

Sib Piav Neej Neej: Co-Constructing Young Hmong American Women's Narratives
with Young Hmong American Women Storytellers

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Dedication

For my people—who dream, hope, and long for home.

Thov muab cob rau kuv haiv neeg—cov uas npau suav, vam, thiab nco txog peb qub teb
qub chaws.

Abstract

Many studies on Hmong American youth represent what Eve Tuck (2009) describes as damage-centered research. Damage-centered research focuses on the problems and deficits of a community rather than the complexities. This study centers Hmong knowledge, values, and traditional ways of inquiry, and challenges the current portrayals of young Hmong American women as victims of culture, disengaged from community, and uninterested in Hmong oral traditions. Eight young Hmong American women storytellers participated in this study, sharing the complexities, contradictions, and desires of their lived experiences. This study highlights the ways in which young Hmong American women resist, maintain, shape, and transform cultural practices, expectations, and traditions.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Following the United States' military withdrawal from Southeast Asia in 1975, thousands of Hmong families from that region were relocated to the United States. Today, there are approximately 260,000 Hmong Americans, and of that population, 44% is under the age of 18 (Pfeifer & Thao, 2013). Since the arrival of Hmong families to the United States in the late 1970s, researchers have been particularly interested in Hmong youth and their adjustment, acculturation, and experiences in the United States (Moua and Vang, 2015). While studies have centered on research questions related to positive and healthy Hmong identity development, the research approaches are often incongruent with the cultural, linguistic, and political and historical identities of Hmong American youth. As a result, these approaches limit Hmong youth narratives and the possibilities and experiences of what it means to develop positive and healthy Hmong identity.

Similarly, research on Hmong women have followed a similar vein. Vang, Nibbs, and Vang (2016) assert that Hmong women are portrayed as victims of culture and war. More contemporary research positions Hmong American women as “an emerging group beginning to ‘come into their own’” (p. vii). While research on Hmong American women have begun to complicate and problematize the current literature (Her, 2016; Vang, C.Y., 2016; Vang, M. 2016), the same cannot be said about research on Hmong American youth, especially young Hmong American women.

Significance of the Study

Research on Hmong American youth have perpetuated an “otherness” which has shaped social work practice, policies, and subsequent research. Weis (1995) describes the process of othering as seeing others different from ourselves, resulting in the construction

of our own identities. Fine (1994) adds that othering can, intentionally or unintentionally, lead to reinforcing positions of dominance and subordination. In early studies of Hmong American youth, these examples of othering, resulting in positions of dominance and subordination, is most apparent.

In a Master's thesis on Hmong high school students in Missoula, Montana, where my family was resettled and still lives, the author describes the lack of being able to describe Hmong, writing, "In summation, an exact description of the Hmong, either historically or culturally, is not possible due to an absence of complete accounts on the Hmong, their own non-literacy, their varying subgroup experiences and their sense of secrecy" (Ingram, 1980, p. 37-38). Instead of writing about the author's own inability to understand Hmong language or why the author chose not to use oral traditions as sources, the author suggests the problem is with the Hmong refugees.

In another example of unintentionally reinforcing dominance, one of the very first articles published on Hmong American youth adjustment in the US, Rumbaut and Ima (1988) write:

The Hmong, nevertheless, as we will show below, despite their surprisingly high level of attainment at the high school level and the fact that they exhibit the lowest rates of juvenile deviance on all of our indices, also have by far the greatest difficulties making the transition from high school to post-secondary schooling, and are more likely to opt for early marriage and family formation—and possibly, therefore, for early reliance on public assistance (p.150).

In this example, researchers present experiences of perseverance and determination, but then juxtapose those experiences to experiences of difficult transitions, early marriage, and reliance on public assistance, using language such as "by far the greatest difficulties," "despite this," and "more likely." As well-intentioned as the

researchers are, they have already created a narrative of difficulties and impossibilities for Hmong youth in this study without much consideration for historical, linguistic, or cultural context.

In another early study on Hmong American youth, Hirayama and Hirayama (1988) note the significant differences between Hmong and other Asians, writing, “Unlike the majority of Vietnamese who arrived about the same time as the Hmong but who have since left refugee status, many Hmong are still struggling” (p. 94). Again, this continues to *other* Hmong. At a different point of the article, the authors discuss the lack of formal education among Hmong refugees. Yet in their discussion of their findings, the researchers commend Hmong refugees for their complex social organizations, their participation in school, and their eagerness to find work and prove themselves to their American counterparts. The researchers make no mention of nuanced and complicated experiences. In these early research studies, Hmong American youth are *certainly the other*, and certainly *the researched*.

Lastly, even among Hmong American researchers, we write with defined boundaries—researcher and Hmong participants. Chilisa (2012) writes, “[Researchers] can operate at the level of colonizer co-opted by the dominant Western discourse on methodology, which uses Euro-Western standards as universal truths” (p. 190). For example, Hmong researchers continue to write about “the Hmong” rather than use “we”. As a result, research on Hmong American youth, whether produced by Hmong or non-Hmong, is not necessarily written for a Hmong audience, but rather, the intended consumer of research, who is often non-Hmong. In this study, I use “we” when I identify as part of the group—Hmong American, Hmong woman, social worker. I do not use

“we” when writing from the participants’ perspectives since I no longer culturally identify as a *young* Hmong woman.

Many studies on Hmong American youth represent what Eve Tuck (2009) describes as damage-centered research. Damage-centered research focuses on the problems and deficits, resulting in recommendations for research focused on the same problems and deficits. Tuck argues that marginalized communities may participate in and allow these kinds of studies because the studies may “pay off in material, sovereign, and political wins” (p. 414). Tuck (2009) poignantly writes, “Here’s a more applied definition of damaged-centered research: research that operates, even benevolently, from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation” (p. 413). For example, Xiong, Rettig, and Tuicomepee (2008) begin their article by stating the “dramatic” increase of crime and delinquency in Southeast Asian communities. They write, “[Hmong are] the least acculturated...face significantly more adjustment problems...[and are] among the poorest ethnic groups in the United States” (p. 338). It would be hard for Hmong youth to redeem themselves after this description, even if this study was meant to bring programs into Hmong communities to assist Hmong American youth.

This study aims to address the concern that the current literature of Hmong American youth, particularly young Hmong American women, is not only damage-centered but damaging to Hmong American communities. The study moves to counter the dominant narratives, challenging the portrayals of young Hmong American women lives as anything less than complex, engaged, and valued. Additionally, this study is

guided by a Hmong research protocol which centers traditional Hmong inquiry protocols and Hmong knowledge systems. My research questions are the following:

1. What stories do young Hmong American women tell and how do they tell their stories?
2. How are the ways in which these stories are told connected to Hmong oral traditions?
3. How do these stories disrupt damage-centered and dominant narratives of Hmong American women?

Dissertation Overview

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. The Introduction chapter contextualizes the study and provides the significance of the study and the research questions. Chapter Two is the Literature Review and presents the major research approaches used to explore young Hmong American women's experiences, resulting in the dominant narratives. Next, Chapter Three outlines the Methodology, including the theoretical frameworks that underly this study, the role of the researcher, research principles in indigenous methodologies, recruitment strategies, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter Four, the results of the study, is divided into two parts: eight, separate narrative portraits and shared experiences. Chapter Five is the last chapter and presents the findings and conclusions for this study.

Situating this Study

I am Hmong American. At one time in my life, I identified as a young Hmong person. Growing up, my parents told me the stories of orphan boy and the dragon princess, and of orphan girl and the handsome *qeej* player. They also told me their own

stories of orphanhood; my mother lost both of her parents before the age of 10, and my father lost his father when he was 12. I began writing stories when I was in high school, finding ways to tell my life through the voices of my characters. As a Hmong person, I believe that the way we tell and share stories is deeply connected to the ways we traditionally, historically, and culturally come to know stories.

Growing up, I often heard adults, both Hmong and non-Hmong, make comments about Hmong youth—we did not care about nor were we interested in our culture, we were delinquents, and we no longer respected the elders. These messages and narratives impacted my own experience and my own narrative as a young Hmong American person. So, this study is as much about my own counter narrative as it is about the counter narratives of the young Hmong American women I interviewed in this study. I cannot deny that their experiences are similar or that their experiences resonate with my own, or that I am intimately familiar with what it means to be a young Hmong American woman storyteller.

In essence, this study is a story about stories. It is written from my positionality and professional and academic training as a Hmong woman, a storyteller, a social worker, and a researcher. There are moments in which the written voice is that of a Hmong person, then transitions to my researcher voice. I am not always immediately aware of these transitions when I write, and yet through multiple readings and drafts of this dissertation, I know this happens. My hope is that these transitions do not distract the reader, but rather offers a glimpse into a complicated process necessary to tell nuanced stories.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review describes the scholarly traditions used in approaching research with Hmong American youth and, within each tradition, explores the narratives, experiences, and possibilities of Hmong youth and identity development. Additionally, it presents the current narratives of young Hmong American women. First, I explore the studies guided by post positivist research approaches and paradigms; these conventional approaches shape the dominant narrative of what it means to be a Hmong American youth. Secondly, I examine studies with constructivist approaches to understanding Hmong American youth identity development. Then, I present studies guided by critical paradigms that generate narratives with more complex portrayals of Hmong American youth and their identity. While these scholarly traditions have developed some understanding of Hmong American youth identity, they have not been completely successful. Finally, I present the dominant narratives of young Hmong American women, which are rooted in conventional research paradigms.

Research Approaches and Narratives of Hmong American Youth

The study of Hmong American experiences is an emerging field of study that spans across a number of disciplines and covers topics such as mental health (Meschke & Juang, 2014; Vang & Bogenschutz, 2013), education (Lee, 2001; Lee, 2002; McNall, Dunnigan, & Mortimer, 1994), and cultural and language loss (Bosher, 1997; Nguyen & Brown, 2010). The Hmong experience is especially interesting to researchers because of the romanticization of their narrative as a stateless ethnic group, who have been able to relatively maintain their cultural and religious traditions and language despite their constant, forced removal from one country to the next (Vang, 2010). Of particular interest to researchers are their adjustment, assimilation, and acculturation in the United States.

Over the years, researchers have utilized different approaches to understand Hmong American youth adjustment, assimilation, and acculturation. Shaping and underlying these approaches are research paradigms. Creswell (2014) writes that worldviews, or paradigms, are the philosophical orientations that guide research studies. Research paradigms have underlying assumptions related to ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (knowledge), and axiology (values). In studies on Hmong American youth, I have identified three paradigms—post positivist, constructivist, and critical—that have guided the majority of studies related to Hmong American youth experiences and identity. These scholarly traditions have given some insight into the lived experiences of Hmong American youth as well as their identity development. In the next sections, I describe the paradigms and how those paradigms shape the studies related to Hmong American youth, their identity development, and their narratives.

Post Positivist Narratives and Identity Development

Post positivist studies tend to be reductionist and empirical in nature; that is, researchers follow the scientific method to objectively measure and observe reality and to establish truth. Based on this approach, researchers identify variables in order to determine cause and effect. Studies based on a post positivist paradigm also tend to be quantitative for the purposes of generalizability and normalizing (Chilisa, 2012; Creswell, 2014).

Among the post-positivist research on Hmong American youth, there is a particular interest in intergenerational conflict as a result of acculturation. Acculturation is a process in which change occurs in either or both groups when two autonomous cultural groups interact. In many instances, refugee and immigrant groups adopt the

dominant culture (Nicassio, 1985). Rick and Forward (1993) argue that intergenerational differences in Hmong families occur because Hmong youth acculturate at faster rates than their parents. Hmong youth are exposed to and have more interactions with U.S. culture, namely at school. As a result, the relationships between Hmong parents and their children is changed as Hmong parents maintain Hmong values, beliefs, and practices while their children adopt values or behaviors of the dominant culture (Hofstetter, et al., 2008; Lee & Liu, 2001). Researchers argue that intergenerational conflict has shown to impact mental health outcomes (Su, Lee, & Vang, 2005; Ying & Han, 2007), academic achievement (Bosher, 1997), and parent-child relationships (Lee & Liu, 2001).

Studies on acculturation are often connected to questions related to identity development, especially for Hmong American youth. Perhaps the most widely-known model for identity development is Erik Erikson's model on psycho-social development (Erikson, 1968). For many post positivist research on Hmong youth, Erikson's theory describes well many of the underlying assumptions of Hmong youth and identity. For example, the fifth stage of Erikson's theory is Identity versus Role Confusion. During the fifth stage, individuals are confronted by questions of "Who am I"; these questions challenge one's values and beliefs, resulting in young people to become focused on himself or herself. This self-focus results in young people believing that they know more than their parents or other adults, and oftentimes youth reject the views of their parents. Instead adolescents are drawn to their peer groups in developing their personal identity. This period of adolescence is viewed as stressful as young people experience an identity crisis. The young person is successful in this stage if he or she develops a stable sense of

self; that is, the young person knows who he or she is and is able to move on to the next stage (Erikson, 1968).

In contrast, if the individual does not overcome the challenges of identity crisis, he or she may experience identity foreclosure or identity confusion. Identity foreclosure is when the young person settles on an identity provided by others, whether parents or peers. In identity confusion, the young person becomes hopeless or delinquent. In some cases, the young person chooses a negative identity. Erikson (1968) describes a negative identity as when a young person chooses an identity with characteristics that have previously been presented as undesirable or dangerous by parents, other adults, or even society. James Marcia (1966) furthered Erikson's model, and added that a young person's identity formation was a result of a young person experiencing internal conflict, prompting exploration of new possibilities. Based on this internal conflict and exploration, young people form and commit to a new identity.

For Hmong youth, researchers focus on identity crises. Erikson (1968) explained that an identity crisis occurs when a young person experiences confusion about him or herself; he likened it to patients returning from war, describing young people who have an identity crisis as experiencing a "war within themselves," facing questions essential to their views of themselves, how other view them, and their doubts about the meaning and purpose of their lives (p. 17). Identity crises among Hmong youth has been connected to a rejection of their parents, their culture, and their values. In response to this crisis, Hmong youth turn to their peers, many non-Hmong, to develop a stable sense of self. For example, Rick and Forward (1992) found that young Hmong people who rated themselves with higher levels of acculturation also reported higher levels of perceived

intergenerational conflict. Likewise, Xiong and Huang (2011) found that anti-social behaviors, academic underachievement, and the lack of the mother's monitoring explained higher instances of delinquent behavior among Hmong American youth.

Another experience that post-positivists are interested in is the experience Hmong American youth have in U.S. schools. Early on, following the first wave of Hmong resettlement in the 1980s, researchers noted differences between Hmong refugees and other refugee groups in the US. Hirayama and Hirayama (1988) wrote, "Unlike the majority of Vietnamese who arrived about the same time as the Hmong but who have since left refugee status, many Hmong are still struggling" (p. 94). These struggles were linked to low formal education and high rates of illiteracy among Hmong refugees as well as the major adjustments from life in the mountains of Laos to the urban life in the US (Hirayama & Hiayama, 1988; Timm, Chiang, & Finn, 1998).

Post positivists have used a number of variables to measure academic success and acculturation, however, grades and test scores seem to be the most common measurement. In a study of Hmong students in St. Paul, Minnesota, McNall, et al. (1994) argued that Hmong students, on average, perform academically higher than non-Hmong students, spend more hours on homework, and receive more parental encouragement, namely that Hmong parents regularly communicate their educational aspirations and expectations to their children. The authors suggest that this is a result of Hmong youth who have adopted the dominant and mainstream belief that in order to be successful, they must do well academically. Adopting dominant cultural values becomes the prevailing narrative of Hmong American youth.

Other studies suggest that even though Hmong American youth value education and want to do well, their grades and test results demonstrate otherwise. In a study of Hmong students and their status as limited English proficient (LEP) students, researchers found that the more diverse a school is, the higher the achievement of Hmong LEP students. The researchers cited other studies that found that Hmong students tend to self-segregate based on linguistic or immigration status, and argued that the results of their study supported their claim that same race exposure negatively contributed to academic achievement (Lee & Madyun, 2008). These studies further a narrative of rejecting language and culture to be successful in the US.

Another theory that builds on Erickson's model but is specific to ethnic identity is Jean Phinney's model of ethnic identity development. Phinney's model (1989) focuses the construction of the knowledge, beliefs, and expectations about ethnic groups and what it means to be a member of that group; for young people, this construction can be influenced by family, community, and peers. Similar to Erikson's Identity versus Role Confusion stage, during Phinney's Ethnic Identity Search stage, adolescents begin to question their accepted views of ethnicity. Usually, this stage is initiated when young people experience a significant experience that creates heightened awareness of ethnicity such as discrimination. If a young person is able to work through this stage, then ethnic identity is achieved, resulting in a stable sense of self. Phinney and Ong (2007) suggest that even though ethnic identity achievement is the highest level of ethnic identity development, an individual may continually reexamine ethnic identity even after this status has been achieved. Although Phinney's ethnic identity model is much more fluid than other models of identity development and has been complimented for its

applicability to multiple ethnic groups (Roberts, et al., 1999), this model still conceptualizes identity as a linear and developmental process.

While these studies and theories do offer some insight into the experiences of Hmong American youth, they exclude other ways to understand Hmong American youth experiences. For instance, Erikson's focus on ego, and the studies that utilize Erikson and other conventional theories, do not give voice to an understanding of Hmong identity as it relates not only to others, but as Hmong youth identities relate to the personal and spiritual, natural and supernatural. Instead, these studies further a narrative that Hmong youth reject their culture in order develop a healthy identity. Similarly, Phinney's theory has been used to further a narrative of opposites; Hmong youth experiences are always drawn as a contrast to the white majority. Yi and Shorter-Gooden (1999) criticize developmental stage theories for not considering intersectionality; that is, how do other identities and experiences of oppression shape identity? For Hmong American youth, how do their experiences of marginalization situated in a long history of marginalization across Asia shape their overall identity? Overall, post positivist studies on Hmong American youth and identity development promote a narrative of difference—different from their parents and different from their peers. In contrast, Yi and Shorter-Gooden (1999) propose the use of a constructivist paradigm to reconceptualize ethnic identity. Constructivist narratives complicate the story of conflict among Hmong American youth, and create a space for alternative and unique experiences to be shared.

Constructivist Narratives and Identity Development

Constructivism guides studies with the assumption that individuals seek to understand the world in which they live, and to do so, individuals make and give meaning

to their experiences. Unlike post positivism, researchers attempt to capture these varied and complex meanings rather than reduce the meanings to variables. Additionally, researchers are aware of how their own backgrounds shape and influence their interpretations. Research studies guided by constructivism are qualitative in nature, drawing on in-depth interviews and ethnographic methods (Creswell, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Constructivist approaches explore the multiple identities and various experiences of Hmong American youth. Many of these studies reveal more complicated portrayals of Hmong American youth. Studies include health and well-being (Mulasi-Pokhriyal & Smith, 2010; Stang, Kong, Story, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007); ethnic identity (Nguyen & Brown, 2010); and sexual orientation and gender expression (Boulden, 2009; Ngo, 2012).

For example, in ethnographic interviews with Hmong students, their parents, and non-Hmong teachers, Thao (2003) found that students named a disconnect between their home lives and their schools lives, namely because of the lack of interaction between their parents and their teachers. One participant shared that by not interacting, parents and teachers could not work together to plan a good future for the participant. In another study, Bakken and Brown (2010) interviewed Hmong youth about the strategies youth used to manage information they share about their experiences with their peers. The researchers found that Hmong youth, on average, are more secretive in their communication with their parents. However, several Hmong youth explained that because of the major cultural differences between Hmong culture and American culture, it was easier to not tell parents than it was to help them understand. Parents in the study

acknowledged the cultural differences but also shared that while their children did not always tell the truth, many had a positive relationship with children, who often served as cultural and linguistic interpreters.

Studies on Hmong American youth guided by constructivism utilize different theories of understanding identity development. One theory is symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interaction theory assumes that the development of the individual is a social process, resulting in individuals assigning meanings, or symbols, to things (Yelaja, 1974). Symbolic interaction theory is founded on the idea that people interact with objects and other individuals in their social surroundings based on the symbols they attribute to those interactions. As a result, individuals develop a sense of self in relation to those symbols, changing their interactions and adapting to their social surroundings (Jaccard & Jacoby, 2010; Payne, 2005). In one study, Nguyen and Brown (2010) found that Hmong youth ascribed meanings to language and clothing. These meanings were used by youth to create categories to define their Hmong peers and to create social and peer groups. In this study, Hmong youth tended to gravitate to those who spoke Hmong and had a shared immigration history. They found comfort in those who sounded like them. On the other hand, in a study of young gay Hmong men, Boulden (2009) argued that protective factors such as strong ties to family, community, and spirituality and religion were often the same places that gay youth experienced discrimination, marginalization, and violence. These participants found themselves having to compartmentalize their identities as Hmong, American, and gay, depending on their surroundings. Sometimes they emphasized one identity over another, and other times they denied their identities.

Constructivist approaches explore meanings and explanations that are not possible with post positivist studies. These studies allow for more varied narratives and experiences pertaining to concepts of ethnic identity (Nguyen & Brown, 2010), sexual orientation and gender expression (Boulden, 2009; Ngo, 2012), and relationships between Hmong youth and their parents (Bakken & Brown, 2010; Thao, 2003). While constructivism sheds light on the complexities of Hmong American youth experiences and allows for Hmong youth to draw from other ways of knowing, Smith (2012) argues that constructivism still operates in a Western research framework. That is, indigenous knowledge and cultural protocols are only necessary for the researcher to know so as to not make mistakes and offend the community. These other ways of knowing are not viewed as valid sources of knowledge and information, but rather as merely cultural background information about the community. As such, critical narratives challenge this notion and start with the assumption that everything is political.

Critical Narratives and Identity Development

Critical studies, or as Creswell (2014) describes them, transformative studies, suggests that research needs to be intertwined with politics. Researchers pay attention to the ways that policies and social structures impact individuals and groups, and studies are often ways to give voice to marginalized or oppressed individuals and groups. Researchers also engage participants in the development of research questions, data collection, and or data analysis. These studies are often participatory and political (Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2009).

Of the three research paradigms discussed in this paper, there are only a handful of studies on Hmong American youth that use a critical research approach. In these

critical studies, researchers challenge many persistent narratives of difference. In a study on marriage among young Hmong people and high school dropout rates, Ngo (2002) challenged the dominant notion that young Hmong women were forced into marriages and forced to drop out. Instead, she found that young Hmong girls viewed dropping out of school and marrying young as an expression of opposition to school and family. Ngo (2002) found that several Hmong girls in this study *chose* to marry young because they wanted to leave challenging school environments and/or escape stressful home environments. Similarly, Lee's (2002) study on Hmong American youth and self-segregation found that among Hmong American youth, the process of othering themselves was a result of the hidden and unhidden messages and interactions at school with non-Hmong students and non-Hmong staff. These findings challenge conventional studies that claim that minority students, and in this case Hmong students, choose to self-segregate or exclude themselves in school. Rather this study points to the unwelcoming school environments experienced by Hmong American students as reasons why Hmong American students do not want to be in school.

Using critical race theory (CRT), DePouw (2012) provides an analysis of Hmong American student experiences, and critiques earlier research on Hmong youth. She argues that little research has examined how Hmong American youth experience racism, and instead, focus on culture clash, in which many researchers blame Hmong culture rather than policies that uphold White Supremacy. CRT attempts to provide a framework for understanding the role of race and racism in society, and intersects the issues of race and racism, law, and power, which when combined, Bell (1980) argues, sustains White Supremacy. White Supremacy relates to the power maintained by political, economic,

and cultural systems that claim white experiences as the normative standard. CRT is useful in understanding Hmong American youth experiences as it relates to systemic oppression. The systems that maintain White Supremacy pressure Hmong refugees and immigrants to assimilate as a way to “whiten” themselves (i.e., speak English, adopt American values, excel as a model minority) in order to avoid racism (Nicassio, 1985). CRT relates to identity development because of its focus on the development of critical and political consciousness of people of color (Cerezo, McWhirter, Peña, Valdez, & Bustos, 2013).

Critical race theorists agree that the following themes are pertinent in critical race theory analyses. The first is interest convergence. Bell (1980) argued that whites will support racial equity only if it converges with white interests. He found that advancements for African Americans coincided with better economic conditions of whites. He argued that with all of the systems that reinforce White Supremacy, whites have few incentives to work towards racial equity. For example, DePouw (2012) utilizes the concept of interest convergence to describe how policies and practices at her university impact Hmong American students. DePouw explains that university officials will encourage and promote Hmong cultural celebrations on campus when it is in their interest, but will reject proposals to provide Hmong-related course offerings because it does not converge with their interests. DePouw concludes that researchers often blame intergenerational conflict, educational disparities, low self-esteem, and other inequities on the *significant* differences between American culture and Hmong culture. The difference between Hmong culture and American culture is so great that Hmong culture is rendered as the culprit or the source of conflict. She argues that by using CRT to guide her

research, she is able to shift the focus on culture as deficit to identify the ways racism impact Hmong American youth and their experiences and identities.

Another theme is that of intersectionality. CRT recognizes that racism does not operate in isolation, and often intersects with other forms of oppression and injustice. Intersectionality also rejects the Black/White binary that often dominates the conversation on race and guides policy-making, and pits marginalized groups against other marginalized groups (i.e., whites labeling Asian Americans as model minorities) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Boulden (2009) interviewed young gay Hmong men, who spoke about their experiences. One participant described reactions from some older Hmong adults, who considered being gay or lesbian as having a White disease. Another participant shared experiences of racism at gay pride celebrations. This study presents narratives that speak to the intersectionality of Hmong American youth identities and the experiences they have as bicultural, as LGBT, and as Hmong.

Of the three research approaches, critical approaches have been used the least among research with Hmong American youth. There remains potential in how critical approaches can explore Hmong American youth narratives. However, the current critical studies have inadvertently left out Hmong American youth. That is, while these studies work to challenge the dominant narratives, the current ways in which Hmong American youth narratives have been used, and perhaps incorrectly, in these studies only move forward the researchers' agenda. There continues to be a line drawn, making distinctions between researcher and researched, observer and observed. These studies have lacked an authenticity congruent with Hmong values such as relationship/kinship, reciprocity, and

cultural and linguistic preservation.

Narratives of Young Hmong American Women

The literature focused on young Hmong American women experiences differs very little from the literature on Hmong American youth. While research topics on Hmong American women are varied and explore different aspects of their lives, research and literature continue to perpetuate narratives of challenges and difficulty.

In an early study on the adjustment of Southeast Asian refugee youth and impact on education, Rumbaut and Ima (1998) found that “Hmong boys, however, are noticeably outperforming Hmong girls...reflecting the heavy subordination and devaluation of girls in Hmong families and the expectation that girls must attend to house chores first before doing their homework and attending to their schooling” (p. 76-78). Similarly, Teranishi (2004) writes about the challenges Hmong culture presents when young Hmong women make choices about college. Teranishi (2004) describes early teenage marriage as “a cultural expectation practiced for many generations in the Hmong culture” (p. 261). In these studies, Hmong women are portrayed as subservient and victims of Hmong culture and its patriarchal system.

In other studies, they are troubled teens, escaping their families by running away, joining gangs, or marrying early (Ngo, 2002; Xiong & Huang, 2011). For example, the purpose of Xiong and Huang’s (2011) study was to address a gap in the literature on Hmong youth delinquent behavior. The authors claim, “Asian Americans have been viewed as a ‘model’ minority by mainstream Americans for decades. Contrary to the model minority stereotype, however, Asian youth, especially Hmong and other Southeast Asians, are increasingly involved in crimes and delinquent activities” (p. 1). They found

that home life was often a factor in predicting delinquent behavior, noting that among their Hmong female participants, lack of mother supervision and monitoring accounted for 19% of young Hmong women's delinquent youth behavior. Interestingly, Ngo (2002) identified home and family life as a factor as well, however, for a different reason. Ngo (2002) described early marriage as an expression of opposition; that is, young Hmong women, fed up with their parents' expectations and wanting to escape their home life, leave their families by marrying early. While both Ngo (2002) and Xiong and Huang (2011) attempt to complicate the narratives on Hmong youth, the studies do not provide enough cultural nuance to contextualize behaviors such as joining gangs and marrying early.

Lastly, and most recently, narratives have focused on young Hmong women who are upsetting Hmong cultural practices and increasingly disengaged from Hmong culture. Hmong resettlement in the United States has been attributed to this phenomenon; the notion of gender equality in the United States has empowered young Hmong women with a new sense of freedom and independence (Donnelly, 1994). According to Lee (1997), Hmong women believe there is a "link between education and freedom from male domination" (p. 813). With this belief, Hmong women have attained post-secondary education degrees at higher rates than Hmong men (Xiong, 2012). However, the implications of education success can have different meanings. Donnelly (1994) writes, "Educated girls quickly fell into disfavor as wives, since traditional parents wanted obedient daughters-in-law and urged their sons to choose compliant girls, often fitting their own preferences" (p. 139). Again, these narratives fail to speak to the complexity of lived experiences.

These narratives reinforce Tuck's (2009) description of damage-centered research. Tuck (2009) writes,

In damaged-centered research, one of the major activities is to document pain or loss in an individual, community, or tribe...It looks to historical exploitation, domination, and colonization to explain contemporary brokenness, such as poverty, poor health, and low literacy. Common sense tells us this is a good thing, but the danger in damaged-centered research is that it is a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community (p. 413).

While many of these narratives aim to give voice to Hmong American women, they do so without the cultural nuance necessary to convey the complicated space that Hmong American women occupy. Instead of presenting these narratives along a spectrum of Hmong American women experiences, oftentimes research and literature presents these stories as singular, competing experiences that create a binary experience.

Summary of Literature Review

Since their arrival 40 years ago, the studies on Hmong American youth have furthered narratives of difference, conflict, and problems. These narratives then reinforce studies that continue to examine acculturation and adjustment, intergenerational conflict, and academic struggles. While more recent studies have challenged past research and moved toward possibilities, current research approaches restrict the development and exploration of new narratives. These conventional research approaches tend to advance researchers' agendas rather than invite Hmong American youth to initiate and shape the research study and questions, or co-investigate with the researcher. As a result, new research approaches are needed to explore new narratives that offer more nuanced portrayals of Hmong American youth experiences and identity development.

Similarly, the narratives of young Hmong American women also lack nuance.

The purpose of this study is to co-create narratives of young Hmong American women and seeks to answer these questions in particular:

1. What stories do young Hmong American women tell and how do they tell their stories?
2. How are the ways in which these stories are told connected to Hmong oral traditions?
3. How do these stories disrupt damage-centered and dominant narratives of Hmong American women?

New approaches to research with young Hmong American women centers indigenous ways of knowing that align more closely to Hmong youth and their historical, political, cultural, and spiritual identities, and draws attention to the complicated experiences of Hmong youth.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The majority of studies about Hmong American youth are written by non-Hmong scholars (Moua & Vang, 2015), and oftentimes, these studies use conventional research paradigms and methodologies that are incongruent with the cultural, linguistic, political, and historical identities of Hmong American youth. The result are narratives of Hmong American youth who are broken and disengaged; Tuck (2009) describes these kinds of studies as damage-centered research, in which researchers focus on the problems and deficits, resulting in recommendations for more research focused on the same problems and deficits. These damage-centered narratives of Hmong American youth are never ending, never moving forward, and never continuing the story toward the possibilities, desires, and imagination of Hmong American youth.

Intersection of Portraiture and Indigenous Methodology

The methodology that guides this study draws from the intersection of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) and indigenous methodologies (Chilisa, 2012; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2012). Portraiture is a qualitative research methodology that makes use of in-depth interviews and observations, and closely resembles ethnographic and phenomenological studies. It was developed by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, who described portraiture as “the systematic and careful description of good ethnography with the evocative resonance of fine literature” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 4). The process of co-creating narratives calls for a methodology like portraiture because of the nature of the study—creating stories with storytellers, women who express their lives through art, and the explicit role of the researcher in the process of co-creation. The role of the researcher is also important as it relates to indigenous methodologies. Indigenous

research methodologies help to center Hmong knowledge and Hmong voices. Chilisa (2012) writes that centering this kind of knowledge results in methodologies in which the researcher plays an active role in challenging conventional research processes, including its assumptions, questions, protocols, and interpretations.

Indigenous methodologies also make space and use of histories, politics, identities, relationships, and experiences not only as sources of knowledge but also as ways to create knowledge. For example, Hmong ways of establishing kinship relies on knowing one's clan history as well as knowing the Laotian province or village of one's ancestors. For the inquirer, knowing another's province also establishes social and economic class; for example, those from Sam Neua province were generally regarded as poor and uneducated while those in Long Cheng were generally more well off because of their access to the CIA military base and CIA resources.

Knowing province then creates knowledge related to the history of the CIA in Southeast Asia and the social and economic experiences of hill tribe people, and complicates notions of a monolithic ethnic group and the relationships that Hmong have with other Hmong. Similarly, in the US, and particularly Minnesota, Hmong American youth tie their identities and experiences to the neighborhoods such as the North Side in Minneapolis and Frogtown or East Side in St. Paul, or low-income apartment complexes such as the Mount Airy Homes and McDonough Homes. While some research approaches would suggest concealing these locations to protect confidentiality, and at times that may be true, an indigenous research approach might make a case to name these places because of the participants' relationships to these places. As Smith (2012) argues, indigenous methodologies draw on the cultural protocols, values, and behaviors of

Hmong American youth, resulting in a research process that is both familiar and familial, and congruent and relevant to Hmong American youth lives. Lastly, choosing indigenous methodologies as a framework offers some preliminary insights into the development of a Hmong research paradigm as it relates to Hmong ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology.

At this intersection of portraiture and indigenous methodologies, I discovered what Tuck (2009) describes as a desire-based framework. In a desire-based framework, there is an epistemological shift from damage, deficit, and pathology to “understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives” (p. 416). Similarly, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) call for *seeking goodness* in portraiture studies. For Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), seeking goodness is the search for “complex and competing truths that combine to shape an authentic narrative” (p.146). Tuck (2009) and Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) are careful to not describe these approaches as mere opposites of conventional research approaches or as to only ask questions that portray idealized narratives. Instead these approaches are purposeful in co-constructing narratives that counter, complicate, and interrogate dominant narratives. Moreover, a desire-based framework calls attention to the historical, institutional, and political ways individuals and communities have been marginalized, oppressed, and colonized through conventional research and dominant narratives.

Smith (2012) states that indigenous methodologies include cultural protocols, values, and behaviors as part of the methodology. For this study, I centered two sources of Hmong knowledge: Hmong oral tradition and a cultural protocol Hmong shamans use when seeking spiritual healing.

Hmong Oral Traditions

Hmong oral traditions range from the public sharing of songs and poetry, to bedtime stories told in the privacy of homes, to sacred chants recited during rituals and ceremonies. While Hmong oral traditions are shared in various spaces, they serve a shared purpose—to teach the listeners (Thao, 2006). For example, one of the most sacred songs recited during a traditional Hmong funeral is *taw kev* (showing the way), in which the individual reciting the song instructs the spirit of the deceased how to return to the ancestral land to then be reincarnated. This song can only be recited during a funeral; the individual reciting the song sits next to the body, singing close to the body's ear. It is believed that the singer's spirit even takes the journey with the deceased; right before they reach the ancestral land, the singer tells the spirit, "This is only as far as I can go with you." While the song is filled with instructions, and the instructions are specifically for the spirit of the deceased, those around the singer can also hear the words. In this sacred song are the Hmong stories of creation and death; the names of the parents of the deceased; and the villages, provinces, states, and countries the deceased used to live in (Her, 2005). For listeners, this sacred song tells stories, lessons, life histories, and memories.

In another example, *kvv txhiaj* (folk songs) also teach listeners. For Hmong, publicly expressing emotion is frowned upon; *kvv txhiaj* allows singers to express any emotion publicly and spontaneously. Listeners familiar with *kvv txhiaj* can also tell which province the performer is from by how the performer begins the *kvv txhiaj*. While there are general guidelines for where *kvv txhiaj* can be performed (at funerals, celebrations, etc), most *kvv txhiaj* are created and improvised on the spot (Thao, 2006).

Extensive and elaborate metaphors allow performers to share their experiences and make suggestions about participants in their stories without explicitly naming those individuals and their emotions, and embarrassing themselves and others.

Finally, *dab neeg* (folk stories) provide lessons for its listeners. Similarly, other communities have documented how folk stories provide teachings and lessons (Thao, 2006). Some of the most common Hmong folk stories are orphan stories. Many of these stories follow similar patterns—someone is orphaned, the orphan lives with a terrible relative, something happens to allow the orphan the opportunity to be the hero/heroine, and in the end, the hero/heroine is celebrated. These stories teach lessons on how to treat others and how to overcome hardships; teach values such as humility and respect; and create narratives of perseverance and resiliency.

Oral Traditions as Sources of Knowledge

As much as oral traditions transmit knowledge such as life lessons and teachings, they are also sources of knowledge and sources for knowledge formation. Smith (2012) suggests that oral traditions serve to connect the past with the future. These connections can provide and support historical accounts as well as help in the reconstruction of the past.

Thao (2006) describes Hmong oral traditions as incredibly complex, providing both moral lessons and answers to the past. He writes, “The Elders [in this study] commented that poems, fables, riddles, folktales, legends and myths written in books have only the Americans’ values and perspectives. When Mong children learn from books, they get only the American culture and language” (Thao, 2006, p. 57). For Hmong American youth, Hmong oral traditions also connect them to their culture and language.

Cultural Protocol

For this study, I followed the protocol a Hmong shamans use when seeking answers for spiritual healing. Traditional healers in Hmong communities are individuals who have specialized, secret, and/or sacred knowledge related to health, well-being, and healing. There are individuals who are knowledgeable about plants, herbs, and other medicines; individuals who know sacred rituals and chants or engage in divination; and there are shamans, who provide healing by establishing balance in the human and spirit worlds.

Traditional Hmong healers share their knowledge through oral traditions such as songs, stories, and chants (Thao, 2006). This is a protocol I am familiar with because my mother is a shaman. The protocol used in this study is based on her personal experience as a shaman, and I have adapted the protocol in some ways to reflect my research process (see Appendix A). This protocol not only provided the roadmap for this study, but also centered Hmong values and behaviors that helped me as I navigated and negotiated myself within the Hmong community as a researcher.

Researcher Role and Reflexivity

As a Hmong American researcher, there are certainly advantages to knowing the language, the culture, and the community. However, in order for the participants' stories to possess their own truths and realities, I knew that it was important to be in constant dialogue about how my role as a researcher with my own biases impacted the research process and the participants. In qualitative research, reflexivity refers to a constant dialogue in which the researcher reflects on the reciprocal influences brought to a study by the researcher as well as the participants. In indigenous methodologies, Chilisa (2012)

states that the very role of the researcher is interrogated, writing with regard to reflexivity: “The postcolonial indigenous research paradigm requires the researcher to critically reflect on self as knower, redeemer, colonizer, and transformative healer” (p. 174). My own process of reflexivity included journal writing which helped me to reflect on my thoughts and feelings throughout the research process. It was important for me to separate my personal knowing through my lived experiences from my knowing through my professional and academic career.

I journaled following each interview and especially during the data analysis phase. My data-analysis reflections were focused on making connections between interviews, the current literature, and implications of those connections. Following each interview, my reflections were mostly process-oriented; that is, how did the interviewee respond to the interview questions and which questions seemed difficult for the interviewee to answer. Portions of these reflections are presented at the beginning of each narrative portrait in Chapter 4.

At times, I wrote about the stories the young women shared with me, especially the more difficult stories these young women witnessed and/or experienced related to violence, shame, and hurt. There is one particular story of violence which continues to be difficult for me to understand. Following my set interview questions, I ask interviewees if there is anything else that the interviewee would like to share with me. One interviewee asked to share a story with me which I find myself still remembering and continuing to think about its meanings, but most important, why did the interviewee choose to share this story with me? In this situation, reflecting on myself as the knower, redeemer, colonizer, and transformative healer requires reflection beyond the duration of the study.

Table 1.
Timeline of Research Activities

Time	Research Activities
Summer 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview Ia Vang Thao to finalize Hmong shaman protocol
Fall 2016 through Spring 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruit participants • Conduct interviews • Journal following interviews • Transcribe interviews and begin preliminary data analysis during transcription • Follow up with interviewees when necessary
Summer 2017 through Spring 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transcribe all interviews • Analyze data and journal during data analysis

Recruitment

I interviewed eight young Hmong women who are engaged in some form of storytelling in the Twin Cities. In order to interview these individuals, purposive sampling was used. Purposive sampling allows researchers to target participants who are knowledgeable about the topic of the study and can offer specific insight into the research questions (Chilisa, 2012; Patton, 2002). I recruited by posting messages on social media, contacting Hmong arts organizations based in the Twin Cities, and emailed personal and professional colleagues.

While purposive sampling limited the overall pool of potential participants, some of the language used in my recruitment materials also caused misunderstanding. For example, one criterion for participation was this notion of *hluas*. In English, this simply translates to “young.” However, *hluas* in Hmong has many meanings, including one’s

biological age, one's own sense of youngness, being an unmarried individual despite one's biological age, and as compared to older individuals or elders. Being a *hluas* in the Hmong community is quite fluid. However, in translation, those who read the word *hluas* or young as simply biological age did not respond to this study. In fact, I had a number of inquiries, asking for an age range for *hluas*.

Similarly, many read *engaged in storytelling* as those who are professional storytellers or those who perform in front of a captivated audience. During two inquiries about this study, I explained to the interested participants that this did not mean they had to perform on a stage, but rather engaged in a form of storytelling that expresses their lived experiences.

Data Collection

Portraiture calls for in-depth interviews and observations. I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight young Hmong American women. As a result of moving out of Minnesota during data collection, two of the interviews were conducted in-person while the majority were conducted by phone. In addition to interviews, I also viewed and listened to the storytellers' stories. For example, I listened to a participant's podcasts, viewed the photos from a fashion show of another participant, and watched one participant's live performance.

Prior to the healing ceremony, the shaman must ask a set of questions that help to determine the cause of the illness. Similarly, the researcher has a set of research questions that guide the study. My research questions are:

1. What stories do young Hmong American women tell and how do they tell their stories?

2. How are the ways in which these stories are told connected to Hmong oral traditions?
3. How do these stories disrupt damage-centered and dominant narratives of Hmong American women?

The process of interviewing individuals who, by practice, by nature, and by skill are storytellers is perhaps one of the most interesting experiences I have had. In the traditional protocol for shamans, the seeker is intimately aware of his or her body, symptoms, and lack of spiritual wholeness. The shaman asks questions or make comments to fill in the blanks or move the conversation along—when did this start, how do you know this is different, do you think it could be this and not that? The result of this exchange is the co-creation of a story of illness. Similarly, as I engaged with each of the storytellers, we began to co-create a story of her lived experience as young Hmong American woman. She is not only intimately aware of her experiences, but she is aware of how stories are created. That is, when I asked her to tell me about herself, she starts at some beginning—where she is born, when her parents arrived in the United States, her clan, or her birth order. She has in mind a beginning, a middle, and an end; she has told her story before. Like the shaman, my questions and comments are meant to fill in the blanks or move the conversation along, however, it is in these exchanges that the telling and re-telling of her story allows her to make new discoveries, insights, and awareness. This is the co-creation of a new story.

Data Analysis

After the shaman discovers the reasons for illness and gathers and prepares the necessary tools, items, and materials for ceremony, the shaman enters into a trance to

heal the sick individual. Throughout ceremony, the shaman is assisted by individuals, both spiritual and human. The shaman's qhua neeb, or spirit helpers, assist the shaman in navigating the spirit world. In addition to qhua neeb, the shaman also has an assistant—tus saib neeb, the one who watches the shaman. As the shaman prepares to enter the spirit world, the assistant loudly bangs on the gong, signaling to the spirit world that a shaman is coming into the spirit world. The assistant continues to bang on the gong throughout the ceremony, only stopping to steady the shaman when the shaman stands to negotiate with a spirit, or to prepare and burn incense and joss paper as the shaman navigates the many levels of the spirit world.

In this study, I draw on a number of strategies and tools to analyze the data. Like qhua neeb and the shaman's assistant, my assistance came from my formal education as a researcher and my experience as a Hmong American woman. There were several times throughout data analysis that these two experiences—my education and my lived experience—were incongruent. Internally, I argued about conventional data analysis approaches and what data analysis might look like utilizing indigenous methodologies. I found answers from Shawn Wilson (2012), who writes, “So if we try to use an Indigenous paradigm in analyzing the results of our research, the importance of relationship must continue to take precedence” (p. 118). Wilson argues that western perspectives train researchers during data analysis to break down data into “manageable portions” to examine and then build some logical order out of those manageable portions, “hoping to discover any rules or laws that may be applied to the whole” (p. 119). Data analysis using an Indigenous methodology, however, is a process of continuing to build relationships. Wilson (2012) recalls a conversation he had with colleagues, writing:

Me: ...if you are breaking things down into their smallest pieces, you are destroying all of the relationships around it. So an Indigenous style of analysis has to look at all those relations as a whole... You have to use an intuitive logic, where you are looking at the whole thing at once and coming up with your answers through analysis that way. So it's mostly innate within us.

Lewis: So we have deep information, and then in dreams and in dream work it communicates with our conscious; our subconscious communicates with our conscious. It uses symbols, but those symbols are usually personal (p. 119).

While I drew on the personal, I also drew from my formal education as a researcher; this process mimics an individual who is bicultural or bilingual, negotiating and navigating with ease and purpose. The following describes how I analyzed data, attempting to keep existing relationships intact and build new relationships.

The Relationship between Transcripts and Field Notes

While each interview was recorded, I also wrote notes during the interview.

Following each interview, I listened to the recording and made additional notes.

Following this, I transcribed each interview. The multiple rounds of listening to the interview, reading the transcript, and reviewing my notes allowed me to keep intact the relationships between the interviewee, the transcript, and my notes. On its own, my notes mean very little; likewise, without my notes, the transcript itself seems isolated. For example, in one of my field notes, I put a question mark next to something the participant shared with me and drew an arrow to another idea. I remember that while listening to the participant, I was interested in a particular connection, and this question mark and arrow was a reminder to ask a follow up question. In the recording, I heard myself ask the follow up question; in my field notes, I could see what word the participant used to trigger the follow up question, resulting in a new line of questioning, and ultimately, a more nuanced portrait.

Eight Portraits

During data analysis, I listened to each recording, read each transcript, and reviewed my field notes for each interview altogether. This was done in order to analyze “the whole thing at once” (Wilson, 2012, p. 119) rather than break up the existing relationships. As a result, each interview is presented in a first-person narrative as its own portrait in the findings section.

The data analysis for these eight portraits was an intuitive process. Meyer (2004) writes of her own process of data analysis, “The ‘analysis’ of data was actually something that I felt was done ‘through’ me. Interviews became metaphoric rivers that shape the rock of my own character. Thinking about what was shared during the interviews changed my timing or step, the things I focused on, and the way I viewed the world...I was unable to sleep without interviews playing further into larger ideas inside my being” (p. 135). I drew on my experience as a Hmong person and a Hmong woman; I remembered my experience as a researcher, interviewing these young women; I journaled whenever a thought passed through me; and I asked Hmong women in my life about connections I was making, confirming and strengthening arguments, and debating and withdrawing from ideas.

In addition, I paid attention to four dimensions that Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) highlight in constructing the aesthetic whole—the portrait. These four dimensions are: *conception*, or the overarching story; *structure*, or the themes that provide the organization and stability for the narrative; *form*, or the ways in which the research captures and expresses the emotion, nuance, and texture of the themes; and lastly, *coherence*, or the narrative unity often expressed by a beginning, middle, and end. In this

study, I expand (and challenge) Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis' notion of coherence. Instead, the coherence of these stories is expressed in the way traditional Hmong stories are told and retold—there is a beginning and an end, and the middle consists of a nonlinear trajectory (Thao, 2006), illustrating the interplay and relationship between storyteller, audience, memory, and context.

Shared Experiences

In addition to presenting eight portraits, it was also important for me to explore common threads and shared experiences. For this analysis, I followed a more conventional method of thematic analysis, which involves a “process of grouping concepts that seem to pertain to the same phenomena” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 65). This involved line-by-line analysis of the interview transcripts, developing levels of codes from general concepts and to themes. In addition to the interviews, I drew information from my field notes and the observation and review of storytelling performances by interviewees. Connor (2008) argues that in conventional qualitative research, the process of triangulation, using data from multiple sources, is a form of cross-validation. Triangulating different sources is an attempt to identify a *truth*, whereas, crystallization is a process that expands what we consider is knowledge and how we come to know what we know. Richardson (2000) writes, “Crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic. Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know. Ingeniously, we know there is always more to know” (p. 934). Crystallization allows me to present the contradictions and possibilities of lived experiences.

Key Principles of Research

Wilson (2008) suggests three key principles to guide indigenous research agendas: respect, reciprocity, and relationality. These guiding principles are connected to Indigenous values and practices that privileges relationships in the research process.

Respect

Wilson (2012) writes that respect is more than simply saying thank you to research participants. Indigenous methodologies calls on researchers to engage in deep listening and reflective consideration, and to have an awareness of the responsibility with what is shared, heard, and learned.

Hmong children are taught from an early age to defer to their elder, whether that elder is an elderly person in the room or in terms of age, whoever is older than you. I am older than the storytellers involved in this study, and during the study, they often deferred to me. For example, in asking what does it mean to be a *hluas* in the Hmong community, after providing their own response, some asked me, “But what do you think?” This may have just been curiosity, however, the use of the word *but* often implies contrast. As I conducted the interviews, I was intentional about expressing not only my gratitude for their participation, but my belief that I had much to learn from them—that in this instance, they were my teachers and elders, and I respected them. For example, when interviewees asked me what I thought, I often replied, “I have thought it about this, but I also want to learn from others.” I encouraged them to keep thinking through some of the questions, reminding them there was no right or wrong answer. I remained silent as they thought about questions and how to phrase their responses. I provided personal stories when they appeared stuck or responded “I don’t know” to my questions; my personal stories often triggered interviewees to share their personal stories.

Reciprocity

In Hmong, inserting the word *sib* in front of (almost) any verb automatically changes that verb into a reciprocal action. *Dhia* (to jump) turns into *sib dhia* (to jump together). *Hlub* (to love) turns into *sib hlub* (to love each other). *Paub* (to know) turns into *sib paub* (to know each other). Because of this, there is no direct translation for reciprocity, however, there is one term that exemplifies the exchange that reciprocity invokes. *Sib pauv zog* literally translates as “to exchange strength.” *Sib pauv zog* traditionally happened before the farming season when families needed the help of other families to clear the fields or during the harvest season when families needed other families to help. During this time, families exchanged strength; one day they all worked on one family’s farm, and the next day, everyone worked on another family’s farm. Today, *sib pauv zog* is used to describe the relationships between friends, families and clans, not only on the farms but during ceremonies, celebrations, and gatherings. Similarly, in indigenous methodologies, reciprocity involves not only an exchange, but the understanding that there is value in the relationship between the researcher and the participants. More specifically, Thao (2006) states that in Hmong storytelling, the storyteller and listeners co-create the stories together; the interchange between storyteller and listeners is an exchange of ideas, memories, reactions and responses, and reflects a level of familiarity.

As the listener in this study, I engaged in deep listening, asking questions and sharing my own stories. The exchange of ideas and memories between me and the storytellers resulted in a portrait of young Hmong American women with complex lives, filled with challenges and joys, and shame and beauty.

Relationality

Kovach (2010) suggests that while certain conventional research paradigms argue that relationality can jeopardize the integrity of a study, many Indigenous scholars would argue that relationality is central to indigenous methodologies. Chilisa (2012) adds that in indigenous methodologies, researchers “will seek to go beyond Euro-Western research issues of power that mainly focus on the “I the researcher” and the “you the researched” to more involving I/We relationships” (p. 194). Wilson (2012) writes that the researcher takes on the role of storyteller, claiming that in storytelling, the storyteller has a relationship with the listener.

However, not only does relationality include human relationships, but also calls attention to the relationships that the researcher has to the land, animals, and plants, and the spiritual world. My favorite storyteller is my grandmother, who passed away several years ago. In telling stories about her or retelling the stories she told me, I am invoking her spirit. Several of the storytellers in this study invoked other spirits—individuals who told them folktales or stories of life in the refugee camps or life in Laos. Understanding the importance of relationality in Hmong communities allows researchers the ability to navigate Hmong communities, both in the spirit world and in the human world, more respectfully.

During the recruitment for this study, I asked friends and professional colleagues to share my recruitment materials with their networks. All of the storytellers in this study came from my personal contacts, and this mutuality and relationality motivated potential participants to contact me, helped and accelerated building rapport, and created a sense of familiarity.

A Final Note about Methodology

This study touches on a number of methodologies, including phenomenology (Vagle, 2018) and narrative inquiry (Polkinghorne, 1988), and largely aligns with qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), however, I have chosen to focus solely on indigenous methodologies and portraiture for the overall research design. This focus allows me to center Hmong ways of inquiry and present the “results” in a manner which aligns more closely with my experience as a storyteller.

Additionally, this study could certainly expand beyond young Hmong American women narratives, however, because of the restricted time frame, the study highlights the experiences of only this particular group. With a focus on young Hmong American women, I am able to bring my personal experiences and professional practice to the data analysis and the discussion of how this study shapes professional social work practice.

Chapter 4: Narrative Portraits

I present the results from the data analysis in two parts. Part One includes eight portraits. Each portrait is divided into four sections, representing the different dimensions explored in this study: oral tradition, gender, conceptualizations of youth, and sense of place. Each portrait is unique in context, relationship, comfort, and interpretation of the research questions, including the storyteller's relationship with me. Some of the participants are bilingual, and I have tried my best to translate and interpret Hmong to English.

In addition, I have attempted to remove myself from these portraits, presenting only the words, stories, and lived experiences of the participants. So, the reader will not see my questions or probes, but rather a stand-alone portrait, open to musings as one might engage in at an art gallery or an open mic.

Part Two of this chapter is presented as a composite sketch of shared experiences—an unfinished rendering of what it means to be a young Hmong American woman. I offer major themes from the participants' responses to questions about oral tradition, gender, conceptualizations of youth, and sense of place.

At times, there is agreement among participants and their perceptions of young Hmong American women's experiences. At other times, there is divergence, in which participants contradict themselves, in which participants have competing ideas. In this chapter, I highlight moments of common and shared experiences among the participants, and also draw attention to new learning and insight gained from the participants. These shared experiences provide the foundations for the answers to this study's research questions.

Part I: Eight Portraits

C

C's responses to my questions come easily, and she needs very little clarification throughout the interview. C tells me at one point during the interview, "As you can see, I've thought a lot about this." And she's right, I can tell. She is engaged in the interview process in a manner unlike my other interviews. C directs the interview, returning to previous questions and making connections between her responses. More than anything, there is an urgency to her storytelling—as if she's been waiting and wanting to tell her story for a long time. I hear an excitement in her voice; she often speaks quickly, almost out of breath as if she's afraid I will cut her off before she is able to say everything she wanted to share. She tells me she was hushed a lot as a child, and perhaps this is what it looks like as an adult—wanting to share, rushing through your story, worrying no one will hear it.

C journals, detailing her life experiences and thoughts in private journals and online blogs. Writing has become a way for her to express her emotions related to a challenging upbringing, particularly as a daughter of a single parent in a community that values and builds its rituals and practices on heterosexual, two-parent, mono-ethnic households. Most recently, she has begun collecting, memorizing, and retelling Hmong ghost stories.

Oral tradition: Journaling, Dab Neeg, and Niam Tais

I would write it down

A couple years back, I looked at my journals. I wanted to know what I wrote when I was 10. And I realized I was a very angry child. Really felt like I wasn't loved,

really felt like I wasn't heard, really felt like I wasn't important. But that's what I journaled. I journaled as a way to express that. Because often times when I was angry, I would lock myself in the room. My only way of expressing it, instead of getting violent, I would write it down. The first time I journaled I was in elementary school. And I continued to journal up until my first year in high school. That was when I started to blog.

I think they're very boring

When I was starting college, I realized the power in retelling ghost stories. So, I would listen to stories on YouTube or Facebook, and I would go to my younger cousins' house and I would—really, I think I was supposed to go and cook—but I would push all the kids into the basement and piav dab neeg rau lawv (*tell stories to them*). So that's what I've been doing recently is collecting ghost stories.

It might just be a personal thing. I like the feeling or adrenaline. And so I find adrenaline in ghost stories, but I also find it in going on a random hike or taking a detour I wasn't intending on taking. So, there are moments like that that I'm not really sure what's going on. I'm kind of afraid. So, I really enjoy that because I was very much a Type A person growing up. I had to know everything, and everything had to be in order for me not to panic or have anxiety all the time. So, being able to get away from such an organized way of doing things, like a bullet-list way of doing things, like going with the flow, like not really knowing what's going to happen around the corner. That was a new feeling for me, so it just happens to be ghost stories. And I think the mystical idea of spirits and ancestors, things you just can't see, it has an influence in my life. And hearing ghost stories and experiencing it myself, it makes it a real part of my life. Whereas, ogres

and clowns, the boogeyman, things like that don't scare me. I think they're very boring. But koj xav txog poj ntxoog, plaub hau ntev ntev sawv ntawm corner (*if you imagine a ghost with long hair in the corner*), that freaks me out. Because one, I have personal experiences with things like that. Two, it's part of my religion. Three, it's part of what's very common in the Hmong community.

That was very traumatizing to me

So I'm really close with kuv niam tais (*my maternal grandmother*). Kuv niam tais would tell stories about the war, what it was like. But I think being like a child, 13, 14, 15, hearing about war, and hearing about the way bombs would hurt and kill people, that was very traumatizing to me. Thaum kuv mloog, kuv ntshai ntshai (*When I listened, I was very afraid*). So, I don't think I knew I was afraid, but inside I was afraid. I would just detach from the story.

Gender: Gender, Family, and Being Hmong American

...where peb tsis muaj txiv

So, I come from a family where peb tsis muaj txiv (*we do not have a father*). I come from a family where I was born in Thailand. Where my mom has remarried multiple times. Where my seven siblings, we come from three different fathers. So, there's being a young Hmong woman, and then there's being a young Hmong woman with all of these things happening at the same time. I think it's hard to just speak about being a young woman and to exclude all of these parts from my life. So, for me, being a young Hmong woman, I have had to find ways to empower myself over the years. Because had I not done that, I would have been completely destructive.

Why do you ask all these questions?

So, hnuv i, kuv niam tais lawv hu plig rau kuv, thiab kuv tus sister, thiab kuv tus brother. So, you have the horn, and you toss it on the ground. And it flips one way or the other. And depending on how it lands, it tells you if koj txhawb tau koj tug plig or koj mus caum tau plig es plig los lawm. So, I was asking my grandmother, how do you know which is which. So, she was saying, “If lands like this, then koj txhawb. If it lands like this, then koj mus caum tau tu plig. If it ua li no ua li no.” So I asked her, “What does txhawb mean?” And she was like, “Txhawb ces txhawb xwb mos.” And I was like, “Koj txhawb leeg twg? Koj txhawb lub zog? Los koj txhawb tus qaib? Like what does that mean?” And she was like, “I don’t know. I never asked these questions. Why do you ask all these questions?”

(So, the other day, my maternal grandmother performed a spirit calling ritual for me, my sister, and my brother. So, you have the horn, and you toss it on the ground. And it flips one way or the other. And depending on how it lands, it tells you if you were able to call back the spirit. So, I was asking my grandmother, how do you know which is which. So, she was saying, “If lands like this, then you need to find the spirit. If it lands like this, then you found the spirit. If it does this, then that.” So I asked her, “What does txhawb mean?” And she was like, “Txhawb means txhawb.” And I was like, “Who do you txhawb? Do you txhawb for strength? Or do you txhawb the chicken? Like what does that mean?” And she was like, “I don’t know. I never asked these questions. Why do you ask all these questions?”)

I was like, I don’t know. Because this is how we were taught how to ask questions in school. Like how to critically ask questions so that we understand it. I find myself in settings where I want to learn, where I’m eager to learn but there’s a resistance to the

learning. Whether the resistance is intentional or unintentional. But that's a big part of who I am.

We kinda hate it

I'm Hmong, but I'm also American. I think the hardest part is that living in America, our grandparents and parents are afraid that we might not know what it means to be Hmong anymore. We might assimilate so much into American society that we might lose touch with our roots. And because of that, there's so much pressure to keep our bloodline clean, keeping our traditions clear. So there's so much emphasis on gender stereotypes, so much emphasis on religious practices. And that's not a bad thing—I don't think it's a bad thing at all, but I think it's bad when it's taken to the extreme where nothing else besides that is allowed. So, I find myself, and a lot of my Hmong women friends, we kinda hate it. We kinda hate what it means to be Hmong. Not because of what it means to be part of the culture, but because of the community, the fighting that we grew up in. So, it's hard. It's hard but it's also very empowering. I'm very proud to be a young Hmong woman.

Conceptualizations of Youth: Growing, Learning, and Fighting

Growing up, I was hushed a lot

In high school, I was in a youth program for about three years. A youth program around multicultural leadership with others and also within yourself. Initially, I joined to hang out with my friend in the program. But the good thing about this is that as the year went on, I was asked in the first year of the program: what are the issues in the Hmong community that you care about. I was like, "The Hmong community has issues?"

I thought that—I was 16. I think I knew there were issues, but I never thought about them as community issues. I always thought about them as my family's issues. And so, I was like I don't know. I know there are problems but I don't know how to name it. And the other question that was asked was, what do you want to do about it? And I was like, "There are things I can do about it?"

Because I think my whole life, and I think this is the narrative a lot of young people are told, is that you're a child. What you have to say doesn't matter. You're young, you don't know, you don't have the experience. Growing up, I was hushed a lot. Even though what I had to say really didn't—kind of went against the grain, I was hushed a lot for it. So when there were these questions for me to think about these things, I was really—I kind of froze because I was like I should be worried about these things, I should care about these things, I should know about these things, but I don't because I've been completely—I haven't been at the table at all, right? When these issues and things come up, I'm not there. It's not for children and it's not for women, right? So, I think that that was the point, in which I realized that the program turned for me from a place for me to hang out with my friends to a place where I can really explore things I care about in ways that I've never thought about them before.

I love learning, I hate schooling

I usually don't invest my time into things I don't care about, which is normal, right? You don't invest your time in things you don't come up as interesting, or that you really don't care about, or that don't really impact your life. And I think, knowing that, that's also the reason I really didn't care about politics growing up. I didn't really care about history. There were a lot of things that I cared about, and a lot of things I didn't

care about, because I didn't feel represented. Like the history textbook. It always talked about white men from the 1900s or 1800s. I did well in school, I was an A student. And the way to be an A student was to show up and do the work. And so, I did my homework and I showed up, and I did very well in high school. But I never really liked high school, the curriculum, the teachers, the setting or anything like that. And it was because I never felt represented in what I was learning.

And now in college, because I get to pick what I want to learn, I love it. I am really engaged. I've also realized that I love learning, I hate education. I love learning, I hate schooling, does that make sense? So, I learn a lot about myself in all of it. And I continue to learn. And I continue find myself in settings where I get to learn, but I get to ask very hard questions.

Fighting every day

I've had to wrestle with my mom about what it means to be a young Hmong woman and what she expects of me to be a young Hmong woman. Because the idea of what I want for myself and the ideas of what she has for me are very different. So, right now, I'm in an interracial relationship. So, there's a lot of resistance on her end because that's what I want for myself, and she's resisting that. And there's tension in our relationship.

So that's what it means to be a young Hmong woman. Fighting every day. Fighting things that I don't necessarily have to if I wasn't a young Hmong woman. If I was a white woman in a progressive community that really didn't care about who I married or if I even married, then I wouldn't even have to create space in my mind for that. But this is my reality; a lot of the battles I have to fight are within myself.

Sense of Place: Home and Going Away

As long as I feel safe, comfortable, and I can grow

Home can be anywhere and anything, as long as I feel safe, comfortable, and I can grow. Because sometimes, I don't feel like that being home with my family. Because sometimes when I'm with my family, I feel targeted or attacked, and minimized and belittled.

I want to go away

I would love to find work that's not in Minnesota, or not in the United States. I want to go away. I want to explore and fly into places to see things that I have never even dreamed about. And then, eventually, I want to grow old in Minnesota.

L

L is hesitant to participate. She is unsure if she “qualifies” to be a participant in this study. Her concern is that her experience with storytelling is “not enough experience” and that she would present as “an outlier” to the data I have collected. She wants to make sure I interview individuals who reflect the purpose and intention of the study. As we proceed with the interview, I have a better understanding of her concern. She draws and has moved some of those drawings from paper to the runway, designing Hmong clothing. She does not identify as a storyteller—perhaps more as someone who draws, someone who is interested in Hmong clothing. L describes her drawing as a hobby, sketching anime and fantasy characters. She only draws women and has a particular interest in designing clothing with traditional Hmong colors and fabric into modern wear.

Of all the interviewees, L has the hardest time answering my questions. I can tell that the concepts of gender, race and ethnicity, and youth are new to her as she thinks about her own identity and the art she creates. She also has a hard time describing her artwork. However, there is a quality to her interview that differs from the others. As we go through the questions, I can hear her begin to articulate a storytelling practice. As the interviewer, it is exciting to witness as L thinks more deeply about her experiences, her drawings, her identity, and the meanings of these things. As much as I have gained and learned from these interviewees, this study allows interviewees to learn as well.

Oral tradition: Just a Hobby

The first time

When the student association had their event two years ago, I signed up to perform a Hmong traditional dance. I did a little bit of that in high school. In middle school, I did a theater program, and we performed at the Ordway. I signed up to dance again this year. I've done fashion designing before as just a hobby but this time was the first time I did a show.

In high school, I would just draw like anime and a little bit of fashion. I like to do a lot of portraits or fantasy like girls with traditional clothing.

I begin by drawing the clothes first

I draw mostly women. Most of it just comes from fashion and my interest in clothing. So, I think about what I want the person to wear. Since I'm interested in traditional female wear, I begin to draw the clothes first and then I draw her face and then her hair and then I begin to add other accessories. So, it just turns out to be a woman in the end.

Conveying peace and serenity, reflecting identity

So, in most of my drawings, you can tell that person is Asian, not necessarily Hmong. It's open to interpretation. There's a bit of mystery to her and most of it is conveying a feeling of peace and serenity. She won't directly look at the person but she's kinda in her own world. Sometimes she's smiling; sometimes she's in a very peaceful mood.

Nowadays you don't really see people in their traditional wear, which is really unfortunate because traditional wear is so pretty to me. There's this aesthetic quality to it; it's different from someone wearing just jeans or a t-shirt. It reflects a person's identity. So then I think about how do you incorporate traditional wear into modern pieces so that you can preserve the culture and also be able to reflect one's identity.

Gender: Being Hmong and Living in America

This anxiety

From my perspective, it's about trying to find my identity. It's the clash of being Hmong and living in America. I'm graduating soon, so I'm thinking about things that I haven't thought about before. I'm living in the United States, there's lots of opportunity for me to develop professionally. But at home, there's this underlying pressure of starting a family. Things like that that didn't really get to me until recently. But it was something I noticed my parents didn't verbally tell us you have to get married, but I just know that they're thinking about it. So, I feel this anxiety or pressure. I have older siblings, who are not married. So, I don't want to disappoint my parents.

They put these standards on us

To my cousins or other close family and friends, my parents seem much more lenient. They understand American culture but because they have relatives, they also have to be cautious about their reputation. So, they put these standards on us, so that their relatives don't say anything.

Conceptualizations of Youth: Young Heart, Old Mentality

You have to hold your tongue sometimes

Most of the time, young people have to listen to those who are older than them. Like older siblings or adults; you have to be very respectful. Like you have to hold your tongue sometimes as well as understand the expectations they have for you.

Sometimes I feel like a granny inside

I am still young because I'm just at the end of my college degree. And there's so much more out there I want to accomplish. You're just starting and really exploring who you are. I guess there's that saying that you're always young at heart, and that's something I will always carry with me. And sometimes, I feel like a granny inside because of the way I think. You know, because at a young age, you're exposed to a lot of things like your parents' immigrant story as well as the things you go through. In some ways, my mentality is very old. I've matured a lot and gained a lot of wisdom and knowledge in that but also at the same time, my dreams, and my goals, and my ambitions are very young.

Sense of Place: Home and Abroad

Love

It's not a specific place, it's more so of a community where you have shared values and also love. I think love is very important for home. No matter what you go

through, no matter if you become rebellious, if there's a group of people you can go back to, who love and accept you for who you are. So, that is home to me.

My community

The community that I was in, most of the time, was my relatives from my dad's side because we went to the same church. And those who weren't my family, I would consider them my family because we went to church together and I grew up with them. So, that was my community. My mom was very intentional about not exposing us too much, or having little contact to her side of the family because lawv coj kev cai kub (*they practiced the old tradition*). So, she didn't want us to be involved in that kind of environment because at that time, she had just converted to Christianity, so she didn't want that kind of influence to be on us.

I do want to come back

I don't plan to get married any time soon. I think it would hinder me from accomplishing what I want to do. So, actually, I want to go back to Korea and teach English. From there, I want to expand to the business sector, and start my own company in Korea. And going abroad, and working abroad, I don't see myself staying in Minnesota. I love traveling and trying new experiences and learning new languages and experiencing new cultures. So, I see myself abroad and working to help others abroad. In the future, I do want to come back and help my community as well.

MV

Of all of the interviewees, I know MV personally. I have known her and her family for a long time through my professional work. We joke quite a bit before the interview actually starts, and throughout the interview, there is a familiarity and comfort in our

conversation. MV's story is much different from the others. She was recently resettled as part of the last wave of refugees from Wat Tham Krabok, arriving in Minnesota at the age of nine. Her memories of life in the refugee camp are vivid; she has strong family connections in Thailand; and she has a desire to return and visit. Additionally, her interview is almost entirely in the Hmong language, illustrating her comfort in and with the language. MV's experience with storytelling varies in both her description of paj ntaub (embroidery) and dab neeg. Paj ntaub is something she learned as a child, gave up, and then realized later in life the importance of re-learning in order to preserve the practice. In the refugee camp, MV remembers the groups of women, sitting together, embroidering together. She is worried that paj ntaub is a dying practice. Today, it is easier to find traditional Hmong clothing with machine-embroidered designs or digitally-printed on the fabric. She organizes workshops at her university so that young people can learn to embroider together much like the women she remembers in the refugee camp.

With dab neeg, there is something (and someone) missing. MV connects dab neeg with grandparents; since her father is an orphan, she never heard dab neeg growing up, saying, "If you asked me to tell you a folk tale, I wouldn't even know where to start."

Oral Tradition: Learning and Re-learning Paj Ntaub and Preservation,

Orphanhood and Dab Neeg

Tsis paub qab hau (Didn't know anything)

Thaum ntawd, kuv muaj li yim xyoo. I think it was during a summer break, so kuv tsis mus kawm ntawv. Kuv niam qhia kuv ua paj ntaub. Thaum ntawd, me nyuam yau xwb ces tsis paub qab haus. Kuv niam qhia ces twb tsis paub ua thiab. Like nws qhia tab sis kuv tsis tau ua ib daim paj ntaub es tiag tiag yuav coj mus muag los yog coj mus

hnav. Nws qhia tias, “Xaw li no, li no ces tau lub paj.” Ntev ntev los no, ces kuv twb tsis ua paj ntaub.

Over winter break, kuv mom mus ua tshav puam tim Hmongtown Market ces kuv mus nrog nws zov taj laj. Ces kuv laj laj nyob ces kuv rov ua paj ntaub dua. Ces thaum kuv ua ces xav tias yog kuv tsis ua tiag ces ntawm ntej no mus kuv yuav tsis paub. Thiab yog kuv muaj me nyuam, lawv yuav tsis paub thiab kuv cov viv ncaus yuav tsis paub ces peb yuav tsis muaj leeg twg paub ua lawm.

(During that time, I was eight years old. I think it was during a summer break, so I was not in school. My mom taught me how to embroider. During that time, I was just a kid so I didn't know anything. My mom would teach me but I still did not know how to do it. Like she would teach me but I had never embroidered something real that you would sell or make to wear. She would say, “Sew like this, like this and you have a flower.” It has been a long time that I have not embroidered.

Over winter break, my mom had a stall at Hmongtown Market so I went with her to help her. I was tired of not doing anything so I started embroidering again. That's when I realized that if I did not continue to embroider then I would not know how to embroider in the future. And if I had children, they would not know as well, and if my sisters did not know how to embroider, there would be no one who would know.)

Ua kom de-stress (Embroider to de-stress)

Kuv yeej tsis tau ua paj ntaub yuav coj mus hnav los sis coj mus muag, tab sis mam, kuv ua kom de-stress. Kuv pom lawv cov paj ntaub zoo zoo nkauj ces kuv ua li lawv ua xwb. Ib yam li lawv ua paj zoo zoo nkauj, bright colors, visually appealing. I think it's also the repetition of the sewing movement. And you're using all of these

colorful threads. Yus xav tias seb yus xav muab xim dab tsi rau. You have the option to change it up and be creative.

(I have never embroidered something to wear or to sell, but I embroider to de-stress. I see other people's beautiful embroidery and designs so I use the same design. Other people have beautiful designs, bright colors, visually appealing. I think it's also the repetition of the sewing movement. And you're using all of these colorful threads. You have to decide what color thread you will use. You have the option to change it up and be creative.)

It's something that should be preserved

Thaum kuv saib saib cov ntawv txog paj ntaub thiab pib ua qho workshop, kuv xav tias ntshe yog peb tsis ua ces tom ntej no mus ces yuav ploj tiag tiag. Ib yam li tiam sis no, we can see it. Thaum koj mus tom taj laj ntshav puam, koj yeej pom tias lawv siv cov print. Lawv mam muab qho print los xaw rau ntawm ib lub ntsho lo sev lo li cas. So, I don't know. It's something that should be preserved. Kuv yeej tsis paub a lot about paj ntaub tiam sis raws li kuv hnov hnov lawv yeej tias ib qho paj ntaub no nws yeej txhais tau ib yam tiam sis kuv tsis paub tias qhov ntawd yog dab tsi.

(When I was doing research about paj ntaub and developing a paj ntaub workshop, I thought that if we did not continue to make paj ntaub, it would really disappear. It is like right now, we can see it. When you go to the flea market, you will see that they use prints. They then sew the prints to a shirt or an apron. So, I don't know. It's something that should be preserved. I don't know a lot about paj ntaub but according to the research, the designs have meaning. But I don't know what those meanings are.)

Peb tsis muaj pog tsis muaj yawg so we never heard stories (We do not have [paternal] grandparents so we never heard stories)

Kuv dad nws yog ib tug orphan so you know in the Hmong tradition ces yus tsis nyob nrog yus niam tais thiab yawm txiv, yus nyob nrog yus pog thiab yawg in the same household. Peb tsis muaj pog tsis muaj yawg so we never heard stories. Thiab kuv dad because he didn't grow up like hearing stories, so nws tsis muaj dab neeg qhia peb and then kuv mom tsis muaj dab neeg qhia peb. So, we did not hear any stories growing up.

(My dad is an orphan so you know in the Hmong tradition you do not live with your [maternal] grandparents, you live with your [paternal] grandparents in the same household. We do not have [paternal] grandparents so we never heard stories. And my dad because he didn't grow up like hearing stories, so he didn't have dab neeg to tell us and then my mom did not have dab neeg to tell us too. So, we did not hear any stories growing up.)

Gender: Camp Life, Education, and Opportunity

Thaum kawg, tsis muaj dab tsis ua (In the end, there was nothing to do)

Poj niam ces nws yeej muaj ib yam rau nws ua, txiv neej ces nws yeej muaj ib yam rau nws ua. Ces feem ntau paj ntaub yeej yog poj niam ua. Tab sis, nyob Qhov Tsuas, paj ntaub ces poj niam los ua thiab txiv neej los ua vim tias thaum kawg, tsis muaj dab tsi ua. Kuv tsis paub tias ua ntej ntawd kuv yawm txiv puas ua tiab tab sis thaum los nyob Qhov Tsuas ces tsis muaj dab tsi ua ces nws thiaj li ua tiab thiab ua paj ntaub muag.

(Women have their work, men have their work. Mostly women embroider. But in Wat Tham Krabok, both women and men embroidered because in the end, there was nothing to do. I don't know if my [maternal] grandfather embroidered before living in

Wat Tham Krabok, and then once he got to Wat Tham Krabok, there was nothing for him to do so he started to make skirts and embroidery to sell.)

Poj niam los txiv neej, mas kuv txiv nkawv yeej push (Women or men, my parents would push)

Poj niam los txiv neej, mas kuv txiv nkawv yeej push kom peb kawm ntawv. Tsis muaj qho tias koj yog ntxhais, koj yuav mus yuav txiv. Nws yeej expect kom txhua tus mus college. I think the biggest problem for them is finances. Yog kuv nyob campus, tshua kuv nrhiav tau scholarship thiab nyiaj los them everything xwb ces nkawv yeej okay.

(Women or men, my parents would push us to study. There was not this idea that you are a daughter, you are going to get married. They expected us all to go to college. I think the biggest problem for them is finances. If I was going to live on campus, as long as I found scholarships and money to pay for everything then they were okay.)

Mus yuav txiv and stuff, mus ua nyab or whatever (Getting married and stuff, to be a daughter-in-law or whatever)

So, vim hais tias peb tuaj Mes Kas, I wonder seb kuv dad lawv xav kom peb mus kawm ntawv xwb nas. Es maybe lawv xav kom peb focus on qhov ntawd instead of hais txog mus yuav txiv and stuff. Maybe that's why lawv thiaj li never hais tias, "Oh, koj npaj li no, lwm hnuv koj yuav mus ua nyab or whatever." Everything was just like, "Oh, koj need mus kawm ntawv." Lawv hais txog mus kawm ntawv, mus kawm ntawv tab sis yus nyob tsev ces lawv yeej txib kom yus ua ub ua no kom yus txawj ua thiab tam sis lawv tsis hais tias, "Oh, koj need puab ua no vim tias koj yuav mus ua nyab." Yog peb

nyob tim ces peb tsis muaj qhov opportunity to kawm ntawv. So, tej zau ntshe lam hais peb mus yuav txiv muaj me nyuam tas lawm.

(So, because we were resettled in America, I wonder if that's why my parents wanted us to only go to school. Maybe they wanted us to focus on just that instead of talking about getting married and stuff. Maybe that's why they never said, "Oh, you need to prepare because you are going to be a daughter-in-law or whatever in the future." Everything was just like, "Oh, you need to go to school." They talked about going to school, going to school, but if you were home, they did ask you to do chores so that you knew how to do things, but they never said, "Oh, you need you know this because you are going to be a daughter-in-law." If we still lived over there [Thailand], then we would not have the opportunity to go to school. So, maybe we would be married with children already.)

Conceptualizations of Youth: Age Versus Knowing Better

Paub qab hau (To know better) and marriage

You become like ib tug laus or ib tug neeg paub qab hau thaum you pais yuav txiv los yauv poj niam. So, I think, tsuav yog koj tsis tau yuav then koj tseem hluas.

(You become an adult or a person who knows better when you marry a husband or marry a wife. So, I think as long as you are not married, then you are still a young person.)

Tej thaum lawv xav kom yus yog neeg laus los tej thaum lawv tias koj yog me nyuam yau (Sometimes they want you to be an older person and sometimes they want you to be a child)

Raws li kuv dad, nws saib peb nws hais tias, “Neb twb txog hnuv nyoog no ces nej yuav tsum paub qab hau me ntsis.” Tab sis yog when it comes to very serious stuff, ces lawv saib yus like, koj tseem yog me nyuam yau. So, nyob ntawm tej thaum lawv xav kom yus yog neeg laus or pau qab hau or tsis paub. I guess it really depends on the context. “Ua cas koj twb laus tag, kom tseem ua li no.” Los tej thaum lawv tias koj tseem yog me nyuam yau. “Koj twb tsis paub qab hau, koj pheej hais dab tsi.”

(According to my dad, he tells us, “You all are of age already, so you should know better.” But when it comes to very serious stuff, they look at you like you are still a child. So, it depends on sometimes they want you to be an older person or to know better or to know nothing. I guess it really depends on the context. “You are already of age, but you still do this and that.” Sometimes they want you to be a child. “You do not know any better, why do you keep talking.”)

Sense of Place: Finding Home

What are we; everything is here

I was told that we came as refugees. But now that we have become US citizens, are we still considered refugees? What are we? There are just all of these questions.

For a long time, ua ntej no, I did not think of Minneapolis thiab Minnesota or teb chaws Mes Kas as my home, but I don't know. There was always this thought of like going back to Thailand. It was like, I want to go back to Thailand. But not until recently, and I don't know what it is, recently kuv mam li start to xav tias Minnesota yog kuv lub tsev. Everything kuv ua, my family is here, everything is here. I have brought it up to my mom before that maybe lwm hnuv kuv xav mus nyob tim Thaib, and she's like, “Oh my gosh, peb koj tuaj no. Ua cas koj hos xav rov qab mus tim Thaib?” I think that in the

future kuv xav ua hauj lwm nrog refugee and immigrant families. I don't really know what that would be yet, but definitely something in the Twin Cities area.

(For a long time, before this, I did not think of Minneapolis and Minnesota or the United States as my home, but I don't know. There was always this thought of like going back to Thailand. It was like, I want to go back to Thailand. But not until recently, and I don't know what it is, recently I started to think that Minnesota was home. Everything I do, my family is here, everything is here. I have brought it up to my mom before that maybe in the future I want to live in Thailand, and she's like, "Oh my gosh, we brought you here. Why do you want to go back to Thailand?" I think that in the future I want to work with refugee and immigrant families. I don't really know what that would be yet, but definitely something in the Twin Cities area.)

MY

There is so much about MY's lived experiences that resonate with my own—MY's sense of responsibility, her family dynamic, her emotions related to school and community. I did not know MY prior to this study, but there was an ease to her willingness to share, a desire to tell someone about her life, about who she is, and what she has witnessed.

MY's storytelling comes in the form of singing and songwriting. She has uploaded a few song covers on YouTube. She describes singing as her therapy and listening to music to voice her experiences. There has been a lot that has happened in her life and in the lives of the people around her that continue to shape her.

Oral tradition: Lessons of Life

My go-to stress reliever

I started listening to music at a very young age. I don't know when exactly. But I just remember zaum hauv tsheb, kuv niam thiab kuv txiv lawv tso nkauj Hmoob tas mus li. Ces thaum lawv thauj peb mus taj laj, thauj peb mus qhov twg los lawv yeej tso nkauj Hmoob hauv tsheb. I think that's where it really came from. (*But I just remember sitting in the car, and my parents playing Hmong music all the time. They would take us to the store, or anywhere and there would always be music on in the car.*) I didn't start singing until after kuv graduate from high school. I sing every day now. Singing is my therapy. Singing is like my go-to stress reliever.

I wrote two complete songs. The first two songs I completed were inspirational songs. And it comes from experiences where muaj kev nyuaj siab (*there is stress*). The first one I named it "Kev Nyuaj Siab." And the second one is "Ua Siab Loj." In the future, I want to write more songs about life in general like yus niam yus txiv tsis paub sib hlub (*your parents do not know how to love one another*) and how that affects children and how they don't realize that.

I listen to love songs or sad love songs or other inspirational songs. For example, mloog cov nkauj Hmoob (*listening to Hmong music*) or cov classic where tus txiv tsis hlub tus niam (*the classic songs where the father does not love the mother*). I love listening to those songs. It really relates to my mom's life, and so, I would listen to that because those songs really voice my mom's life story.

This negative voice

Honestly, I am a very shy person. I have only performed on stage, I think, three or four times. I record myself and I upload some covers on YouTube. Txaj txaj muag. (*I'm very shy.*) Maybe it's due to childhood experiences where I am always judged. I grew up

getting bullied a lot so I'm still on this journey of healing and trying to love myself and building up more confidence. Because every time thaum kuv mus (*when I go*) perform, I feel like I want to show my talent, but I have this negative voice in my head that tells me that, "Oh my God, you're showing off." It makes me feel like I don't want to perform or show my talent. Or I'm always afraid of messing up.

My mom's stories

Growing up, kuv nyiam mloog kuv niam piav dab neeg heev. Kuv niam piav txog dab neeg dab, or kuv niam piav txog kuv niam lub neeg es txom nyem ua niaj hnuv mus khws pab niam pab txiv ua liaj ua teb. Nws lub neej hluas nyob tsis ntev nws twb mus yuav kuv txiv lawm es yuav kuv txiv los tseem ntsib txoj kev txom nyem thiab. Kuv pog tsis hluv kuv niam es kuv niam basically nyob nram teb zov cov npua thiab ua teb. So, I love listening to my mom's stories. I think that's where I like kept those lessons of life with me too. I think when I was younger, she just nyob nyob ces cia li qhia xwb. Ziaq no ces, yus loj lawm, yus yuav tsum tau nug xwb. Kuv mom tsis tshua piav lawm. Thaum yus yau ces kuv niam ntshai ntshai tsam peb mus ua neeg phem ces kuv niam yeej piav kuv niam tej kev txom nyem kom yus ua neeg zoo.

(Growing up, I liked to listen to my mom tell stories. My mom told ghost stories or my mom told stories about her life, when there was suffering, when she worked hard to help her parents in the fields. She was young for only a short time before she married my dad. When she married him, she was met with more suffering. My grandmother did not love my mom, so my mom basically lived in the home at the fields, taking care of the pigs and farming. So, I love listening to my mom's stories. I think that's where I like kept those lessons of life with me too. I think when I was younger, she just would tell me these

stories. Now, I'm older, so you have to ask her to tell stories. My mom doesn't tell stories as much now. When I was younger, my mom was afraid that we would grow up to be bad people, so she would tell us about the suffering in her life so that we would be good people.)

Gender: Koj Yog Ntxhais (You Are a Daughter), Going to College, and Marriage

My parents understand

I'm very glad that my parents aren't really strict. My parents are pretty open-minded. Growing up, they did say, Koj yog ntxhais, koj yuav tsum ua noj. Lwm hnuv koj mus ua nyab koj thiaj li paub mus pab tsev neeg sab tod. Kuv niam thiab kuv txiv yeej qhia qhia yus li ntawd.

(You are a daughter, you have to know how to cook. In the future when you become a daughter-in-law, you will know how to help the other family. My mom and dad did tell me this.)

But then growing up, yus busy thiab yus mus kawm ntawv thiab ua hauj lwm ces my parents understand that. Txawm yus tsis txawj ua noj npaum li cas los tsuav yus rau siab kawm ntawv, yus mus khws tau noj tau haus li ntawd xeb los yeej zoo. And also growing up, I see that kuv parents lawv txib peb cov ntxhais ua hauj lwm dua cov tub. So, cov tub tau nyob dawb dua hos cov ntxhais khwv dua hauv vaj hauv tsev. But then thaum tawm sab nraud no ces kuv niam thiab kuv txiv lawv yeej tsis pub peb cov tub ntxhais tawm mus ua si li. Yuav tsum tawm qhov zoo xwb, yog tias yuav nrog cov phooj ywg, then they'd be like, "Nrog phooj ywg ua si xwb ces tej kos tsis important. Kav tsij rau siab kawm ntawv."

(But then growing up, you got busy and you go to school and you have a job so my parents understand that. So, even though you didn't know how to cook the best, at least you could go to school, get a job, feed yourself, and that was good enough. And also growing up, I see that my parents did ask us daughters to do more chores than the sons. So, the sons would not have to do as much as the daughters in the home. But with going out with friends, my parents did not let the sons or daughters go out. We could only go out if it was for a good reason. If we went out with friends, then they'd be like, "Going out with friends is not important. Just study and go to school.")

I felt like I was leaving my family behind

A lot of people were proud of me, especially my uncles and my aunts. My parents were proud of me. I wasn't so proud of myself though because I felt like I was leaving my family behind when going to college. I felt like I was moving on forward whereas my family was not. I was really sad. I wasn't proud of myself. I always have this guilty feeling that I wasn't able to pull my family with me. And I'm like going forward, and thinking, I don't think this is fair. And not only that but in my family, I'm considered the favorite child, the perfectionist. And that is something that I'm also not proud of. People say that I'm the favorite child. "You're perfect. You're smart." But that doesn't make me proud at all because *muaj kev tu siab (there is sadness)*. My older siblings, they don't get much attention from my parents. And so, it's a lot of struggle. I still feel that way, but I think after I graduated from college, all that school and workload was finally off my shoulder. I'm able to focus on myself. I was able to reflect. I was able to let go of that guilty feeling. But I still feel like I could have done something, but I know I can't change people. I can't fix people.

That pressure builds fear

Like kuv mus qhov twg los, zoo li, especially cov txiv neej laus. They would be like, “Okay, koj twb kawm ntawv tas, nrhiav tau hauj lwm ces mus yuav txiv.” They always expect you to like marry or get into a relationship and have kids. And that’s success for them. And that pressure builds fear too. Tsam lwm hnuv yus laus, tsis muaj leej twg saib xyuas yus thiab.

(Like if I go anywhere, it’s like, especially the male elders. They would be like, “Okay, you graduated from college, find a job and then get married to a man.” They always expect you to like marry or get into a relationship and have kids. And that’s success for them. And that pressure builds fear too. That when you get older, there might not be someone there to take care of you.)

Conceptualizations of Youth: Feeling Old

Age is just a number

Personally, kuv paub kuv tseem hluas (*I know I am young*), but I feel old. I think it’s due to all the experiences that yus coj laus tas mus li (*you always take on an older person’s mentality*). I feel old, but physically, I’m young. Maybe the feeling matters more. But in general, I feel like cov hluas no ces cov laus tseem ntshai ntshai tias cov hluas no tseem hluas hluas, lawv tseem ua tsis tau dab tsi, lawv tsis tau paub tab (*the young people now, the elders are afraid that they are still young, they can not do anything, they are not mature*). But honestly, I would say that age does not define maturity at all. Age is just a number because I can say that I’m 23 but I have way more experiences or knowledge than my 28-year-old brother.

Tus paub pab (The one who knows to help)

Honestly, if you think back to it, my parents never said you have to do it. I think I just took it. Ces yus niam yus txiv pom hais tias yus yog tus paub pab lawv ntau ces yus niam yus txiv depend on you. Txij thaum ntawd los. Because yog txib lwm tus ces txib cov hlob ces cov hlob tsis ua ces lawv txib yus ces yus hos kas thiab yus hos pab lawv dua ces lawv cia li they depend on someone who's more reliable or more willing to do it for them.

(So, your parents saw that you were the one who knows to help more so your parents depend on you. Since that time. because if they asked someone else, they asked the older siblings, but the older siblings did not help. But if they asked you and you helped them then they depend on someone who's more reliable or more willing to do it for them.)

Sense of Place: Getting Out of My Comfort Zone

Don't know where to start

Emotionally, mentally, spiritually, I want to go...I just want to be a stronger, more confident, more courageous person. And I want to be a more decisive person. And set my mind to something and do it. Because right now, I'm like scattered mind or I'm always doubtful or skeptical. And just don't know where to start. It's lacking a lot of confidence. So, me personally, I want to be more confident in myself. And I want to also start getting out of my comfort zone and start taking on more leadership roles because honestly, thaum kuv tawm sab nraum (*when I'm in public*) I'm really quiet, nervous, really reserved. I like to do stuff behind the scenes, I don't like to be put on the spot, or take lead roles. So, I want to overcome that. I want to be financially stable so that I could help out

my parents a lot more. Definitely want to take them places, like travel, or go on a vacation for once.

N

N and I found each other through mutual friends. Like some of the other participants, N has spent time thinking about some of the topics covered in this study—her gender, being Hmong American, her art. Her blog covers several of these concepts and more, ranging from gender and ethnicity to more taboo subjects like challenging the concept of saving face and Hmong who date and marry someone from the same clan. The interview feels much more like a discussion—two people, interested in similar things, having a conversation about what each other has noticed about their communities. N’s interview exemplifies one of the key purposes of this study—to co-construct a narrative. We interrupt one another, build off of each other, listen and learn from one another.

N is a dancer, writer, and fashion designer. Most interesting is her design team made up of N, her sister, and their mother. This mother-daughter trio, as N calls it, works collaboratively to create clothing that brings traditional Hmong designs into the contemporary. N describes this as “to carry our stories into the future.”

Oral Tradition: The Story of My Experiences

So many outlets

I did not have a lot of Hmong friends growing up before high school. So, I was trying to tell the story of myself, but I was never white enough. And then something clicked, and I made the decision to go to a high school with 90% Hmong students. I had no friends going there because I felt like a part of my story just wasn’t resonating with people around me. So, going to high school is where my storytelling developed. Just

really understanding different parts of me that I haven't really explored or really saw. It was just a really interesting context because my life really revolved around not being white enough growing up, and then turning into not being Hmong enough. And so, I've always been working different outlets to tell the story of my experiences. On being a Hmong woman. Being Hmong American. Being not white enough and being not Hmong enough. And just coming full circle and expressing all those things through dancing, writing, poetry, fashion. I have so many outlets of being a storyteller from a young age of dancing, we were always told that we had to dance a story. And then I started doing a lot of writing, so that's where I did a lot of storytelling, talking about my life or anything, poetry, blogging.

Mother-daughter time

Growing up, New Year time is always important to us, especially because we were dancers. It was a time that my mom would sew our dance clothes, but then once we got out of dance, which was my first year of high school. We were so used to doing something for New Year, and my mom was always interested in fashion. So, she influenced me and my sister. We were very interested in modern fashion and Hmong fashion. So we started fusing the two. So, every New Year since my first year in high school, it was always a mother-daughter time, going to the fabric store, finding pictures of what we wanted to do, the kind of image we wanted to portray that year, the type of limits we wanted to push that year with Hmong designs and modern designs. So, it was really my mom and my sister and I spending time together because New Year was coming up. I guess it really stems from the traditional Hmong mother-daughter preparing

for Hmong New Year like my mom would do with her mom. So that got passed down, except we started fusing modern fashion.

Being vulnerable

My parents are really connected with where they're from. My parents are still young, but they're really concerned with making sure us kids know where they came from, from where we came from. Growing up, my dad was always the storyteller, so I got that from him. Stories have always been very important in our family in terms of knowing who we are, where we're from, what our family has done and been through, the tragedies, the triumphs. Remembering people. A lot of those things, my parents are always storytelling, whether it's about their life in Laos or in the refugee camp or going through the war. Or our ancestors, or our relatives who are no longer with us, the lives they lived.

I tell stories of hardship, things I have gone through emotionally, mentally. Being vulnerable is such a taboo in human society, not just American or Hmong society. Being vulnerable is scary yet it's something people struggle with the most. I think with me and the things that I write tends to be very vulnerable and it pushes people to be comfortable with their vulnerability and so I do my best and be brave to share stories of hardships like breakups or loving ourselves or dreaming.

Gender: Saving Face and Being a Woman

It keeps you very bound sometimes

I can't say being a woman is hard because being anyone is hard. But I would say it has its own pressures. I think it can be liberating because I don't get the same pressures that my male counterparts get but I think being a Hmong woman—it keeps you very

bound sometimes. I feel like I'm constantly pushing the limits and borders every day of my life. I acknowledge my fellow sisters and acknowledge that our hardships can be pretty different but can be similar. I've been a part of [Hmong women's organizations] and lots of other spaces with other Hmong women who are verbal, expressive, and explicit about the struggles of Hmong women. In a way this has been liberating for me, but it also shows me how much work our community still has to do.

To push the silence

It's not that I don't love being a Hmong woman but I do see all the struggles. Being a Hmong woman is hard but it's a beautiful thing. They are so resilient, so adaptable, so strong. It makes me really proud, and at the same time, it hurts me. It brings me heartache when I think about Hmong women. Hmong women have incredible stories to tell, and oftentimes, our stories are so unheard and goes so silent. That is one of the inspirations to my mother-daughter trio; we want to push the silence of Hmong women and get our stories out there. That's one thing our line, as a Hmong woman, has really pushed me to bring my mom on board. My mom wanted to be behind the scenes. She didn't want to be acknowledged as a team member but my sister and I did not let that go. "You do as much work, if not more." That was one of our big steps, acknowledging my mom as part of the team. And giving my mom encouragement and empowering her to find her own person and individuality. Because Hmong moms, they were women before they were moms. I think as Hmong women, that's something we forget a lot is that we are individuals before we are something else. That's one of the things I hold on to, and I try my best to hold on to as a Hmong woman because I am an individual before I am someone's daughter, someone's wife, or girlfriend, or mother.

What culturally and traditionally is wanted for me

Even though I'm in a progressive household, I see my parents struggle between what they want for me and what culturally and traditionally is wanted for me. For example, they've always pushed me on my education and finding myself and working hard for myself and developing myself. And then sometimes, it switches over to focus on marrying well. "As long as your husband is successful, you are successful." Things like that. I see that the struggle in their Hmong American identity as well in terms of who I should be as a Hmong woman. I find it interesting to see that they don't really push that on my brother as who he should be as a Hmong man. I even talk to my brother, and I ask him, what things does he feel, any pressures. And he can hardly name any, and I find that interesting. It also has to do with us being in a progressive household. I'm sure that if I was in a traditional household, I feel the answers would be different.

When to serve, when to keep quiet, when to be obedient

I find interesting how in a progressive household, we've lost touch with some traditional views, which is good at times and bad at times. But I find it interesting that the things that hold the Hmong community back, those still remain for me as a Hmong woman. But those don't remain the same for my brother as a Hmong man. Even though my household is progressive, and I am pursuing an education, and doing things that other Hmong girls, traditionally, couldn't do, I still face traditional things that are centuries old. Like making sure my hair is not blonde, making sure I don't have tattoos all over my body. I'm not covered in piercings and that I'm wearing the appropriate clothes at the appropriate times. That I know when to serve, when to keep quiet, when to be obedient. Even at the cost of my own comfort. Being polite, especially to Hmong men, knowing

my place in family gatherings and events to the point where patriarchy is so much in my body that sometimes I can't differentiate if I know my manners or I'm disrespecting myself. So, I find a lot of struggle with those things, those are the pressures I feel.

You dropped your face

A lot has to do with face. Face is a real concept to us. We use terms like, "Poob ntsej muag" or "xiam ntsev". In English, we don't say, "You dropped your face." As a Hmong woman, those pressures are put on you a lot that if I do this or that, the face of my family will drop, will be tainted. All of the decisions I make directly reflect the face of my father as a face of the household, as my grandpa's bloodline.

I've always been so interested in the study of the face concept because a lot of our Hmong fears and struggles in society revolve around this social concept of a face. That is not real. We fear the judgement of others. All of us fear that, but it's interesting that in perfect world, if we just learn to put that fear down and accept everyone as we are, none of us would have an issue. And none of us would have to live with the fear everyday because Hmong men and Hmong women have this fear of keeping up this face every single day. Hmong men need to know kev cai and know all of the things they have to uphold. And Hmong women need to know all of the things they need to support. It causes a lot of suffering. It's not tangible but it strikes a lot of fear.

Growing up, I don't think I understood I was a Hmong woman until I was 13 when I started hitting puberty and you start doing all the duties to become a nyab (*daughter-in-law*). I think that's when it really hit me that one day there's going be a bride price on me too, and one day I have to live up to the name of my father so that I can then be transferred to live up to the name of my husband and his family. I feel as Hmong

women, there's a huge part of politics and image. I don't think Hmong men realize or give credit. We are the image holders. We are the goods.

Conceptualizations of Youth: Being a Young Person, Regenerating Hmongness

The catalyst in change

I think being a young person in the community, you're like a liaison between the American world and the elders. I feel like you often get stuck a lot as a young person between two worlds, between two generations. You get stuck between many personalities. I think we are often the catalyst in change, but also the keepers of our history. It's our choice. It's our decision in terms of, "Does the Hmong language survive? Does the Hmong practices survive?" I don't know how aware youth are with how much of our identity is in their hands. I think elders are keepers of tradition, but the youth plays into what happens to that because we are the catalyst.

It's my responsibility to carry our stories

My mother-daughter trio, we are so in love with incorporating our tradition into innovation because innovation and assimilating into American culture is inevitable. Historically, we have always assimilated into other cultures, so that's not something we can stop. So, when we create these modern clothing, it's not to erase our traditions, it's to bring our traditions with us constantly into the future. I think, as a young person, that's why I do the things that I do. It's because I'm doing whatever I can to hold my hand out to the past, to our history, and to our traditions, while reaching to the future. I really do experience this pull in my life, in my daily life. I feel like it's my responsibility to carry our stories into the future. Because only I, as part of the youth generation, only we can do

that. Not just me, but also all my peers. I think we all experience this pull and stretch of holding on to what has always been and making room for it in the future.

Sense of Place: Place as an Experience, Navigating the Past and Future

The noise of coins

Home to me is very much an experience. An experience of seeing people who share the same food as me. An experience of seeing people who get just as excited about getting ready for Hmong New Year, who get excited about the noise of coins. Home is very much my family when we hu plig, or family gatherings. Those little moments are home to me. It's not so much of a physical thing, but much more of an experience and an emotion.

Take up a lot of space

I really am on a journey, and sometimes, it's not a straight journey. It's a journey that goes back and forth. It goes into my past, into the history before me, and it goes into the future as well. And that's what my journey has looked like. It's going back and forth, back and forth, to create a path that I want to walk. Because of all of the identities that intersect within me—Hmong woman, Hmong American, my identity as myself, there are parts of me that are very special to me, that doesn't fall into a category or a label, being a woman in general, being the oldest daughter, being a dancer, writer, performer, storyteller, all of those things. I'm really just finding—it's not finding—I'm really just creating that space for myself. I feel like everyone spends their life taking up less space than they should. They take a lot of less space than they deserve. I think there's so much space for everyone. I think if you could take all the space that you could, I think the world would be so beautiful. That really is my journey. I want to inspire people to take up

a lot of space, to be their full potential. I can't do that by talking, I have to do that by showing. I have to walk my talk, before I talk it. And so, that's what I have discovered where I'm going. I don't know what the path looks like, but that's part of my journey.

PC

PC is a stage performer and a writer. Her writing comes in the form of writing monologues and blogs that center Hmong American identity. She is fascinated with language, especially the challenges of “learning and having to master both the English and Hmong languages.” She has researched this topic herself, conducting a study with Hmong American college students, gathering their personal narratives on language.

For my own personal reasons, PC is the only interviewee who I meet in-person to conduct the interview. Although we have mutual friends, I have never met PC before. She is curious about this study mostly because of its focus on storytelling. The questions related to gender, youth, and place are harder for her to answer; she takes a longer time to respond to questions and her responses are often convoluted, requiring me to ask follow up questions for clarification. However, as a stage performer and theater major, PC can easily articulate the meanings of storytelling and her identity as a Hmong American. She has a strong desire to weave together these two communities—theater and Hmong Americans—so that she can showcase how Hmong American stories transcend audiences.

Like so many other participants in this study, PC's grandmother plays a significant role in her life. PC associates her grandmother to storytelling and to home. Growing up, her grandmother cared for her, often putting her in front of a TV to watch a Hmong movie. PC describes these moments as learning Hmong stories—dramas,

romances, comedies, and tragedies—and connecting those stories to life-lessons, morality, and what it means to be Hmong.

Oral Tradition: Hearing Stories, Telling Stories, and Hidden Messages

Good storytellers; where I got good morals

My grandparents—I think they were good storytellers. Definitely my grandma—she likes talking about stories about us growing up, stories about being in Laos, about my mom was at my age at the time, just being a kid. And I don't know if this counts, but as someone who was in front of the TV a lot. Not only with American media, but definitely with Hmong movies. I think a lot about being at my grandparents' house. They always had the TV on, always had Hmong movies on. And being there, I was inspired.

A lot of messages from my grandma's stories were, "When your mom was your age, she did this or something." From movies, the lessons were as simple as, "Be a good person, and good things will happen" or "Don't do this or karma will happen." It was definitely from folktales, where I got good morals.

How four simple lines could impact people

I did a research project, where I wrote my own narrative. In this study, I interviewed about 16 people and I got their stories and their own personal narrative with language. How they felt growing up and being Hmong American, and learning and having to master both the English and Hmong language. Because that's something I have always struggled with and it was just something I was very curious about—how other people, other Hmong Americans felt about it.

Growing up, I've always been someone that loved hearing stories and loved to tell my own stories. And I think writing was a strong strength of mine. I submitted a short,

very short monologue. But it was very powerful, which is what I learned. It's very cool how four simple lines could impact people. I performed the piece and it was performed again by another person. And I think what drew her into the piece was that she could connect to it. Even though she's not a Hmong woman, which this piece concentrated on just being someone who is Hmong and struggles with speaking Hmong. And she is a Latino woman, but she struggles with speaking Spanish. And I think it is so cool how it came from something like it's my own problem to something that is a problem for many other people. It's just not in my community.

You're really exploring a person

If you're playing a character, you're just not really playing a character. You're really exploring a person, you're really trying to figure out why do they do. You're trying to understand this person and their situation. Last year, I performed a monologue. And it was a very personal monologue about verbal abuse. I just didn't read it off, I just didn't act it out. I really dissected this piece and tried to understand. Like where is this person? Why is she telling this story? What is this about? I think is how empowering theater is. And it felt great to perform and actually have people come up to me at the end of the show and be like, "Hey, you know, I really liked that piece and I can connect to it. It's something that has happened to me." Like that itself is very empowering. Being able to connect with people, being able to have people come up to you and open up. And as someone in the audience, theater has a lot of hidden messages. I have seen a lot of plays, a lot of venues. And something I realized is there so many messages in plays.

Gender: Being a Hmong American Woman

It's a hate-love relationship

I used to see it as a very hate relationship. But it's a hate-love relationship. But for the most part, it's love. It's a very extraordinary relationship because I'm exposed to two different cultures. And it's up to me; it's really my choice to be like, "Which one do I want? Which customs do I want to keep? Which one do I kinda want to change?" I feel that a lot Hmong American women today are moving forward. They're hardworking and innovating. I believe in just bettering myself and working together with other Hmong Americans to better our community.

I don't want to be a token or anything

I think being a Hmong American woman, it's a colorful experience. It does get hard. I acknowledge even being in certain environments because you feel like, if you're the only Hmong person, it's hard. I know there have been times when I like, "Oh my gosh, being the only Hmong woman, I don't want to be a token or anything." It's hard for me to really be me, or share my own experiences without, "Yeah, this is how all Hmong people are like."

I felt like that in some classes. Actually, being an English major, I was pretty much the only person of color at times in my English classes. I do recall in one of my final classes that students were saying that I was representing my Hmong community and what Hmong culture is. And I felt really uncomfortable, I'm not gonna lie. I disagreed with them, but they were like, "You know your people, you know your culture." And to some extent, I don't know too much because my parents were immersed in the American culture. I grew up not even speaking Hmong, in my household, with my parents.

Conceptualizations of Youth: Oh, You're So Young

There's still so much wisdom to be gained

I don't see myself as a child but I see myself as someone, who—there's still so much wisdom to be gained. I'm still very naïve and very vulnerable. I'm enthusiastic about learning. I'm happy I'm gonna learn life lessons. And that's gonna make me a better and wiser person. I joke around sometimes with my friends that I don't feel bad that I'm getting older, I'm actually very happy that I'm getting older. Because I know sometimes people look at getting older as, "Oh, I'm gonna get wrinkles and have less years to live." But I see it as, you know, becoming a wiser person.

Embedded in the Hmong community

I see the idea of young people being naïve as both just being a young person but also something that is embedded in the Hmong community. If I talk about love or about pursuing my dreams, older people say, "Oh, you're so young. It's not really like that" or "You youngsters still have a lot to learn."

Sense of Place: Home and Helping

Grandma's house

Home is a place that connects me to my childhood. I would consider my grandma's house because I see it as more of a home to me than my actual home that I'm living in. I was very young when I was in my grandma's house and that's where I stayed at a lot growing up. Both my parents worked so we had to be there. I really like being in Minnesota. I also just believe it's where I should be, where I need to be. Not only is my family here, I also feel connected to the community here and I want to help.

I just really want to work with my community

My future is not a clear path. And I think because it's not a clear path, that frightens my parents for sure, and I think the people around me. Cause part of it is in our

society, we believe that we need to know what we're gonna do, we have to have a plan. And I like plans, but I'm just a very flexible person. I really do believe that life will take me where it will take me. And of course, I will be doing something and it's not just that I'm gonna let opportunities find me. I'm definitely gonna find those opportunities too.

As of right now, I just really want to work with my community. I'm with the theater company because I want to bring more diverse audiences to the theater or somehow attract more people of color to be interested in attending shows or being involved with the shows, or maybe having collaborations of some sort.

I feel really conflicted in the Hmong community, with my college degree, and just the fact that I'm choosing not to do a very traditional occupation. Like I'm not going into the sciences or not quite going into teaching, even though it's possibly something I am interested in. I am still discovering myself. And I personally feel like maybe the idea of discovering yourself and just taking your time to do that is still something Hmong parents and Hmong elders don't really want you to do.

PY

Of all the participants in this study, PY's paid work is to be a storyteller. She works on a podcast for a local university. She interviews, researches, records, and mixes these stories, which are then broadcasted online through the university's website. PY notes how the process of learning stories as an outsider makes her much more aware of the stories from her own community. She has a desire to record her elders' stories in a manner very much like the work she is doing now. Her desire is fueled by her belief that more and more Hmong American youth are "turning away" from their stories and culture.

PY is majoring in biology with a minor in English. The decision to do both, as she shares below, was to find a balance between the expectations of her parents (they want her to be a doctor) and to fulfil her own desires to be creative. She describes her studies in biology as her “logical” side, and she describes her love for words and stories as her “illogical” side.

Oral Tradition: I Wanted To Do Something with Writing

To appease my parents

My original intent was to just study biology to appease my parents because Hmong parents are like, “Become a doctor. Become a lawyer.” But during my senior year, I really got into slam poetry. So, I wanted to do something with writing and storytelling whether it be my story or telling other people’s story. So, that’s where the English minor came from. That English minor was me, trying to find my inner self.

Outsider looking in; oral tradition

I’m currently co-producing a podcast. I’m telling the story of others so I’m writing it as if I was an outsider looking in, which is what I am, but I’m trying to tell the story of these women and how they have impacted the community around them. By researching and learning about these women, I also learn more about myself and what I want to do with my future career path. I’m learning what is storytelling and how important storytelling is to me.

I only just started as their producer in January, so I’m still learning a lot of new things in regards to writing the story, recording my story, and then mixing it with music and background noises. But that’s something that’s so important because there is

something special when you only have audio and you have to tell a story through audio because that's how our grandparents and our parents have told us stories.

Niam tais and yawv txiv (maternal grandmother and grandfather); turning away

As a child I grew up with my niam tais and yawv txiv. They told me a lot of dab neeg. Every night it would be a new one or it would be a repeat of the same one for hours on end before we knocked out but that's how I learned the Hmong language.

I think when I was little, I didn't realize that they were telling me their life stories but now as I've grown older and I've listened more to them, they do a mix of dab neeg and a mix of their own life story. And for my future career path, I want to capture these moments and the stories from my grandparents and my parents and all the elders in the Hmong community. They all have stories that should be kept especially now that our Hmong people are slowly turning away from our community and the culture.

Gender: Individualism, Collectivism, and Patriarchy

A lot of push and pull

I feel like I'm freer in thought compared to my mother and my grandmother only because I've grown up in the US and I have the influence of Western individualism. But I also hold tight to collectivism in Hmong culture. It's a lot of push and pull, and I still struggle right now to tell my mother and grandmother what I truly want because they still have a mindset of "a woman can only do so much."

I get told that I am going to be a housewife because I'm a daughter or "You have to follow these rules because you're a daughter." But I also have the teaching of my mother and my grandmother saying that there is a problem in our community, there is a lot of sexism that goes around. So, they are always discouraging me to get a boyfriend.

They want me to focus on my education and find a stable job so that don't have to live the life that they've lived.

They've given me two plates

My father and grandfathers are the most prominent characters who have continued to strive for that patriarchy. So, they encourage me to continue the traditional route, but they also do have the message of focusing on my education as well. So, it's almost like they've given me two plates to work from, and to make sure I balance both, but also try to prioritize one plate over the other. So, it's a confusing message, but I think the general message is to be a good Hmong daughter, I have to be a good housewife, and I have to look up to my husband if I were to get married.

Conceptualizations of Youth: To Be Ib Tug Hluas (A Young Person)

This walking ghost

I think to be ib tug hluas in Hmong is to have a lot on your plate because you are held by the expectations of your family as well as the expectations from the outside, where it is more individualistic. It's a constant push and pull because you have so many influences that you kinda get lost and it takes a while before you can find yourself. If you were to ever find yourself. Because I'm aware that some people never find themselves, and they just become this walking ghost, trying to figure out who they really are. And so, to be ib tug hluas in the Hmong community is to be someone with a lot of struggles but also to be someone, I hope, with a lot of love for the world so that they can make changes to the environment that they live in and to the community that they love.

A part of me wants the protection, the overlooking

I still see myself as *ib tug hluas*, but sometimes I see myself as almost a child because there is a part of me that wants the protection, the overlooking from my parents and the elders. Just to know that I'm on the right track. But there's also moments where I'm like, "I know what I want and I want this. And I want you guys to back up." So, to be *ib tug hluas*, is to know my roots, to know where I come from, and to appreciate that but also to challenge when needed.

Sense of place: Where I am most comfortable

People who looked like me

To me home is ultimately where my family is because I have such a tight tie back to my family, but I think home is also where I am most comfortable being who I am. I say this because my family and I moved to Virginia where we were the only Hmong family in that state because my father had to go to school. But that didn't feel like home because I had no one I could go to and say, "This is my struggle, and I would like help." So, I felt like going to Virginia wasn't home even though I had my family, but coming back to Minnesota was home because I saw people who looked like me. And I also saw people who did not look like me, but they understood where I came from.

"Adult"

I think even though home is where family is, and that might be Minnesota, but I would like to see the world around me. I want to live on the coast somewhere just to separate myself from family, live away from family, so that I can "adult"—for a lack of a better term.

T

I meet T a number of times before we actually set a time for the interview. Unlike the other interviewees, T is not originally from the Minnesota. She is a student, who reluctantly came to Minnesota, and then found a sense of place among the large Hmong community in the Twin Cities. As she explains, she found a new sense of appreciation for her own identity and her form of storytelling—lug txaj (folk songs).

I actually have the opportunity to see T perform live. The lug txaj which she performs is about how Hmong fled Southeast Asia and were relocated throughout the world. She sings about how Hmong have struggled and persevered. Her performance moves many in the audience to tears, including me. I do not know why others are crying—perhaps they remember when they fled into the jungles or arrived in a new country or perhaps they know this is their parents' story. T tells me these are the kinds of stories and songs she likes to tell and sing because they are so essential to the Hmong story—struggle and perseverance, hardships and overcoming, leaving and finding home.

Her experience, particularly as a child, is complex. I am not sure if T completely understands or knows all of the details, especially since those experiences happened when she was little, but she has come to interpret them in a way that those experiences seem to have come full circle—her appreciation for lug txaj, her relationship with her parents, and her sense of place.

Oral Tradition: The Way I Learn Lug Txaj (Folk Song)

Niam tais (maternal grandmother)

I spent more time with my niam tais so that's how I started to get exposed to lug txaj. I heard my mom sing it during Hmong New Year. My grandma's sisters, they all sing it. She has three sisters and two brothers who all sing lug txaj. They sing at parties

and New Year. Back in Laos, one of them used to sing on the radio. Another one was in a pageant. That was her talent too, and it helped her win.

The way I learn lug txaj—it's different from the way my grandmothers and the older people probably learned it. Back in Laos, they would go to the garden and just start singing and practicing. They would learn through just listening to it. For me, I don't learn that way. I can listen to it, but I'm also a visual person, so I have to write it down. When I first started out, I would just listen to other singers and write down all of the words. But then I also listened to it over and over again. Then my mom and my dad would correct me if I didn't pronounce it right, and then if I didn't understand a word, they would explain it to me. As I started singing more and more, I can't just try to memorize it. I took the initiative to learn the meaning of the words. When I got more serious, I went to my niam tais and asked her to teach me. I would go over with my recorder and tell her that I want to learn a lug txag.

Sometimes, if it's a hard lug txaj, my grandmother would speak it. She would say it and recite it like words, like talking. So, she would say the words, and I would repeat the words after her. And that's how I really learned it. Learn the words, repeat after her. Once I have the words down and their meanings, I would cuab lub suab (*find the melody*) and sing it. But sometimes, I think for me, it's hard because I was born in the US. Sometimes, I write it, and I would ask my mom to sing it so I can hear it. Sometimes, she can't figure it out too. So, we work together. Sometimes I add other words to make it sound better as a song.

Only old ladies sing that

I didn't really fit in with the Hmong people where I grew up because they were very traditional, and I wasn't like that. And I grew up Christian. And a lot of the Hmong people there, they are still practicing shamanism. They had different things that they wanted to do, different interests. A lot of them got married young. Out of the nine Hmong girls that I went to school with, there's only three of us that didn't get married. So, I just never got along with them even though we were classmates. I didn't interact much with Hmong people. It wasn't until I got to Minnesota that I started to embrace who I was.

Back at home, I sang lug txaj as a little kid but then I stopped singing lug txaj because people made fun of me. And it was Hmong people. They would say, "That is so weird. Only old ladies sing that." And that really discouraged me. You know, I loved what I really loved to do. My mom did it, my grandma did it and her whole family did it. It really put me down. It wasn't until middle school that my aunt asked me to sing lug txaj for my grandparents' party. I did it for my grandma. I just did it for her. Then, I realized that I really loved it. I shouldn't let people discourage me. When people hear me sing it, they tell me, "Oh my God, you could pass for an old lady. Or someone who just came from Thailand or Laos. It doesn't sound like a Hmong Mes Kas (*Hmong American*) kid." But Minnesota changed me. I met people who accepted being Hmong and having a Hmong identity, and that really motivated me to learn more about my culture and myself, and my true identity of being Hmong.

I compare it to William Shakespeare; my favorite lug txaj

In lug txaj, there are words that rhyme. I compare it to William Shakespeare's poetry. There's a rhyme scheme like certain words would rhyme, and my niam tais would explain that this word rhymes with this word. As long as you have this word memorized,

you should be good. It's getting harder to learn because my grandmas are getting older and starting to forget the template. It's getting harder for them to remember the rhyme scheme.

It's important for me, when I sing, that people connect to it. It's harder for young people, but if I can portray the emotions through my voice and they connect to it, that means a lot to me. There's a variety of lug txaj that you can sing such as weddings, for dating, New Year, ones for famous people, funerals, lug txaj ntsuag (*orphan folk songs*).

One of my favorites was one that I sang for my cousin when she won Ms. Hmong. In that one, that was a hard one to learn because the words in that one aren't used in everyday language. It was a lot of hard words that I've never heard before—words specifically for lug txaj that wouldn't translate in regular Hmong language. That was very hard for me, but it helped me learn lug txaj, and it made the story more meaningful for me. The song was about her and how her parents raised her. There's so many metaphors. Those poetic elements make it really interesting for me too. There's a part about how every time she walks in her shoes that everyone can hear her footsteps and they all look to her; that she's so smart, that she's able to translate books of the great Chinese people; and that every time she walks on stage, everyone is going to look to her. In the future, she's going to be an important figure and everyone is going to look to her to create change.

Another one of my favorites was about a parent's love for you. It talks about the beginning when she was in her mother's womb, and how excited her parents were and anticipated her birth. There's one metaphor; if all her mom ate was just rice and water, it still tasted so sweet because her mom was so happy that she would have a daughter. Her

dad was so happy that one day he would have a daughter to hold. At the end, it goes through the journey from being in the womb to when she comes out and grows up. She's thankful for her parents and their love, and that she will do whatever she can to support them, love them, so that they could live for as long as they can.

There's another one about tsiv teb tsiv chaws (*leaving your homeland*). I try to understand the feelings of a girl living in Laos and coming to the US and missing her family. Those feelings of being in the war. Those feelings, I really do try to understand it as best as I can so I can convey those feelings to the audience. Hopefully, touch them and re-awaken their memories too.

Gender: I'm Still Learning About What It Means To Be a Hmong Woman

The only daughter

When I was growing up, I was pretty spoiled because I was the only daughter. I didn't have to do things that Hmong girls typically have to do. I didn't get along with my mother well. My mom is significantly younger than my dad. My dad is 15 years older than her. He's been married before. So, I guess when she had me, she was young like 18 years old. And my dad was much older so he had kids and knew how to take care of me. So, I spent more time with him and because of that, I think that I had the luxury of not having to kill chickens or I didn't have to do dishes all the time or go help other people. My dad would tell people that I didn't have to do that, and he would go and do it for me or my grandpas would do it. They would tell me that I didn't have to wash the dishes or that I didn't have to cook, and my mom would tell my dad that I would have to do it because I was a girl.

It wasn't until I got older that I realized I had to learn those things, not because I was a girl but because my mom was trying to help me so that when I'm on my own, I can cook for myself and take care of myself. So, I think growing up, I didn't recognize difference in treatment in terms of what it means to be a woman or a man. Growing up, my dad cooked and cleaned too. It wasn't like my mom did everything herself. In high school, when I would go over to other girls' house, that's when I noticed those differences. My friend would have to wash dishes, and I wondered why she couldn't just hang out and talk to me. So, she would be washing dishes and her dad would just be sitting. It opened my eyes to gender roles. Also, my friends would comment things to me that it's so weird that you and your parents talk like you're friends. I didn't realize that until I was exposed to the families of my more traditional friends.

I think when I was younger, I hated my mom

Everything I learned, I learned from my dad because my mom was away. But if she was home, she didn't know how to interact with me. She was young herself. She didn't really have many siblings. I spent more time with my dad so kuv ncawg kuv txiv more (*I am closer to my dad more*). I think when I was younger, I hated my mom because she really didn't talk to me. It wasn't until I was in middle school that I started to hang out with my mom more. When you get to that age, it's weird you're with your dad more. My grandmas would make comments like, "You shouldn't be with your dad so much because Hmong people will say stuff." My dad would play tennis with me and we didn't have an awkward relationship. I didn't care and my dad didn't care. I'm his daughter. But I think it started to get weird when I would see Hmong guys that are my dad's age marrying Hmong girls that are my age from Laos. That made me realize that I probably

shouldn't be with my dad all the time like that in public. But I don't really care because this is America, and he's my dad and I love him. I mean my relationship with my mother is better now but when I was younger, I was always with my dad. I had lots of boy cousins. I was like a tom boy. I played sports. I was rough. I didn't really talk to my mom ever. And I didn't even let her touch my hair. Only my dad and my grandpa could put my hair up for me. I didn't let her do anything.

It opened my eyes to sexism

I'm still learning about what it means to a Hmong woman. When I first started college, I wanted to be a lawyer, but my dad didn't like that idea. My cousin was a lawyer and she later became a judge. He heard stories about how hard it was to be a woman and a minority and working in that field. He told me, "No, I don't want you to be a lawyer." He told me that he didn't want me to experience that hardship of working in that field when it's dominated by white men. I think my dad knows that I'm a strong person, but I can be sensitive too. He said, "I don't want you to go through that." It opened my eyes to sexism.

My grandparents only have my mom and her sister, and they're both adopted. They don't have any sons. As my grandparents have gotten older, they have said things that are hurtful to my mom. They would cry to other people and say, "We don't have any kids, we don't have any sons." And my mom was right there. How could they say that? I didn't even know my mom was adopted until I was 16 years old. We were going to Hong Kong and China, and that's when my mom told me. People at school knew and they told me, "Yeah, you know your mom is adopted." I didn't even know. I guess my grandparents would say those types of things, and I noticed that my mom was treated

differently because not only is she adopted but she's not a son. She's a daughter, and she can't carry on their name. It really made me mad. It opened my eyes to the sexism that is prevalent in our culture. That really changed me. I love my grandparents, even though they're not my real grandparents. I see them as my real grandparents, they raised me. I sometimes called them my parents because my parents were working. They lived with us so they took care of us. They raised us. I don't treat them differently, but those hurtful things they said to my parents really hurt my mom and it hurt me too.

Conceptualizations of Youth: Being Young

It's hard to do the family stuff and the Hmong stuff

Being young is complicated. There's a lot of expectations. My grandparents expect me to speak Hmong all the time, to have perfect Hmong. They tell me, "You have to speak Hmong and keep your language." And there's the fact that I have to go to school and speak English. Hmong was my first language. I didn't learn how to speak English until I went to preschool. There were no Hmong kids, just white kids. That's when I was forced to learn English. There's this conflict of being American, becoming more mainstream, and then embracing and keeping the Hmong aspect with our language and learning more about our culture. Sometimes that's difficult. My parents tell me to get a college degree and do all of these things. I go to all of these family things and help out. They don't understand because I have to do homework. Like, there was a funeral. I had to do an essay. It was due on the next day. And my dad said, "You know, you shouldn't say you have homework all the time when there's a funeral. Because when it comes to your funeral, someone is going say that to you if you keep doing that." It's hard to do the

family stuff and Hmong stuff because I'm also American and I try to be part of American culture too.

Sometimes I feel like an older person

When I was young, I would walk around the school playground and sing lug txaj to myself. I thought it was cool, especially because my aunts would pay me to sing it. They thought it was so cute, so they would give me money. But the other Hmong kids would ask me, "Why do you sing that?" People would ask me, "Do you even understand it?" And I do understand it. To me, it's the Hmong language. It's just regular words to me. To them, when they hear it, like my brothers, who don't speak Hmong, they say it sounds Chinese. But to me, it just sounds like regular Hmong language. Sometimes I feel like an older person because I understand it. Whereas some young people, who do sing it, sometimes they just sing it without understanding it. But in order to really sing it, you have to understand it. It's an art. It's not something you memorize.

Sense of Place: Maintaining My Hmong Language and Identity

That place is my home because of my grandparents

Where my family lives now is my home. That's where I grew as an individual. That's where I really connected with my mom's parents. They raised me and my brothers and my cousins too. And that's why I was interested in lug txaj because I was with them, and I only spoke Hmong with them. That's what helped me keep and maintain my Hmong language and identity. I would say that place is my home because of my grandparents. They did everything for us. We moved from where I was born to go live with them. And that's probably something that's looked down on in the Hmong culture because a son-in-law probably wouldn't move in with his in-laws. But my dad wasn't

narrow-minded. My dad made that sacrifice because my [maternal] grandparents could help to take care of us.

“Minnesota nice”

Going to Minnesota really changed me. I view Minnesota as my second home because I met great people. Everyone was so friendly—like you say “Minnesota nice.” All of the grandmas and grandpas—they were really friendly. I didn’t always get that at home. The Hmong people are different in Minnesota. In the future, I could picture myself living in Minnesota. Once I’m done with school, I’ll figure out the rest.

Part II: Shared Experiences

Hmong Oral Traditions

The Stories We Hear, See, Learn, and Feel

One common theme of Hmong oral traditions is that grandparents played a significant role in sharing and teaching Hmong oral traditions (Thao, 2006). Several participants in this study identified grandparents as some of the earliest storytellers with whom they interacted. PY shared, “As a child I grew up with my niam tais and yawv txiv (maternal grandparents). They told me a lot of dab neeg (folk stories).” The experience of growing up with grandparents as caretakers was shared among several participants; some even shared that their grandparents lived with them in the same home. Multigenerational households are not uncommon among immigrant and refugee families, particularly Hmong Americans. These intergenerational interactions can be viewed as strengths of a family system (Detzner, Senyurekli, Yang, & Sheikh, 2009).

Whereas the presence of grandparents was synonymous with dab neeg, an absence of grandparents had a different meaning. MV made the following connection:

My dad is an orphan, so you know in the Hmong tradition you do not live with your [maternal] grandparents, you live with your [paternal] grandparents in the same household. We do not have [paternal] grandparents so we never heard stories. And my dad because he didn't grow up like hearing stories, so he didn't have dab neeg to tell us and then my mom did not have dab neeg to tell us too. So, we did not hear any stories growing up.

MV's experience without paternal grandparents support the notion that intergenerational interactions are important in the sharing of oral traditions.

In their interviews with me, the participants described two kinds of oral stories—dab neeg (folk stories) and stories about real people and their lives. PY added, “I think when I was little, I didn't realize that [my grandparents] were telling me their life stories but now as I've grown older and I've listened more to them, they do a mix of dab neeg and a mix of their own life story.” The dab neeg told range from stories of how the world was created to orphan folktales to ghost stories. C told me Hmong ghost stories resonated with her so much more than non-Hmong stories. C said,

I think the mystical idea of spirits and ancestors, things you just can't see, it has an influence in my life. And hearing ghost stories and experiencing it myself, it makes it a real part of my life. Whereas, ogres and clowns, the boogeyman, things like that don't scare me. I think they're very boring. But if you imagine a ghost with long hair in the corner, that freaks me out. Because one, I have personal experiences with things like that. Two, it's part of my religion. Three, it's part of what's very common in the Hmong community.

For C and many others in this study, hearing stories where she could identify herself is an important experience to her as a listener.

With regard to life stories, participants described the many kinds of life stories they heard. N shared, “Stories have always been very important in our family in terms of knowing who we are, where we're from, what our family has done and been through, the tragedies, the triumphs. Remembering people. A lot of those things, my parents are

always storytelling, whether it's about their life in Laos or in the refugee camp or going through the war. Or our ancestors, or our relatives who are no longer with us, the lives they lived." MY added, "My mom told stories about her life, when there was suffering, when she worked hard to help her parents in the fields." Similarly, PC told me, "Definitely my grandma—she likes talking about stories about us growing up, stories about being in Laos, about my mom was at my age at the time, just being a kid." The life stories invoke memories, emotions, and experiences.

Many of these life stories focused on the experiences of war and have had a profound impact on participants. C shared, "My grandmother would tell stories about the war, what it was like. But I think being like a child, 13, 14, 15, hearing about war, and hearing about the way bombs would hurt and kill people, that was very traumatizing to me. When I listened, I was very afraid. So, I don't think I knew I was afraid, but inside I was afraid. I would just detach from the story."

Besides folk stories, participants described other oral tradition practices, including lug txaj (folk song) and paj ntaub (embroidery). T shared that singing lug txaj allowed her to draw on metaphors to "re-awaken memories." Her lug txaj has conveyed the pride of new parents, the intelligence of a Hmong woman, and the emotions of tsiv teb tsiv chaws (leaving your homeland). T described an intricate process of learning a lug txaj: developing the story or messages she wanted to express, consulting her grandmother, writing the lug txaj, learning what each word meant, making changes to the lug txaj, and finally, finding the right melody. With regard to paj ntaub, MV described the process of choosing patterns and colorful thread to express creativity and to create something that was visually appealing. MV expressed a desire to learn more about paj ntaub, sharing, "I

don't know a lot about paj ntaub but according to the research, the designs have meaning. But I don't know what those meanings are.”

Another theme was the purposes of oral traditions. While participants described different forms of oral tradition, all the forms have shared purposes. Storytelling provides life lessons for participants. PC shared that whether it was her grandmother who told her folk stories or watching folk stories adapted into film, there was a lesson. “From movies, the lessons were as simple as, ‘Be a good person, and good things will happen’ or ‘Don’t do this or karma will happen.’ It was definitely from folktales, where I got good morals.” Likewise, MY had a similar experience, noting, “When I was younger, my mom was afraid that we would grow up to be bad people so she would tell us about the suffering in her life so that we would be good people.”

Oral tradition is also a way to learn and preserve Hmong language and aspects of Hmong culture (Thao, 2006). PY shared, “Every night it would be a new [story] or it would be a repeat of the same one for hours on end before we knocked out but that’s how I learned the Hmong language.”

Lastly, several participants found engaging in storytelling and oral traditions as a way to de-stress or cope with challenging life experiences. MV told me, “I have never embroidered something to wear or to sell, but I embroider to de-stress. I see other people’s beautiful embroidery and designs so I use the same design. Other people have beautiful designs, bright colors, visually appealing. I think it’s also the repetition of the sewing movement. And you’re using all of these colorful threads. You have to decide what color thread you will use. You have the option to change it up and be creative. Similarly, MY said, “I didn’t start singing until after I graduated from high school. I sing

every day now. Singing is my therapy. Singing is like my go-to stress reliever.” MY also described listening to contemporary Hmong music to cope with challenges. She added, “I listen to love songs or sad love songs or other inspirational songs. For example, listening to Hmong music or the classic songs where the father does not love the mother. I love listening to those songs. It really relates to my mom’s life, and so, I would listen to that because those songs really voice my mom’s life story.” The kinds of stories that participants in this study have heard spread across a wide spectrum of genres and experiences. The role of Hmong oral traditions serve a purpose in the preservation of histories, culture, and language, and is the foundation and motivation for the storytellers in this study to engage in their own storytelling practices.

The Stories We Tell

Many participants described the significance of hearing stories which resonated with their identities and experiences. As storytellers themselves, many participants also spoke to the importance of creating and sharing stories aimed at generating resonance among their listeners. For example, C shared why hearing Hmong ghost stories resonated with her. So much so, she started compiling Hmong ghost stories. She said, “When I was starting college, I realized the power in retelling ghost stories. So, I would listen to stories on YouTube or Facebook, and I would go to my younger cousins’ house...I would push all the kids into the basement and piav dab neeg rau lawv (*tell stories to them*). So that’s what I’ve been doing recently is collecting ghost stories.” C described experiences with the supernatural as a common experience within the Hmong community, thus ghost stories resonated so much more with her and her audience.

Similarly, N described her own storytelling process of sharing personal experiences that resonated with a Hmong American audience. She is especially interested in telling stories that “pushes people to be comfortable with their vulnerability,” noting that among Hmong Americans, there is a strong desire to “save face.”

PC and PY have told stories with a broader audience in mind, sharing experiences that resonated with people beyond Hmong American communities. PC recounted one particular experience of writing and performing a monologue about the challenges of speaking Hmong. She said,

I performed the piece and it was performed again by another person. And I think what drew her into the piece was that she could connect to it. Even though she’s not a Hmong woman, which this piece concentrated on just being someone who is Hmong and struggles with speaking Hmong. And she is a Latino woman, but she struggles with speaking Spanish. And I think it is so cool how it came from something like it’s my own problem to something that is a problem for many other people. It’s just not in my community.

PY produces podcasts about impactful women for an audience outside of Hmong American communities. However, the individuals whom she interviews and the stories they tell transcend demographics like race and ethnicity and age. PY shared, “By researching and learning about these women, I also learn more about myself.”

For L and MY, they are much more interested in conveying feelings and inspiring others through their storytelling. L said of her drawings of women, “It’s open to interpretation. There’s a bit of mystery to her and most of it is conveying a feeling of peace and serenity.” MY told me, “The first two songs I completed were inspirational songs. And it comes from experiences where there is stress. The first one I named it “Kev Nyuaj Siab.” And the second one is “Ua Siab Loj.” In the future, I want to write more songs about life in general like your parents do not know how to love one another and

how that affects children and how they don't realize that." The kinds of stories that the participants in the study share often reflect their own experiences, emotions, fears, and desires.

Gender

The Messages We Receive

One shared experience among participants was related to the mixed messages and emotions related to being a Hmong woman. Both PC and C described being a Hmong woman as a love-hate relationship, noting the sexism that exists in Hmong communities and wider society, and yet appreciating the progress and achievements of Hmong American women. PY described her experience of being a Hmong woman in two ways: first, as a pull and pull, and second, as being given two plates, saying, "So, [my parents] encourage me to continue the traditional route, but they also do have the message of focusing on my education as well. So, it's almost like they've given me two plates to work from, and to make sure I balance both, but also try to prioritize one plate over the other. So, it's a confusing message..." Likewise, N told me,

But I find it interesting that the things that hold the Hmong community back, those still remain for me as a Hmong woman. But those don't remain the same for my brother as a Hmong man. Even though my household is progressive, and I am pursuing an education, and doing things that other Hmong girls, traditionally, couldn't do, I still face traditional things that are centuries old. Like making sure my hair is not blonde, making sure I don't have tattoos all over my body. I'm not covered in piercings and that I'm wearing the appropriate clothes at the appropriate times. That I know when to serve, when to keep quiet, when to be obedient. Even at the cost of my own comfort. Being polite, especially to Hmong men, knowing my place in family gatherings and events to the point where patriarchy is so much in my body that sometimes I can't differentiate if I know my manners or I'm disrespecting myself.

N added that she felt bound up as if she was “constantly pushing the limits and boundaries every day of my life.” These mixed messages are often challenging to make sense of, and several participants spoke to the pressures, confusion, and even weariness of being a Hmong woman while at the same time, sharing the resilience, the sisterhood, and the strides Hmong American women have made.

Another common message that participants have received is the expectation to be silent. C shared a poignant story of asking her grandmother about a traditional spirit calling ritual. After multiple questions, C’s grandmother responded, “Why do you ask all these questions?” C told me, “I was like, I don’t know. Because this is how we were taught how to ask questions in school. Like how to critically ask questions so that we understand it. I find myself in settings where I want to learn, where I’m eager to learn but there’s a resistance to the learning.” Silencing can also manifest as self-silencing, in which individuals silence themselves. N shared a story of her mother, who did not want to be publicly acknowledged as part of her fashion design team. N said, “That was one of our big steps, acknowledging my mom as part of the team. And giving my mom encouragement and empowering her to find her own person and individuality.” These stories speak to the ways that Hmong women unknowingly perpetuate internalized sexism.

Our Responsibilities

One shared experience that many of the participants discuss is the wide-range of responsibilities placed on Hmong American women. Two major responsibilities that participants discussed were marriage and education. For example, L told me, “I noticed my parents didn’t verbally tell us you have to get married, but I just know that they’re

thinking about it. So, I feel this anxiety or pressure. I have older siblings, who are not married. So, I don't want to disappoint my parents." The participants shared that these messages to marry were both overt and subtle. The participants heard these messages from elders, parents, and the wider Hmong community. The messages were often unplanned, occurring at a family gathering, preparing a meal, or driving in the car together. MY, who graduated from college, told me a story of being around male elders at a gathering, saying, "They always expect you to like marry or get into a relationship and have kids. And that's success for them. And that pressure builds fear too. That when you get older, there might not be someone there to take care of you." These seemingly innocuous conversations and questions often lead to and build on the immense pressure that Hmong American women experience.

The messages around education were very much overt. MV told me that the pressure to go to college was felt by both her and her brothers. MV said, "Women or men, my parents would push us to study. There was not this idea that you are a daughter, you are going to get married. They expected us all to go to college. I think the biggest problem for them is finances. If I was going to live on campus, as long as I found scholarships and money to pay for everything then they were okay." And while there is a desire to go to college to satisfy their parents' wishes, there is also oftentimes other emotions. MY shared a poignant story of being the first to attend college, saying,

A lot of people were proud of me, especially my uncles and my aunts. My parents were proud of me. I wasn't so proud of myself though because I felt like I was leaving my family behind when going to college. I felt like I was moving on forward whereas my family was not. I was really sad. I wasn't proud of myself. I always have this guilty feeling that I wasn't able to pull my family with me. And I'm like going forward, and thinking, I don't think this is fair.

As demonstrated by the stories above, the great amount of pressure placed on Hmong American women related to marriage and education can have unintended consequences, resulting in anxiety, fear, shame.

MV's story about her parents' emphasis on education over marriage demonstrates the discourse on marriage and education in which marriage and education are often at odds. PY shared a situation in which her elders discouraged early marriage, saying, "I get told that I am going to be a housewife because I'm a daughter or "You have to follow these rules because you're a daughter." But I also have the teaching of my mother and my grandmother saying that there is a problem in our community, there is a lot of sexism that goes around. So, they are always discouraging me to get a boyfriend. They want me to focus on my education and find a stable job so that don't have to live the life that they've lived." Likewise, N described a situation in which her parents discussed her future, encouraging her to do well in school and to pursue a career. However, that conversation quickly shifted, and N shared, "And then sometimes, it switches over to focus on marrying well. 'As long as your husband is successful, you are successful.'" While Hmong have resettled in the US for over 40 years, these stories demonstrate the shifting expectations among Hmong American communities as they continue to struggle with evolving ideas, expectations, and identities.

Intersectionality

One of the most interesting themes of gender highlights the intersectionality of gender and other identities among participants. C best described it, saying,

So, I come from a family where we do not have a father. I come from a family where I was born in Thailand. Where my mom has remarried multiple times. Where my seven siblings, we come from three different fathers. So, there's being a young Hmong woman, and then there's being a

young Hmong woman with all of these things happening at the same time. I think it's hard to just speak about being a young woman and to exclude all of these parts from my life.

More specifically, C discussed being in an interracial relationship and the challenges that exists for her, especially the tension her relationship has created between C and her mother. She wondered if she were a white woman in a different community, would she experience the same challenges from her mother? Likewise, MV, who resettled in the US as a young child, told me, "So, because we were resettled in America, I wonder if that's why my parents wanted us to only go to school...If we still lived over there [in Thailand], then we would not have the opportunity to go to school. So, maybe we would be married with children already." These wonderings speak to the intersecting identities of Hmong American women, including being Hmong, being a woman, and being a refugee.

T's experience as the only daughter in her family have greatly shaped her identity as a Hmong American woman. She described a very different experience than most participants, sharing that she is still learning what it means to be a Hmong woman. Growing up, T was particularly close with her father, and he had always been very protective of her. T told me that her father dissuaded her from pursuing a career as an attorney because he had heard about the racism and sexism women of color experience in that field. T said, "He told me he didn't want me to experience that hardship of working in that field when it's dominated by white men." Similarly, for PC and her experience in theater, racism and sexism can manifested in the form of tokenism. PC told me, "I acknowledge even being in certain environments because you feel like, if you're the only Hmong person, it's hard. I know there have been times when I like, "Oh my gosh, being the only Hmong woman, I don't want to be a token or anything." It's hard for me to

really be me, or share my own experiences without, “Yeah, this is how all Hmong people are like.” These stories illustrate the intersectionality of Hmong American women’s experiences and the need for more nuanced understandings of these experiences.

Conceptualizations of Youth

Feeling Old

Most participants defined *ib tug hluas* (a young person) in the Hmong community as someone who is not yet married. Some defined *ib tug hluas* in terms of context. For example, if you were among elders, you might be considered *ib tug hluas*, but if you were among young children, you might not be considered *ib tug hluas*. Others defined *ib tug hluas* using two similar phrases: someone who *paub tab* or someone who *paub qab hau*. *Paub tab* is loosely interpreted as mature and *paub qab hau* is loosely interpreted as to know better or to be wise. While all of the participants in this study were not married, when asked if they considered themselves as *ib tug hluas*, the responses were mixed. Several shared that although they were not married, the expectations, responsibilities, and different life experiences have resulted in them considering themselves as individuals who *paub tab* or *paub qab hau*. Some even described themselves as “feeling old” or “feeling like a granny.” T told me when she was a young child and started to learn and sing *lug txaj*, which is a skill and knowledge many associate with older Hmong individuals, she was often teased by other children. She told me,

Back at home, I sang *lug txaj* as a little kid but then I stopped singing *lug txaj* because people made fun of me. And it was Hmong people. They would say, “That is so weird. Only old ladies sing that.” And that really discouraged me. You know, I loved what I really loved to do. My mom did it, my grandma did it and her whole family did it. It really put me down. It wasn’t until middle school that my aunt asked me to sing *lug txaj* for my grandparents’ party. I did it for my grandma. I just did it for her. Then, I realized that I really loved it. I shouldn’t let people discourage me.

When people hear me sing it, they tell me, “Oh my God, you could pass for an old lady.

Similarly, MY shared a powerful example of how life experiences and family responsibilities can shape individuals. MY said, “Personally, I know I am young, but I feel old. I think it’s due to all the experiences that you always take on an older person’s mentality. I feel old, but physically, I’m young. Maybe the feeling matters more.” For the participants in this study, their conceptualizations of youth are much more related to experience and emotion rather than a numerical age. These conceptualizations better reflect their lived experiences and are more closely aligned with some cultural understandings of youth.

Expectations and Responsibilities

Among participants, one shared experience as a young Hmong person is the great amount of expectations placed on them. As one might imagine, the weight of these responsibilities can create stress. PY described it as a constant push and pull between her role in the Hmong community and her role in the wider community. T shared the following challenges when asked how these responsibilities impact her, saying,

Being young is complicated. There’s a lot of expectations. My grandparents expect me to speak Hmong all the time, to have perfect Hmong. They tell me, “You have to speak Hmong and keep your language.” And there’s the fact that I have to go to school and speak English... There’s this conflict of being American, becoming more mainstream, and then embracing and keeping the Hmong aspect with our language and learning more about our culture. Sometimes that’s difficult. My parents tell me to get a college degree and do all of these things. I go to all of these family things and help out. They don’t understand because I have to do homework. Like, there was a funeral. I had to do an essay. It was due on the next day. And my dad said, “You know, you shouldn’t say you have homework all the time when there’s a funeral. Because when it comes to your funeral, someone is going say [I have an essay] to you if you keep doing that.”

Others, however, had a strong sense of pride with regard to these responsibilities. N described her experience as a young Hmong person as a liaison between the Hmong community and the wider community. N is a fashion designer, and she responded with the following when asked about storytelling and being a young person,

So, when we create these modern clothing, it's not to erase our traditions, it's to bring our traditions with us constantly into the future. I think, as a young person, that's why I do the things that I do. It's because I'm doing whatever I can to hold my hand out to the past, to our history, and to our traditions, while reaching to the future. I really do experience this pull in my life, in my daily life. I feel like it's my responsibility to carry our stories into the future. Because only I, as part of the youth generation, only we can do that. Not just me, but also all my peers. I think we all experience this pull and stretch of holding on to what has always been and making room for it in the future.

These differing views illustrate the nuances of making sense of young people's experiences in Hmong communities. They offer glimpses of how young people negotiate expectations, identities, and realities.

While there are great expectations for young Hmong American women, there are also instances of great challenges or pain as a young person. L put it best when she described what it meant to be a young person, saying, "Most of the time, young people have to listen to those who are older than them. Like older siblings or adults; you have to be very respectful. Like you have to hold your tongue..." Likewise, PC told me that the challenging experiences that young Hmong American people have in Hmong communities is "something that is embedded in the Hmong community. If I talk about love or about pursuing my dreams, older people say, "Oh, you're so young. It's not really like that" or "You youngsters still have a lot to learn." This dismissal, based on age, perceived lack of experience, or marital status can have a hurtful impact. C shared her experience as a young person, saying,

I think this is the narrative a lot of young people are told, is that you're a child. What you have to say doesn't matter. You're young, you don't know, you don't have the experience. Growing up, I was hushed a lot. Even though what I had to say really didn't—kind of went against the grain, I was hushed a lot for it. So when there were these questions for me to think about these things, I was really—I kind of froze because I was like I should be worried about these things, I should care about these things, I should know about these things, but I don't because I've been completely—I haven't been at the table at all, right? When these issues and things come up [in the Hmong community], I'm not there. It's not for children and it's not for women, right?

While the experience of young people being silenced is not necessarily unique to Hmong American communities, it is nonetheless troubling. The experiences of young Hmong American women in a community that is already dismissed, ignored, and marginalized to be further dismissed, to be further ignored, or to be further marginalized creates questions related to self-doubt, worth, and significance.

Sense of Place

Sense of Place as Physical Location and Emotional Experience

Physical location. The first theme is sense of place as physical location and emotional experience. For participants, notions of home are strongly tied to a physical place. For PC, her immediate thought was her grandmother's house. She said, "Home is a place that connects me to my childhood. I would consider my grandma's house because I see it as more of a home to me than my actual home that I'm living in. I was very young when I was in my grandma's house and that's where I stayed at a lot growing up. Both my parents worked so we had to be there." Likewise, for T, home was where her grandparents lived because of her memories of her grandparents. T shared that it was her grandparents who taught her *lug txaj*, who helped her maintain Hmong language and identity, and who helped care for her and her siblings while her parents worked.

Similarly, sense of place was connected to a physical location like Minnesota, where there is a large Hmong American population. When PY was asked where home is, she initially shared that anywhere where her family is living is home for her. However, she quickly shared an experience of moving from Minnesota to Virginia for a short period of time while her father was in school. She told me, “But [Virginia] didn’t feel like home because I had no one I could go to and say, “This is my struggle, and I would like help.” So, I felt like going to Virginia wasn’t home even though I had my family, but coming back to Minnesota was home because I saw people who looked like me. And I also saw people who did not look like me, but they understood where I came from.” The experience of growing up in a community, where there is a large population and representation of Hmong Americans greatly impact a sense of place and belonging.

For one particular participant, the notion of home was slowly transitioning. MV had been part of the most recent resettlement of refugees from Thailand. She still has strong connections to Thailand through family and friends and memories. Most interestingly, she discussed how she recently became a naturalized citizen and questioned whether that meant she was no longer a refugee. She told me,

For a long time, before this, I did not think of Minneapolis and Minnesota or the United States as my home, but I don’t know. There was always this thought of like going back to Thailand. It was like, I want to go back to Thailand. But not until recently, and I don’t know what it is, recently I started to think that Minnesota was home. Everything I do, my family is here, everything is here. I have brought it up to my mom before that maybe in the future I want to live in Thailand, and she’s like, “Oh my gosh, we brought you here. Why do you want to go back to Thailand?”

For many participants, growing up in the Twin Cities, where there is a large Hmong American population, has shaped notions of home and belonging, and ultimately, identity and experience.

Emotional experience. For other participants, home was connected to feelings and experience. For N, having a shared experience and shared emotions exemplified home. N shared with me, “Home to me is very much an experience. An experience of seeing people who share the same food as me. An experience of seeing people who get just as excited about getting ready for Hmong New Year, who get excited about the noise of coins.”

For C, it was not so much a shared emotional experience among a group of people, but having an individual experience that allowed her feel at home. C said, “Home can be anywhere and anything, as long as I feel safe, comfortable, and I can grow. Because sometimes, I don’t feel like that being home with my family. Because sometimes when I’m with my family, I feel targeted or attacked, and minimized and belittled.” L expressed a similar sentiment in her discussion on home. She spoke about how important community was, but only if that community had shared values. L told me, “No matter what you go through, no matter if you become rebellious, if there’s a group of people you can go back to, who love and accept you for who you are. So, that is home to me.” For young Hmong American women, a sense of place can be both a physical location and an emotional experience, however, a sense of place must center the experiences of Hmong Americans.

The Role of Community and the Future

The second theme related to sense of place is the role of community and how young Hmong American women see their future place in their communities. Not surprisingly, many participants are deeply invested in their communities. Many expressed a desire to travel, to briefly live elsewhere, and to go to graduate school out-of-state, but

wanting to return. They see themselves in community-orientated work such as working with refugee and immigrant families and advocating for and engaging Hmong communities. Among participants, there is a general desire to help their communities.

For others, the future is not necessarily rooted in community, but in a desire to better understand themselves. One participant discussed how society, both within Hmong communities and in wider communities, there is an expectation to have a plan for the future, which can be incredibly challenging for young people. For N, she described her future as much more of a journey. She said, “I’m really just creating that space for myself. I feel like everyone spends their life taking up less space than they should. They take a lot of less space than they deserve. I think there’s so much space for everyone. I think if you could take all the space that you could, I think the world would be so beautiful. That really is my journey.” Likewise, MY discussed a similar path of self-discovery. She shared with me, “Emotionally, mentally, spiritually, I want to go...I just want to be a stronger, more confident, more courageous person. And I want to be a more decisive person. And set my mind to something and do it. Because right now, I’m like scattered mind or I’m always doubtful or skeptical. And just don’t know where to start. It’s lacking a lot of confidence. So, me personally, I want to be more confident in myself.” For MY, where she was going was much more about her individual growth, but perhaps, it speaks to just part of a much longer path in which self-discovery and gaining confidence and courage can lead to understanding one’s sense of place, community, and home.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

The narratives of young Hmong American women have primarily been investigated through the paradigmatic lenses of post-positivism, constructivism, and critical theory, resulting in important perspectives on young Hmong American women experiences. These experiences include Hmong women and their relationship with Hmong culture and its patriarchal system (Rumbaut & Ima, 1988; Teranishi, 2004); Hmong women and early marriage (Ngo, 2002; Xiong & Huang, 2011); and Hmong women empowerment in the United States (Donnelly, 1994; Lee, 1997). And yet, these studies do not center Hmong ways of inquiry in the research process, which would align much more closely with Hmong lived lives and perhaps offer more culturally-informed perspectives. In addition, these studies perpetuate the binary narratives of teen marriage (Ngo, 2002) and college success (Lee, 1997). A desire-based framework (Tuck, 2009) seeks to complicate narratives and provide nuance and context so necessary to understanding the complex ways young Hmong American women navigate and negotiate their identities and lived experiences.

The purpose of this study was to co-construct narratives of young Hmong American women, particularly with young Hmong American women who were already engaged in some storytelling practice. This study centered traditional Hmong ways of inquiry to build on existing values of relationships, collaboration, and community. This study also purposefully sought to complicate the current narratives of young Hmong American women in hopes of offering portraits which better capture the contradictions, desires, and hopes of young Hmong American women.

The following chapter presents the findings to the three research questions: (1) What stories do young Hmong American women tell and how do they tell their stories?; (2) How are the ways in which these stories are told connected to Hmong oral traditions?; and (3) How do these stories disrupt damage-centered and dominant narratives of Hmong American women?

Following the discussion of the findings, I will provide implications for this study as it relates to social work practice and further research.

Centering Hmong Ways of Inquiry and Key Principles of Research

The Hmong shaman protocol aligns itself well with the research process because this has always been a way Hmong have asked questions, sought answers, and shared information. This way of inquiry, whether it be for researchers or shamans, is entirely based on the three key principles of indigenous research: respect, reciprocity, and relationality. In presenting the findings for this study, I use the Hmong shaman protocol as both a guide and as a metaphor to help us better understand the co-construction of young Hmong American women narratives.

Once the healing ceremony is successfully completed by the shaman, a community meal is shared where the shaman declares to everyone present that the ill individual's spirit has returned. Throughout this meal, the three key principles of respect, reciprocity, and relationality are exemplified.

Respect

The individual's family members perform a ceremonial bow called *pe*, in which they stand in front of the shaman and thank the shaman by cupping their hands, slightly swinging their arms back and forth, and saying words of gratitude. As one, all of the

family members un-cup their hands, get onto their knees, and press their closed fists and thumbs into the ground. The entire process of *pe* (cupped hands, words of gratitude, and bent knees) is performed two times as the shaman tells them to stand up.

Reciprocity

As the individual's family members *pe*, the words of gratitude include the following: Hnub qab nram ntsis, yog koj txiv neeb txiv yaig hom vam tsis txog los tseg, yog koj txiv neeb txiv yaig hom vam txog koj lub dag lub zog peb yuav tsis nrauj tus txiaj tus ntsig mog (*In the future, shaman, if you do not rely on us, that is okay. But, shaman, if you do rely on us, we will not forget your kindness*). The concept of *sib pauv zog* (to exchange strength) or reciprocity is central to Hmong daily life. For some, this constant notion of having to return someone's kindness with your own can be daunting, yet reciprocity also keeps individuals, families, and communities connected to one another.

Relationality

Traditional Hmong shamans are chosen by spirits, and the initial calling involves a serious illness for the soon-to-be shaman. As previously mentioned, the shaman protocol used in this study was provided by my mother, who is a shaman. The individuals who come to seek healing from her have a relationship with her; they are her relatives. Based on this, my mother, as a shaman, has a responsibility not only to her relatives but to the spirits who have chosen her to be a healer. She maintains these relations, both seen and unseen, through ceremony.

A New Name, A New Story

In some cases, after a healing ceremony, the shaman will assign the individual a new name. The new name works to renew and uplift the individual and their spirit, to tell

the individual that they should no longer be afraid. The new name works to secure the spirit to the individual and to protect the individual and spirit from future challenges. A new name often includes a material or object that resembles strength such as rock (zeb), copper (tooj), gold (kub), or a sword (ntaj) to ward off evil spirits; a new name also signifies a new story. The ill individual assumes a new identity, reconciling the identities of illness and newness into someone different. Similarly, in this study, young Hmong American women reconcile their identities and experiences, in which a new name, a new story emerges.

Significance of the Findings

What stories do young Hmong American women tell and how do they tell their stories?

As the researcher, like a shaman, I have a role in co-constructing stories shared with me. I sat with these young women, listened to their stories, asked them questions, pushing and pulling for more, and added my own stories. And yet, I also have a responsibility to provide insight that allow others to understand the experiences young Hmong American women share.

Young Hmong American women receive mixed messages from so many different sources around them: parents, other relatives, peers, those outside of the Hmong community, social medial, mainstream media, etc. The messages range from what it means to be Hmong to what it means to be a Hmong woman to what it means to be a storyteller. The resulting stories are young Hmong American women's attempts to navigate and negotiate those messages. And because those messages are mixed, their stories provide an array of emotions, ideas, contradictions, and desires.

For some young women, the messages of what it means to be Hmong are stories of personal struggle. For example, not being able to speak Hmong or not being in a relationship with a Hmong individual of the opposite sex. These personal struggles were the same for me and my generation of young Hmong American women over ten years ago. As much as Hmong women have resisted these messages, they continue to shape our narratives and require continued efforts to counter and transform.

For others, their stories challenge messages from outside the Hmong community about what stories are valuable. One participant shared that “the mystical idea of spirits and ancestors, things you just can’t see, it has an influence in my life. And hearing ghost stories and experiencing it myself, it makes it a real part of my life. Whereas, ogres and clowns, the boogeyman, things like that don’t scare me. I think they’re very boring.” Like so many other marginalized young people, young Hmong American women yearn for stories in which they see and hear themselves. That yearning results in stories that center Hmong language, cosmology and spirituality, knowledge, daily life, and history. Young Hmong American women are telling the stories women my age wished we had read, seen, listened to, or told to others. They are telling the stories their grandmothers told them as children in long car rides; after school, waiting for their parents to come home; or at night, trying to put them to sleep. They are telling the stories of divorced parents, same-clan-name kisses, guilt-ridden decisions, and other taboo subjects that would make their grandmothers frown.

And for others, the stories they tell are painful: “I want to write more songs about life in general like *yus niam yus txiv tsis paub sib hlub* (*your parents do not know how to love one another*) and how that affects children and how they don’t realize that.” Their

stories are about how other young Hmong American women shame, tease, and hurt them. The stories are embarrassing and violent. Several times, as I listened to these stories, I cried with the young women, I told them how terribly sorry I was that they experienced those emotions, and I shared my own stories of hurt.

In the simplest sense, young Hmong American women's experiences exist on a spectrum—a wide-range of experiences which stretch from one end to another. In a more accurate description, these experiences exist on the snail motif used in Hmong embroidery. The snail motif is a spiral, however, that spiral is rarely embroidered on its own. Oftentimes, the snail motif is embroidered to another snail motif, and those two spirals are perhaps embroidered to a completely different motif altogether. Then, all of those motifs are presented on a single piece of cloth, sewn all together with thread from the same spool. This is the reality of young Hmong American women's experiences. The narratives are interconnected; they transcend time and place; they are passed down from generation to generation; they are intergenerational; and they involve the human and the spiritual worlds.

In paj ntaub, the motifs and patterns compete for the observers' gaze and thoughts. An observer might ask: Where does it begin? How was it made? Who made this? What does it mean? Like paj ntaub, the stories young Hmong American women tell mimic similar responses. In one breath, the narratives compliment and contradict: "We kinda hate what it means to be Hmong. Not because of what it means to be part of the culture, but because of the community, the fighting that we grew up in. So, it's hard. It's hard but it's also very empowering. I'm very proud to be a young Hmong woman." Or "Being a Hmong woman is hard but it's a beautiful thing. They are so resilient, so

adaptable, so strong. It makes me really proud, and at the same time, it hurts me. It brings me heartache when I think about Hmong women.” These narratives speak to the complexity of young Hmong American women lived experiences, and draw attention to the need for context such as history, culture, language, and institutions.

Lastly, how do young Hmong American women tell their stories? Complex narratives naturally warrant various storytelling practices. Young Hmong American women are engaged in both new and old ways of storytelling. They embroider and sing love songs and lug txaj. They tell stories to small children and with their mothers. They write and act. They blog and upload songs to YouTube. The various ways in which these stories are told speak to the dynamic nature of young Hmong American women.

How are the ways in which these stories are told connected to Hmong oral traditions?

Thao (2006) states the purpose of Hmong oral traditions is to teach its listeners. Whether it be through song or poetry, bedtime stories, or ritual, oral traditions provide lessons in history, culture, life, and relationships. Oral traditions serve as sources of knowledge and connect the past with the future (Smith, 2012). One of the most prevalent narratives found in oral traditions is the orphan. The orphan represents the history of Hmong in the truest sense—an orphaned people: a people without a motherland, a history riddled by war and persecution, and generations of forced relocation and assimilation. Young Hmong American women, so many who are immediately removed from war, continue these stories today. If young Hmong American women’s narratives exist as spirals on a fabric, then the thread that connects those narratives is the story of war.

The story of war includes death and loss, violence, relocation, and assimilation. Young Hmong American women hear stories of the most recent war—the Vietnam

War—and experience the fear that war brings: “I think being like a child, 13, 14, 15, hearing about war, and hearing about the way bombs would hurt and kill people, that was very traumatizing to me.” Or “When I was younger, my mom was afraid that we would grow up to be bad people, so she would tell us about the suffering in her life so that we would be good people.”

The story of war makes one question identity and place: “I was told that we came as refugees. But now that we have become US citizens, are we still considered refugees? What are we? There are just all of these questions.” And it makes one search for meaning and home: “I felt like going to Virginia wasn’t home even though I had my family, but coming back to Minnesota was home because I saw people who looked like me. And I also saw people who did not look like me, but they understood where I came from.”

Oral traditions are distinctly intergenerational. Most of the young women in this study, like me, heard and learned to tell stories from our grandparents, specifically, our grandmothers. In contrast, the loss or absence of grandparents very much means the loss and absence of oral tradition. For example, one young woman told me, “My dad is an orphan... We do not have [paternal] grandparents so we never heard stories. And my dad, because he didn’t grow up like hearing stories, so he didn’t have dab neeg to tell us and then my mom did not have dab neeg to tell us too. So, we did not hear any stories growing up.” Another young woman shared with me the urgency of learning oral tradition from her elders: “It’s getting harder to learn because my grandmas are getting older and starting to forget the template. It’s getting harder for them to remember the rhyme scheme.”

Throughout the years, there has been a concerted effort to maintain oral traditions and its purposes (Her, 2005; Thao, 2006). Young Hmong American women have researched practices, they have organized workshops, and they have continued the practices: “I try to understand the feelings of a girl living in Laos and coming to the US and missing her family. Those feelings of being in the war. Those feelings, I really do try to understand it as best as I can so I can convey those feelings to the audience. Hopefully, touch them and re-awaken their memories too.”

Young Hmong American women want to preserve and to be keepers of oral tradition, and yet, they want to challenge and be innovators as well. This is the desire, which Tuck (2009) describes as a “longing about a present that is enriched by both the past and the future” (p. 417). Young Hmong American women have centered themselves in the process of *maintaining* oral tradition and *reimagining* it: “When we create these modern clothing, it’s not to erase our traditions, it’s to bring our traditions with us constantly into the future. I think, as a young person, that’s why I do the things that I do. It’s because I’m doing whatever I can to hold my hand out to the past, to our history, and to our traditions, while reaching to the future.” Young Hmong American women have found and are still finding ways to sustain and shape oral traditions as an intergenerational and communal practice.

How do these stories disrupt damage-centered and dominant narratives of Hmong American women?

Attempts to complicate the binary narratives of young Hmong American women (Ngo, 2002; Xiong & Huang, 2011) have been unsuccessful because they lack the nuances of culture and language, they lack the collaboration of young people’s expertise,

and they have no commitment to disrupting damage-centered narratives. Tuck (2009) states that damage-centered research documents the pain of a community and explains a community's brokenness by looking to the past. On the other hand, a desire-based framework "stops and counteracts the effects of a poison...the frameworks that position these communities as damaged" (p. 416). This study has sought to purposefully center culture, language, and young Hmong American women's expertise to co-create a nuanced narrative of what it means to a young American woman. In doing so, I have found that young Hmong American women are working to stop and counteract damage everyday through their storytelling practices: "I think we are often the catalyst in change, but also the keepers of our history. It's our choice. It's our decision in terms of, "Does the Hmong language survive? Does the Hmong practices survive?" I don't know how aware youth are with how much of our identity is in their hands." The frameworks that position Hmong as damaged are shifting because Young Hmong American women are actively engaged in shaping narratives of not only what it means to be a Hmong woman, but what it means to be Hmong. They are actively disrupting the dominant narratives, produced by majoritarian frameworks.

Tuck (2009) writes that a desire-based framework "accounts for the loss and despair, but also the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives" (p. 417). Young Hmong American women's desires range from plans for the immediate to the future; they want to travel and work abroad and yet come back home. Their desires range in emotions; they are excited for the future and fearful of what will happen to traditional practices. And their desires range from paying attention to themselves to engaging in their communities. Young Hmong American women express a need to learn more about themselves, to take

care of themselves, and to gain more confidence. Young Hmong American women are deeply committed to their communities, seeing themselves in community-oriented work as liaisons, advocates, organizers, artists, and activists.

Implications for Practice and Policy: Relationality

Centering Historical, Cultural, and Linguistic Context

In order to develop, implement, and evaluate programs and services for communities, which include Hmong Americans, social workers must not only consider the historical, cultural, and linguistic context of their clients. As social workers, we must *center* the historical, cultural, and linguistic realities of their clients. This might include understanding the impact of intergenerational trauma and the long-lasting effects of war. Regardless of how far removed they are from the war itself, young Hmong American people's identities are deeply shaped by war in that the very reason why they are in the United States is because of war. War underpins both folk stories and life stories, and those narratives continue to shape Hmong identity. Social workers center this knowledge when we develop services which honor this experience and offer opportunities to heal from the effects of war.

The development and implementation of programs and services might also center the ways language is changing. While there have been efforts to preserve and maintain Hmong language among young people, the reality is more and more young people speak English. Centering linguistic context means programs and services must be flexible with language. Young Hmong American people feel welcomed and included when Hmong language is present; language offers a sense of comfort and familiarity. It conveys relationality among people. However, speaking and knowing language (especially as it

relates to fluency) does not define Hmong identity. For some young Hmong American people, the inability to speak Hmong has been a source of shaming, ridicule, and teasing by their elders and peers. Young Hmong American people must have access to multiple ways to express themselves. Social workers who center these complex, and sometimes contradictory, messages can create spaces that better exemplify the lived realities of young Hmong American people.

Centering Intergenerational and Communal Practices

Many practices in Hmong communities is intergenerational and communal. The notion of relationality requires social work practice with Hmong Americans to have expanded definitions of family and community. An expanded definition of kinship may require changes or additions to organizational policies related to staff who require time off. For example, a traditional Hmong funeral service can last between three to four days. Sometimes, these funeral services are open 24 hours (Her, 2005). Most bereavement leave policies clearly define who is considered an immediate family member. While the intention of these policies is reasonable, these policies also create challenges in Hmong communities, who have a different definition of a family member. In reviewing these kinds of policies, social workers can examine organizational policies for bias.

In addition, social workers center intergenerational and communal practices when we develop programs and services which view intergenerational families as a lived reality rather than an atypical living situation. When we perceive Hmong American experiences as unfamiliar, we further perpetuate narratives of difference and damage. We are not able to see and value the importance of relationships. Relationality in Hmong American lives requires us to expand our definitions of family and community; this definition includes

who and what is seen and unseen, it involves a history of war and orphanhood; and family and community are the sources of motivation to persevere and yet, they also create the stress that drive young Hmong American people to despair. Social work with Hmong Americans means centering these oftentimes marginalized experiences and utilizing a desire-based framework to work from the complexities and contradictions.

Teaching and Research as Practice

I am a social work professor. In my introductory courses, I highlight the importance of the profession's core values, specifically its principles for professional and ethical practice. I teach my students that part of professionalism is establishing boundaries between the social worker and the client(s). In my upper division courses, I begin to critique this very argument of boundaries, and instead conversations with my students shift to concepts of self-disclosure, dual roles and relationships, and authenticity. Having worked within Hmong American communities, particularly with Hmong American youth, I have discovered how important these three concepts are to my professional practice. More importantly, I have realized how aspects of my professional training have limited my ability to work within these communities. Similarly, my education as a social work researcher has also limited the kinds of questions I want to ask (even the *way* I want to ask questions) and the methodology which guides my inquiry. This study offers some important learnings for expanding social work practice.

First, there is a need to teach social work practice and research that reflects the reality of lived lives. Some educational experiences such as internship/practicum and immersions address parts of this need, however, examining the curricula and purposefully

including marginalized perspectives, engaging students in challenging conversations, and teaching and practicing critical thinking skills also address this need.

Finally, I have found I engage with my students in similar ways I engage with research participants, and this is a similar manner in which I engaged with Hmong American youth during my professional practice. The concepts of self-disclosure, dual roles, and authenticity are about relationships. To expand social work practice, we must consider teaching and research as social work practice, in which relationships are central, and ethical and professional practice is evaluated by “relational accountability...that is, being accountable to your relations” (Wilson, 2008, p. 77). In my experience, building relationships with students, clients, and research participants has allowed me to teach, advocate, and ask questions in ways I am accountable to maintaining these relationships.

Implications for Theory: Respect

Centering Hmong Ways of Inquiry

In centering traditional Hmong ways of inquiry, language, and young Hmong American women’s expertise, this study calls attention to the ways young Hmong American women have been researched and understood. Most of the existing research on Hmong American youth rely on conventional research paradigms. These paradigms include post positivism, constructivism, and critical approaches. Post positivist approaches present Hmong youth development along a linear, life stage model. Constructivist approaches emphasize the binary experiences of Hmong American youth as troubled teen or model minority. Critical approaches have questioned post positivism and constructivism, and yet have failed to include Hmong American youth as co-collaborators and Hmong knowledge as sources of knowledge in the research process.

This study highlights two sides of the same coin: the lack of respect for Hmong expertise in previous studies and the need to respect Hmong expertise. The notion of respect, as Wilson (2012) argues, involves having an awareness of responsibility to what is shared, heard, and learned. As we develop theoretical frameworks for understanding Hmong American youth development, we must center Hmong ways of inquiry. In doing so, we respect the history, language, and knowledge of the communities in which we engage in research.

New Story, New Storytellers

The lack of indigenous ways of knowing and inquiry in previous studies highlights a need for such a study. The respect for and purposeful use of indigenous methodologies in this study, the centering of Hmong knowledge, and the attention to complexity, or as Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) call *seeking goodness*, allows for more authentic narratives of young Hmong American women's lives. This authenticity gives way to new stories, which require new authors and storytellers, particularly those from Hmong communities. Hmong storytellers, with their unique positionalities, have the ability to seek "complex and competing truths" (Lightfoot and Davis, 1997, p. 146) to develop more appropriate understandings of Hmong American youth. We must allow these new storytellers to narrate; this means we encourage and support new storytellers from these communities, we get out of the way, and we listen.

Recommendations for Further Research: Reciprocity

Based on the learnings from this study, there are several recommendations for further research. This research must be grounded in reciprocity; that is, researchers and community members must *sib pauv zog*, or exchange strength, in the research process. In

damage-centered research, the resources have come into Hmong American communities at the expense of perpetuating narratives of despair in these communities, and researchers, particularly non-Hmong researchers, have little to no sense of responsibility to these communities. The research questions must be developed and answered in ways that both research communities and Hmong American communities mutually benefit.

The first recommendation involves further exploration of intergenerational practices in Hmong communities. A deeper understanding of the role of intergenerational practices in Hmong oral tradition can help practitioners develop and evaluate services and programs that model these practices. This research also serves our Hmong communities in better understanding and developing ways to maintain and preserve cultural practices.

The second recommendation involves more exploration of violence and intergenerational trauma among Hmong American youth. During my interviews, several participants shared stories of experiencing or witnessing violence in their families and communities, or experiencing intergenerational trauma. These stories would add to our understanding of Hmong American youth lived experiences and further expand our knowledge of youth identity development. Research on violence in Hmong American lives can also assist Hmong communities in better advocating for and against policies which impact our everyday lives.

Lastly, findings from this study are the beginnings of conceptualizing youth within a Hmong American context. Building on the stories from this study, I am interested in including the lived experiences beyond young Hmong American women. Expanding on this group allows me to further complicate, challenge, and disrupt the current narratives of Hmong American youth.

Summary

Since Hmong have been resettled in the US, research on Hmong American communities have created one-dimensional narratives of Hmong American lived experiences. This study sought to complicate those narratives in order to *crystalize* our understanding of young Hmong American women, or “know there is always more to know” (Richardson, 2000, p. 934) about young Hmong American women’s lives. In addition, this study centered traditional Hmong ways of inquiry, building on the values of relationships, respect, and reciprocity. The hope of this study was to illuminate the desires of young Hmong American women as change agents, makers and preservers of culture, community leaders, and storytellers.

For scholars and practitioners, this study advances a new practice of centering Hmong knowledge and people. It requires us to reexamine the services and programs we develop and offer, the policies we create and advocate for, and the research we propose. As scholars and practitioners, we have a responsibility to Hmong communities, to recruit, mentor, and retain Hmong social workers and researchers. In this responsibility, we must build relationships, respect indigenous knowledge, and *sib pauv zog* (exchange strength).

This study found that young Hmong American women are deeply engaged in Hmong culture, particularly Hmong oral tradition. The stories they tell today, rooted in morals, values, and life lessons, closely resemble the *neej neeg* (life stories) and *dab neeg* (folk stories) their own elders shared with them. In addition, the manner in which these stories are told—communally and intergenerationally—are consistent with Hmong oral tradition practices. Their stories are meant to teach, to preserve, and to resist. They express the same sentiments of the stories our elders told—of a people, deeply connected

to one another, fiercely protective of their identities, and always searching and longing for home. The stories Hmong American women tell seek to disrupt stories of only damage. Rather they seek to tell stories of the complicated lives they live—the experiences of being shushed, empowered, excluded, and loved. Young Hmong American women have been telling these stories for generations.

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Appendix A: Shaman Protocols and the Research Process

<p>Data Collection Procedures</p>	<p>Recruitment: Have an existing relationship with interviewees; purposeful sampling—interviewees may have existing relationship with one another</p> <p>Data Collection: Co-create counter narratives</p>	<p>Seeking a shaman for healing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have an existing relationship with the shaman • Bring incense and joss paper for the spirits • Ask for help (<i>pe</i>—ritual bowing for help, shows respect and honor) • Shaman and seeker engage in conversation; what is wrong, for how long—co-create a story of illness <p>Shaman seeking the answers: Saib neeb (to seek the spirits for help)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Ask the spirits to help; tell spirits how the sick person is related to shaman, spirits 2) Why is this person sick? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Spiritual b. Beyond the shaman’s ability 3) How to fix this sickness? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Spirit calling ceremony b. Shaman healing ceremony 4) If this person is well in 3 days, we will do as promised in number 2
<p>Data Analysis</p>	<p>Sources of knowledge: Draw from Hmong knowledge systems: oral traditions, elder knowledge</p>	<p>Hu plig/ua neeb (spirit calling/healing ceremony)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask and invite the spirits to help as move into spirit worlds

	Invite others/bring interviewees into conversation about counter narratives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Careful navigation, trust in the spirits to lead • Shaman helper assists, explains to guests what might be happening/what shaman is saying, burns joss paper, incense, plays the gong
Dissemination	Return the stories to interviewees, communities	<p>Celebration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everyone is invited, meal is shared • Shaman publicly declares person's spirit has been returned, do not be scared • Relatives <i>pe</i> (ritual bow) to thank shaman and shaman helper