

## **The Mediated Figure of Hmong Farmer, Hmong Studies, and Asian American Critique**

**By**

**Hui Niu Wilcox, Ph.D.  
Department of Sociology  
St. Catherine University**

**Hmong Studies Journal  
Volume 13, Issue 1, 27 Pages**

### **Abstract**

The objective of this article is two-fold: First, it argues for critical engagement between Hmong Studies and Asian American Studies. Second, to illustrate the productivity of such engagement, this article analyzes the media coverage of an incident involving Hmong American farmers and their white neighbors in Eagan, Minnesota, June 2010. The focal question is how media discourses around farming and immigration serve to racialize Hmong American identities. This analysis shows that Hmong Americans experience “Asiatic racialization” in that they are either discursively cast outside of the imagined American nation, or included contingent upon assimilation and conformity. Critiquing both the exclusionary and assimilative narratives, this article explicates the inherent contradictions of the U.S. nationalism, referencing both existing Hmong Studies literature and Asian Americanist discourses on race and nation. Both bodies of work foreground the historical and social construction of identities, as well as the simultaneous, intertwined workings of race, class, gender/sexuality and nation. Critical dialogues could generate new ideas and possibilities for both Asian American Studies and Hmong Studies.

**Keywords:** Hmong Studies, Asian American Studies, Hmong Americans in the media

“Hmong Pages spent an afternoon ... to share and follow up on the farming incident that occurred last month when a man from Eagan loaded a 12-gauge shotgun in plain view of Xiong in an effort to intimidate [the Hmong couple] over a property dispute.” (Vue, *Hmong Pages*, August 1, 2010)

“More than 40 growers sought restraining orders against a nearby resident who police say used a loaded shotgun to threaten a Hmong couple working in the field.” (Yuen, *Minnesota Public Radio*, July 9, 2010)

“A man confronted a Hmong-American couple working in their field, which is adjacent to his land. He was agitated; their English wasn’t great. He said he was going to kill them, and then left and returned with a loaded shotgun, according to the farmers.” (Ly and Stokes, *Star Tribune*, June 30, 2010)

These are snippets of a Minnesotan story involving Hmong American farmers and their white American neighbour in the summer of 2010, told by three different media outlets. I have found this story intriguing for multiple reasons. I was, at the time, doing ethnographic research about Hmong American farmers in Minnesota, thus paying attention to all stories related to farming. Secondly, as a sociologist of race/ethnicity and immigration, I am always interested in how Asian Americans and immigrants experience race and racism. What immediately captured my sociological imagination was that very few parties involved were willing to tell the story in ways that implicate race or racism. The conspicuous denial of race in this discourse, or the “masking of race” (Schein and Thoj 2007), paradoxically informs us of the racialized reality in the U.S. Last but not the least, I am a Chinese-born American sociologist simultaneously involved with Asian American Studies and Hmong Studies. Trying to make sense of this incident has allowed me to think through the productive tension between these two fields.

In this article, I will argue for Hmong Studies to *critically* engage with Asian American Studies, by way of positioning myself and by way of analyzing the media narratives and discourses around this Hmong American story about farming and violence. This analysis serves as a micro site where I trace the uneasy relationship between Hmong Studies and Asian American Studies and imagine a future of mutually generative engagement between the two

fields. It is my hope that my story and my critical inquiry contribute to a vibrant Hmong Studies that forges critical alliances with other interdisciplinary fields such as Asian American Studies<sup>1</sup>.

### **MY JOURNEY: PROBLEMATIZING IDENTITIES**

I was born and grew up in China as a member of the Han majority. My intellectual journey can be traced back to Beijing Foreign Studies University, where I studied the English language and American Studies in the early 1990s. In China, my identity as Chinese was nearly totalizing and my exposure to Asian American Studies was limited to reading Chinese American literature. I was not aware of the history and realities of the Hmong—in relation to both China and the United States. Landing in the Midwest in 1996 to pursue advanced degrees in Sociology, I continued to have limited experience with Asian American Studies, though I conducted empirical research with Chinese immigrants in Minnesota. The Asian American Studies Initiative at the University of Minnesota began to function in 1998 (Lee 2009), but I was not aware of this new initiative until quite a few years later. My obliviousness mainly reflected the narrow, disciplinary focus of my Sociological study at the time, but it also had to do with Asian American Studies' difficulty in reaching out to increasingly heterogeneous Asian-raced peoples living in the U.S. (Chuh 2003, Lowe 1996).

Eventually I did become interested in Asian American Studies, partly because I had to deal with racially charged interactions even on a relatively insulated university campus. My study of race and ethnicity was impelled by my need for sanity and survival in an environment where no one wanted to talk about race and yet race was everywhere. Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (1996) enabled me to conceptualize my research of Chinese immigrants through the lens of Asian Americanist critique. This framework

conceptualizes the heterogeneity and multiplicity of Asian American communities in social, political and economic contexts that go beyond, but are still circumscribed by nation-states.

My first encounter with the Hmong American community in Minnesota was indeed a transnational experience, but not at all through an Asian Americanist lens. It was my first year in Minnesota as a graduate student, 1996. A Chinese NGO worker was visiting Minnesotan women's organizations as part of an international exchange program. I accompanied her on her visits to a few Hmong organizations in Minneapolis/St. Paul. My memories of a particular Hmong non-profit are especially crisp, maybe because in their office, a group of young Hmong American dancers insisted upon dressing me up in a traditional Hmong outfit. I remember also the sweet scent of rice in a Hmong American household in Minneapolis, the delicate hand gestures in a Hmong dance class for children, and the smiles and laughter at a support group of Hmong American high school girls. I remember talking with an older Hmong woman who patiently helped me understand why she did not know her age, and riding with a 30-ish Hmong American woman who juggled family and work with beautiful poise.

These images and sounds did not surface to my consciousness until I began writing this article. In 1996, they left me slightly disoriented—I had just come from China and my preconceived image of America, or even Asian America had not included Hmong America. But these encounters had made an impact on me nonetheless, although I had them tucked away in memory as I worked on my Sociology degree, focusing on China and then Chinese America. Fast forward eight years, when I began teaching at St. Catherine University, the students who immediately connected with me were Hmong American women. They taught me about life in Minnesota as Hmong and Asian Americans more than I could teach them Sociology, as best as I tried. At the time, St. Catherine University had courses on neither Asian American Studies nor

Hmong Studies, despite a fast growing Hmong American student population. As a faculty member coming to terms with my own woman-of-color identity and Asian Americanist politics, I felt deeply obligated to work towards a more inclusive curriculum. I began my research about Hmong American farming in 2008; I knew to make changes happen, and to engage with Hmong American students on a deeper level, I needed to educate myself about the multifaceted Hmong American experiences. Through doing empirical research with the Hmong American community, I have learned much about the politics of knowledge production. I reflected deep and hard on my outsider status, as I learned that my Chineseness had connotations for my research in the context of the historical and ongoing oppression of the Hmong-affiliated ethnic groups in China (Schein 2000).

As I got involved in Hmong Studies, I started attending conferences of the Association for Asian American Studies (2009, 2010). But I was disturbed by the lack of representation of Hmong Americans at the annual conference. My concern was validated by Schein and Thoj's (2007, 2009) critique: many established Asian American organizations have yet to come to terms with the implications of the Hmong presence in the United States; existing Asian American discourses, heavily focused on Americans of East Asian descent, can be complicit in rendering Hmong Americans invisible. My questions are both about the status quo and the future: What is (and could be) the relationship between Hmong Studies and Asian American Studies? Why, after 30 years living in the United States, and being "raced" as Asian, are Hmong Americans excluded or marginalized in Asian American Studies? Why did I, in my effort to expand my university's curriculum, first imagine an Asian American Studies program long before my colleagues and I pushed for a Critical Hmong Studies minor<sup>ii</sup>? What are the reasons why Hmong

Studies should maintain a critical distance from Asian American Studies? In what ways can these two fields inform and enrich each other through critical dialogues?

I share my intellectual journey as an allegory for the tension and connection between Hmong Studies and Asian American Studies, *and* between Hmong, Chinese, and Asian American identities. I was, and remain, an outsider to Hmong America, to Asian America, and to America, although my relationship to these different social territories has evolved, and I no longer feel like an insider to China, my “homeland.” The last 16 years of my life have seen me winding my way through these cultural and social landscapes and negotiating my place in intellectual fields that *seem* to correspond to certain “identities” – China Studies, Asian Studies, Asian American Studies, and Hmong Studies. But Cultural Studies scholars (Hall 1996) and Asian American Studies scholars (Chuh 2003, Lowe 1996) have taught me about the constructedness of both identities and disciplinary boundaries. I am interested in finding out how these identity terms as well as these disciplines have come to be. And I am invested in envisioning border-crossings that could expand and decolonize our imagination.

Before the recent, critical shift towards postcolonial frameworks, Asian American Studies scholars had struggled to relate to newer immigrants who arrived from Asia after the 1965 Immigration Act (Chuh 2003, Lowe 1996). A main objective of Asian American Studies has been to claim America and Americanness, or to work towards national inclusion. To this end, Asian Americanists are sometimes compelled to distance themselves from Asia, the geographical space, and Asians, the “authentic” foreigners. This tension sometimes translates into quotidian awkwardness when “assimilated” Asian Americans encounter us “real Asians” who speak English as a second language. In the late 1990s, Asian Americanists began to theorize the heterogeneity and multiplicity of “Asian American” communities (Lowe 1996), and engage in

analyses that simultaneously consider power dynamics along race, nation, class, gender, and sexuality. One of the latest shifts in Asian American Studies is to foreground transnationality as an analytic (Chuh 2003). Given these recent developments, Asian American Studies must recognize the important contributions made by Hmong Studies, for Hmong experiences are transnational in nature and variegated by race, class, gender and sexuality (Schein 2000, 2004, Schein and Thoj 2007, 2009). Asian American Studies have provided historical contexts of “Asiatic racialization” that can shed light on Hmong American experiences, which can then illuminate both the strengths and weaknesses of the existing paradigms of Asian American Studies. In other words, the recent frameworks of Asian American critique, sensitive to transnational and postcolonial issues, and to the heterogeneity of Asian American communities, can be both referenced and critiqued by Hmong Studies scholars.

Returning to the story of the Hmong farmer in Eagan, Minnesota, I will demonstrate how the tension between Asian American Studies and Hmong Studies informs my understanding of Hmong America. I will first elaborate on the haunting of race, in the sense that the denial and persistence of race can both be sighted in the mediated discourse. And then I will explore the tension between the national and the transnational in the Hmong American experience, explicating how gendered racialization and resistance take place both within and beyond the imagined nation-space.

### **THE GHOSTLY MATTER OF RACE, CIRCA 2010, EAGAN, MINNEOSTA**

“Schliesing’s attorney said Xiong’s race didn’t factor into the confrontation. ‘It has nothing to do with that,’ said attorney Paul Rogosheske, ‘It has to do with all of a sudden, we’ve got fences up here, and the wildlife isn’t coming into our backyard that we’ve been feeding for the last five years.’” (Yuen, *Minnesota Public Radio*, July 9, 2010)

“Xiong wonders if some of the white neighbors view him with suspicion because he’s Hmong.” (Yuen, *Minnesota Public Radio*, July 9, 2010)

“[A Hmong community leader] thinks the incident was isolated. But she said it’s not unusual for Hmong growers working in the outskirts of the Twin Cities to be questioned by neighbors. ‘Some have yelled at the farmers to get off the property and ‘go back home,’ she said.” (Yuen, *Minnesota Public Radio*, July 9, 2010)

“Mason, who is of Korean descent, says he doesn’t think the issue has anything to do with the fact the growers are Asian.” (Yuen, *Minnesota Public Radio*, July 9, 2010)

“While this incident is under investigation, race has played a role in several recent high profile cases involving Hmong and Whites. Tou Ger Xiong, a community activist said, ‘Whether race played a role or not in this incident, the fact is racism is alive and well.’” (Vue, *Hmong Pages*, August 1, 2010)

Embedded in the above narratives are contradictory accounts of the role of race in this incident. The white neighbor’s attorney insisted that it had nothing to do with race, and that his client’s action was explainable, and perhaps justifiable under the circumstance reconstructed through the client’s and the attorney’s (white American) lens. It is a lens that sanctifies the boundedness of property and the ideal of a pristine nature—unperturbed by Hmong farmers and their activities. As Schein argues (Schein and Thoj 2007: 1074), the discourse of “territory and property” becomes “another way that race gets masked. If it’s about property, then it’s deracialized.” But of course, the sacredness of private property is a culturally specific and Eurocentric construct. The denial of race encoded with this notion of property rights figures prominently in a narrative intended to justify violence towards Asian-raced bodies<sup>iii</sup>.

But the farmers are not the only Asian-raced bodies in this story. “Mason, who is of Korean descent” (Yuen 2010) was a police officer that responded to the call when the incident took place. It is meaningful that the Minnesota Public Radio reporter felt compelled to describe the ethnicity of the police officer, who has an Anglo last name, in the context of Mason’s denial of race’s role in the event. In addition, while Xiong and his wife are repeatedly referred to as “Hmong” or “Hmong American,” the white neighbour is never racially marked. In the *MPR*



story, he is referred to as “a nearby resident;” In *Star Tribune*, he is “a neighbour,” and in *Hmong Pages*, he is simply “a man.”

Interestingly, a Korean American police officer is made to speak on behalf of color-blindness. Race clearly matters in the reporting of the event, not only in the sense that the Hmong American farmers have to endure racially charged verbal, psychological and physical violence, but also in the sense that only the non-white bodies involved in the incident are racially marked in the retelling of the story. And depending on how the reader understands their own racial/ethnic statuses, they could interpret this color-blind discourse in divergent ways. To many [white] readers, the denial of race’s relevance by an “Asian” police officer might have more weight than similar statements from a white officer or a white bystander. This could be the case because the few Asian Americans who have gained voices and presence in the mainstream media are often expected to speak for and act on behalf of “their people.”<sup>iv</sup> This burden of representation is rarely carried by white Americans who find themselves in the media limelight. To an Asian American reader with anti-racist consciousness, it could be frustrating that a Korean American police officer was *reported to* have issued color-blind statements, undermining the potential critical race discourse that this incident could instigate.

It is important to note that the stories in the media are told from the dominant, white American perspective, and that the reported utterances by Asian American individuals are not the only things they said during the interview processes. These statements are in fact highlighted and selected by writers and editors. The stories that the reader encounters in print have already been filtered through racializing, color-blind lenses.

Typical of the color-blind post-civil rights public sphere, the narratives in *Minnesota Public Radio* and *Star Tribune* rendered whiteness invisible and normative, and bodies of color

hypervisible and deviant, even when they are the victims of deviant acts by white Americans<sup>v</sup>.

Whiteness surfaces explicitly only in *Hmong Pages*: “Xiong wonders if some of the white neighbors view him with suspicion because he’s Hmong” (Vue 2010). We know that this incident is not isolated based on his reference to plural “white neighbors,” and from a community leader’s testimony that “it’s not unusual for Hmong growers working in the outskirts of the Twin Cities to be questioned by neighbors. ‘Some have yelled at the farmers to get off the property and ‘go back home’” (Yuen 2010). Acts of physical violence involving guns are not everyday occurrences, but this community leader is aware that violence takes many shapes, not the least of which are verbal and psychological assaults inflicted upon Hmong American farmers.

And yet, this community leader “thinks the incident was isolated” according to the *Minnesota Public Radio* story. The statement that “the incident was isolated” has become a code for color-blindness, assuming that most readers understand implicitly that “isolated” actually means “isolated” from systemic racism, or patterns of racism. The lone voice rebuking such colorblindness came from community activist Tou Ger Xiong, who insists that “racism is alive and well.” He reached this conclusion by situating this incident in a larger societal context where “race has played a role in several high profile cases involving Hmong and Whites” (Vue 2010). The community activist perspective was reported only in *Hmong Pages*, a community paper featuring a largely Hmong American readership. The story in *Minnesota Public Radio* evoked the “race” word only in its denial; however, traces of a race discourse are discernable anyway, if only because the reporter found it important to write about the denial of racial implications. This treatment is double-edged in effect. On one hand, the discourse of race is not altogether silenced, despite people’s vehement claims to be color-blind. On the other hand, unsuspecting readers might go along with the color-blind cultural script.

Overall, this contradictory discourse around race indicates that the grip of the color-blind narrative about race, despite its potency and prevalence, is not absolute and complete in its power. A counter discourse that reveals the workings of race and racism exists on the margin of the media space and the public imagination, and can be excavated from between the lines of mediated narratives. Race, in these narratives, fashions a ghostly presence—relentlessly haunting the in-between realm between the imaginary (constructed realities) and the material (embodied experiences). As Schein articulates (Schein and Thoj 2007: 1090): “[Racism] insidiously makes itself known to people of color while maintaining its deniability in official mainstream discourse. That’s why its appearance can be called ghostly, like a supernatural being that you know is there but cannot see.” Her interlocutor Thoj, however, points out that anti-racism actions can call racism into visibility, and that racism is “something more systemic than a ghostly apparition” (Schein and Thoj 2007: 1090). I would like to add that critical analyses about racism also have the effect of “outing” the ghost of racism. Not only do these analyses explicate how race is constructed, but also what racism’s visceral effects are. A month after the incident took place, the Hmong American woman facing the gun barrel and the white man’s threat “still gets teary eyed and fear is still laced into [the] tone of their voices” (Vue 2010). They were “scared for their lives.” As an Asian person living in the U.S., I had a visceral reaction to not only the story but also some readers’ comments in the anonymous cyber space.

## **RACE AND NATION**

The readers who responded to these stories in cyber space are not immediately racially marked, but they reveal their own racialized national identities by way of positioning themselves vis-a-vis the racialized bodies in question.

“If we give our business to Hmong growers and thereby drive out of business our own native farmers, we are making ourselves dependent on a group of people who have

absolutely no allegiance to us or our country. That would be sad.” (Anonymous, *Star Tribune* website, June 30 2010)

“Only buy from people who identify themselves as first and foremost Americans. Doesn’t matter what your race [sic] but if you describe yourself as something else before being an American (and thus implying that it is more important than being American) then you will not get my patronage.” (Anonymous, *Star Tribune* website, July 2, 2010)

The authors of these two comments clearly draw a line between “Hmong farmers” and “Americans.” The former are also described as “a group of people who have absolutely no allegiance to us or our country”—in other words, potential enemies of “our country.” The figure of Hmong American farmer is thus cast as the “national abject” (Shimakawa 2002), whose embodied *labor* the nation depends upon and incorporates and yet whose *bodies* are marked and rejected as alien. In fact, the American national self is constituted through its contrast to racialized Others who, according to a racist nationalist ideology, can never be fully assimilated. Inversely, the racialization of the Hmong American farmer is predicated upon the alleged lack of allegiance to the American nation. As such, the contemporary experience of abjected Hmong American labor is a continuation of the historical experiences of Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans and other Asian Americans who were denied citizenship despite their contributions to the building of the American nation. But Hmong American experiences need to be understood in their particular historical contexts. Hmong American farmers’ experiences, for example, have been significantly different from Japanese Americans’ agricultural experience at the turn of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Japanese American history of citizenship struggle as well as their loss of land and agricultural tradition could help us understand contemporary Hmong Americans’ difficulty in accessing land and other resources. However, we cannot let our knowledge of Japanese American history colonize our attempt to understand Hmong American experiences that are differentially contextualized.

The plot of race/nation entanglement thickens in the following exchange, charged with righteous emotions.

“OMG, grow up people. How about support all local farmers? Oh no, that would be too simple, too inclusive, and it would take away the ‘special’ treatment you want to afford some people purely based on their race. You are a racist if you only buy from a Hmong farmer and not from a Scandinavian, German, French, English, American, ...farmer.” (Anonymous, *Star Tribune* website, June 30, 2010)

“OMG grow up yourself. Nobody is saying ‘buy only from Hmong farmers.’ The point of the article is that these folks are working very hard to get ahead... Yet xenophobic jackasses like this idiot in Eagan are afraid of people who don’t look like him... I bet a Scandinavian/German/French/English farmer wouldn’t get a visit from the police because he was watering squash at 7 pm. Everyone has their own story, but the Hmong have had to work long and hard because the U.S. military/government let them down after Vietnam and because they settled in areas where most everyone else is white. They’re doing everything we want immigrants to do – work, maintain families, raise kids, assimilate ... Give them a break.” (Anonymous, *Star Tribune* website, June 30, 2010)

Deploying the logic of reverse racism, the first interlocutor interprets the editorial’s plea for people to support Hmong farmers and to understand their difficult situations as a plea for “ ‘special’ treatment...purely based on their race.” If such “special treatment” is given to Hmong farmers, it follows that the “Scandinavian, German, French, English, American...farmer” is being victimized by this reverse racism. Again, the Hmong farmer is firmly cast as the opposite to “Americans” whereas the descriptors preceding “American” are all Northern and Western European in origin. “Whiteness” is stamped all over the sentences despite its not being in print. At stake in this particular comment is a white American nation that excludes bodies of color.

The rebuttal to this comment is just as incensed and not any less interesting. The reader rightly points out that the differential treatment that Hmong farmers get is most likely discriminatory (being the target of white neighbors’ suspicion and police inquiries called for by these neighbors). The commentator subtly reveals his or her [liberal] whiteness and Americanness, by referring to the Hmong as “them” and positing “us” vis-a-vis “immigrants:”

“*They*’re doing everything *we* want immigrants to do—work, maintain families, raise kids, assimilate” (emphasis mine). It is implied that the Hmong are “good immigrants” because they do what “we”—code for the American nation historically constituted as white—want “them” to do.

This commentator expresses anger at “xenophobic jackasses like this idiot in Eagan” who “are afraid of people who don’t look like him.” By specifically indicating and locating “this idiot in Eagan,” the writer distances him/herself from such xenophobia. The angry name calling places racist individuals in the discursive spotlight while obfuscating the structural context that enables their racist behavior. Attributing racism to individual attitudes and actions is a common theme in this discourse, as seen in the following statements.

“Support all farmers locally. Not just Hmong. Every race has a nut. Every day someone is doing idiotic things to someone else. See if this one gets pulled.” (Anonymous, *Star Tribune* website, June 30, 2010)

“All the (racist) nativists are worried: The Hmong are harder workers and more industrious. And the produce they sell in the farmers’ markets is good – I buy it and enjoy it. It’s disgusting that some racist jerks can’t simply leave well enough alone.” (Anonymous, *Star Tribune* website, June 30, 2010)

In both of these statements, the incident is accounted for with individual bigotry, despite the fact the editorial writers who have worked with Hmong American farmers for many years make it clear that although this incident of physical violence is out of the ordinary, it nonetheless exemplifies the frequent harassment and discrimination Hmong American farmers have to deal with. “Hmong-American farmers...live every day with misunderstandings, suspicions, and even dangers” (Vang and Stokes 2010).

Other commentators eschew the issue of race altogether but their statements effectively racialize Hmong American farmers by suggesting that they are deviant.

“Most of the produce sold by Hmong farmers in Minneapolis is produce shipped in from California. Just go down on Nicolet Ave. and check out the boxes. Or do you really believe that bananas and pineapples are grown in Minnesota; or that you harvest grapes in Minnesota in April. These ‘farmers’ are just retailers of California produce, not real farmers at all.’ (Anonymous, *Star Tribune* website, June 30, 2010)

Other readers responded that in fact, this particular farmers’ market in Minneapolis allows for resale (selling of produce not grown by the vendors). Without noting this important context, the above statement incriminates “these ‘farmers’” for not being “real farmers at all.” What is striking is the absolute certainty and sweeping generality with which the indictment is declared. This declarative attitude and such homogenizing statements are important mechanisms through which Eurocentric/imperial “knowledge” essentializes racial Others as objects of knowledge.

So far I have identified three different sentiments expressed in this discourse: indictment of Hmong American farmers’ deviant practices in the market, suspicion that Hmong American farmers are engaged in illegal activities in the fields, and finally the allegation that Hmong American farmers “have absolutely no allegiance to us or our country.” These sentiments are motivated by divergent ideologies and expressed in different manners. But one could argue that all of them have effectively essentialized, criminalized, and Otherized Hmong Americans. These statements have the effect of racialization, regardless of the speakers’ intention.

Some liberal commentators went up against these incriminating statements by redeeming the Hmong American reputation by saying “The Hmong are harder workers and more industrious.” But even here, they speak as if they have total knowledge of the Hmong. Kandice Chuh (2003) urges Asian Americanists to think about the partiality and situatedness of knowledge, and in fact, the unknowability of subjectivities and identities. She argues that if we counter the racializing essentialism with opposing “truth claims,” we might end up reproducing the dominant, colonial episteme, because these counter truth claims often emphasize one

dimension of reality instead of complicating reality, as in the above statements about the “hardworking” Hmong.

## **RACE, NATION, AND GENDER**

Complicating reality means never taking anything for granted, and always trying to figure out how reality is constituted through discourse and practice. The discourse that I am examining offers glimpses into various dimensions of American nationalist ideologies. Potentially resonating with many white Americans (especially those of liberal leanings) is the statement “They are doing everything we want immigrants to do—work, maintain families, raise kids, assimilate...” It resonates because it pictures the American dream with Hmong Americans as protagonists held up to be the assimilated model minority. In this dreamed up America, as long as Hmong Americans conform to the heteronormative American bootstrap narrative of success, they should be respected. It is no accident that the trope of assimilated “model minority” are anchored around work and families, for the ideal of heteronormative family functions as an ideological apparatus that disciplines immigrants, and indeed, all members of the American nation (Park 2005, Shah 2011).

The opposite, racializing trope of “forever foreigners” is also gendered and sexualized, albeit in different ways. Hmong American men, along with other Asian-raced men, are seen as either excessively masculine (potentially violent) or insufficiently masculine. The “violent Hmong man” is a figure historically constructed through the “mountain warrior” image of the Vietnam War era, and through the publicity of the 2004 hunting incident in Wisconsin involving Chai Vang and white hunters (Schein and Thoj 2007). The white neighbor who pulled out a gun on the Hmong American farmers later stated in a mediation session that he did so because the farmer reminded him of Chai Vang and he was scared. This discursive association epitomizes



gendered racialization through evoking violent, dangerous Asian masculinity, transposed from one Hmong American man in Wisconsin woods to another Hmong American man in a Minnesotan farm field. Indeed, “all Hmong have been made to bear the guilt of Chai Vang’s actions” (Schein and Thoj 2007: 1093).

If we counter such stereotypical claims by insisting that Hmong Americans have nothing to do with gendered violence, they work really hard, and they just want to fit in the American society, we would fall in the same trap of essentializing Asiatic racialization. There are ready stereotypes awaiting us in that end as well: the model minority, a stereotype that “bespeaks simultaneous inclusion and exclusion” and serves “the particular function of being at once a signifier of assimilative potential and of the limitations proscribing that possibility” (Chuh 2003: 12).

So what are we to do? In order to resist the urge to offer up “counter stereotypes,” Chuh (2003) suggests the notion of “strategic anti-essentialism” where we challenge all truth claims and always consider multiple, interconnected dimensions of power that constitute identities. One such dimension is space, both imagined and real, national and transnational.

### **THE TRANSNATIONAL WITHIN THE NATIONAL**

In the case of Hmong farmers in the media discourse, being racialized is intricately connected to being cast as “foreign.” The claim that buying from Hmong farmers would mean that “we” become dependent upon “them”—potential enemies, evokes all too familiar nationalistic rhetoric that workers in Asia are taking “our” jobs, and “our” economy has become dependent on “them.” The Hmong farmer is thus imagined as a transnational figure, not in the sense that he or she has literally crossed national borders, but in the sense that this figure embodies and evokes transgression of what is considered as national economy and ideology.

Reading into such “transnationality” reveals both the repressive nature of the American nation and the resistive potential of being on the national margin, or “the transnational within the national” (Chuh 2003:113).

The spatial dimension of racism and nationalism manifests in statements such as “go back home” hurled at Hmong American farmers and other Asian-raced bodies. White Americans who make these comments often have little idea where this “home” is specifically, but they have no doubt that it is spatially outside the U.S. The American nation is imagined to be white. Despite all the globalizing forces, and despite the increasing, but differential mobility of capital and people to cross national borders, the U.S. nation has yet to be imagined as fluid and porous. It is delimited by ideological boundaries that separate “us” (white) from racialized Others.

Kandice Chuh (2003: 15) points out that this vision of U.S. nationalism that “has repeatedly denied or ‘nullified’ potential citizenship, by creating ‘Asians’ as different from ‘Americans’” is an integral part of Asiatic racialization.” She argues that it is in response to such exclusionary nationalism that Asian American Studies scholars have insisted on emphasizing “American” in “Asian American,” signifying struggles for citizenship and national inclusion. But Chuh (2003) disagrees with this goal of claiming America, contending that this nation-based Asian Americanist discourse not only overlooks the transnational dimensions of Asian American experiences, but also reproduces imperialistic knowledge that subjugates Asian-raced bodies as Others and fails to challenge the cooptation of Asian American Studies “by the assimilative modes of nationalist narration: by the bootstrap narrative celebrating individualism, the story of immigrant success defined as economic and political equality” (Chuh 2003: 139).

Hmong people underwent treacherous journeys to arrive in the U.S. Access to legal citizenship, albeit hard-earned<sup>vi</sup>, distinguishes Hmong Americans from other Asian Americans who were legally excluded from the U.S. in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and from contemporary Asian Americans whose migration does not involve being refugees of wars. Here lies one of the sources of tension between Hmong Studies and Asian American Studies: it is in reaction to historical denial of citizenship to Asian-raced peoples that Asian American Studies was created as a politicized academic discipline. More recently scholars (Park 2005) have expanded the notion of citizenship to include not only legal citizenship but also social citizenship that connotes social inclusion, equality and belongingness. What does it mean to have legal citizenship and yet not social citizenship? How do we make sense of the multiple routes immigrants and refugees from Asia have taken to obtain American citizenship (in multiple senses of the word)? Do we need to imagine Asian American subjectivities differently so that they can account for all these contradictory experiences? Or do we need to come to terms with the idea that Asian American subjectivities cannot subsume Hmong identities and that both must be constantly reimagined?

Such reimagining must take into account transnationality and postcoloniality. Transnationality, in Chuh's work (2003), not only indicates the reality that people and capital cross national borders, but also suggests a conceptual place where existing knowledge, especially state-centered knowledge, can be de-centered and displaced. "I mean transnational as a cognitive analytic that traces the incapacity of the nation-state to contain and represent fully the subjectivities and ways of life that circulate within the nation-space" (Chuh 2003: 62). Transnationality thus offers resistive potentials. According to Chuh, postcoloniality in the context of Asian American Studies refers to "the histories and legacies of European and U.S.

colonization of especially South Asian and Southeast Asian countries, as well as the contemporary forms of uneven global relations of economic and political power” (Chuh 2003: 116). This notion of postcoloniality impels Asian Americanists to 1) investigate how contemporary lives (migration patterns and global inequalities) are shaped by legacies of historical colonization, and 2) problematize the “nation-space” as inherently contradictory and question national inclusion—either through legal citizenship or through cultural assimilation—as the ultimate goal of Asian American political struggles. Instead, Chuh (2003: 8) reconceptualizes justice as “an endless project of searching out the knowledge and material apparatus that extinguish some (Other) life ways and that hoard economic and social opportunities only for some.” Justice, in other words, is a knowledge project that seeks to decolonize the mind.

Because of the particularity of Hmong diasporic experiences, Hmong Studies scholars have paid close attention to transnationality and postcoloniality (Lee 2006; Schein 1999, 2000). However, there seems to be a bifurcation in the field, as most of the “domestic” studies of Hmong American experiences have focused on acculturation and confined their analyses within the American nation (Her and Buley-Meissner 2010). “Acculturation” is another name for “assimilation” and both words are tied up with the assimilationist national ideology. Neither the transnational focus nor the acculturation focus automatically leads to a systematic critique of the American nationalist ideology and its racializing logic. Schein and Thoj’s (2007, 2009) are among the few who have been developing such a critique, and perhaps it is not coincidental that they have consciously engaged with Asian American Studies, though they are also critical of Asian American Studies for excluding the Hmong diaspora experience. I argue that to connect the narratives of acculturation and racialization with the narratives of postcolonial diaspora in an

analytical manner, we must take “transnational” as not just an empirical phenomenon, but a theoretical framework that challenges the academic status quo as well as dominant ideologies of American nationalism<sup>vii</sup>.

Despite the difficult relationship between Asian American Studies and Hmong Studies, I propose that the two fields critically engage with each other. For one thing, the term “Asian American” connotes more than just a common connection to the continent of Asia. Chuh (2003: 26) summarizes the social meanings of “Asian American” in the following passage:

“Asian American”...connotes the violence, exclusion, dislocation, and disenfranchisement that has attended the codification of certain bodies as, variously, Oriental, yellow, sometimes brown, inscrutable, devious, always alien. It speaks to the active denial of personhood to the individuals inhabiting those bodies. At the same time, it insists on acknowledging the enormous capacity for life that has triumphed repeatedly over racism’s attempt to dehumanize, over the United States’ juridical attempts to regulate life and culture. ‘Asian American’ provides entry into these histories of resistance and racism.

It is these histories that Hmong Studies should enter, *both* histories of the Hmong read through the lens of racism and resistance, colonization and postcoloniality, *and* interconnected (but different) histories of all Asian-raced bodies. In such an understanding of “Asian America” and “Hmong America,” identities only have meanings through social interaction embedded in power relations. This understanding challenges Hmong Studies scholars to consider the complex and mutually constituting relationship between Hmong (American) identities and their social contexts, never assuming stabilized identities and cultures. If “Asian American” can function as “a metaphor for resistance and racism” (Chuh 2003: 27), then “Hmong American” can become a much needed metaphor for resistance and racism contextualized and historicized in ways that foreground postcoloniality and transnationality.

To be absolutely clear, I do not advocate for Asian American Studies to subsume Hmong American differences. If Hmong Studies loses its distinctive focus on transnationality and

diaspora, it would be a loss for both fields and knowledge production in general. Difference and friction can lead to critical edges, if the two disciplines actually engage with each other. I am, however, troubled by the institutional marginalization of Hmong Studies by Asian American Studies on one hand, and by some Hmong Studies scholars' lack of attention to Asian American Studies on the other hand, even when the issue at hand is race and ethnicity (Hein 2000, Ruefle, Ross and Mandell 1992). Some authors who deal with Hmong American experiences of racism either compare these experiences to African American experiences (Hein 2000) or ignore race altogether and adopt more neutral concepts such as "ethnocentrism" (Ruefle, Ross and Mandell 1992). Asian American Studies scholars ought to also pay more attention to the happenings in Hmong Studies and reckon with this emergent field's empirical and theoretical contributions. The best gift that the field of Asian American Studies has to offer is its tradition of critique, especially of American racism, but there remains the essentializing and assimilating impulse in the field to assume a common destiny if not common identity of "being Asian American." Hmong Studies, just being itself and refusing to be subsumed, reminds Asian Americanists that communities and identities can never be taken for granted<sup>viii</sup>.

Theoretically, the argument about differential subjectivity can be applied to all Asian American groups: "There is no common subject of Asian American Studies; there are only infinite differences that we discursively cohere into epistemological objects" (Chuh 2003: 147). However, historically speaking, Asian American Studies has been dominated by scholarship about experiences of groups with East Asian heritages. Perspectives from Southeast Asia and South Asia have been marginalized in the field. Thus it has not been necessary to establish subfields such as Chinese American Studies or Japanese American Studies, whereas work is being done to institutionalize South Asian Studies, Filipino Studies and Hmong Studies<sup>ix</sup>.

Hmong Studies, being a younger discipline, can probably take cues from South Asian Studies and Filipino Studies on how to critically engage with Asian American Studies and actively carve out spaces within this broader field while maintaining strong sub-field identities.

### **MORE ON IDENTITIES, DISCOURSE, AND FUTURES UNBOUND**

I began this paper by mapping out my intellectual journey that has led to my current inquiry of Hmong Americans' complex experiences of race, nation, and transnationality. This mapping is an important part of my attempt to assume a certain kind of scholarly identity and engage in a certain kind of scholarship—more reflexive of positionality and sensitive to the politics of knowledge. No identity ought to be taken for granted. If researchers investigate multiple social identities without questioning our own identities, then we reproduce the same colonizing knowledge structure that dichotomizes self and Other, subject and object. Disciplines studying marginalized identities need to first have a complicated view of those identities. Although my analysis is based on close readings of specific media stories and dialogues, my intent is not to make them represent the entire American society. Discourses—statements uttered in contexts of power—are not mirrors of society. Discourses constitute social practices, identities, and power. When someone decides to tell a story or express an opinion, she has become a social actor with certain identities, and her story or utterance has been shaped by her entire experience of society to that point. However, you can never know the entirety of her story or of her social context just by listening to what she says at that moment. What we can tell is that she is using some of the same ideological constructs and discursive structures that are referenced by many other individuals and institutions. We can also tell that these repeated references to ideology become parts of discourse, solidifying the power relations that condition discourse in the first place. So what ultimately interests me in looking at the “discursive

constructedness of subjectivity” (Chuh 2003: 9) is these oft-cited ideological constructs and discursive structures, because they have been in operation for a long time before specific utterances take place. A discourse analyst is interested in how these constructs shape (but not bound) the stories and statements, and how they can also be disrupted by stories and statements that have been informed by alternative ideologies and knowledges. This is why it is important to analyze discourse and to engage in critical reading practices, not only to understand how our thinking, doing and talking are shaped by society, but also to realize that we have the power to disrupt existing structures, beginning with what we think, say and do the next moment.

Hmong Studies scholars’ thoughts, words and actions matter a lot. This is a unique field with an unquestionably transnational focus, and it has great potential for developing complex analyses of race, class, gender, sexuality and nation. I have arrived at this realization after a journey through China Studies, Critical Race Theory, and Asian American Studies. But others could very well get to the same place through other pathways. The crossroads where Hmong Studies meets other disciplines is not a place of arrival; it is a point of departure, into a world of unbound possibilities, a world in which disciplines inform and transform each other. In a world that defies all kinds of boundaries, but also witnesses too many acts of violence in the name of borders, we cannot afford to take borders for granted and confine our work within boundaries that colonize and delimit our imagination. We cannot afford to reify any kind of identity, binding it to an unchanging culture or ideology. It is imperative that we challenge essentialism and rigid disciplinary boundaries; only so can we do justice to the complexity of our communities.



### References Cited:

Chuh, Kandice. 2003. *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Hall, Stuart and Paul du Gay, eds. 1996. *Questions of Cultural Identity*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Hein, Jeremy. 2000. "Interpersonal Discrimination against Hmong Americans: Parallels and Variation in Microlevel Racial Inequality." *The Sociological Quarterly* 41(3): 413-429.

Her, Vincent K. and Mary Louise Buley-Meissner. 2010. "Hmong Voices and Memories: An Exploration of Identity, Culture, and History through Bamboo among the Oaks: Contemporary Writing by Hmong Americans." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 13(1): 35-58.

Lee, Erika. 2009. Asian American Studies in the Midwest: New Questions, Approaches, and Communities. *Journal of Asian American Studies* 12(3): 247-273.

Lee, Gary Y. 2006. "Dreaming Across the Oceans: Globalization and Cultural Reinvention in the Hmong Diaspora." *Hmong Studies Journal* 7: 1-33.

Lee, Stacey. 2005. *Up Against Whiteness: Race, School, and Immigrant Youth*. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.

Lee, Stacey. 2008. "The Ideological Blackening of Hmong American Youth." *The Way Class Works*, edited by Lois Weis. New York: Routledge.

Lowe, Lisa. 1996. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Park, Lisa Sun-Hee. 2005. *Consuming Citizenship: Children of Asian Immigrant Entrepreneurs*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Ruefle, William, William Ross and Diane Mandell. 1992. "Attitudes toward Southeast Asian Immigrants in a Wisconsin Community." *International Migration Review* 26(3): 877-98.

Schein, Louisa. 2000. *Minority Rules: The Miao and the Feminine in China's Cultural Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Schein, Louisa. 2004. "Hmong/Miao Transnationality: Identity Beyond Culture." In *Hmong/Miao in Asia*, edited by Nicholas Tapp, Jean Michaud, Christian Culas and Gary Yia Lee. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books.

Schein, Louisa. 2007. "Occult Racism: The Masking of Race in the Hmong Hunter Incident/A Dialogue Between Anthropologist Louisa Schein and Filmmaker/Activist Va-Megn Thoj." *American Quarterly* 59(4): 1051-95.

Schein, Louisa and Va-Megn Thoj. 2009. "Gran Torino's Boys and Men with Guns: Hmong Perspectives," *Hmong Studies Journal* 10.

Shah, Nayan. 2011. *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the North American West*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Shimakawa, Karen. 2002. *National Abjection: The Asian American Body on Stage*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Vang, Chia Youyee. 2010. *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Vang, Ly and Susan Stoke. 2010. "Support Your Local Hmong Farmers." *Star Tribune*, June 30.

Vue, Malisamai. 2010. "Dispute Over Property Leads to A Hmong Man's Life Being Threatened: Hmong Farmer Contends that the Man Threatens Him With a Shot Gun." *Hmong Pages*, August 1.

Yuen, Laura. 2010. "Vegetables, Tension Grow on Hmong American Farm." *Minnesota Public Radio*, July 9.

**About the Author:**

Hui Niu Wilcox, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor of Sociology, Women's Studies, and Critical Studies of Race/Ethnicity at St. Catherine University, St. Paul, MN. Her life and work revolve around integrating scholarship, teaching, dance (Ananya Dance Theatre), activism, and family. She has published research and reflections on the connections between migration, race/ethnicity, dance, and activism. Her current research concerns the relationship between knowledge (especially regarding the body and its discipline) and power in China and the United States.



---

<sup>i</sup> I understand that some readers might want to get straight to the analysis. Please note that the ultimate purpose of both my own journey and the media analysis is to better understand the relationship between Hmong Studies and Asian American Studies. The narrative of my journey provides the necessary background for the analysis and for understanding how these two fields relate.

<sup>ii</sup> St. Catherine University approved a Critical Hmong Studies minor in April 2012.

<sup>iii</sup> Throughout American history, violence in the name of property has been defensible. For example, the imposed idea of property ownership was key in politically justifying the violent displacement and disenfranchisement of indigenous populations.

<sup>iv</sup> Another example is the fact that the Hmong American actors in *Gran Torino* are often mistaken as their characters (Schein and Thoj 2009).

<sup>v</sup> In recounting of white violence against South Asian migrant labor in North America in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Nayan Shah points out, “Public fear, horror, and incomprehension were redirected at the alleged actions that *incited* violence and thereby justified the vengeance claims and the guiding system of gendered horror and racial subordination” (2011: 22, emphasis mine)

<sup>vi</sup> Most refugees are granted Permanent Resident (or Resident Alien) status upon entering the United States. They are eligible to apply for American citizenship after residing in the U.S. for a number of years. The application process demands financial resources as well as energy and time to pass the citizenship test.

<sup>vii</sup> This kind of theoretical nuance is what distinguishes Schein and Thoj’s analyses: It is through contextualizing analysis in the transnational and postcolonial realities of the Hmong diaspora that they explicate and connect multiple forms of violence inflicted upon Hmong Americans – physical, psychological, and epistemic.

<sup>viii</sup> And let’s not forget that the essentializing category of “Asian” is routinely used by the state and other mainstream institutions as the umbrella term to refer to all groups that are historically connected to Asia. This term racializes all Asian American groups because it erases subgroup differences and flattens Asian American identities.

<sup>ix</sup> University of San Francisco houses a Philippine Studies Program. California State University, East Bay boasts of a Center for Filipino Studies that hosts an on-line *Journal of Filipino Studies*. The infrastructure of Hmong Studies in the U.S. seems to mirror that of Filipino Studies in the U.S., featuring Center for Hmong Studies at Concordia University and a Critical Hmong Studies Minor at St. Catherine University, both located in St. Paul, Minnesota. The online *Hmong Studies Journal* also plays a pivotal role in the institutionalization of Hmong Studies.