

Her, Vincent K., & Buley-Meissner, Mary Louise. *Hmong and American: From Refugees to Citizens*. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2012, 278 pp.

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While much research has been done on the Hmong, few studies have focused specifically on Hmong American identity. Vincent K. Her's and Mary Louise Buley-Meissner's *Hmong and American* is a contribution to this area of Hmong Studies as contributors to this anthology examine Hmong identity within the American context. The topics covered in this volume are diverse and include history, gender and sexual orientation, age, education, and the arts. Her and Buley-Meissner creatively weave together an assortment of academic, artistic, and community voices to articulate the changing, and often challenging, facets of the Hmong American identity. Taken together, all of the essays in *Hmong and American* convince us that the Hmong are indeed making America their permanent home and are redefining the Hmong diaspora and Hmong identity altogether.

The book is divided into three parts: identity and history, family challenges and community transitions, and cultural integration through education and the arts. The neatly crafted sections of the book display a chronological analysis of the Hmong experience. Various authors and contributors to the volume argue that the Hmong community is indeed a global community. Every generation retains their "Hmong identity" and sense of community through their

reimagination and participation in homeland narratives, entrepreneurial initiatives, and education. This section also presents some new and pressing questions on the implications of these constantly remade and shifting forms of Hmong identity for the Hmong American community and America more broadly. Vincent Her explores Hmong student involvement at university campuses and the impact of this engagement on academic programming, race-relations, and student activism. Keith Quincy questions how intermarriage will affect the Hmong community, while Gary Yia Lee assesses the effects of the consumption of Hmong costumes, videos, and other cultural products on the Hmong diasporic identity. Although the authors only begin to explore these questions, they nonetheless challenge us to rethink the complexities of Hmong American identity. The authors in this section refer frequently to Hmong life in Laos. There are also recurring allusions to the Hmong refugee narrative in several of the essays. While these issues are vital to Hmong identity formation, they do become repetitive and serve to distract readers from the central theme of the anthology, which is focused upon Hmong identity formation in contemporary America.

Perhaps the greatest strength of the anthology may be found in Part II. The authors in this section detail under examined, and sometimes controversial, topics associated with Hmong identity including gender, sexual orientation, and age. Taken together, the essays in this section explicate the heterogeneity of the community and its very real consequences for Hmong America. Ka Vang contends that men and women eating together at gatherings may serve as a first step in ending gender inequality while Bic Ngo argues for a reexamination of sexuality as being central to Hmong American social life. Song Lee, Pao Lor, and Kou Vang all argue that different groups contribute their own expertise and should be recognized for what they bring to the Hmong community. Not only does this section shed light on under examined issues and

topics in the Hmong Studies literature, more specifically it provides insights on what happens to identity and “culture” when we elucidate heterogeneity. These articles challenge us to revise our approach to Hmong Studies and attempt to come to grips with how Hmong Americans negotiate difference.

Part III of the volume looks to the arts as a site of identity formation. Most of the authors in this section utilize oral history and their own personal narratives to articulate identity. The wide-range of artistic forms analyzed (teaching, painting, dancing, drama, animation, photography, creative writing, and paj ntaub) are impressive. The manifestations of identity formation are most revealing when the participants themselves are able to produce and articulate their own vision of what it means to be a Hmong American as community members learn about new ways of using technology and disseminating their work. Hmong American college students in particular have found multiple avenues to express the complexity of their identities. Specifically, Chan Vang, Ma Lee Xiong, Shervun Xiong, and Hue Vang have all shown that creative and artistic pursuits can illuminate their own thoughts about family and history. All of the chapters, except for Buley-Meissner’s on Hmong embroidery, focus on the ways in which young people are using the arts to articulate their Hmong American identities. Buley-Meissner’s chapter, while attempting to engage with Hmong American students on the importance of paj ntaub, still mainly describes its significance as interpreted through the lens of Hmong women in Laos. The language of paj ntaub seems more covert given the ambiguity of symbols and motifs typically utilized while other more contemporary forms of Hmong art seem to convey more overt messages about family and history. Yet, I found myself left with some more questions regarding the creation of art itself and its impact on Hmong American identity and culture. Does art in the

Hmong community have a temporal essence? Furthermore, does art itself create a binary notion of Hmong American identity?

Hmong and American is a significant contribution to Hmong American studies and Asian American studies. The book is an indispensable volume that will prove accessible to a wide audience. The anthology's overall strength lies in its potential ability to open doors to the entire community in reevaluating and redefining Hmong American identity.



About the Author:

Kong Pheng Pha is a doctoral student in the Department of American Studies at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. As an interdisciplinary activist-scholar, he is interested in exploring questions that connect the Hmong American identity, gender, sexuality, affect, and well-being.