

**Navigating Graduate Education as a First-generation, Hmong American Woman: An  
Autoethnography**

**By**

**Manee Moua**

**Hmong Studies Journal, Volume 19(1), 25 pages**

**Abstract**

This study highlights the various identities of a Hmong American woman in graduate education by deconstructing the intersectionality of race, gender and culture that influences the way I navigated academia. Through a critical race feminist lens, my autoethnographic research highlights the diverse stories and experiences of me as a Hmong American woman, and illuminates the struggles and challenges I have encountered in graduate school. Furthermore, I deconstruct the gender and racial discourses that also revolve around culture and academia to create space and agency that will illuminate my personal stories as political learning.

*Keywords:* Hmong Women, Graduate Education

**Introduction**

As a first-generation, underrepresented Hmong American woman and graduate student, I navigate life at the intersection of race, gender and culture to negotiate the expected or normalized standards of what has been defined as a “good” graduate student (Lynch, 2008). With the lack of literature on this topic, there is a need to highlight stories such as mine to challenge traditional understandings of Southeast Asian American (SEAA) identities in education by providing a more complex and deeper understanding of Hmong American women in education. In addition, this article also draws attention to the macro forces that continue to marginalize and oppress students of color, like myself, in graduate education. In turn, this will add to the understanding of the importance and diversity of experiences within this population contrary to the research that has, in the past, focused more on the lack of education and

deficiency of Hmong American students and parents (e.g., Lee, 2009; Lee & Green, 2008; Supple, McCoy & Wang, 2006; Vang, 2004; Xiong, 2012).

Although women of color in graduate and professional school have continued to grow in numbers over the last few years, they are still significantly underrepresented in academic literature and in graduate education, especially Hmong American women. The purpose of this article is to illuminate pieces of my stories and lived experiences to add to the literature of the underrepresentation of Hmong American women in graduate school, and to reclaim the importance of Hmong identities within academia. My stories offer deeper understandings rather than implying that I have a solution to end all concerns of first-generation, Hmong American women in education. Autoethnography, like a counter-narrative, challenges the common-sense understandings or dominant ideologies about Hmong Americans and their experiences (Chang, 2008), such as the common critique of low academic performances and attributing this to a lack of Hmong parental involvement (Lee, 2009; Lee & Green, 2008; Supple, McCoy & Wang, 2006; Vang, 2004; Xiong, 2012). Instead, I critically explore and examine the intersection of gender, social class, and racial identities that revolve around academia and one's ethnic culture, and highlight the challenges through the process of a graduate education as a first-generation student. It is through these stories and experiences that I hope to provide a glimpse of how navigating graduate education can be both challenging and empowering. I anticipate my stories can serve as a window or path for others who may not see themselves in these spaces in academia, and instead be inspired and empowered to pursue a graduate degree to change the faces of higher education.

## **Hmong Americans in Education**

### **Model Minority**

The model minority myth, also known as the model minority stereotype, is one of the most prevalent stereotypes of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI), even until this day. This myth has been examined, debunked, and deconstructed in academic research, and has been perceived as both pervasive and influential, for example in the positive and negative labeling of AAPIs (Kawaii, 2005; Kim, 1999, Ngo & Lee, 2007; Teranishi, 2002; Wong, Lai, Nagasawa & Lin, 1998; Wu, 2002). The model minority myth implies that “Asians are doing well, and what can they possibly be complaining about” (Wu, 2002, p. 40). Lew (2011) states that the stereotype “mythologizes the economic and social success of Asian Americans; legitimizes institutional racism and poverty, (and) sustains the hope of the ‘American dream’” (p.618). The myth is also used by the White dominant race to dismiss and devalue other minorities and their needs, attributing their failures to their lack of hard work and educational values (Lee, 1997; Lew, 2011; Wong, 1998).

This model minority stereotype is positive for those who can fit the markers of success. However, it is negative for those who cannot meet the expectations of the model minority, which adds unrealistic expectations for those who cannot perform successfully. This is in particular, dismisses the challenges of Hmong Americans in education, and produces a lack of support, both academically and financially. The myth has been critiqued by many scholars, especially AAPI scholars, about its generalizing implications towards anyone who identifies as AAPI. Due to this myth, many AAPI, and even more so SEAA, have been excluded from research about the role racial identity plays in schooling, and which further refuses to acknowledge AAPI as marginalized, oppressed and disempowered minority groups (Wu, 2002). Lew (2011) argues that the studies that do focus on the success of AAPI in academia often attribute the success to

family and cultural dynamics, such as the value of education, parental involvement, and hard work. However, these attributions dismiss the challenges that SEAA do encounter, especially for those who are first or second generation, low-income and underrepresented (Lee, 1997; Lew, 2011; Museus, 2009; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Ng, Lee & Pak, 2007; Wong, Kim & Tran, 2010; Wong, Lai, Nagasawa & Lin, 1998).

Much of AAPI and SEAA academic research tends to focus on the binary of success and failure of students, classifying groups and individuals as either on one side or the other of the continuum of education (Kawaii, 2007; Ngo & Lee, 2007). Unfortunately, though AAPI are labeled as the model minorities, they do encounter challenges that are frequently overlooked (i.e., cultural differences, language and literacy barriers, first-generational challenges and socioeconomic status). Furthermore, those who do not possess or demonstrate characteristics of the model minority are considered disobedient, unintelligent, gang members, dropouts, or unsuccessful in life (Lee, 2009; Ngo & Lee, 2007, 2011). The use of this black and white labeling of AAPI and SEAA in academic research is problematic as it continues to marginalize and oppress these communities further, especially Hmong Americans. More importantly, the over emphasis on cultural deficiencies often turns a blind eye to the macro forces that perpetuate these discourses in academia about AAPI and SEAA. Although it is important to break down the micro forces, there is much to do to address the larger systemic issues.

### **Hmong in Education**

Over the years, there has been a slow increase of Hmong Americans in higher education, specifically graduate education, yet much still needs to be done. About 4.1% of the total Hmong American population 25 years and over (n = 137,391) has attained a graduate or professional degree in the United States (U.S. Census, 2015). With this small percentage, there is little literature that highlights Hmong American graduate students and their experiences in graduate

school. Most of the research literature about Hmong Americans and Hmong American students often focuses more on psychological needs (Thompson & Kiang, 2010), poverty, or socioeconomic status (Sakamoto & Woo, 2007) or academic deficiency and a lack of parental support for K-12 and college (Huster, 2012; Lamborn & Moua, 2008; Lee, 2011; Lee & Green, 2008; Supple, McCoy & Wang, 2006; Vang, 2004; Xiong, 2012). Even within the *Hmong Studies Journal*, only a few articles have focused on Hmong Americans in college, whereas a majority have focused on K-12 experiences, or historical events (Vang, 2004). Although studies such as these are needed, it is apparent within the psychological field that studies on Hmong American students often problematize and pathologize the community, emphasizing the lack of parental involvement or other deficiencies of Hmong American students in academia (Lee, 2009; Lee & Green, 2008; Supple, McCoy & Wang, 2006; Vang, 2004; Xiong, 2012). Critical deconstruction of the macro context that further perpetuates the continuing oppression and marginalization of Hmong American students at the undergraduate and graduate level is still significantly needed.

Though there is limited research on graduate education, Xiong and Lam (2013) did explore the various factors that influence success in graduate education among graduate students, utilizing grounded theory to guide their understanding due to the lack of literature and data that supported their purpose. With a sample size of five Hmong graduate students, their study explored the barriers they encountered in graduate school and how they overcame them. The participants illuminated many barriers that influenced their challenges. Some examples mentioned consisted of a lack of understanding and guidance to seek resources and counseling support, difficulty navigating through expectations of higher education, and the pressure of cultural and gender responsibilities, expectations, roles and obligations to one's family, and

financial struggles. Success factors included access to academic support through scholarly relationships, such as professors, advisors, and classmates, as well as other supportive programs. Participants also stated that having professors take their time to get to know them as individual learners influenced their success. Furthermore, cultural support and some family responsibilities motivated individuals to succeed (Xiong & Lam, 2013). The findings implied that academic and personal struggles and success at the graduate level were similar to the undergraduate experience. Although cultural values were a barrier to some, they were also a motivation to succeed for others. Xiong and Lam (2013) suggest in their study that counselors are being underutilized by undergraduate and graduate Hmong students, and they believe counselors who are aware of the needs of Hmong students could provide better support for success. Studies such as this implies that the choices lie within the individual to seek for the support. Although, it is important to illuminate the challenges that Hmong American students still struggle with at the undergraduate and graduate level, change also needs to be directed at the practices and policies at the institutional level to address the administration and faculties that work to support these students, as opposed to a sole reliance on parental support and counseling services.

### **Theoretical Framework**

I utilize a theory that centralizes my experiences as a Hmong American woman in graduate school, which values and acknowledges personal experiences as political learning (Berry, 2010). Telling my stories to illuminate the complexity and nuance of these identities is supported and relevant to the significance of critical race feminism, as well as autoethnography. Critical race feminism (CRF) focuses on the stories of women of color, specifically at the intersection of race, gender and class, highlighting the differences and challenges they face in comparison to men of color and White women (Wing, 2003). CRF tenets stem from critical

legal scholars (CLS), critical race theory (CRT), and feminist theory. The tenets that CRF has acquired include racism is normal, the use of narratives and counter-narratives, and the importance of theory and practice. Some of the strengths of CRF focus on the intersectionality of all the layers of our identities, and “[...] by permitting ourselves to engage in the ideology of CRF, we can be freer to bring all of who we are into the classroom. By doing so, we can disregard the monolithic discourse of the universal Black wo/man and acknowledge the multi-dimensionality of our personhood.” (Berry & Candis, 2013, p. 49)

CRF also utilizes critical storytelling, to empower women and make the personal political. The use of storytelling and counter-narrative supports the importance of telling one’s own stories to disrupt traditional forms of research (Berry, 2009, 2010; Collins, 1998, 2000; Glenn, 1994). Like critical race testimony (Baszile, 2008), critical storytelling is considered “[...] as the act of bearing witness – from a critical perspective—to the ways in which racism is inflicted on and inflected in one’s life experience” (p. 252). CRF and Black feminist scholars often emphasize the importance of storytelling to voice the reality of racial and gender discrimination (Collins, 2000; Hooks, 2014). Collins (2000) stresses that the creation of knowledge and ways of knowing for women of color are driven and shaped by real lived experiences. To better understand this creation of knowledge, it is important to tell one’s story and share it with others to illuminate the complexity that lies within these experiences and find meaningful connections to the self and others.

As one of CRF’s key methods of challenging the dominant and patriarchal social system, narratives or storytelling is an inclusive practice to reach out and connect to a larger audience, academic and non-academic (Matsuda, 2001; Wing, 1997). Storytelling provides a critical way

to analyze and understand race and gender identities and bring forward significant experiences that are often neglected when using post-positivistic research approaches.

### **Autoethnography**

Throughout history, storytelling has been an essential method of teaching and understanding for the Hmong people to pass down knowledge of their ancestors, cultural traditions and practices (Quincy, 1988; Reagan, 2012). Culturally congruent, I utilize autoethnography as a methodology to share my personal and academic stories to make meaningful connection to the cultural and societal forces that shape our beliefs.

Autoethnography has become known as a methodology that is accessible and appealing to scholars throughout all disciplines to create a space of social change through the voices of those who have been traditionally marginalized (Boylorn, & Orbe, 2014; Chang, 2008; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Forber-Pratt, 2015). Autoethnography merges specific tenets from both ethnography and autobiography, which makes autoethnography a unique academic research methodology. It is a qualitative research methodology that focuses on understanding cultural groups. Autoethnography allows the author to actively participate in one's own research study to critically look at the world from the inside out. The researcher's goal is to make meaning of certain phenomena, cultural and societal forces that shape one's own beliefs, thoughts and life experiences without [mis]representing or generalizing others and their culture (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010). Autoethnography confronts the traditional methods of understanding these experiences and connects them to the larger social, political, economic contexts within our society (Chang, 2008; Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2010). This method of research challenges the post-positivistic approaches to conducting academic research, specifically for cultural groups that are often underrepresented or misrepresented in dominant literatures and academia.

Through storytelling, I share the following vignette as an example of [mis]communication and [mis]understanding between me and my advisor, who is a middle age White woman. I am her first Hmong American graduate student. This situation occurred during the first year in my doctoral program, and is one example of many that illuminates my reality of how unspoken expectations of the institutional practices have hindered and challenged me as a first-generation graduate student.

### **Vignette: The “Good” Graduate Student**

When I first transition to anything new, such as a new job position, I tend to be more reserved and attentive in order to learn and get a better understanding of my environment, instead of taking on a more assertive approach. Throughout my life, I have felt the need to down-play certain identities depending on the environment and the people around me to avoid conflict or marginalization. For example, having to speak perfect English to avoid being stereotyped as a foreigner or marginalized as someone lacking intelligence. Furthermore, to escape being seen as unproductive, or as invaluable to the team, I often extend myself to help in any way possible to prove my existence in the position as needed. I always work hard to avoid any negative evaluation from my supervisors that may label me as inadequate as a worker. This has been a characteristic of mine growing up due to the constant need to prove the worth of my identities to society as a Hmong American woman and first-generation scholar.

During my first year in the doctoral program, I was fortunate to also receive a scholarship that would allow me to be a research assistant for the first few years in the program. This scholarship included a tuition waiver and a stipend. The goal of the scholarship was to help alleviate the financial and workload stress in combination with heavy coursework that typically occurs during the first years of a doctoral program. For the first time, I was assigned as a

research assistant for my temporary advisor, who was also the head of the program that year. Although most assistantships required a twenty-hour per week appointment, with the tasks and responsibilities that were given to me, I felt I was not performing to expectations. At the very least, I was probably working only 2-3 hours a week. By no means was I complaining of the little work given; however, I felt like I was not able to assist her according to the contract and expectations of the scholarship for the research assistant position. As a new research assistant, I did not know what to expect since I have never had such a position before. Up to this point, I had only experienced administrative graduate assistant positions, where I was given heavier workloads that consisted of working and advising students for at least 20 hours per week or more. At times I worried that I might appear lazy or useless, therefore I wanted to assure her that I was a hard worker and not a slacker. Because of this, I would often politely ask my advisor for things to do or check in with her often to assure her that I was available. As the head of the program that year, she was quite busy; however, when I asked, she would give me some minor paperwork to keep me busy. I did not complain and accepted the simple tasks happily, as long as I could do something for her.

Throughout the semester, she apologized to me for not being able to give me any research projects to work on. I always reassured her that I did not mind doing the small tasks for her. Near the end of the year, I still had not received any research experience. My advisor again apologized and felt bad for not having had the time to do research with me.

“I don’t mind at all. I enjoy doing these more administrative tasks for you.” I said.

I honestly did not mind, only because I felt that I was not able to perform as a suitable research assistant for her, and instead only worked on simple tasks. Unfortunately, my eagerness

to work hard, despite the tasks given, seemed to have come off very differently to her. Giving me a look of confusion, she asked me,

“Are you sure you want to get your Ph.D.?”

“Yes?” I answered confused as to why she was asking me this.

“Well, you seem to really enjoy this sort of administrative work, instead of wanting to do research like most graduate students do.” She said.

Still confused as to where she was going with this, I stayed silent.

“I feel that maybe getting a Ph.D. is not what you would like to do because it involves a lot of research work,” she explained. “Do you see yourself doing administrative work or teaching and doing research?” she asked.

I was quite surprised at the questions she asked me. I thought to myself, “If I didn’t think I would want to do this in the first place, then why did I apply to the Ph.D. program?” In that moment, I did not realize and fully understand that my intentions to work hard in the hope that my advisor would not think I was slacking or not doing my job accordingly would get misinterpreted as not wanting to do research. With her comments and questions, I understood what she said as pursuing a Ph.D. may not be the right thing for me since I was not pushing her to gain research experience like many other doctoral students traditionally do. I quickly reassured her that I did want to pursue this path, hoping she did not have regrets about admitting me into the doctoral program; however, I could not explain myself further because I did not process the situation quickly enough. Not only that, I lacked the confidence to speak up, especially since I felt like an imposter already. After all my effort to be the best research assistant and student as I could be, I seemed to have failed.

After walking away from her office that day, I reflected on the situation further. As I recalled all the moments of my eagerness to take on small tasks, such as making copies of her syllabus for her class or checking out library books for her, I realized what may have driven her to think that way. Every time she apologized for not having better things for me to do, I often reassured her that it is 'ok' and I was happy to help in any way. By this time, the moment had passed, and I felt it was a bit too late to try and explain to her where the misunderstanding happened in a way that did not further make me seem unfit for the position.

Growing up, I was taught to question less, work harder, and respect all elders. That was the fate of a Hmong daughter. If my parents asked me to do something for them, I was expected to always be willing to do it with no complaints. This was common practice within the Hmong culture. A Hmong woman has expected roles and duties in the family and these are instilled at a very young age; we are further "trained" to be good daughters-in-law who will work hard, be respectful, and know how to care for our future family. In past generations, the elders' fears were that if a Hmong daughter does not perform as a good enough daughter-in-law, she may be returned to her parents and bring dishonor to the family (Huster, 2012; Ngo & Leet-Otley, 2011; Xiong & Lee, 2011). Although many of these gender expectations have changed here in the United States, many Hmong women are still raised in traditional patriarchal ways that sometimes hinder us even as adults, whether it is consciously or subconsciously.

Although my parents did not encourage marriage at a young age, raising me as a good, hardworking and respectful daughter who would bring honor to the family was still important to them. My dad did not speak of this to me, but, the responsibility was placed on my mother to raise me appropriately. My father's role was focused more on encouraging educational aspirations so I would be able to provide for my future family and pursue larger dreams. Being

taught at a young age about the expected roles and duties that I had little control of, I learned quickly to abide by what I was told to avoid any disgrace to my family and myself. Further, I was told to excel in whatever I do, since I have more opportunities and resources than what my parents ever had. These traits were carried into my work ethics and practice, as well as my relationship values. Personally, these teachings are what empowered me to believe in myself to accomplish anything, and overcome the odds that I may encounter. Others, such as the dominant culture, could easily misinterpret these cultural teachings such as being submissive or obedient. For example, social Western stereotypes often assume Asian women are submissive, obedient, easily manipulated and always conforming (Cho, 2003). In an academic setting as such, my eagerness to work hard and avoid being misjudged was misinterpreted as being unfit for a Ph.D. program because I was not performing like other traditional graduate students. Whether I understood the ways of being a “good” graduate student or not, there was an obvious disconnect of understanding between the White faculty and myself. This created further [mis]representation of who I was or was not, questioning my own sense of belonging even more than before.

### **Implications and Future Research**

The implications for stories such as mine illuminate the nuance and challenges that can be further discussed both at the macro and micro level. At the micro level, mentor and mentee relationships in graduate school are a crucial relationship that should establish trust, support, and a healthy and productive working environment for graduate students to succeed (Thomas, Willis, & Davis, 2007). More specifically, these elements of support are key for many first-generation and underrepresented students of color in graduate education in that they may foster the confidence that these students need. According to Springer, Parker and Leviten-Reid, (2009) the ideal graduate student is often expected to participate in teaching, research, community service

and activism, as a way to prepare them to be future researchers and professors. Furthermore, it is important for graduate students to support their advisor's research agenda as needed. Professors may often forget that not all graduate students, especially first-generation students, are trained to understand the expected roles of being a graduate student, unlike others who have a family legacy of graduate education and are more aware of these roles. As a first-generation graduate student, I was already struggling with the imposter syndrome, which is defined as self-perceived feelings of fake or fraudulent intellectual identity in academic and high achieving environments, often present with anxiety and fear of being revealed even if one has proven their intellectual abilities (Sakulku & Alexander, 2011). Since the day I was accepted into graduate school, I have been constantly questioning my belonging even until this day. My awareness of having to perform to be a "good" graduate student provoked my continuous self-evaluation, as I constantly questioned if I belonged or if I was smart enough. This is only one example of many other scenarios that has further deteriorated my self-confidence and reaffirmed the constant self-doubt of not being "good" enough.

Although I still encounter challenges in graduate school, I have found ways to overcome them or move forward and find spaces where I can exercise my confidence and develop my academic voice within this predominantly White Research 1 institution. For example, after this incident, there were no doubt other similar misunderstandings that occurred. However, my confidence and ability to speak up in a way that would allow my advisor to get to know me as an individual, instead of another "traditional" student created a better relationship between the two of us. Throughout the years with my advisor, our relationship and friendship developed beyond the basic advisor and advisee meetings. She became one of my most supportive and helpful mentor who empowered me to do the things I thought I could never do in academia. It was her

ability to acknowledge her positionality as a White woman and be willing to learn from me as I learned from her as well.

At the macro level, the goal of this article has aimed to add to the ongoing discussion on racial and educational equity issues that are still apparent among our community and other minorities in academia. It is important to further deconstruct the hegemonic ways that perpetuate and continue to marginalize and oppress students of color and first-generation students at the systemic and institutional level. For example, first-generation graduate students of color are still underrepresented in graduate education and in academic literature. At the undergraduate level, there are programs that support and guide this population to succeed and prepare them for graduate education, such as the McNair Achievement program. This program prepares first generation, low-income and underrepresented students to enter graduate school and change the underrepresentation of these populations at the graduate level. However, once the students are admitted and start graduate school, they are often left alone to navigate the graduate culture, which in many ways still holds traditional and White hegemonic expectations of “good” graduate students (Hughes, 2013; Kirshner, Saldivar & Tracy, 2011; Springer, Parker & Leviten-Reid, 2009). For example, at the doctoral level, a researcher’s professional identity is often emphasized to gain any form of credibility or status as future professionals in their respected fields (Eisenbach, 2013). This includes continuously seeking more notable research experiences, producing and finding publication opportunities, presenting at prestigious national conferences within the respective field, more so for networking, and on top of it all, obtaining and maintaining academic funding, such as grants and fellowships. Many of these expectations come with a heavy cost, which impacts not only financial means, but also mental and physical health, and time commitment. Consequently, many first-generation graduate students cannot

afford such expenses, let alone fully understand the unspoken expectations and responsibilities of being a graduate student (Eisenbach, 2013; Lynch, 2008; Springer, Parker & Leviten-Reid, 2009).

Such expectations of graduate students can hinder the success of first-generation graduate students, which often times can be misinterpreted more so as an individual setback than understanding that there are larger forces that continue to oppress us from succeeding. The implications are that there must be awareness and resources at the graduate level to continually support and guide these students, similar to the support provided at the undergraduate level. Although the institution is generally situated around White hegemonic ways (Hughes, 2013; Kirshner, Saldivar & Tracy, 2011; Springer, Parker & Leviten-Reid, 2009), some changes towards a more inclusive and equitable education at the undergraduate level have been more visible in comparison to graduate education. In most cases, first-generation graduate students of color are still trying to keep up with the scholarly language and intellectual requirements that graduate education often assumes all students are equipped with. Many McNair scholars, for example, have only begun to understand and learn the academic research a year or two prior to being admitted into graduate school. Some of these students are still learning about what it means to pursue a graduate degree, let alone try to understand and explain to their family and cultural community what the differences are between a Ph.D. doctor and a medical (M.D.) doctor.

As a McNair scholar and a first-generation graduate student, I navigated the expectations of how to be a “good” graduate student for the first few years. I was learning and trying to understand the graduate culture, the academic research language, how to write scholarly, and understand enough to articulate complex theories and concepts through my coursework. It is

important to continue to address these issues at the systemic and institutional level as it continues to reproduce injustice, and further marginalizes first-generation students of color in graduate education, enabling them to fully overcome challenges and change the face of higher education. One way would be to start at the micro level, as mentioned above. Through the individual learning and understanding between mentor and mentees or advisor and advisee, these inclusive spaces of learning and knowing can be carved out for change amongst those who have been traditionally silenced and oppressed. By challenging traditional ways of learning and knowing through forms of storytelling for cultural understanding can build stronger relationships, thus creating a more successful and positive graduate process for both advisor and advisee.

For future research, it is important to explore more in-depth the importance of the advisor and advisee relationship, specifically with an emphasis on how racial identity and allies can influence the success and success rate of the student. I strongly believe that as a faculty mentor, you have the power to shape the way your students can perceive themselves positively (i.e., having a sense of empowerment to make their own decisions) or not, as well as, how they perceive higher education and their own success. Especially for first-generation students, we value the acceptance of faculty advisor/mentors, for they are the experts in their field and also have the power to make changes from the micro level. Furthermore, the lack of research on how significant advisor and advisee relationships are at the graduate level is needed, especially for first-generation graduate students of color. I anticipate moving forward in exploring this further, as it is important to be able to create change for other students of color who follow.

Overall, through the process of critically analyzing and telling my story, I have gained the ability to step away from the social, academic and cultural expectations of being a “good” graduate student and find what empowers me to succeed. The emotional labor that I experienced

to find a sense of belonging has been overwhelming, yet rewarding. It is liberating for me to find a space like my doctoral program that did not confine me to the traditional ways of knowing and learning, and instead allowed me to do research that centered my personal experiences as political learning. The story featured in this study is only one scenario of many more that I have experienced throughout graduate education. Although the macro forces may continue to still marginalize and oppress me and many other students of color in academia, stories of triumph are also necessary to add depth and understanding of the racial, gender and cultural adversity for changes to happen. As I previously mentioned, it is through stories and experiences such as these that I hope to provide a glimpse of how navigating graduate education can be both challenging and empowering. I anticipate my stories can serve as a window or path for others who may not see themselves in these spaces in academia. Furthermore, I hope to bring awareness to recognize the way the system continues to marginalize us in which we often attribute the challenges to other forces, such as the lack of parental support, and instead be inspired and empowered to make a change and break any negative stereotypes of Hmong Americans in higher education. Together, we can change the faces of higher education.

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I was born and raised in Spokane, WA. to Xf. and Niam Xf. Chong Vang Moua, who are still currently living in Spokane, WA. I also have three younger brothers. As a first-generation Hmong American woman, I received my bachelor's degree in psychology from Eastern Washington University. With the support of the Ronald E. McNair program, I went on to get my master's degree in counseling from Washington State University. After receiving a fully-funded scholarship to continue my education, I decided to further go on, and ultimately received my Ph.D. in Cultural Studies and Social Thought in Education from Washington State University. I have three beautiful children, two of which were born during my graduate education, and married to Weitang Hu. I am currently a tenured-track Assistant Professor in Psychology at Lewis-Clark State College, where I teach Abnormal Psychology, Ethical Principles in Counseling, Counseling Theories and Practice Skills, and Developmental Psychology.

**Author Contact Info:**

Lewis-Clark State College

[mmoua@lsc.edu](mailto:mmoua@lsc.edu)

(509) 768-4100