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## Notes to my Dad

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# Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement

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## Creative and Literary Works

### Notes to My Dad

Karen Vang

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This is a critical reflection of my experience navigating higher education as a Hmong woman. My dad is well known among our clan to be very “traditional” and respectable. However, over the past 6 years during my graduate studies, my dad has remained my number one supporter. I sometimes, I tell him he is the chosen one, to derail his beliefs. At times, I begin to imagine what life would be like if I were a son. As for me, one of my mentors told me one time, that it is my sacred path to do this work. I have since then began my project of learning and being a Hmong woman. Like Anzaldúa’s *autohistoria*, I write from within. I know my ancestors have waited for me to do this work. I am still grappling with the meaning(s) of feminism. What does Hmong feminism look like?

Keywords: Hmong feminism, autohistoria, gender

I am grateful and forever indebted to you. You facilitated my understanding of my life through your perseverance to rebuild your suffocating life in a new world. You transformed and integrated new languages, cultures, and traditions to reconfigure who you are today; a wise soul, full of integrity to our ancestors we still call upon. Given this, I can understand fully that you embody the strength in which you continue to practice trying to understand me as I continue my journey of research and critical reflections of my experiences as your daughter. These are my scattered notes to you because I am trying to understand my own politics of location. These are my fragmented notes to you as I prepare to become an ancestor.

We first understood me pursuing a higher education as an economic pursuit and social status for our family. “Do it so they recognize us. Go so that the whites can respect us.” Dad, recognizing us means nothing, if we cannot recognize ourselves. I know that you are willing to read my notes. This is a short collection of ideas that I have been processing in my mind. It has really transformed my motivation to continue and focus on my own dislocated position in the university as your daughter. So here it goes Dad, I know you have questions, and I understand your concern for me to remain in your own words “traditional,” however, you have also pushed tradition aside to support me, as a daughter, in school, by taking care of my children and allowing time for me to pursue my research. We both know a father supporting a daughter in education remains outside our tradition. Yet, you continue to be my biggest fan.



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In the article titled *Research through Imperial Eyes* by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, she argues that what we are learning now in the west is rooted in an “archive” of knowledge, systems, rules, and values. This archive is believed to include many forms of knowledge yet remain in a hierarchical order. This means that some rules and values and systems of thought are emphasized as more dominant, and some are less valued. In this case, the west remains superior. Essentially, language as a system of representation creates our reality. Yet, no languages can create the reality I lived to be able to receive your full support.

Dad, this is important because when I ask questions about Hmong gender roles and expectations, I am also at the same time wondering why women are less important in our community. Likewise, I do not mean to devalue your understanding of Hmong gender roles and expectations. Men often are assumed head-of-household, then women beneath them. More than often, women are not a part of decision-making processes. It was never a part of our tradition for you to support my pursuit of higher education, yet you are one of my true supporters today. This alone demonstrates to me that even you can set aside differences and tradition to stand by me, in my dislocated position in the U.S. academy and our Hmong community. This illuminates for me, Smith’s core argument of western domination through discourse. In my own words, let us change the discourse to reframe our realities.

I wonder what our archive contains if we were to look for a storehouse of our ancestors’ images, texts, artifacts, and philosophies. I ask if we can look at our archive without looking through a western imperial gaze. I recognize this is your concern of me as I remain in the academy. That I may somehow, distort our tradition or perhaps not share enough of our story. That I may in various ways impose a western gaze on your role as my father. Let me be the first person to assure you, that I share your concerns as I continue to read, theorize, and analyze my position and knowledge formation. Smith argued that western cultural ideas determine reality. This is again, done through discourse. In other words, even if we can access our archive, our ancestors’ ideas that you and I share, are meaningless through the western gaze. With this perspective, we should step back and consider dominating discourses within our community and wonder what it would look like if these discourses shifted. Here, I express again, let us frame the Hmong daughter discourse, to reflect our realities.

Given that a discursive archive can have real material consequences, what if you consider and rethink the archival discourse surrounding power, gender, and tradition? First, think about the many thousands of years of migration our ancestors’ and the various ways they had to integrate and even sometimes alleviate their traditions. Second, think of their relationship between our world and their world, and the changes they experience. Third, think about a Hmong tradition in which you can openly support your daughter. Maybe, if we can shift our discourse about our Hmong daughters, we can begin to understand our complex reality. And build from these complexities.

I am asking you to consider that your ancestors are both men and women. Their migration from what we know refer to as China, to Southeast Asia, to the United States, back and forth through geo-political and geo-spiritual spaces remain complex. I am not asking you to let go of traditional beliefs, neither will I let go of values and beliefs that you have taught me. However, maybe we can start to think more broadly about our tradition. We can start imagining ways to include both sons and daughters in spiritual callings so that daughters can remember their ancestors.

Furthermore, we believe our ancestors are with us today. Of course, in western research as Smith will also note, that translation is problematic. Sometimes there are no words for me to express the ways that I am in dialogue with my ancestors through the western gaze because

ancestors are nonexistent in the western world we live, right? Yet at times, I do not know how to translate feminist or the category of women without offending you. Dad, can you for only a few days suspend your thinking of traditional thinking for Hmong daughters? For example, consider that daughters are capable of honoring ancestors. If this can happen, Hmong parents that do not have son(s) can still have funeral rites. If our ancestors are both men and women, how different is it if a son or daughter calls on our ancestors? I know your beliefs are deeply rooted and no way will I ever seek to dismiss it. I do wish to share with you, that in your own subtle ways, I do see that you have changed because you have recognized that sometimes our realities are grounded in love so deep, that it extends beyond patriarchal boundaries and traditions.

With this love and caring that you have expressed in subtle ways, it is of no surprise that you too, have begun to form your own perceptions of love and care toward your daughter. Dad, in no way does this mean that you are disregarding your ancestors' thousands of years of tradition. I bet our ancestors understand what Anzaldúa (1992) (see Kolmar & Bartkowski, 1999; McCann & Kim, 2013) describes as the new *mestizas* connecting with places, different races, a connection to new notions of ethnicity, to a new tribalism that is devoid of any kind of romantic illusions. In these words, you and I are the bridges that connect our ancestors, to us, and connect us to the larger world. The survival of our culture depends on this connection.

I hope that you consider these notes. Some ideas in this collection of notes foreground my thinking about my funeral rites as your daughter. I think of mom for instance and the ways in which she believes that if she were to separate or divorce from you, she will not have a proper funeral which will lead to a lost soul. Can you also consider that if her father were to be here, he would love and care for her the way you do for me? That after so many years of her unhappy life, that maybe she is deserving of a proper funeral regardless of traditional beliefs. After all, mom did bear 3 sons. You have changed, and so let us imagine that if we can begin to think outside our tradition, that maybe we can complicate the western gaze together.

Furthermore, Mahmood (2005) complicates my thinking of agency and ethics. I recently learned about agency, to resist the structures. Agency is generally understood in opposition to systems of oppression. Mahmood argued that we allow agency to mean more than resistance, since not all communities experience a "feminist conscious". Agency must be complicated. This is so important to think about when I am thinking of research in our community. The definition of agency becomes limiting if we think of the ways in which we come to understand resistance in Hmong communities, without the western gaze. How do I begin to articulate a Hmong feminist consciousness without it being in direct opposition to Hmong patriarchy? How then does one come to "agency" without consciousness?

I do not claim to be agential by resisting you or subverting Hmong traditional beliefs. Because agency, regardless of how empowering it is believed to be, cannot explain the various ways in which we begin to articulate our ways of being and knowing. We come from different unnamed canons. We come from a misrecognized tradition. We come from shattered pieces of story cloth embroideries. These are not canons of western research, however, know that my research will not look through the western imperial gaze. I am conscious of this gaze, and will make all efforts to shift this gaze.

Discourses are closely linked to consciousness. If we can shift the ways in which we categorize Hmong women in opposition to Hmong men, our consciousness as a collective can bridge our differences in countering the western gaze. Let us change our discourse. Since we do not have a written language, our bodies hold our knowledge and our experiences. Our archive is different from the western archive. Our ideas, artifacts, and images do not look the same as the

western archive that Smith describes. However, many years of imperialism, has made way for the western cultural archive to thrive. This domination has led to many marginalized forms of knowledges and discourses. So here, I ask that you consider the dominating Hmong discourse surrounding gender and consider if we can shift these, not to benefit men or women in any way, however, to help us recognize us as a “new mestiza” to counter the western gaze that continues to dominate us and people of color.

As I continue to do research, I am forced to think within boundaries. This means, I can only think from canons that the university will allow me to. In this case, the western canons. Feminist theorists, such as Anzaldua, Smith, and Mahmood have helped me think beyond the boundaries. Anzaldua reminds me, that I must function as a bridge. Mahmood reminds me, that I must rethink what agency is, whether it is a shared consciousness among my community. Smith reminds me, that the western gaze is so dominant, their research and discourse directly shapes our way of life.

This is a short collection of my notes I am sharing with you. I know you have concerns about my research. I am conscious of your values, traditions, and beliefs. No way, will I devalue it. I hope these notes will explain a little bit of my thinking in the past couple of years. Now that I begin to understand my politics of location and the ways in which I must maneuver between multiple places, I begin to understand your politics of location. I understand your courage and strength to maintain your values and integrate my values. With this, I sincerely thank you, for being kuv Iv. You are more than my inspiration. It is inevitable that you will become my ancestor one day, and I hope that when it is my turn to call upon you, you will hear me and share with me all your knowledges.

### About the author



Karen Bao Vang is a PhD Candidate in Cultural Studies at the University of California, Davis. Her research focuses on regenerating Caub Fab worldviews and ancestral memories through spirits of skies, spirits of lands, and spirits of waters. She collects oral histories from elders in Hmong communities to learn different ways of knowing, being, and doing.

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