarely compared their parents to a certain U.S. norm, nor did they purposefully disassociate themselves from their parents. While a junior at Kent, Kue invited his mentor mom, her husband, and their daughter over to his house for dinner with his parents, twice. He said everyone enjoyed themselves and appeared comfortable at his parents' house sharing a meal together in the

family's dining room. When I asked if his mom had made an elaborate meal for their dinner guests, he said, "No, just simple Hmong food." In the documentary *American Promise*, one of the middle-class, African American mother's says that she wants her son to be "comfortable around white folks because at this point, *I* am not comfortable around white folks" (Ohikuare, 2013, p. 3). Hmong parents never discussed the importance of having their children or themselves feel comfortable around whites.

Lareau (2011) discovered that working-class and poor adults compared themselves to other adults living in their neighborhood and/or in their social circle, but *not* to middle and upper class adults. This is important to reflect on because too often an assumption is made that poor and working-class immigrant families compare themselves to mainstream, white, middle class families in the U.S., who they aspire to be or emulate, when this is not always the case. Kue's parents were concerned about the perceptions of other Hmong adults in their lives, not the white, middle to upper class adults in Kue's life. Although Kue wished his parents would support him in the same ways his mentor mom and his teachers at Kent continued to, he never wanted to replace his parents with any of them. Like other WTK Hmong youth, he yearned for a closer relationship with his *own* parents; he did not wish to replace his parents with upper class white people.

Although I never interviewed Kong and Kue together, nor shared information with them from each other's interviews, both of them talked to me extensively about wanting their families to spend more leisure time together and to take vacations as a family. Kong told me that he plans to marry his girlfriend, Amanda, after they graduate from college and find jobs and that he wants to purchase a house with a yard where his

family can spend time together. Kong said, “My parents accused [Kue] of wanting to be an American and not Hmong anymore and he accused them of not enjoying life.”

Hmong girls, who often described being confined to their homes unless they were at school or with Mark and Teng, also lacked leisure time with their parents (and leisure time, in general). In the U.S., their parents were almost always outside of the home working or participating in extended family obligations. Girls described spending time inside of their homes taking care of household responsibilities and younger siblings, but rarely spending time with their parents inside of the home. This differs from what Lareau (2011) found in working-class and poor homes where families, who did not have much structured time for themselves or their children, spent the majority of their time together watching TV and enjoying each other’s company. All families in Lareau’s study, regardless of social class, had family rituals together, but these rituals seemed absent in WTK Hmong families.<sup>64</sup> Again, these are all additional reasons why other factors must be included in analysis, rather than social class alone.

### **Hmong Thai Teb**

When Kue was in the third grade, and 11 years old in Thailand, he did something that no other Hmong child at his Thai school had done: he won first place in an art contest. Kue explained that he had actually been creating art on his own for several years prior. It was the main thing that had kept him occupied since he was six and had been denied entry into Thai school. Until he was admitted into the first grade at the age of

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<sup>64</sup> Because I stopped doing observations in family’s homes when parents were present, I can only go by what youth told me about their family time and involvement.

nine, he created artwork outdoors with whatever he could find: flat stones, metal scraps, and sticks. His Thai teacher had entered one of his drawings anonymously in the school's annual art competition and it had taken first prize. He said that this made him feel elated because it was the only thing he felt he was good at and also one of the few ways he could express himself. Shortly after Kong was awarded this prize, the Lee family were processed as refugees, and left for the U.S.

In the U.S., Kong continued drawing and added painting to his repertoire. When he had any downtime in school or at home, he filled notebooks with various drawings including Japanese animé. Over half of the teachers at SJH interviewed in 2010 discussed, without our prompting, the incredible artwork produced by WTK Hmong boys like Kong. In fact, when they discussed boys' academic problems, some teachers said, "*but* they are fantastic artists!" A science teacher, who said that she had difficulty engaging Hmong boys in her classroom and noted that their parents did not seem particularly concerned with their lack of engagement, said that whenever there was an opportunity for them to draw anything in her class, they "suddenly came alive", wanted to participate, and became actively engaged through their artwork.

As I discussed earlier, there is growing evidence that using traditional academic strategies in school classrooms has little impact on increasing immigrant male youths' engagement with school as these strategies do not typically address boys' strong attachments to non-school identities and interests (Archer & Yamashita, 2003). Frey and Fisher (2004) discovered that using Japanese animé in school classrooms encouraged immigrant youth to engage in classroom discourse and that over time it actually improved

their written communication. Using culturally relevant pedagogy in similar ways as Frey and Fisher (2004), this particular science teacher discussed how she incorporated artwork into her science curriculum:

Students have to learn the vocabulary, but you can learn the vocabulary sometimes by writing a sentence or drawing a picture and then explaining the picture. I mean, there are different ways in terms of grading students that don't have high language skills... If you can get them into an afterschool program with art, I wonder if they would participate more in school.

When the PI and I interviewed Dr. Anderson in 2009, her face lit up when she talked about Kong's prized artwork that had won an all-school prize when he was in the ninth grade. According to Kong, the school framed several of his drawings and hung them on walls throughout SJH and presented him with a medallion at an all-school assembly.

When I mentioned Dr. Anderson's reaction to Kong, a young man who never discussed his accomplishments, he said with pride, "I was the top student in my art class; I was the top student in art in my school." Art was his favorite subject and he looked forward to attending SSH so that he could take even more art classes. However, his parents did not appreciate his artwork. Whenever he drew in notebooks at home they told him to do homework instead. "They say it's not going to help me with anything, so I just sopped drawing in ninth grade," Kong said.

As usual when discussing profoundly sad, disturbing, or violent events from his past, Kong showed little emotion and spoke about this event in a straight-forward matter. At the time of our interview, Kong planned to major in computer engineering because he could at least develop things on a computer; however, if his parents had supported his true passion, he said he would have become a graphic artist or an architect. He spoke

about it with great resolve as if he were a much older man reflecting back on a distant past. “Do you create *any* art anymore?” I asked. “No,” he said.

**“We hate it when they call us HTT.”** For WTK Hmong youth, being ashamed of their parents, or preoccupied with popular white students at SJH and the organized activities that they participated in, were not concerns. Instead, they were upset with the ways that Hmong American youth perceived them. A WTK Hmong girl noted that white students at SJH, “do not laugh at you like the Hmong Americans. If you speak English to them and it doesn’t make sense, they don’t laugh at you because they know you’re a new comer and they say that they know you can learn.”

In fact, the main reason why WTK Hmong girls did not want to attend Hmong charter schools is because they did not want to attend school with Hmong Americans who called them “HTT” (Hmong Thai Teb–*Hmong Thailand*), made fun of their heavily accented English, and laughed at them when they spoke English. Lee and Vaught (2003) found similar attitudes towards newly arrived Hmong immigrants by Hmong American students, particularly girls, and not just about spoken English, “They don’t care about clothes,” a Hmong American girl said, “they are stingy about clothes. They dress in out-of-date, 1980s style clothes. American-born Hmong are into clothes and cars” (p. 459).

WTK Hmong parents also said that they did not want their children attending Hmong charter schools, but only because they believed that their children would not receive a quality education at Hmong charter schools compared to “American schools” like SJH and Kent. When I asked WTK Hmong youth how they felt about Mark referring to them as “Hmong Thai” they admitted that they did not like it. “We are all Hmong,”

both WTK Hmong boys and girls stressed emphatically. “We just want to be called

*Hmong*.” When I asked Teng, a Hmong American male about the label HTT, he said:

It's kind of like a FOB, like hey look at you, you dress HTT. Your haircut is HTT. You talk HTT. That means your sense of style is a little off... They probably get their clothes from goodwill or they probably take second hand clothes from their cousin which is okay too. It's probably something that they're proud of, it's their style, but at the same time I don't think they really care... It's more of just a teasing and joking matter. I don't think a Hmong American has ever said "Oh, we hate those HTT." It's just to say those are the new arrivals, some say the Hmong from Wat Tham Krabok, some say HTT, some use different names.

Teng said that he did not think that WTK Hmong youth cared if they were called HTT.

Like many Hmong Americans I have spoken to, he said it was simply a descriptive term used in a “teasing manner”; however, I am certain that he and other Hmong Americans would consider it racist if a non-Asian used the term HTT or FOB (Fresh off the Boat) to describe any Hmong individual (Pyke & Dang, 2003). Teng also did not understand that the ridicule WTK Hmong youth received from Hmong American youth felt even more offensive to them than the ridicule they received by non-Hmong American youth—even some of the racist names they were called by African Americans.

In Pyke and Tang’s (2003) research on the term FOB used by Asian American youth to refer to Asian immigrant youth, they discovered that when FOB was used by Asian American youth, they felt a sense of “shame, embarrassment, disgust, and discomfort” towards Asian immigrant youth and used the term to distance themselves from the stigma connected to their own status as non-whites who seek membership and acceptance in the dominant group (p. 160). Grigoleit (2011) argues that WTK Hmong youth are regarded by Hmong American youth as, “backward, conservative, striving, and

traditional, basically implying that they were too Hmong which meant too ethnic and too authentic which translated into a social degradation” (p. 15).

Vue (2012) also discovered that WTK Hmong youth hated being referred to as HTT. He argues that although the concept HTT was created by Hmong American youth, it is an extension of the “forever foreigner” (Tuan, 1998) stereotype. Vue argues that HTT takes on additional meanings when Hmong American youth associate WTK Hmong males with cultural practices that both racialize and emasculate them. In my conversations with WTK Hmong girls, I learned that as a response to Hmong American boys making fun of them, they only dated WTK Hmong boys in a neighboring city who they met online through *Facebook*. In fact, WTK Hmong girls in the TAG group had extensive online dating lives that began when they were at SJH and which they kept hidden from their parents as well as Mark and Teng.

In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss the ways that the majority of WTK Hmong youth used cultural practices as protective spaces which involve alternative masculinities and a built-in peer support network. Through these practices, youth exercised agency and resistance in spaces where they were guaranteed no protection and at the same time were able to maintain their ethnic identities that had been shaped in Thailand.

### **WTK Hmong Youth Cultural Practices**

**Badminton as a Hmong space.** The athletic coordinator and physical education teacher at SJH, Gina, a white woman, was instrumental in starting badminton for SJH students. As a veteran teacher of 30 years in the district, she has seen the demographic



changes at SJH over time. Similar to all of the teachers and staff interviewed, she has welcomed these changes and has been particularly accommodating. She was the only teacher interviewed that gave specific examples of how she accommodated African American students at SJH. For example, she said that certain teachers made assumptions about why African American girls refused to swim in gym class and wanted to fail them for poor attitudes and lack of participation. Gina spent time listening to these girls and found out that they actually wanted to swim, but were embarrassed because they lacked swimming skills and also worried about their hair and skin. Gina suggested that the girls braid their hair the days they had to go swimming and she provided lotion for them in the locker room. Instead of making assumptions about students' attitudes based on their race, Gina spent time trying to understand students' point of view and then problem solved with them.

When Gina found out that Hmong students wanted to play badminton, she was ecstatic about being able to offer them something that they could finally participate in at school:

So the first time I called all the kids over and started going over all the rules and stuff. They went out to play and they were all just amazing! And I'm like, "You've played this before, haven't you?" And they were like, "Yeah." So where did you learn, I asked, and they said, "Thailand." In fact, they knew more about the game and rules than I do!

Because badminton is not an official school sport in the district, Gina figured out a creative way to offer it through community education through the city two days a week. Because of this, she was able to offer it to any junior high or high school aged student who lives in the district (including kids who are home schooled) or who are bussed in through the school choice program. The first year it was offered, the gym was packed

with both junior high and senior high students throughout the district from 3pm–5pm for half the school year. One activity bus for students in the school choice program left SJH at 5:10pm. Because every Hmong student at SJH and SSH wanted to participate in badminton, it was an activity that parents were familiar with and associated with WTK, and Mark and Teng talked to them several times about how beneficial it could be academically, their parents were willing to let them participate. The main reason why parents allowed their daughters to participate is because they equated it with academic achievement, and it was only offered two days a week for half of the school year.

Many of the Hmong students I spoke to said that these two days were their favorite days of the week at SJH, particularly the girls, who said it was the only time when they got to be “just normal teenagers.” When it was their turn to sit out, they sat in the gym and helped each other with their homework. An added bonus to this is that older girls from SSH helped younger girls from SJH. The boys said that when they sat out, they did pushups, sit ups, or ran laps around the gym. All of the students loved playing badminton and they took it seriously as if it were a competitive sport.

Gina said that the boys in particular assumed leadership positions and became self-appointed captains. They also made sure all of the equipment was set up and put away before they left at night. Much of this had to do with the fact, as I have discussed in previous chapters, that some Hmong youths’ families had been too poor to afford to rent badminton equipment in WTK. Hmong who played badminton outside of WTK, at schools for example, could never win official badminton tournaments as non-citizens.

Being able to finally crown winners of badminton games, in an institutional space, was very meaningful for Hmong youth and something that they took immense pride in.

It was also only through badminton that Gina had opportunities to get to know students on more of a personal level which she said was one of the most positive outcomes of offering the activity. With the exception of ELL teachers at SJH who recognized that their classrooms were “safe spaces” for Hmong students to express themselves during one class period a day, Gina said that badminton was a space where she got to see a side of Hmong students that other teachers rarely saw. She said that instead of the quiet and reserved Hmong students with sweet smiles that most teachers and staff saw at SJH, the students she saw laughed loudly, talked incessantly, and were extremely social with one another. The only other teachers who described Hmong students in similar ways were the ELL teachers. One ELL teacher told me that Hmong girls in particular were the “chattiest”, “friendliest”, and “most outgoing” students she had in her classes.

Gina also recognized certain Hmong students’ athletic abilities that went unnoticed at SJH because they did not participate in school affiliated sports. When Gina encouraged them to join the volleyball, tennis, track, and soccer teams in particular, she said that none of the students expressed interest. Instead, they asked if she could offer badminton as a competitive team sport, which she was unable to do at the time.

During the first year badminton was offered, Gina said a variety of kids came to play, but by the second year, the players were almost exclusively Hmong. She believed there were two reasons for this: 1) Hmong players were much more skilled in badminton

than non-Hmong players and took the game seriously which intimidated some non-Hmong players; and 2) Badminton quickly became known as a “Hmong activity.” In fact, all of the teachers and staff interviewed at SJH discussed WTK Hmong students and badminton without any prompting. Several of them talked about how wonderful it was to see the joy on Hmong students’ faces when they played, especially the boys, as if it were something that finally connected them to school.

According to Bourdieu (1984), social space is often stratified and within these spaces, individuals are included, excluded, and some exclude themselves. In these spaces, Hmong youth do not just express aspects of their race and ethnicity spatially, but they experience and produce it spatially (Sundstrom, 2003). Like other ethnic and racial minorities, Hmong youths’ cultural practices are always racialized no matter how they attempt to represent themselves. As Garcia (1989) argues, an individual’s space, place, belonging, and identity are *always* inextricably linked. Given this, spaces are filled with racial representations that shape individuals’ common sense understandings of the ways in which an institution operates (Sundstrom, 2003).

Dr. Feldman was concerned that WTK Hmong youth felt like social outcasts through badminton because she understood that badminton was not a normative activity at SJH like cheerleading, soccer, football, or hockey. However, Dr. Feldman did not understand the multiple reasons why WTK Hmong youth could not or simply did not want to participate in activities at SJH that were racialized and spatialized as white, middle class activities – the unspoken norm at SJH. In addition, it never occurred to Dr. Feldman that social exclusion works in a number of different ways; for example, she

never encouraged any of the popular white girls who participated in cheerleading to join Hmong girls in after-school badminton.

Gina, as well as a couple of other teachers interviewed, discussed the ways that traveling sports teams at SJH such as soccer and hockey, divide the “haves and the have nots” as these teams are feeders for the varsity and traveling teams at SSH. In fact, if students do not participate in traveling sports teams at the junior high level, it is almost impossible for them to participate in traveling sports teams in high school. In other words, a cycle of social reproduction is actively in place that maintains a hierarchy in these schools where certain students maintain their positions at the top.

Given the exorbitant costs involved with traveling sports teams at the junior and senior high levels, as well as the actual traveling aspect associated with these sports, the “haves” are often the only students who are able to participate in them. Their parents, who most often share the same racial and social class backgrounds, network with one another through their children’s traveling sports teams. As one of the WTK Hmong girls said to me, they are the “American parents” who have time to join the PTA and “give lots of money to the school.” These white, middle-class parents are engaged in a pattern of concerted cultivation where they monitor their children’s institutional experiences through organized activities at SJH (Lareau, 2011). As Monroe (2014) argues, “It’s an inescapable fact that extracurricular activities, which increase student investment in school, are planned by parents who have ample time and money, who sometimes lack insight into the lives of students whose parents don’t.” (p. 3).

This is yet another example of the ways that students and their parents unknowingly engage in practices of exclusion based on social class performances (Foley, 1990). However, because students *choose* to play on these teams, or they do so based on their ability levels, the reasons for certain students' participation on traveling sports teams does not appear to be inequality, but rather a common sense, democratic way that organized activities at schools operate. As Lareau (2011) points out, individuals view their society's "social arrangements" as legitimate because they are *earned* by individuals based on motivation and a host of other skills. Bourdieu (1984), in particular, argues that certain forms of cultural capital are what privileges individuals in their social positions and locations, and that this is rarely based on personal merit or motivation.

In Chapter two, I noted that Barajas and Ronnkvist (2007) recognized racialized spaces as those that illuminate a "supportive, reflective relationship" that can serve as a "mechanism of awareness." Although badminton is a racialized Hmong space at SJH, I argue that it has been enormously positive for WTK Hmong youth, particularly for girls. Although it may not be considered an organized activity in the upper strata of the school, it offers a protective, empowering space in the school where they can be *Hmong*. Like the ELL classroom, it is also a space where they receive peer support and a feeling of connection to SJH regardless of where it is located on the social hierarchy. The only non-white teacher interviewed at SJH, an ELL teacher originally from West Africa, said:

I kind of feel that when they come to our ELL room, sometimes I give them a chance to vent because sometimes our kids have too many things in their regular ed. classes throughout the whole day. So they can vent and let out whatever without drawing attention to the fact that they speak differently or look differently.

Like the ELL space, WTK Hmong youth could just be themselves when they played badminton with their peers. They did not have to perform, monitor themselves, or worry what other students thought of them. It was also one of the only spaces where girls in particular got to have fun and be “just normal teenagers” without worrying about the adult responsibilities they had in their lives. Although Dr. Feldman was concerned that WTK Hmong youth felt like social outcasts playing badminton, I argue that what is most important is that *they* did not feel this way about themselves.

**Rock bands and Japanese animé.** Many WTK Hmong boys consumed and produced some form of Japanese animé. However, this was almost always done privately. As discussed previously, boys kept numerous notebooks where they produced their own animé characters in and out of school, however, these endeavors were private, and as far as I could tell, not shared widely amongst each other or produced together. Even so, there were several factors that I found compelling about these productions: 1) Their artwork was, as their teachers pointed out, high quality; 2) Because they were willing to share it with teachers, some teachers saw it as opportunities to engage boys in their classes through culturally relevant pedagogy; and 3) The characters and storylines they produced were often a direct response to the everyday bullying and harassment that they experienced at SJH. In these ways, their artwork served as a protective factor for them and a healthy outlet for self-expression.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Because of the private nature in the ways boys consumed and produced Japanese animé, I did not have opportunities to examine it in the ways that I had hoped to.

Kong Lee and Leej Moua played keyboards and sang in rock bands. Kong had his own band with three other WTK Hmong peers around his age and Leej played in his father's band with his father's friends. Although participating in bands was not something that the majority of WTK Hmong boys did, they all consumed the type of music that these bands played. This music, produced by popular Hmong rock artists throughout the U.S. and Thailand, can easily be downloaded for free on YouTube. Kong and his band created and played mostly original music, whereas Leej and his father played cover versions of the popular Hmong and Thai songs that are circulated widely over the internet.

Both Kong and Leej's bands played at various Hmong events, particularly private parties and both said that music provided an outlet for them that they could not get elsewhere in their lives. All of the boys who were junior high aged discussed their regular consumption of Korean popular music, coined K-Pop, and even wore similar hairstyles as many of the musicians in K-Pop bands, which Teng referred to as an "HTT haircut". Although the majority of Hmong boys in my study did not participate in bands, they all consumed the music online. Kong, in particular, found his band a "home away from home" and spent hours in the recording studio that the lead singer had purchased for the band. Their band has grown in popularity on *YouTube* and now has promotional pictures. Although Kong is realistic about his future in the band (i.e. he plans to complete college, not become a professional musician), I believe that he also participates in the band because he can express himself artistically through songwriting. For these reasons, the band, as well as the spaces it plays in, also illuminate a "supportive, reflective relationship" that serves as a "mechanism of awareness" (Barajas and Ronnkvist, 2007)



for Kong and his peers. “You get to create art through your music,” I told Kong, “with your friends.”

The music that Kong and Leej produce and play, and that all of the WTK Hmong boys consume, is not what Hmong American boys typically listen to according to Vue (2012). This was confirmed by Teng who referred to WTK Hmong youths’ music as “HTT music”. Kong and Leej both discussed a Hmong rock band called, *The Sounders*, as their favorite. Leej discussed his favorite Thai rock band, *Loso*, but said that he listened to many Hmong and Thai bands. Whereas the Hmong American males in Vue’s study adopted African American styles through hip-hop in Hmong American spaces, WTK Hmong males adopted Hmong and Thai styles, in WTK Hmong spaces. As Schein (2002) astutely notes, the ways that Hmong youth understand their identities and how they belong is always inseparable from the media they consume. The ways in which Kong and Leej consume and produce these specific forms of music, has strengthened their cultural identities as WTK Hmong.

Both Kong and Leej spoke about music as part of their everyday lives. However, only Kong discussed listening to music for personal enjoyment and as an outlet to express his frustration about the ongoing conflict he experienced with his parents about his relationship with Amanda. In fact, it was Amanda who had encouraged Kong to begin playing keyboards and who convinced him to join the band when his friend had asked him if he was interested. She seemed to understand, at an early stage in their relationship, that Kong needed an outlet, away from his parents. Kong was also the only WTK Hmong male in my study who listened to non-Hmong music. One of his favorite bands in 2013

was the rock/pop band, *OneRepublic*. The non-Hmong bands that Kong listened to were much like *OneRepublic*–rock/pop bands that consisted of white, male, band members from the U.S. Unlike Hmong American males in Vue’s (2012) study, he did not listen to, nor did his band play, hip-hop, performed mainly by African American males.

When Kong reminisced about a fight he had gotten into with his parents when he was still living at home, he said he went to his room, shut the door, and listened repeatedly to the *OneRepublic* song, “Apologize”, on his headphones. He told me that it was a song he listened to often when he still lived at home. I had heard the song before, but it was not until I listened to it closely and read the lyrics online that I found myself startled and shocked given how Kong’s parents had punished him in Thailand after they learned he was running drugs:

I'm holding on your rope  
Got me ten feet off the ground  
And I'm hearing what you say  
But I just can't make a sound

You tell me that you need me  
Then you go and cut me down, but wait  
You tell me that you're sorry  
Didn't think I'd turn around and say

That it's too late to apologize, it's too late  
I said it's too late to apologize, it's too late<sup>66</sup>

Field Note. October 9, 2013

I’ve been watching the boys play soccer and interact with one another for the last half hour. When they wear their soccer jerseys, something magical happens. Their bodies change in outward appearance. They move differently. They become human in a different way. They are confident, look people straight in the eyes and own the space they are in.

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<sup>66</sup> Ryan Tedder, “Apologize” from *Dreaming Out Loud* (Sony/ATV Music Publishing, LLC, 2007).

They are no longer visitors in their neighborhood; they *belong* in their neighborhood. After everything they've been through at school, this is immensely satisfying to witness.

I watched [Chai] walk down his entire block and didn't recognize him at first. He is usually so socially awkward and shy that sometimes it seems like it's painful for him to make eye contact with adults, including his own dad. But today he walked down the street and looked everyone in the eyes who he passed on the sidewalk, including a young black man who nodded his head at him, the way men do to acknowledge each other's presence. Young men in this neighborhood know they need to be careful about making eye contact with each other, but somehow when [Chai] puts on that soccer jersey with the name of his neighborhood park, all of those unsaid rules no longer apply for him.

When I see the boys in their jerseys, I think of the boy who [Teng] always talks about who got kicked out of [SJH] because he wouldn't take shit anymore from the black kids who were always saying racist shit to him and threatening to beat the shit out of him. Unlike the other boys, he refused to just take it; he always fought back. [Teng] said he had a permanent "don't fuck with me" look on his face and after awhile, black kids just stopped messing with him. That's the way [Chai] and the other boys look when they walk down the street in their neighborhoods wearing their jerseys. They move differently, take up space differently. All of those archetypal stereotypes about Asian boys as wimpy, effeminate, and foreign just wash away. I wish they could look and feel this way when they are at school. Wearing their jerseys would carry no social meaning in school spaces, but I wish they could articulate, through their bodies, the same movements and take up space in the same ways, as I am witnessing now.

In 2005, Mark formed a boys' soccer team to provide a safe space for WTK Hmong youth to talk about what was happening in their lives at school through sports. Mark, armed with knowledge that soccer is a well-known cultural practice in the Hmong community and also understanding that teenaged boys have a lot of physical energy, had originally hoped that he could organize WTK Hmong families through boys' soccer as a united voice to confront the unjust issues they faced in their neighborhood public schools. However, when none of the boys' parents or family members showed up to their soccer practices or matches, Mark was dismayed. For the last few years he had been organizing soccer teams for Latino families which he described as "a family affair... large social gatherings where the entire extended family comes out to support the kids."

When Teng joined Mark in his neighborhood organizing efforts, he explained that for WTK Hmong parents, soccer was not perceived as an activity related to improving educational outcomes for their children. However, parents were okay with their sons playing soccer because it was something they were familiar with and they trusted Mark and Teng. It was one of the few activities that their parents allowed them to leave their houses for in their neighborhoods. Although Mark eventually understood that he could not organize Hmong families through soccer, he continued to support and grow the teams for WTK Hmong boys because of the high demand from the boys themselves.

When WTK Hmong youth began attending school in larger cohorts at SJH, Mark told Dr. Anderson and Gina to buy more soccer jerseys because he was certain that Hmong boys would try out for the school's soccer teams. Again, to Mark's dismay, none of the WTK Hmong boys tried out. Boys did not want to and could not participate in these teams for the same reasons Hmong girls did not try out for cheerleading. Playing neighborhood league soccer allowed Hmong boys to create their own spaces, to perform their own "practices, rituals, and discourses" (Pascoe, 2007) in their neighborhoods and on their terms.

Ipsa-Landa (2013) argues, "It is not insulting to be masculine. Masculinity is never inferior" (p. 10). However, not all masculinities are created equal, have access to power, are valued in U.S. society, or are represented in a positive way via the media or other institutions (Lopez, 2012). As I discussed in Chapter two, within the framework of hegemonic masculinity, Asian American masculinities are often subordinated (Shek, 2006). For WTK Hmong boys, these subordinated forms of masculinity often occurred in

the spaces of SJH, however, Mark also used these subordinate forms to describe Hmong boys in his constant description of them as, “small”, “short”, “non-English speaking”, “poor”, and “refugees”.

Lei (2003) discovered that white high school teachers used subordinate forms of masculinity to describe what they considered to be aberrations of Southeast Asian American male youths’ bodies. These perceptions of an emasculated male body are what teachers used as explanations for why they did not participate in organized school sports. However, As Lei explains, the real reasons why Southeast Asian American males did not participate was because of high level racial tensions between themselves and African American students as well as family and employment obligations that conflicted with the day and time these sports were offered. During school lunch, these boys often played basketball together in an empty school gym or participated in other athletic activities outside of school. In fact, many of these boys were actively engaged in sports outside of school.

Lei’s (2003) research is an example of the power that racialized narratives have in shaping our perceptions about male masculinity performances. Her research points to the fact that just as cultural practices can never be race neutral, neither can bodies. In junior high and high school, masculine social hierarchies develop in relation to boys’ physical body types and social inequality amongst boys develops through the different cultural practices that they participate in (Connell, 1995; Messerschmidt, 2004). However, research does not always critically analyze the ways that race and ethnicity also play a role amongst these hierarchies and social divisions that form. As Tengan (2008) argues:

Hegemonic norms of gender, especially those of masculinity, work to naturalize inequalities and oppressions that are tied to other “games” of race, class, nation, age, and sexuality, to name a few. Recognizing this, we must also attend to the ways that men and women access different points of privilege and subordination based on their positioning, engage in both hegemonic and marginalized practices in different contexts, and articulate new social and cultural forms over time. Gendered social actors are situated within larger sociocultural systems and structures of knowledge and power, which both shape and constrain the possibilities for action, as well as provide resources which individuals use to reproduce, negotiate, and transform those very systems. (p. 34)

I reflect back on the ways that Kong described how he felt “alive” in WTK when he was a young boy running with his friends in the middle of the night. He embodied freedom, power, and strength even though he knew he was malnourished. Still, he only compared his physical body and the ways in which his body performed, with other WTK Hmong boys. As I discussed in detail in Chapter two, just as race and gender are not homogenous categories, neither is masculinity. “Therefore,” as Pascoe (2007) argues, “it is important to look at masculinizing processes outside the male body, not to catalogue a new type of masculinity, but to identify practices, rituals, and discourses that constitute masculinity. (p. 12).

Lopez (2003) found that second generation Caribbean males viewed basketball as a metaphor for masculinity and freedom from their apartments that they also viewed as a female space. She noted that some of the young men in her study saw basketball as a way out of their poor, urban neighborhoods while others invested in it heavily as a non-school identity. Similarly, Archer & Yamashita (2003) discovered that Asian immigrant male youth in Great Britain performed cultural practices that allowed them to invest heavily in masculine discourses in their working-class neighborhoods. However, with the exception

of Vue's (2012) research, there have not been many studies that have analyzed the ways that Hmong males construct their masculinities.

Many immigrant and youth of color perform cultural practices in ethnically exclusive, racialized spaces (Maira, 2002). For example, Archer and Yamashita's (2003) as well as Lopez' (2003) studies on second generation immigrant male youth not only reveal how youth use neighborhood sports as a cultural practice that influences and impacts their identities, but do so in designated racialized spaces in their neighborhoods. In my analysis of WTK Hmong boys' participation in neighborhood league soccer, I argue that soccer is a way for them to defy racialized and racist narratives of what is considered their non-normative, abject bodies.

Like the males in Lopez' (2003) study, soccer is also a metaphor for them to leave their homes where they often feel confined, and the soccer field is a safe space apart from the violence in their neighborhoods. However, unlike the males in Archer & Yamashita's (2003) study, Hmong boys do not use soccer to invest in the masculine discourses in their neighborhoods—neighborhoods which they perceive as predominately African American spaces. Hmong boys understand that masculinities are positioned in a hierarchy where the subordinate forms that they are perceived as embodying and the hypermasculine forms that African Americans are perceived as embodying, are not the hegemonic ideal. Instead of attempting to embody either masculinity form, they view their participation in neighborhood league soccer as a way to perform alternative masculinities that they create on their own terms.

The neighborhood soccer space is also not one which WTK Hmong boys have been forming gangs. In Vue's (2012) study, he describes a conversation he overhears between Hmong American males where they realize that an infamous Hmong American gang was initially formed through a neighborhood soccer team. I have overheard other Hmong American males discuss this. When the PI and I first met Mark, he held up photographs taken of WTK Hmong boys' soccer teams and pointed to several individuals and said that they had joined gangs. I recall him literally pointing to each kid saying, "Gang. Gang. Gang. Gang..." I argue that this phenomenon of newly arrived Hmong immigrant boys using soccer teams as a way to form gangs is more of an exception rather than a norm. Neighborhood league soccer is always racialized, which often leads to misperceptions. As Cacho (2012) argues, in these spaces it is too easy to misread "resistance as deviance" and in doing so we patronize youth as, "childishly disobedient rather than consciously and deliberately defiant" (p. 162).

Kue Lee had once played on the same neighborhood soccer leagues, but stopped playing after he earned a spot on the varsity soccer team at Kent. I believe this contributed to why Laj, Mark, and Teng all believe that Kue, "thinks he's better than us now." Besides the fact that he would have never had time to play on two teams, it makes sense to me why Kue only played soccer at Kent. The majority of Kue's friends at Kent had been attending the school since they had been in kindergarten. These students, many of whom became Kue's closest friends, had been active in organized school activities, *together*, for many years and their parents all socialized with one another (i.e. networked). Kue understood that varsity soccer opened up a world to him that he would not have had access to otherwise. Kent had only been a positive experience for Kue. It



was a school where he had acquired an exceptional, rigorous education *and* a social life with peers who came from families who were interested in seeing him succeed. His everyday schooling experiences at Kent were void of harassment, bullying, or violence of any kind. In other words, Kue did not need neighborhood league soccer for the reasons that his brother, Kong, and other WTK Hmong boys, did.

In much of resistance theory, actors display agency by outwardly rejecting assimilation and other types of structural rules (Brayboy, 2005). Resistance is often shown as a way that a Hmong boy, for example, might alternatively challenge or reinvent societal narratives about his race, ethnicity, gender, or social class through an oppositional narrative (Brayboy, 2005; Eckert, 1989; Willis, 1977). The type of resistance that Hmong boys enacted through soccer should not be confused with transformational resistance that Brayboy (2005) uses to theorize the experiences of American Indian students who attend Ivy League institutions, and which I discussed earlier in this chapter in relation to Kue. It was not boys' intentions to enact social justice on the soccer field, however, they did push back on the numerous oppressive and racist experiences they'd had in the racialized spaces of SJH and in their neighborhoods.

Kong and many other WTK Hmong boys used the soccer space in their neighborhoods to work out, kick out, and play out their feelings of anger, fear, mistrust, resentment, and dismay that they felt in their neighborhoods and at SJH through their everyday schooling experiences. It was also a meaningful space for Kong, in particular, where he could express his emotions towards other boys, instead of focusing solely on intimacy with Amanda, the only person in his life who he claimed he shared his deepest

feelings with. I argue that through repeated, albeit alternative masculinity displays, Kong did experience important forms of much-needed intimacy and closeness with other boys through soccer, as an event, which mediated these male relationships (Karioris, 2014).

Finally, I argue that through the ongoing peer support and their loyal friendships with one another that they had through neighborhood league soccer, WTK Hmong boys created protective spaces where they embodied forms of resistance, away from SJH, which allowed them to persist at SJH, then at SSH, and for the majority, to matriculate on college. It was in these spaces where power provided a "supportive, reflective relationship" and where racialization served as a "mechanism of awareness rather than a mechanism for hiding differences in neutral assumptions" (Barajas and Ronnkvist, 2007, p. 1521).

## Chapter 9

### Insights and Implications: A Conclusion

*“Many of the most important issues a person confronts in life often manifest themselves at a very young age. Then, as you grow older, you continue to cycle through them and encounter them over and over again... While these issues may be experienced differently each time, this does not make each journey any less difficult. And this knowledge certainly does not prepare you for your first encounter. Certain issues remain with us all our days; only our perspective on them changes. Our interpretation grows.”*

-John Borrows (2010), *Drawing out Law*

Although it happened over fifteen years ago, I remember vividly the day one of my advisees sat across from me in my office, telling me about his plan to take his own life. He was nearing the completion of his degree program and had learned recently that he had failed a major course, which would prohibit him from graduating later that year. Originally from West Africa, he explained that he could not face his wife and young children. He had promised them that they would move into a home of their own, but now, this seemed unlikely. His family, back in West Africa, also depended on him for financial support and he had assured them that more money was on its way.

This man, in his late thirties at the time, reported this to me in a straightforward, almost formal manner, until he told me that his family would be better off without him and that he had to end his life, to make theirs, better. He planned to kill himself in his car, far from home, so that his wife and children would not find him. Tears streamed down his tired face, but he was silent as he cried. I told him that I had no idea how he was feeling, only that his burden seemed too great to bear on his own. I also said that I believed him and that I was grateful that he had shared his plans with me because I had no choice but

to intervene. I called the college's lead counselor, our standard procedure for emergencies, who met me at my office door. Later that afternoon, the counselor stopped by to speak with me. "That is one proud man," he said, and then explained that my advisee had checked himself in, voluntarily, to a psychiatric unit.

Just over one year later, I watched my advisee walk across the stage at the college's commencement and thought about all of the things he had shared with me. I recalled the comments that some of his professors had made about him throughout his degree program; he was described as "arrogant", "angry", and having "no respect for female authority". In a faculty meeting, one professor said that she did not feel comfortable talking to him in her office and that she made a point to leave her door wide open when he was there. This particular department had struggled with the influx of students from West Africa, many of whom were men, and had been white collar professionals in their home countries. When professional development for the faculty in this department was recommended, they resisted. "We are not the ones who need to change," seemed to be a collective sentiment amongst the group.

I use this particular example from years past because it speaks to the everyday racialized (and racist) practices of educational institutions beyond SJH and the junior high context. As newly arrived Asian immigrants, "arrogant", "angry", and having "no respect for female authority" were never sentiments used to explain any of the Hmong youth by teachers and staff at SJH. As discussed in Chapter four, Hmong girls neatly fit into model minority characterizations often associated with successful immigrants,

whereas the majority of Hmong boys were described using “forever foreigner” narratives, often used to describe refugees.

I recall how the professors in this department were unwilling to let my former advisee retake a final exam in the course that he had failed, but that they had let a white, female student who was in the same situation, retake the exam a year prior. When members of the college’s administration questioned professors’ decisions, they gave “commonsense” responses. The white, female student was far from “hostile” or “arrogant”. She was described as a “sweet, hard-working” student who had been under enormous duress at the time. Because of this, she deserved “a second chance.” Ironically, none of the professors in this department had any knowledge of the daily experiences of my advisee or any of the male students from West Africa to actually form any opinions about them one way or another. Their commonsense beliefs about who these men are, got in the way of empathizing with them, or getting to know them on an individual level.

As I discussed in Chapter six, Barajas and Ronnkvist (2007), who studied the ways that whiteness is built into institutions through informal and formal practices, argue:

individual prejudice simply cannot explain this happening to such a high percentage of this group. However, we believe this commonly occurs not because of individual assumptions, but because the organizational logic in schools is racialized and delineates along lines of race. (p. 1530)

This is crucial to understand because it is where I believe we often get stuck when attempting to make sense of acts of injustice that happen every day to individuals. These acts of injustice will continue to happen, but it is the organizational logic in these institutions that allows it to continue. The policies that SJH produced and stand behind do not protect *all* students. They are upheld to protect the institution and individuals within

the institution who are a part of its mainstream culture. This has little to do with how much teachers and staff “like” Hmong students or have gone out of their way to make their experiences positive. I am referring to the ways that school officials were unwilling to protect Hmong students in the spaces of their school where they were violently attacked by other students. As Mr. Sloane, the current associate principal of SJH said, the school’s zero-tolerance policy on fighting allowed him to “stay neutral”. In essence, this “neutral” policy allowed deeper structural problems to continue within the spaces of the school, which ultimately made Hmong and African American boys responsible for negotiating their relationships with each other.

### **Significant Findings**

**Wat Tham Krabok.** Prior to this research, none of the everyday experiences of Hmong youth or their families in WTK has been documented in any detail, in the literature. In Chapter eight, I argue that because of their unique experiences, the WTK Hmong are a distinct cultural group within the larger Hmong diaspora. The majority of studies on immigrant youth focus on the second generation, in part, because newly arrived immigrant youth are not as prevalent in the U.S., especially amongst the Hmong, where the majority of K-12 school aged students are of the second generation. However, what is often missing from the narratives of second generation youth, are the details of their parents’ lives, prior to arriving in the U.S. (Park, 2008).

Having knowledge about some of the strategic decisions that Hmong parents in WTK made regarding their families, gives us important information about the relationships that youth have with their parents in the U.S. as well as the ways that they experience schooling. For example, assumptions were made often, especially early on in

Kong and Kue Lee's resettlement in the U.S., about the reasons why Kong was not as academically prepared as his brother, Kue. Local newspaper reporters focused their stories on Kue, the Asian immigrant, academic superstar who had "beat the odds" as a "poor refugee" to win a full academic scholarship to Kent, arguably the most expensive, elite prep school in the state. However, what reporters failed to understand is that Kong and Kue's parents had made a deliberate decision early on in their lives to solely finance Kue's education as a strategy out of poverty. Kue had begun his elite, private education in Thailand, while his younger brother Kong, had been denied an education until much later in adolescence.

Knowing that between the ages of nine and eleven, Kiab Moua worked in a family business, creating a product, and negotiating with Thai adults in Thai institutions, helps us understand why today her parents rely on her to fulfill adult responsibilities in their household, while she is able to manage and excel at the demands of college. We also have a better understanding as to why she makes higher education a priority based on a strong dual frame of reference that she developed working alongside her mother and grandmother in WTK—women who were denied formal education.

Having these understandings of immigrant youths' lived experiences prior to emigration allows us to rewrite simplistic narratives that often conceal the complexity in their lives. The reality is, parents often made decisions in WTK based on their families' longevity and survival, and these decisions have had major ramifications and implications for Hmong youths' schooling experiences in the U.S., as well as their experiences with social inclusion and exclusion in peer groups. In addition, these decisions have impacted

youths' relationships with their parents, albeit in different ways. The decisions that parents made in Thailand, continue to impact their family systems, today.

**“Commonsense” notions and nonsense.** The gang activity that occurred in WTK is a significant finding in this research for several reasons. Besides the fact that Kodluboy (1996) and others claim that Southeast Asian gangs are solely a U.S. phenomenon, it is a major finding because research on delinquency and/or criminality amongst immigrant male youth is often blamed on intergenerational conflict between immigrant parents and their assimilating children, or it is deemed as a response to the violence youth encounter in their neighborhoods and schools, largely by African American youth.

Instead of focusing on larger structural inequalities, research and public policy has moved quickly to interrogate familial structures. As I discussed in Chapter two, the 1966 Coleman Report as well as Oscar Lewis' 1966 Culture of Poverty thesis, had a heavy hand in creating the commonsense notions that are still used today to describe poor, families of color in the U.S. Like Bettie (2003), I argue that “family values” are a reincarnation of the Culture of Poverty thesis. When families have the “wrong” family values, what does this tell us about families who have the “right” ones?

The model minority myth (also a product of the 1960s), in conjunction with research in the 1980s, most notably by Ruben Rumbaut, worked to remove Southeast Asians from the African American underclass as “refugee exceptions” (Tang, 2000; Wu, 2002). It has allowed us to view the Hmong as perpetual victims; their gang activity in the U.S., for example, is a justified response to the horror they experience in U.S.



neighborhoods and schools. The model minority myth may seem harmless, perhaps even complimentary to some, but it is actually destructive in its pervasiveness. Not only does it mask deeper issues that Asian Americans such as Hmong youth face, but it allows continued tensions, misunderstandings, and acts of profound violence to proliferate between Asian American and African American youth. Like S. Lee (1996) argues, the model minority myth is truly a “hegemonic device” that gives us a green light to look past a troubling history of race relations in the U.S.

In addition, it allows us to mask the profound, multi-faceted violence that Hmong male youth in particular, face. Everyday violence was experienced in the form of hitting and punching as well as verbal, racist assaults within unmonitored spaces in SJH, but it also took place in spaces such as school busses—unmarked territory for school officials. The everyday forms of violence that all Hmong male youth experienced at SJH, as well as the horrific and inhumane violence that Kue experienced on the school bus, and that Kong experienced on the street in his neighborhood, remain largely hidden in the American consciousness. Quite frankly, everyone should be outraged at the violent acts that have been committed against WTK Hmong youth. Brandzel and Desai (2013) argue:

While black men’s historical racial injuries are duly noted, greater emphasis is placed on their supposed contemporary propensity for violence that is attributed to such factors as a culture of poverty, familial deviance, and inherent criminality... Asian American men are predominately associated with just a few forms of violence, namely patriarchal gendered violence and gang violence, in the American imaginary. However, this violence is rarely attributed to experiences of race; instead, Asian American traditions and cultures are seen as responsible for engendering familial/domestic and criminal violence. Hence, racial injury and violence are rarely linked in narratives of Asian American masculinity. (p. 90)

As discussed in Chapter two and Chapter eight, the types of masculinity that Hmong male youth are associated with, considered “subordinate” forms of masculinity, are

heavily racialized and intensified by the model minority myth, which allow these everyday forms of violence not only to go unnoticed, but to continue. Although the U.S. Department of Education reported in 2009 that 54% of Asian American boys are bullied and harassed in U.S. schools, I am certain this percentage is far higher. As I discussed in Chapter six, exacerbating the hidden nature of this everyday violence is a belief that the two main barriers that WTK Hmong youth face are learning English and assimilating into U.S. norms and culture.

**“Catching up” with Hmong Americans.** It is important to keep in mind that WTK Hmong youth included in this study are those whose parents chose a school choice option for them. These students are considered “highly motivated” and the majority have been Hmong girls. Their parents spend an inordinate amount of time filling out school choice applications for each child annually and regularly attended parent-teacher conferences. Whenever Mark and Teng asked parents to join them at a school board meeting or a community event, they made a point to be there.

WTK Hmong parents are preoccupied with their children’s ability to excel academically and learn English. As I discussed in Chapter two, educational achievement and the attainment of advanced degrees is of utmost importance to Hmong families as it increases his/her entire family’s reputation in the Hmong community in the form of high status and respect (P.N. Yang & Solheim, 2007). Teng often discussed WTK Hmong parents’ preoccupation with their children’s education as a need to “catch up quickly” to Hmong American families.

WTK Hmong parents compared their families to other Hmong families, not to the white, middle to upper class families whose kids filled the halls of SJH and Kent. At the

same time, WTK Hmong parents had no understanding of how organized activities are directly connected to the academic success that they want so desperately for their children and ultimately for their families. I argue that the majority of parents, regardless of race, ethnicity, or social class, make strategic choices about their children's schooling that rarely follows a linear process. However, affluent families' choices often *appear* more strategic and linear because of the social and cultural capital that they possess.

Because of WTK Hmong parents' fixation with their children's educational success in the U.S., all parents said that they wanted their sons *and* daughters to complete high school and college before they married. As I discussed in Chapter two, Hmong males still possess higher levels of educational attainment overall than Hmong females in the U.S. Although this gap is shrinking, educational persistence, as S. Lee (2005) astutely notes, is not the same as high levels of educational achievement.

**“The girls go to school, the boys go to jail.”** Unlike the line in the film, *Gran Torino*, as well as the sentiments held by many teachers at SJH about Hmong girls' educational achievement and motivation, several WTK Hmong girls who attended SJH married while they were still in high school, whereas all but one of the WTK Hmong boys (Leej Moua) either went to college or are planning to go. Mark and Teng were shocked, dismayed, and disappointed to learn that the majority of the Totally Awesome girls (TAG) married early.

One of these girls is Xue Lee, Kong and Kue's youngest sister. Although Houa and Thao never encouraged her to marry early, they allowed her to marry her boyfriend before she graduated from high school. Another was Li, the girl who expressed to me how overwhelmingly tired she was from multitasking throughout the week as she looped

her arm through mine and we walked together after a college admissions workshop. And yet another was Mai, the girl who was attacked in the gymnasium at SJH because of her sexuality. In response to this, Teng said:

I know a lot of these Hmong girls—they want to be able to get out and do stuff, we do our best to provide all these opportunities. But at the same time, what are we doing wrong if a lot of them are getting married... For me that makes me sad, it's like damn, all this effort went to waste. We were trying to make sure they didn't do that, which was the whole sole purpose of trying to make sure that these girls got out doing things, too. We worked really hard with these girls not for them to just call up guys and meet them. We did it because we want them to realize that they can go to college, you can be at [a good college], not so you can go around and hang out with guys, get pregnant, and get married.

When I met some of the TAG's in 2009, they were college bound and talked incessantly about the importance of school in their lives. However, they also had intensive online dating lives that they kept hidden from Mark, Teng, their teachers, and most of all, their parents.<sup>67</sup> They maintained these secret dating lives primarily through *Facebook*, where they met WTK Hmong boys who did not attend SJH or SSH. Teng believes that many of the girls married to “escape” the multiple responsibilities that overwhelmed them at home. Early in the original study, girls had shared that it upset them that their parents didn't trust them as they had never given them a reason not to. In addition, they resented that they were not allowed to participate in most organized school activities or socialize outside of their homes, when their brothers could. As I noted in Chapter four, one of the girl's said, “The guys are free, like they can do whatever they want.” However, they also equated school and homework with “freedom.”

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<sup>67</sup> S. Lee (2005) also found that high school aged Hmong girls used the internet to meet, and at times date, Hmong boys, but they were primarily Hmong American girls, not newly arrived Hmong immigrants.

As I have discussed previously, early marriage continues to be a major issue in the Hmong community and is beyond the scope of this study. The reasons why WTK Hmong parents allowed their daughters to marry early were not explored in detail as this was not a focus of my research. Still, I believe that it is a significant finding, in part, because teachers at SJH believed so strongly in Hmong girls' ability to achieve and persist academically, particularly compared to their brothers whose academic abilities and motivation they questioned. In Chapter two, I noted an observation made by an individual about gender and educational achievement in the African American context, "both men and women struggle in the same ways—but I think it *looks* different" (Ohikuare, 2013, p. 5). Questions still remain about how these differences "look" amongst male and female Hmong youth. In the case of WTK Hmong youth, I argue that most adults in their lives believe that they understand the ways struggle "looks" different, but these beliefs are largely based on racialized and gendered stereotypes.

When Kong discussed his ability to stay on track in school, he credited Mark, in particular, for lecturing him about going to college, providing out-of-school tutoring for all WTK Hmong youth (where he received more lectures about college), and for providing neighborhood league soccer teams. I was surprised that Kong did not mention Teng or Laj and wondered if this had something to do with the fact that they are Hmong American and/or that Mark is an older white, male. When I asked him about this, he noted that Teng, in particular, had been an excellent soccer coach, but it was Mark who both lectured *and* educated him about the value of a college education.

Kong also credited the "strict" parental monitoring he received from both of his parents. R. Lee et al. (2008) discovered that Hmong American male college freshmen

perceived conflict with their parents as concern, caring, and investment, which had a direct effect on decreasing their delinquent behaviors and increasing their educational aspirations and achievement. Although a few WTK Hmong boys believed conflict with their parents was a reason why they matriculated to high school and then to college, none of them interpreted this conflict as concern, caring, or any type of investment from their parents. Nonetheless, if some of the WTK Hmong boys equated parental monitoring and conflict with their parents as the impetus to persist educationally, in what ways did the WTK Hmong girls who married early, interpret it? The answers to these questions still remain largely unknown.

### **Implications and a Call for Change**

Hmong students' everyday experiences of bullying, harassment, peer violence, and social isolation, continue to go largely unnoticed by educators, policy makers, scholars, and media. Although the Hmong community has been in the U.S. well over thirty years, I still meet individuals in 2014 who have never heard of them before. In a state with some of the highest educational and economic gaps in the U.S., this does not surprise me. However, what alarms me, is the persistence of high levels and forms of violence that WTK Hmong youth experience daily, that continues to go unnoticed. I believe that the model minority myth contributes to this as well as the everyday ways that race is discussed and analyzed using a white/black framework.

Teachers and staff at SJH were not aware of the ways that racism and violence impacted Hmong students' lives on a daily basis, as they believed that learning English and assimilating into U.S. norms and culture were what impacted Hmong students most. Teachers also noted that Hmong students isolated themselves, suggesting that they were

solely responsible for their isolation. The majority of teachers at SJH knew that Hmong students qualified for free and reduced lunch, but since none of them had ever taught a Hmong student prior to 2007, they had little understanding of the challenges that the Hmong population has experienced in general, and that WTK Hmong students face, in particular. All but one teacher interviewed had ever been to the area of the city where Hmong and African American students live and therefore did not possess even a surface level understanding of the differences between Hmong students' neighborhoods and the predominately white students' suburban neighborhoods.

When Kong's therapist at SSH, for example, recommended that he run outside in his neighborhood for exercise, he did not understand what that meant for a young, Hmong man, alone at dusk, in his neighborhood. He was not aware of the different "unwritten rules" that function in his neighborhood, "codes of the street", as Anderson (1999) has documented extensively and as A. Goffman (2014) has most recently documented. Teachers had never been to the social spaces in Hmong students' neighborhoods, spaces such as *McDonalds*, for example, that include daily and nightly surveillance by mostly white police officers as well as parks and beaches where the majority of children are black and Hmong, and not supervised by adults.

At the time of the interviews, conducted between January, 2010–April, 2010, none of the teachers were aware of the bullying, harassment, or peer violence that Hmong students had experienced at SJH. Unlike their former public schools in their neighborhoods, Hmong students were not "warehoused" in ELL classes all day at SJH. They were mainstreamed into courses with their predominately white peers. I argue that

this has been exceptionally positive for WTK Hmong students and that without this mainstream model, as well as the innovative learning strategies that teachers enthusiastically utilized and Dr. Anderson supported financially, WTK Hmong students would not have been able to achieve high levels of academic success in such a short amount of time. However, although their academic experiences were positive, especially for girls, it did not integrate them into the mainstream culture of SJH, and this social isolation impacted them in numerous ways.

The teachers that were interviewed at SJH are some of the most pedagogically sophisticated, attentive, and considerate teachers I have ever interacted with. It was obvious that many of the content teachers (i.e. science, civics, etc.) regularly reflected on how to make their classroom environment and assignments more inclusive for Hmong students and were always willing to try new learning strategies and collaborate with their ELL colleagues who they respected. During the time data was collected for the original study, Dr. Anderson was principal of SJH, the most exceptional school principal I have ever interacted with, and Dr. Feldman was associate principal, an educator with over thirty years of experience in public school education who cared deeply about all of the students' well-being.

Because of this rich and caring learning environment, none of the WTK Hmong participants in my study wished to leave SJH or SSH even when they experienced high levels of bullying, harassment, and peer violence. Although data was never collected at SSH, nor were observations of the school conducted, all of the participants in my study said that not only did they love high school, but that the peer violence they had



experienced at SJH, was not a regular occurrence at SSH. This is not to say that it did not exist, but that it was not as frequent—not an everyday experience in high school.

In Chapter two, I discussed demographic data from the 2010 U.S. Census and the 2012 U.S. Census American Community Survey that has been disseminated by the Asian Pacific American Legal Center and Asian American Justice Center (2011). This includes the fact that the Hmong population in the U.S. increased by 40% between 2000–2010 and that 26% currently live below the poverty line—a rate that exceeds African Americans and Latinos. In addition, their educational achievement continues to be the lowest among Asian American groups in the U.S. In the state where participants in my study live, less than 59% of school aged Hmong children are proficient in reading and only 40% in math.

When I discuss these data in academic presentations to scholars, school educators, and public policy makers, many of them are surprised *including* those who have had experience with the Hmong population, noting that they thought the Hmong were doing far better. I always stress that in the short amount of time that the Hmong population has lived in the U.S., approximately thirty years, their economic and educational disparities have decreased each decade. The Hmong community has made great strides in a short period of time, but there are still segments of the population that are actively struggling, and remain isolated *within* the larger Hmong community, including WTK Hmong youth and families.

School officials in both public school districts that WTK Hmong youth have been enrolled in did not view Mark positively, in fact, most perceived him as an overtly hostile neighborhood and community organizer, a “bull in a china shop”, who interrupted them,

took them to task, and did not have sufficient facts before doing any of this. What they failed to understand, is that Mark (and Teng) were the only adults in WTK Hmong youths' lives who were willing to advocate for them at an institutional level. As Laj often said, "if it weren't for [Mark], there still wouldn't be anyone paying attention to these WTK Hmong kids."

Diversifying school curriculums, hiring Hmong teachers and staff, including school principals and individuals in more senior levels of administration, are all positive steps in the right direction. However, they will never be enough to actually *change* institutional climates and cultures that allow the everyday violence that occurs in schools to continue and that put WTK Hmong youth in harms way physically, emotionally, and socially. In addition, as Barajas and Ronkvist (2007) argue, "Identifying the existence of institutional racism, discrimination, or individual prejudice does not go far enough, and ultimately, hides the processes supporting these acts and attitudes" (p. 1528-1529). As Lewis (2004) adds, these systemic issues, "were not created by and will not be overcome by the actions of one or even several individuals. More broad-scale, truly redistributive policies are necessary" (p. 192).

Lewis (2004) offers an example that is worth noting:

Black children living in inner cities have alarming rates of asthma because of the high level of environmental pollutants in their neighborhoods. This is not a genetic issue, but a social one. The long-term cure here would not be a steady stream of individually prescribed inhalers and medications but actions to eliminate the pollutants and to prevent the continued dumping of such toxins into poor neighborhoods filled with disenfranchised people of color. (p. 196)

These arguments beg answers to the following questions: Which students in U.S. schools do adults choose to advocate for, create policies for, and to intervene for? Which parents

of which children demand that their children are not only safe at school, but that they get the best education possible? And what does “the best education possible” *really* mean to WTK Hmong youth and parents?

**Rethinking social and cultural capital.** WTK Hmong parents believe that education is the primary way their families can “catch up” to Hmong American families and be successful, but they continue to have little resources in understanding *how* and what it takes for their children to actually succeed in U.S. schools from kindergarten well into higher education. To some extent, education is the great equalizer. However, it does *not* put everyone on an even playing field. Integrating students of color from urban neighborhoods who qualify for free and reduced lunch into predominately white suburban schools is an excellent idea in theory. However, actual integration *amongst students* takes on different forms and has different meanings in predominately white suburban institutions. For example, Holland (2012) and Ipsa-Landa (2013) conducted qualitative investigations of school integration processes on African American and Latino students in predominately white suburban schools, focusing on students’ social integration with white peers. Both researchers discovered that African American males had the “easiest” time integrating with white male peers based on their athletic abilities (real or perceived).

In contrast, racialized stereotypes about Asian Americans males, based on subordinate forms of masculinity related to commonly held beliefs about their abject bodies, masked many of the WTK Hmong boys’ natural athletic abilities. Because Gina spent time with boys (and girls) at badminton twice a week for half of each school year, she witnessed these youths’ athletic abilities, some of whom she said were quite talented,

but she was not able to get them to join school sports teams. For the same reasons why proponents of school integration rarely recommend that middle class, white suburban students be integrated into urban schools where the majority of students are nonwhite and qualify for free and reduced lunch, Dr. Feldman never encouraged white, middle class, female cheerleaders or male hockey players to join WTK Hmong badminton players. I have often wondered what school integration would look like if this actually happened.

The social and cultural capital that middle class, white suburban students bring with them, what Lareau (2011) coined, “concerted cultivation”, is what all schools privilege. Kue understood that being a part of organized activities was detrimental for success at Kent, but this created intensive conflict between himself and his parents. With the exception of Kue, other WTK Hmong boys and girls did not have the same access to these types of organized activities. Mark and Teng provided these activities for them in the form of out-of-school tutoring, neighborhood league soccer, and orientations to colleges and universities. Overall, this programming has been highly influential for Hmong boys, but it remains unclear how and in what ways it influenced Hmong girls.

### **Social Capital as Organic Capital: A Call for Out-of-School Programs for WTK Hmong Youth**

At the close of this research, I had hoped to report that Hmong American youth, Hmong leaders and elders, Hmong Mutual Assistance Organizations, government agencies, public school officials, and WTK Hmong parents, had all joined together to advocate for and support WTK Hmong youths’ educational success. Unfortunately, this never happened. Although Mark’s role with WTK Hmong youth and their families has been problematic and at times, far from ideal, I agree with Laj that without Mark, as well

as Teng (and quite frankly, without Laj), WTK Hmong youth and their families' educational needs would still largely be ignored or unnoticed. There is a good chance, for example, that they would have never learned about the school choice option and that Kue would not have made his way to Kent, an institution where he has had the best experiences of his life, with the most supportive adults in his life, to date.

In Rios' (2011) examination of the effects of criminalization on African American and Latino males, only three out of the forty males in his study found meaningful connections in out-of-school programs, but these outcomes made significant, life-changing differences in their lives:

All three boys reported feeling that these programs and mentors had made a significant difference in their ability to transform. These programs provided these three boys with genuine caring relationships with adults who advocated for them and helped them develop their everyday resistance and resilience into navigational skills, to transform organic capital into social capital, which allowed them to desist, complete high school, and attend college. These three boys found one thing in common—access to resources that allowed them to move from negative credential status to positive credential status. These resources included college-prep programs, youth leadership organizations, mentors, and teachers and law enforcement officers who acknowledge them as young people capable of reaching the peak of human possibility. (p. 162)

Like Rios, I argue that educators, policy makers, government officials, and nonprofit organizations must make it a priority to find ways to transform the untapped “organic capital” that WTK Hmong youth and other disenfranchised youth of color possess, into forms of “social capital” that Lareau (2011) and others argue hold the highest value in schools and other institutions.

An ideal out-of-school program for WTK Hmong male youth, for example, would give them ample opportunities to continue engaging in cultural practices where they create protective spaces that allow them to persist academically, perform alternative,

empowering forms of masculinity, and to deepen their relationships with peers. An ideal program would also allow them to create artwork such as Japanese animé, where they have an outlet to express their deepest concerns as well as their greatest aspirations for the future. I reflect on the ideas of a science teacher at SJH who utilized boys' interest in art as way to engage them in science curriculum. This teacher wondered if an after school art program could get them to participate more in school—not just classroom academics, but *schooling*.

This research has developed and solidified my commitment in the continuation of research that examines the significance of immigrant youths' relationships amongst peers. As adults, it is easy to forget how central these relationships once were in our own lives when we were junior high and high school aged. The relationships that all youth possess with peers are influenced heavily by gender. For example, WTK Hmong girls' relationships with their peers were significant to them, but they utilized these relationships in different ways than boys. More than anything, girls wanted to participate in school activities related to academics and they wanted to do this alongside their female peers for support and encouragement. Out-of-school programming designed with WTK Hmong girls' in mind would give girls opportunities to express their feelings about the inequitable treatment they feel they receive from their parents. Spaces would be available for them to address long-term choices and consequences about early marriage. Ideally, these spaces would also allow girls to have fun and be “just normal teenagers.”

I often reflect on the conversations the PI and I had with our Hmong American undergraduate research assistants who had no contact with WTK Hmong families, my research assistant, Lia, who enjoyed getting to know WTK Hmong youth, and the Hmong

American undergraduate and graduate students who admitted not knowing how to connect with WTK Hmong youth. Ideally, these spaces would also offer opportunities for mentorship and/or collaboration between WTK Hmong youth and Hmong American youth, which would also allow them to break down and move past some of the stereotypes they hold about one another.

Although such programs for WTK Hmong youth and Hmong youth in general would be highly beneficial, there are many challenges to consider in actually getting them to participate. The out-of-school programming that Mark and Teng offered was, and continues to be, successful for five specific reasons: 1) They convinced WTK Hmong parents that programming would have a direct impact on their children's educational achievement; 2) Parents trusted Mark and Teng and knew their children would be safe with them; 3) Transportation was provided; 4) Programming was offered free of charge to families; and 5) Programming was funded through Mark and Teng's employer, who receives ongoing funding in the form of tax dollars from the state.

As I discussed in Chapter 9, Friedman (2013) argues that middle to upper class youth gain "competitive kid capital" through out-of-school activities which include: 1) The importance of winning; 2) Learning from loss; 3) Time management; 4) Adaptability; and 5) Grace under pressure (p. 2). Kue Lee gained all five of these skills while at Kent, but in doing so, his relationship with his parents suffered in a number of profound ways. Transportation, for example, was always an issue for him because there was no after-school activity bus that went to his neighborhood and his parents were unwilling to pick him up because they did not see any value in varsity soccer or SAT prep.

When WTK Hmong boys played neighborhood league soccer, their parents never came to any of their matches to support them. Parents allowed their daughters to play badminton, but did not perceive it as anything but an activity where their daughters would be safe at school and could get help on their homework. As Lareau (2011) and others have noted, social exclusion from organized school activities as well as out-of-school activities not only occurs because of economic resources, but because of limited parental time and understanding about what it takes in order for their children to be successful in academic institutions.

### **A Call for Action**

I recall a conversation that I had with Laj about Hmong male youth in general who have experienced many problems both at home with their families and in school:

Kari: Do you think their families are responding to these boys? Trying to help them?

Laj: No. Hmong families can't deal with it; they don't know how to deal with it. They never have helped their boys and they never will.

This bothered Laj immensely and he admitted to not having answers about what he perceived as such a wide-spread problem in the Hmong community overall to address some of the ongoing issues with Hmong boys and young men in their families. It is my hope that additional research will be conducted with WTK and Hmong American male youth that gets at the depth of these boys' experiences and perceptions so that we can continue to grow our knowledge base on the multiple ways that institutions can address their various needs.

I also invite Hmong leaders and elders to reach out to WTK Hmong families in order to collaborate and work together to *invest* in Hmong children's education. I still



recall the words and sentiments of a WTK Hmong father, a man who fought alongside U.S. soldiers during the Secret War in Laos, who expressed great interest in being part of a Hmong parent group to support their children collectively. I encourage the leaders of Hmong American parent groups to reach out to WTK Hmong parents and include them in dialogue and decision making. Furthermore, I cannot emphasize enough, that it is not the sole responsibility of the Hmong community to address the pressing needs of WTK Hmong youth and families. As I have stressed throughout this work, school and government officials, nonprofit organizations, public policy makers, and other institutions must also be held accountable in making an investment in *all* Hmong youth and families.

### **Kong and Kue Lee: A Call to Listen to Hmong Youth**

The last time Kong and I had a conversation, he spoke at length about having just moved home for the summer after his first year of college. When I asked him how things were going, he said that his parents were making him sleep in the basement. His brother, Kue, had also moved home for the summer and their parents had given him Kong's old bedroom to stay in. When I asked Kong why, he replied, "I just don't feel like I belong in the house." He described grabbing an old, twin sized mattress and throwing it in the middle of the basement floor, on the concrete, to sleep on every night. He said there was nowhere to put his clothes or other personal belongings, so he kept them in his suitcase, near the mattress. As he continued to talk to me about how it felt to be relegated to the basement, he said that his girlfriend, Amanda, "told me that if she saw a family picture of us, she feels like in that family picture they just cut a picture of me and put me in the picture."

Kong's feelings of not belonging in his family seemed to intensify each time we talked. "My father," Kong told me, "he usually doesn't listen to us. It's kind of the same thing with Hmong people. The parents don't listen to their children. The children and their parents are not close." When I asked Kong additional questions about this, he said, somewhat out of the blue that, "[Kue] told me the reason why he doesn't want to talk to you anymore is because every time he talks to you, he always wants to cry." Since I could not discuss Kue's participation in my research study with Kong (and vice versa), I asked Kong if there had been any point in our conversation in the last ninety minutes that had made him want to cry. In the three interviews I had conducted with him, and in our many informal conversations, Kong had never remotely looked like he was going to cry.

Kong: A little bit, yeah.

Kari: At what point?

Kong: Just what I talked about when I got back home. For me, I want to have a connection with my family, but it doesn't go as how you expect.

Kari: You want to have a connection with your parents or with your brothers and sisters?

Kong: With everybody.

Boss (1992) makes an important observation that, "If we examine only the common perception held by the majority of family members, we are likely to overlook the least powerful person in that family and may inadvertently reinforce a dysfunctional dynamic" (p. 117). As I have discussed throughout the chapters of this work, Kong has always been compared to his older brother, Kue, by many of the adults in their lives as the brother who never quite measured up and was not as exceptional. I argue that although Kong may hold the least power in his family, he possesses the deepest insights

about their dynamics and their relationships with one another. Kong is a profoundly insightful young man, a keen and savvy observer, and a thoughtful listener.

Unlike Kue, he has dealt with and processed the immeasurable trauma that he has experienced by talking to therapists, facing his attackers (albeit in a symbolic way), expressing his feelings through music, and investing in a long-term relationship with his girlfriend, Amanda, who continues to be a major support for him. Also unlike Kue, he makes an effort to have relationships with peers (his bandmates), and has also made friends in college, where he maintains a high grade point average. If we strip away model minority narratives, steeped in meritocracy to describe these brothers, I believe that it is Kong who has achieved the most “success”. I still recall the words of Thandeka Tutu-Gxashe, one of Reverend Desmond Tutu’s daughters, and her plea for us to listen to and believe people’s stories. She said that this is what we can offer individuals who are brave enough to share pieces of their lives with us. I encourage and invite all adults to do this with youth.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Psuedonym Matrix**

#### The Lee Family

Kue	Oldest son in Lee family. 1 <sup>st</sup> Hmong student to attend Kent.
Kong	Second oldest son in Lee family. 1 <sup>st</sup> Hmong student to attend SJH.
Houa Vue	Mother. Married to Thao.
Thao	Father. Married to Houa.
Mee	Oldest daughter in Lee family. Lives in Thailand with husband's family.
Kao	Second oldest daughter in Lee family. Lives with husband's family.
Xue	Youngest daughter. Attended SJH. Graduated from SSH.
Chai	Third oldest son in Lee Family. Attended SJH. Currently at SSH.
Bai	Youngest son in Lee family. Attending SJH. Will attend SSH. Best friend is Kai Moua.
Amanda	Kong's girlfriend. Hmong American born in the U.S.

#### The Moua Family

Leej	Oldest son. Attended SJH. Graduated from SSH.
Kiab	Oldest sibling (female). Attended SJH. Graduated from SSH.
Kai	Youngest son. Attended SJH. Will attend SSH. Best friend is Bai Lee.

#### Neighborhood Organizers/Cultural Insiders

Teng	Hmong American neighborhood organizer. Cultural insider.
Mark	White American neighborhood organizer.
Laj	Hmong American leader. Cultural insider.
Lia	Hmong American research assistant. Cultural insider.

### Teachers and Staff at Suburban Junior High (SJH)

Dr. Anderson	Principal at SJH. Retired, Spring 2011.
Dr. Feldman	Associate Principal at SJH. Resigned, Spring 2011.
Ms. Johnson	Principal at SJH, Fall 2011 to present.
Mr. Sloane	Associate Principal at SJH, Fall 2010 to present.
Gina	Athletic coordinator and physical education teacher at SJH.

### Schools

Kent	An elite, K-12 prep school that Kue Lee attended.
Suburban Junior High (SJH)	The suburban public junior high that WTK Hmong are bussed to.
Suburban Senior High (SSH)	The suburban public high school that WTK Hmong are bussed to.

### Other

Tong	Monk at WTK that I interviewed in 2012.
Mai	WTK Hmong girl who was attacked in the gym at SJH.
TAG	Totally Awesome Girls. Cohort of WTK Hmong girls who were admitted to SJH together in 2008-2009. They graduated from SSH in 2013.

## Appendix B

### Photograph of Wat Tham Krabok



Note: This photo was taken in 2004 as Hmong families were being processed as refugees. Many families had already left and houses had been disassembled. This is only a partial view of the 93 acres.

## Appendix C

### Sample Focus Group Protocol

I. Opening Question: Tell me your name and something you enjoy doing (hobby, activity, etc.)

II. Introductory Questions:

1. What schools did you attend in \_\_\_\_\_ before coming to SJH?
2. What are some of the reasons why you left your schools in your neighborhood?

III. Transition Questions:

3. How did you find out about SJH and what are some reasons why you decided to apply to go to the school?
4. Who helped you fill out your application?
5. Talk a bit about your schedule this quarter. What classes do you take every day?

IV. Key Questions:

6. Tell me about your classes.
  - A. Who do you hang out with in class? Outside of class?
  - B. What do you enjoy about these classes?
  - C. What don't you enjoy about these classes?
  - D. How much or little do you talk in your classes? Discuss reasons for this.
  - E. I want to hear what you think of your teachers. Who are your favorite teachers and why? Who are your least favorite teachers and why?
  - F. How much do you interact with your teachers in classes and outside of classes?
7. Tell me about your ESL classes.
  - A. Do you speak Hmong or English?
  - B. Are there non-Hmong kids in your class? If so, do you hang out with these kids in class? Outside of class?
  - C. What are some things you do in class?
  - D. How much or little do you talk in class? Discuss reasons for this.
8. Tell me about your school.
  - A. What kinds of things do you do in school?
  - B. Who are the popular kids in your school? Describe them a bit for me.
  - C. Do you hang out with any non-Hmong kids in or outside of school?
  - D. Talk about how you get to school.

9. Who helps you with your homework?

- A. Are your parents able to help you with homework? If so, in what ways?
- B. Talk about when and where you study.
- C. How much time you put into your homework when you are not in school?
- D. Are there other people who help you study outside of school? Tell me more about that.

10. Do your parents visit your school?

- A. Do your parents volunteer at your school? If so, talk a bit about what they do at your school. If they do not volunteer, do you know why?
- B. Do your parents attend parent/teacher conferences? If not, what are the reasons for this? If they do attend conferences, do they use an interpreter?

11. I want to hear more about the things you do when you're not in school.

- A. Where do you spend most of your time?
- B. Who do you hang out with?
- C. What kinds of things does your family want you to do when you're not in school? And how much time does this take out of your week?
- D. What kinds of things do you do for fun?

#### V. Ending Questions/Conclusion

12. I'd like to summarize the key points of our discussion... Does this summary sound complete? Is there anything you'd like to add or change?

13. Have we missed anything?

14. What advice do you have for me?



## Appendix D

### Sample Interview Protocol (Parents)

#### I. Opening Questions:

1. What are the names of your kids?
2. Which of your kids are at SJH through the choice program?
3. If you don't mind sharing with us, tell us about how and when you came to the U.S.

#### II. Introductory Questions:

4. What schools did your kids attend in \_\_\_\_\_ before going to SJH?
5. What are some of the reasons why your kids left school in \_\_\_\_\_?

#### III. Transition Questions:

6. How did you or your kids find out about SJH?
7. What were some of the reasons why you wanted your kids to go to SJH?
8. Who filled out the application?

#### IV. Key Questions:

9. We are going to ask you some questions about your impressions of SJH.
  - B. What are some things you like?
  - C. What are some things you do not like?
10. Tell us about your involvement with the school.
  - A. Have you met the principal or talked with her? If so, what are some things you talked about?
  - B. How about the associate principal?
  - C. Have you met your kids' teachers or talked with them? If so, what are some things you talked about?
  - D. Do you know about parent teacher conferences? If you have been to them, is this when you talk to your kids' teachers?
  - E. How do you find out about things going on at school?
  - F. Is there a Hmong parent group at the school? Or do you get together with other Hmong parents whose kids go to SJH, outside of school?
11. How do you think your kids are doing in school?
  - A. Do your kids bring home much homework?
  - B. Do your kids do homework by themselves?
  - C. Do your kids do homework with you or their siblings?
  - D. Do you know when report cards come out?

E. When your kids come home from school what kinds of things do they talk to you about?

12. What are some things your kids do when they are not in school?

V. Ending Questions/Conclusion

13. Where do you want your kids to go to high school and why?

14. Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

15. We want to make sure we have your complete story. Are we missing anything?

## Appendix E

### Sample Interview Protocol (Teachers and Staff)

1. How long have you worked here and in what capacity?
2. Describe the work you do.
3. How would you describe SJH?
4. How long have you been working with Hmong students and in what capacity?
5. Before working with Hmong students here, did you work with Hmong students in another educational context? If so, please discuss.
6. What kinds of things are in place in your school that you think support Hmong students' academic success?
  - A. Are there things you'd like to see happen to support Hmong students even better?
  - B. If you are a teacher, discuss any changes you have made to your course materials, methods, or pedagogy as you've continued to teach more Hmong students.
7. Tell me about the ways you see Hmong students succeeding.
8. What do you see as the biggest challenges or obstacles for Hmong students?
  - A. What do you see as the biggest challenges or obstacles that Hmong students face at your school?
9. How would you describe the relationships or experiences between Hmong students and staff?
  - A. between Hmong parents and staff?
  - B. between Hmong students and non-Hmong students?
10. What activities are Hmong students involved with?
11. Who do Hmong students hang out with outside of classes?
12. How has the addition of Hmong students affected or changed your school, staff and students?
  - A. What do Hmong students bring to your classes/school?
  - B. Since Hmong students are a relatively new group of learners, how have you responded to them joining your school?

- C. Have there been requests to learn more about Hmong families and culture?
- D. What kinds of professional development have you found important or would you like to see in the future?

13. When you reflect on work with Hmong students, are there any resources you wish you had?

- A. Given the fact that resources are scarce, what are some things you have had to do to accommodate Hmong students?

14. Is there anything you would like to add that we have not covered in this interview?

## **Appendix F**

### **Sample Interview Protocol (Male Youth)**

1. What are some of the things you enjoy doing outside of school?
2. Tell me about your friends.
3. Do you spend time on social networking sites? If so, tell me about them.
4. Talk about some of the things you do when you are at home with your family.
5. How are the things you do at home different than the things your sisters do?
6. Tell me about your school. How would you describe it to someone who has never been there before?
7. What are some things about your school that people would be surprised to know?
8. What are some things that you have experienced at your school that people would be surprised to know?
9. If you had transportation, what kinds of activities would you join in school?
10. What do you hope to do after middle school? High school?
11. What advice would you give to other Hmong students who plan to go to your school?