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Toward HMoob-centered Inquiries: Reclaiming HMoob American Educational Scholarship and Curriculum

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Introduction

As the intersecting field of HMoob (Hmong/Mong) Studies/Hmong American Studies, Southeast Asian American Studies, and Education Studies grow, there is also an increased desire to learn, read, and produce scholarship by HMoob people. Throughout our graduate journeys and as early career scholars and educators at the intersections of Critical HMoob Studies and Education Studies, we—Choua and Kaozong—have yearned for scholarship on HMoob that is not just about representation but includes research that recognizes HMoob strengths and assets. Specifically, we craved scholarly knowledge that employed HMoob assets to interrogate racist, colonial discourses and decenter whiteness.

This special issue centers HMoob (Hmong/Mong) epistemologies and ontologies in HMoob American education research to produce “new narratives and imaginaries” (Vue & Mouavangsou, 2021, p. 273). We aim to provide empirical, theoretical, epistemological, ontological, and methodological HMoob-centered approaches in scholarship and curriculum building. While there are existing scholarships that aim to understand and advocate for HMoob American education, we call for a critical analysis of this genealogy. HMoob scholarship, especially those that seek social justice change, should not be grounded *nor* should it produce deficit and/or damage-centered discourses on the communities it is advocating for.

In this issue, we seek to curate a scholarly movement for scholars and practitioners to share their research and practice as a means to humanize and elevate HMoob inquiries, peoples, and communities. To be clear, this special issue is not about permitting the legitimization of HMoob epistemologies and ontologies but rather it is to reclaim and recenter them in education. Through this issue, we reclaim power by pushing against dominant discourses that position our communities as deficit and damaged. This issue also centers HMoob teaching and learning that critiques systems of oppression by dismantling educational inequities and racism. We reposition HMoob communities and many others through strengths and assets. The focus on strengths and assets is not about (re)producing an overly positive narrative about success as Model Minorities nor contributing to dismantling the Model Minority Myth. Rather, we draw on Critical Refugee Studies to generate critical scholarship on knowing HMoob people on our own terms (Espiritu et al., 2022).

Our special issue emerges at a critical time in the sociopolitical context of the United States in regard to anti-Asian hate violence, national debates about the value of ethnic studies, and the



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increased commitment to building HMoob model curricula. We are grateful to the Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement for sharing our vision of providing global accessibility to students, scholars, practitioners, and community members invested in HMoob American education. Thus, JSAAEA is also an intellectual fit and embodies our ethos and values to provide scholarly knowledge about HMoob people through an open-access format. It is our hope that the works submitted for this special issue will inspire and be utilized in research, policy, and practice that honors and centers HMoob Americans. This special issue is dedicated to HMoob Education Studies and serves as a catalyst to build a political scholarship that transforms and challenges deficit and damage-centered research on Southeast Asian American education.

HMoob 101: Disrupting the “HMoob Handbook”

Early research on HMoob people has historically privileged colonial and imperial inquiries about preliterate, primordial societies that are cloaked as cultural appreciation and educational resources (see discussion by DePouw, 2012; Mouavangsou, 2019; Vang, 2021; Vue & Mouavangsou, 2021). Such research has been engrossed into a metaphorical handbook for introductory courses and workshops on HMoob people. While those early studies captured a historical moment and provided public knowledge about HMoob people, such scholarship perpetuates colonial violence and sustains imperial conquest. While the intentions of these scholars may not be malicious, it is necessary to recognize how their research created a colonial canon that positions HMoob as deficient and damaged. Most, if not all, of those early scholarships were non-HMoob researchers writing about HMoob people to introduce HMoob to the general public. This power dynamic demonstrates the deep colonial history that displace HMoob people. Meanwhile, HMoob people are denied opportunities to learn and create knowledge about themselves while the ivory tower (i.e., higher education/academia) gets to deliver “new discoveries” about HMoob to the world. These early scholarships produce deficit, hegemonic discourses about who HMoob people are and how the world should understand them.

HMoob people were characterized as rebels, troublemakers, and national threats throughout HMoob history (M. N. Lee, 1998). While there continue to be debates about the names given to HMoob people as an ethnic group, HMoob oral stories have noted the derogatory nature of the names Miao in China and Meo in Southeast Asia. Early scholars, such as Yang Dao and Mai Na Lee, have had to undo these harmful narratives about HMoob people. When HMoob entered the U.S. public as Southeast Asian refugees in the 1980s, HMoob became internationally depicted as asylum seekers and refugees who needed political resettlement. Once U.S. researchers turned their attention to learning more about this new population, colonial discourses continued to prolong deficit and damaged-centered frameworks about HMoob people.

Initial studies that mentioned HMoob people referred to the population as refugees and utilized the HMoob case to examine resettlement policies and processes. As the Critical Refugee Studies Collective interjects, this categorization of “refugee” relies on legal classifications and does not interrogate the responsibilities of U.S. militarism (Espiritu et al., 2022). U.S. researchers and journalists have also used colonial knowledge to make HMoob people legible to the general American public by defining them as “free people” (Chan, 1994) and explaining resettlement issues through a cultural mismatch lens such as Fadiman’s racist work (Chiu, 2004). Kaozong Mouavangsou (2019) argues that these discourses miseducate people about who HMoob people are. Miseducation is not simply providing wrong information, rather miseducation displaces HMoob people from accessing accurate information about themselves and is a form of colonial

violence. Mouavangsou also points out that this form of miseducation also negatively shapes the ways HMoob scholars engage in knowledge production about their community and themselves.

Beyond Deficit and Damaged: Decolonizing HMoob Education Studies

Educational researchers also took interest in examining HMoob people in the United States¹ utilizing a nation-state-centric framework rooted in legality. Specifically, the United States introduces educational programs that treat HMoob people as particular legal subjects. HMoob adult learners who needed continuing education to develop English skills and transition to life in the United States were referred to as refugees. On the other hand, their children fell into the larger immigration framework of integration. While HMoob students in the 1980s can also be refugees, the immigrant framework merges refugees into immigrants whose new task is to assimilate and integrate into the host country. Much of the education literature on HMoob students in formal U.S. schooling then examined HMoob students through the immigrant framework. This immigrant framework was utilized to analyze and contextualize the educational issues that HMoob students encountered. Although the immigrant framework helps us trace the migratory history and political explanation for why HMoob are in the United States, this framework maintains a narrative around integration and Otherness.² Specifically, HMoob educational “success” and “failures” are measured and explained through their immigrant challenges and their outsider status. While we cannot forgo the ascribed categorization of HMoob as immigrant, it is important to note this debate about whether HMoob is “a refugee” or “an immigrant” continues to shift based on the disciplinary background of the researcher.

When examining the intersecting literature between immigration, racialization, and education, HMoob students have been lumped under the Southeast Asian American (SEAA) racial category. While numerous scholars have written intensively about this topic (e.g., Lee, 2005; Lee et al., 2017; Museus, 2013; Ngo, 2006; Poon et al., 2016; Vue, 2021), we highlight how colonial discourses continue to produce racist, deficit and damage-centered educational narratives that focus on HMoob people’s deficiencies. Deficit discourses position minoritized students and their communities as responsible for their own academic failures, while damage-center narratives document their oppression in order to achieve political or material benefits (Tuck, 2009).

Schools, researchers, scholars, and advocates operate from this discourse to gain resources for their HMoob students (Poon et al., 2016; Vue & Mouavangsou, 2021). HMoob students are scripted as failed model minorities when their educational attainment is low in comparison to East and South Asians. When HMoob students struggle in school and are tracked into English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, the cultural clash ideology is utilized to rationalize HMoob students’ failures (see DePouw, 2012 to read more about the critique on cultural clash). When HMoob students assert dissent against formal educational norms, they are criminalized and marked as troublemakers (Xiong & Pheng, 2022). These perspectives are also utilized to explain how HMoob students’ failures are the faults of their parents and become a justification for schools to modernize HMoob people. Such frameworks position HMoob parents as deficit (e.g., not having the correct parenting styles) and damage (e.g., uneducated parents do not know how to support their children) without focusing on alternative suggestions that center HMoob parents’ strengths and assets to support their children’s education (M. S. Lee, 2020). HMoob students and their families should not be subjected to a victimized and damaged position to justify equitable access to resources and educational success.

While well-intended educators have utilized deficit and damaged research to advocate for resources, we heed Tuck's (2009, 2018) caution that documenting damage for change *is* flawed and adheres to the colonial theory of change that power can only come from outsiders. We emphasize that this colonial theory of change is in fact a colonial script, one where the oppressed must demonstrate their *worthiness* (i.e., how damaged they are) to receive gains. Specifically, we see the colonial script play out in schools where HMoob students are portrayed as damaged beings, meanwhile, educational institutions as possessing power and control to grant recognition and resources to the disempowered HMoob students who are in need. This script is overplayed and violent in locating HMoob students within education scholarship. Most notably, this script instills the idea that HMoob students are not agents of change *and* that change can only happen outside HMoob communities. These deficit-based and damaged-centered frameworks become the main discourse on how HMoob people are perceived and treated by educational institutions. We echo Vue and Mouavangsou's (2021) call for new narratives that move beyond deficit and damage to center HMoob epistemologies and strengths. That is, we breathe and make possible the radical questions that Tuck (2018) posed:

What if we...believe that our own awareness, our own knowing, is enough to make change?...What if we believe that we are the ones who can make change, and that others are not more powerful than us to effect change? (p. 160)

We, as HMoob scholars, believe in our knowing, are inspired by each other, and can effect change. When we believe, we also engender change with this special issue by departing from such cyclical colonial violence of miseducation and racism to amplify a new turning point. As previously mentioned in regards to HMoob education related research, HMoob people become a case study for understanding larger educational issues related to immigration, resettlement, racialization, language programs, etc. While we maintain that studying HMoob people does indeed contribute to the broader debates in the field of education, this special issue asks readers to “flip the script” to focus on how we can better understand HMoob Studies through education (Espiritu et al., 2022). We do not simply want to introduce HMoob people to a non-HMoob audience nor are we interested in making HMoob legible to larger educational debates. Instead, we follow decolonial scholars to prioritize research that addresses interlocking systems of domination, exploitation, and oppression (Fúnez-Flores et al., 2022; Smith, 2012). In the vein of George J. Sefa Dei's (2022) call for decolonial thought and praxis, this special issue becomes a “potent intellectual weapon” through “a social and political corrective by engendering action” (p. 679). The action in this special issue is a political movement demonstrating how humanizing scholarship for and by HMoob people decenter whiteness and critique colonial and imperial genealogy about HMoob people. We point out that HMoob people have always been talking about our ways of knowing, but we have been blocked from being recognized as legitimate knowledge producers. By making this shift, this special issue joins rising HMoob scholars (e.g., M. S. Lee, 2020; C. Y. Vang et al., 2016; M. Vang et al., 2022; Vue, 2021; X. Xiong, 2009, 2018) to reposition power and reclaim our authority to learn and teach about ourselves.

Collective Refusal of Colonial Scripts

This special issue includes two creative pieces and four scholarly articles that engage with decolonial and anti-racist research to refuse colonial scripts about HMoob people. We intentionally

begin this special issue with the creative works as a way to center and recognize literary work as scholarly knowledge. The creative works are nontraditional examples of the multiplicity of HMoob knowledge production, becoming primary sources themselves. All contributors provide theoretical, methodological, and empirical knowledge that emphasizes HMoob epistemologies. In their refusal, each article offers opportunities to explore humanizing knowledge about the complex debates of educating within our HMoob communities. Rather than romanticizing that asset-based scholarship must solely focus on glorification, the authors of this special issue demonstrate how we can hold contradictions in a way that does not further cause harm for minoritized communities. In their refusal of colonial scripts, they call into action a collective commitment to prioritize HMoob knowledge, critical reflection within and of educational spaces, and the continual support and development of HMoob education.

Chong Moua's literary work demonstrates how HMoob people teach and learn about themselves. While her *kwv txhiaj* focuses on the affects of displacement and loss as a HMoob child, her reflection reveals her process to rediscover HMoob history through the art form. As Moua noted, teaching and learning a traditional art form is deeply embedded within our lives, where the knowledge and ability to access the artistry requires careful, long-term observation and intuitive skills. Moua infuses both formal instructional classes on the art form structures and her own intuition as a HMoob child to understand the history and intergenerational depth of *kwv txhiaj*. Refusing colonial scripts that HMoob history is tied only to nation-state, Moua's *kwv txhiaj* itself also offers a primary source that traces HMoob history through our oral tradition. For Moua, relearning *kwv txhiaj* through her own processes highlights the ways HMoob people's pedagogy is central to sustaining and telling their own historical narrative.

Defying dominant narratives that marginalize HMoob students, **Mao Lee's** poem, *Paj Xyeem* is a narrative reflective piece that critiques how U.S. schools operate through white supremacist ideologies and invisibilizes students of color. In recounting her experiences, Lee also defies this marginality by re-centering her voice and visibility in these spaces. In doing so, Lee challenges educators to create educational spaces that are inclusive and center on the knowledge and experiences of their students. *Paj Xyeem* also serves as a reminder that students' academic grades do not reflect their intelligence but rather the educational system in the United States. Her work serves as a guiding example for marginalized students to draw on their assets in reframing their experiences and knowledge as valid.

Pa N. Vue's scholarly analysis demonstrates that creative works are more than artistic expressions and can also serve to testify against colonial violence. Vue uses the rap song, "Hmoob Zaj" by Shong Lee, as a primary source to refute the dominant history that has been created about HMoob people. In doing so, Vue reframes this rap song as a testimony that centers HMoob experiences and re-narratives HMoob history from HMoob perspectives. By positioning this rap song as a primary source of knowledge, Vue demonstrates how creative works validate truths and serve as knowledge within educational spaces that can humanize and critique distorted realities of Hmong histories and experiences.

Thong Vang's exploration of HMoob-centric pedagogy through eldership pushes scholarly debates on HMoob education within formal and institutional spaces to consider teaching and learning from the home. Refusing deficit ideologies that HMoob people are uneducated or lack intelligence, Vang interrogates the colonial assumptions that legitimate knowledge is only written down and taught in formal educational settings. In contrast, he offers *HMoob eldership as pedagogy*, a form of collective lessons from his elders and his own transition to eldership, to

illustrate the ancestral and intergenerational forms of HMoob education and knowledge production.

Drawing on community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and radical love (Freire, 1970; hooks, 2003, 2006), **Ariana Yang** theorizes *sib hlub sib pab* as a form of capital to capture the assets that HMoob educators bring into formal schooling. Drawing from her experiential knowledge of the ways HMoob people build community and sustain relationships, Yang's *sib hlub sib pab* as capital emphasizes the community and radical love that reimagine educational community ownership, institutional authority, and access that departs from educational colonial practices. Yang examines how one HMoob teacher practices *sib hlub sib pab* as capital to develop an open-access HMoob language curriculum for future teachers and students. Through this refusal to prolong colonial violence, Yang urges educators to lean on HMoob epistemologies and ontologies within their own practices.

In examining the colonial and racialized neoliberal university, **May Kao Xiong** focuses on the Hmong Student Association's (HSA) effort to see and recognize themselves. Drawing on Coulthard's (2014) self-recognition and Espiritu's (2014) refugee as social critique, Xiong highlights the importance of how minoritized undergraduates have refused institutional recognition that violently sought to position them as damaged and valueless minorities. While the neoliberal university intends to omit HMoob students in its diversity facade, Xiong asserts that HSA's organizational vision, goals, and practices hold significant evidence of how HMoob undergraduates forge inclusive learning that counters racialized neoliberal education.

Implications for the Field

We close this introduction by offering implications for several fields of study including HMoob Studies, Education Studies, and Asian American Studies. It is our hope that this special issue bridges and offers connections across these fields.

Research on HMoob within the field of education has been utilized to understand immigrant and refugee communities in relation to U.S. education. This growing body of literature has also contributed to the larger field of Education Studies to unpack, understand, and transform our educational institutions. While this scholarship has shaped our understanding of HMoob people's experiences and educational outcomes, HMoob students and communities are predominantly depicted as educational delinquents and portrayed as damaged. The articles from this special issue challenges such colonial discourses and aims to dismantle white supremacy. Each article provides new ways of engaging with the field that is not based on deficit and/or damaged portrayal of HMoob students and communities. Instead, this special issue offers a perspective that reclaims HMoob power, knowledge, and agency. This perspective provides insights that have been overlooked in education. It is not enough to "include" HMoob in the field of education only for observation, rather this special issue demonstrates that scholarship can decolonize and dismantle white supremacy by centering HMoob epistemology and ontology through an asset-based lens.

Not only does this special issue challenge monolithic assumptions about Asian Americans, but as a transdisciplinary field, we also provide nuance to Asian American debates about the racialized experiences of diasporic and displaced communities. Asian American Studies as a field has focused on various concerns regarding humanities and social science inquiries about Asian Americans. Asian American scholarship centers the racialized experiences of Asian Americans to offer critiques and understanding of the sociopolitical and economic contexts of the United States. This special issue contributes directly to these efforts, however, HMoob scholarship has been

marginalized as a minor subfield within the larger field of Asian American Studies. We extend Southeast Asian American Studies critiques that Asian American Studies has been dominated by certain ethnic groups such as East Asians. Thus, the articles from this special issue shed light on HMoob Studies as an important field that connects Southeast Asian and Asian American Studies with other scholarly debates. Within the intersectional fields of Education Studies, Asian American Studies, and Southeast Asian American Studies, our special issue is also a vehicle to interrogate the marginalization and harm of white supremacy. This special issue is not just about understanding educational policies or practices, but our contributors demonstrate the ways Asian Americans draw in their particular position as HMoob Americans to challenge racialized educational practices and policies. We recognize HMoob Studies scholars as major players in shaping the critical scholarly knowledge about Asian America, the United States, race, racialization, and racial relations.

Within the field of HMoob Studies itself, we are also departing from the colonial legacies that frame HMoob people as an object of investigation. While these early scholarships put HMoob Studies in the academic map, now is our time as HMoob scholars to make academia legible to us. In this decolonial turn, the articles within this special issue demonstrate an example for how HMoob people (students, educators, researchers, and communities) can reimagine academia as a place that we can and must occupy. Our special issue is a tribute to our HMoob communities, to reclaim our space, our knowledge, our experiences, and our histories in the academy. Rather than providing thick descriptions of HMoob people's lives or attempting to rescue HMoob from their primitive selves, the contributors interrogate systems of power that shape the discourse, narratives, and racialized meanings of HMoob people's knowledge, community, and education. Most importantly, these articles are testimonies that HMoob scholars are academic experts about their community. All of the authors are graduate students and/or early career scholars, marking a turn in HMoob Studies as a field to center young people and their vantage points. This special issue shows that young scholars can develop and forge an academic space to belong to. This special issue is a commitment to growing the field and cultivating young scholars as legitimate knowledge producers. We are not writing *for* our HMoob communities, but we are writing *with* our HMoob communities. Each of these articles is a piece of HMoob strength, asset, knowledge, and wealth weaving a new genealogy and extension of Critical HMoob Studies.

Conclusion

We want to reiterate that this special issue does not assume that HMoob epistemologies and ontologies have not been used in educational context, but rather that academia has not taken the opportunity to center them. This special issue decenters whiteness by employing a HMoob epistemological and ontological approach in education. Hence, we are reclaiming HMoob American education scholarship and curriculum to be HMoob-centered. Together, each of the articles contributes to the ongoing scholarly movement for HMoob inquiries in education. This special issue features scholarship written by HMoob-identified scholars, but this movement cannot happen without the community offered by the blind reviewers and our copyeditor. While not all of them are HMoob and their disciplinary backgrounds and scholarly status range from junior to senior scholars, we thank them for joining us on this scholarly movement. And, in the union of this scholarly movement, we all participate in the catalyst to produce asset-based knowledge that disrupts the colonial scripts of HMoob people.

Notes

1. This special issue primarily focuses on HMoob education in the U.S.; however, the conceptual ideas and theories offered by our contributions can be applicable to HMoob communities throughout the diaspora.
2. The body of literature on immigration in the United States is vast and beyond the scope of this introduction. We recognize that definitions of assimilation and integration have changed over time to capture the nuance that processes of assimilation and integration are not unidirectional.

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Dr. Kaozong N. Mouavangsou is a University of California President's Postdoctoral Fellow in the History and Critical Race & Ethnic Studies Department at the University of California, Merced. Her research examines race/ethnicity, gender, education, epistemology, and methodology. She has spent many years working with multiple campus communities serving both undergraduate and graduate students through mentorship, advising and teaching.

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