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Day 785

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Creative and Literary Works

Day 785

Koua Mai Yang

October 17, 2020

To the future HMoob/HMong identifying people,

It has been seven hundred and eighty five days since I started dressing myself in the clothing of our ancestors. Although they have experienced thousands of years with ris tsho HMoob or HMong clothing in the everyday, within the last sixty years, the HMong living in the Western hemisphere have stopped wearing HMong clothing. I started the *Hnav HMoob, Wear HMong* project because I was curious about what would happen to my life if I looked like our ancestors and over the course of two years much has happened.

In the first fifty to one hundred days, my family, especially the elderly women, my mother and grandmother were shocked that I wear ris tsho HMoob or HMong clothes everyday. They said, “ua li koj yuav nyiam ua HMoob ua luaj” or “why do you like being HMong so much?” and “tus txhais nos yog HMoob tiag tiag” or “this daughter is really really HMong”. Their comments emphasized how HMong I looked, and sometimes suggest that I have out HMong’d them. The disorientation from seeing a younger HMong person look traditional, forced them to become aware that they are no longer engaging in the wearing of the everyday dress. The everyday dress of our people has died and I do not believe it was given a proper burial nor proper recognition as our people continued to find ways to survive in our respective host nations after the Vietnam War.

I speculate that these comments also suggest other things like how certain generations of HMong people collectively engage at various thresholds in the idea of culture being fixed in the older generation. Fixed notions of culture in our community, for example, means that the older generation creates the culture, and authenticity is based on these creators, therefore later generations of people receive a diluted version of the HMong culture and are seen as less HMong. However, a reality is that culture is never constant, it is a sociological construction and has always been changing and influenced by geography, and the communities we are surrounded by. The mixing of cultures happens so organically that sometimes it is difficult for any one ethnic group to make claims on who authorized shared designs and aesthetics.



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These responses reminded me that our elders have also stopped engaging in paj ntaub, that they are also victims of the times, of the lack of space to reconnect with land and bodies of water, and to re-engage in the practices that were once a part of our everyday life. Although the pacing of society today feels faster and instant, for me, wearing ris tsho HMoob slowed down time and allowed for much needed observation and reflection about how our people looked and how we have moved throughout human history. Through the making and wearing of paj ntaub, I understand today that at one point, we saw ourselves as kin to the land and the living things around us. Embedded in the fibers are the collective memories and archival evidence that perhaps our ancestors have done everything that they can to create the possibility that the future will be a better place. Our ancestor's struggle to survive is a reason why I wanted to better understand how to properly grieve the death of the everyday HMong dress. The wearing of ris tsho HMoob is precisely sacred because I believe it is our ancestor's labor of love and sacrifice, and collectively it communicates across generations without a written language system.

Yet when learning how to create paj ntaub, the process is not as rosy and romantic compared to the theories about its beautiful aesthetic. For example, today HMong women and girls that are still making paj ntaub and ris tsho HMoob, however their voices are often rendered invisible in the patriarchal society. People often say that it takes patience to create paj ntaub, but as one engages in the making, it has little to do with patience. Paj ntaub involves small repetitive gestures, and for some it can take several weeks to one month to complete, paj ntaub is more like an endurance and requires dedication to the craft. The craft however is not dead, and is very much alive in the diaspora. On the internet it is easy to find gatherings of HMong people on social media sharing and exchanging knowledge about paj ntaub and other cultural practices. Similarly, today it is more common to see HMong clothing sold via online and on social media through the Facebook live streaming option, where HMong women and men stream and record online shopping sessions.

During these sessions, the seller dresses in the clothing they are advertising, they measure, describe and communicate directly to their HMong audiences or buyers in real-time. It can be entertaining and addictive to watch and for the HMong living in the Western hemisphere, the internet provides instant access to buying cultural materials that otherwise would have been difficult to obtain. These sellers live all over the world, but the majority of materials and labor utilized to create their products are sourced from Laos, Vietnam, Thailand and China. It is noticeable that the majority of ris tsho HMoob today is no longer made from natural fibers like hemp and cotton. They have been replaced by plastic fabrics and additionally machine printed paj ntaub are produced more quickly than the laborious needle work typically found on HMong clothes. My project engages in these tensions in how the commoditizing of paj ntaub has expanded on the practice. In relation to the consumption of paj ntaub, I am also interested in observing what becomes of these materials and clothing. Considering the fast pace at which ris tsho HMoob is being created today, will ris tsho HMoob become less sacred and be treated like fast fashion? Who really benefits from the demand of ris tsho HMoob in the global textile market? What does it mean to wear ris tsho HMoob today?

In reflection it took me roughly two years before I was able to arrive at more nuanced questions about paj ntaub. Throughout this project I noticed consistently how there has been little pause given to the large changes in how our people engage in culture materials and practices. Another reason why I created the project *Hnav HMoob, Wear HMong* is because I grew up hearing that paj ntaub practices are dying. For me this statement creates fear within the community and adds to the generational trauma and loss that our people have been carrying since the 17th century

when they were persecuted and forced to migrate from China. What I think has been overlooked in the statement ‘paj ntaub practices are dying’ is that in the general HMong community, the desire to commoditize, capitalize and consume paj ntaub is more urgent and easier to access than engaging in the practice itself. Assimilation, trauma, and surviving makes it difficult to learn and maintain paj ntaub practices because of the lack of access to teachers and mentors and general exposure to ancestral cultural practices.

Additionally, collectively in the HMong diaspora, there has been little effort and support to hold space to engage HMong identifying people intergenerationally in paj ntaub and other cultural practices like basket weaving. I often question how active and involved we all are in our culture’s erasure? We all collectively feel ownership of paj ntaub and other cultural practices, however not all will feel the obligation and need to organize to teach the youth about traditional practices. As historically stateless people, people without a national identity, who has the ability to authorize what is and is not HMong culture? What is it that we need to do to shift the language of fear in the changes that we see in paj ntaub and other cultural practices to arrive at a place where these conversations are included in the scholarship about our people?

Hnav HMong, Wear HMong centers women’s knowledges, and recognizes that paj ntaub as something that is still a gendered expectation of women and girls in some HMong societies. It recognizes that HMong women have been at the forefront of creating records of our people’s relationship to land and the natural materials that we give and take from. This project does not seek to test theories or find answers about who our ancestors are or what a specific article of clothing and stitch symbolizes, but instead encourage speculation, and questioning.

I originally created *Hnav HMoob, Wear HMong* with the intentions of inviting and involving various HMong identifying people, yet at the beginning I was not able to foresee what kinds of situations people will experience. Especially as the body is dressed differently from the norm, anyone who engages in *Hnav HMoob, Wear HMong* will not be protected. Therefore I proceeded with the project alone and overall it has been an alienating experience. Although I have the advantage of living in the Twin Cities, Minnesota where it is densely populated with HMong people, no one here looks like me.

With that said, to all HMong identifying people who encounter this letter, I am inviting you to participate in *Hnav HMoob, Wear HMong*. I want you to know that this project is guided by rules that you get to create, that centers your own unique experiences of culture and identity (see the attached guiding performative text). I cannot guarantee that you will be safe as you engage in the wearing of HMong in the public, however, I encourage you to take small steps to build confidence and find meaning for why you are interested in ris tsho HMoob? For example, instead of walking outside in ris tsho HMoob right away, for a few hours simply wear it indoors in the safety of your home or a controlled space. This will allow your body to feel the weight of the clothing, and to practice seeing yourself in the mirror. When you feel like you can move forward, make adjustments, perhaps walk outside for a few minutes, then try wearing ris tsho HMoob for a whole day.

At the beginning of the project I was not able to anticipate what would become of my life because I was not able to imagine a future with paj ntaub. I wanted to find a different way of communicating to the general HMong community beyond the classroom and gallery walls, while also reaching our ancestors, our peers, and the future HMong. Now, I am at a point in the project where I am no longer anticipating how people will see me or how they think about what I am wearing. I no longer have to brace myself for the way people gawk, sexualize and stare from curiosity. Their gazes however, still remind me that looking stereotypically HMong, feminine, and

different from how the majority of people are dressed today, is unsafe; but there is much to learn and much to gain from the disorientation, and that is a risk that I am willing to take. I believe that sometimes people need to see what I am wearing to see the question that I am asking, what I am trying to say is that for me, the best way to imagine a different future and create new language around the complexity of our personhood, we need to breathe new ideas into existence. I still feel new with wearing ris tso HMoob as my everyday fashion and I will continue to dress myself this way until it no longer serves me. I will continue to leave as much information behind as this project progresses and I hope that you consider challenging yourself by participating.

With much love,

Dej Txiaj Ntsim/Kuab Maiv Yaj/Koua Mai Yang

Hnav HMoob, Wear HMong performative text

1. Wear ris tsho HMoob or HMong clothing everyday:
 - a. How did you arrive at this project? What is your understanding of ris tsho HMoob?
 - i. these can be clothing that you create
 - ii. gifted to you
 - iii. ones that were purchased
 2. What needs to happen to center self-exploration? How do you want to experience self?
 - a. try not to anticipate how others will react
 - i. unless reaction is what you seek to understand yourself
 3. Document the experience everyday
 - a. documenting the experiences become a material of time and history
 - i. examples of documentation are:
 1. Photographs
 2. sound recordings
 - a. songs, speech
 3. Drawings
 4. Paintings
 5. Writings
 6. Textiles
 - b. If adjustments are made where one decides not to document, take note of why that is
4. Reflection
 - a. Write, record your experiences, thoughts, ideas and questions that arise from the performance
 - i. to consider what has happened, to slow down the experience
 - ii. to make meaning of the performance and images
5. Allow yourself to make adjustments the rules:
 - a. adjusting the functions of the rules are needed to protect the self from being

overwhelmed by new and old experiences

6. Repeat 1-6

a. or decide when the performance ends

About the Author



Dej Txiav Ntsim, Kuab Maiv Yaj, Koua Mai Yang is a HMong American female artist based in the Twin Cities, Minnesota. Yaj's studio practice investigates HMong identity, culture and history. Ongoing for a little over 946 days, her current project, *Hnav HMoob, Wear HMong* is photographs, moving images, and installations. The project engages in everyday HMong clothes through making, dressing and performance to raise questions about HMong materiality, aesthetics, culture and female representation in the circulation of global cultural production. The project seeks to understand the history of Hmong traditional dress from a female perspective, a place of labor, experientially and through an embodied methodology. The heart of her work is to hold space for the possibilities of addressing the legacy of statelessness, wars, invisibility, and the layers of oppression in HMong female experiences. Yaj holds an MFA from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, and BFA from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.



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