Toward HMoob-centered inquiries: Reclaiming HMoob American educational scholarship and curriculum
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Recommended Citation
DOI: 10.7771/2153-8999.1303
Available at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/jsaaea/vol18/iss2/4

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Hmong Narratives as Testimony

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Abstract

Refugees are often depicted in studies and popular media as helpless and in need of rescuing. In the song “Hmoob Zaj,” which was released on YouTube in 2019, Hmong rapper Shong Lee humanizes Hmong refugee experiences by sharing a story that has been “secreted” (M. Vang, 2021, p. 10) by the U.S. government. Through the public archiving of this story on YouTube, Lee presents what Espiritu (2014) calls an “oppositional narrative” (p. 163) that speaks back to the empire. He asserts a critical stance to challenge the dominant narrative, validate the experiential knowledge of Hmong people, contribute to Hmong collective remembering, and co-construct a Hmong diasporic collectivity that looks to the future without forgetting the past. Specifically, “Hmoob Zaj” is a testimony that reveals U.S. injustices in Southeast Asia and positions Hmong people as legitimate producers of knowledge not confined to the boundaries of Western ideals. This type of knowledge is essential to transforming the schooling process by (a) providing an inclusive, humanizing, and just understanding of Hmong history and (b) revealing the way dominant perspectives and ideals distort Hmong realities in order to uphold existing power relations.

Postcolonial scholar Edward Said (1994) said those who have “the power to narrate” and the power to spread those narratives also have the power to “block other narratives from forming and emerging” (xii). Hmong presence in the United States is intricately tied to this country’s nation-building efforts in Southeast Asia. However, the secrecy surrounding the war in Laos—hence the name “Secret War”—has allowed the United States to intentionally shape narratives of the war and representations of Hmong people in ways that clear the United States of any wrongdoing (M. Vang, 2021). Specifically, this intentional “secreting,” as Hmong scholar Ma Vang (2021) calls it, along with a healthy dose of Orientalism and revisionist history, has positioned Hmong people as premodern and in need of rescue, invalidating their lived experience and calling into question their accounts of history. This positioning of Hmong knowledge and history is also reflected within racialized U.S. classrooms.

The U.S. education system has a long history of viewing Students of Color through a deficit-based lens, which positions these students, their communities, their knowledges, and their
languages as a disadvantage (Yosso, 2005). This lens has negatively shaped general perspectives of Students of Color, which has impacted educational policies and classroom practices for all students (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Katznelson & Bernstein, 2017; Valenzuela, 1999). Specific to the context of this article, Hmong students have received deficit-based schooling by being miseducated to “believe that our own culture needs to be fixed and that we—our culture—were the cause of the problem”—“the problem” being Hmong students’ social and educational struggles (Mouavangsou, 2020, p. 191). To dismantle deficit perspectives of Hmong students and foster a more inclusive and just educational system that honors Hmong students’ knowledge, languages, and experiences, we must challenge dominant narratives of Hmong students and their communities as premodern and deficient by centering Hmong narratives. We must reposition Hmong knowledge in all its forms—oral, written, embodied, and spiritual—as valid knowledge.

I present an analysis of the song “Hmoob Zaj"¹ as not only a legitimate form of knowledge that centers Hmong refugee epistemologies and reveals narratives not available in the official archives, but as a testimonio of U.S. injustice that requires radical listening. “Hmoob Zaj” is a type of “oppositional narrative” (Espiritu, 2014, p. 163) that speaks back to empire, challenging its version of history, and “literally write[s]” Hmong experience into the “American landscape” (p. 137). First-person narratives such as “Hmoob Zaj,” which emerge from within the Hmong community, are crucial to empowering Hmong people to critically examine and reject distorted representations of themselves, repairing damage done by the majority culture.

How the United States Invalidated Hmong Narratives of War

I start this article with a summary of the United States’s entanglement in the Laotian Civil War to highlight how Hmong history became intertwined with U.S. history, and to set up context for “Hmoob Zaj.” I note that Hmong histories exist beyond the U.S. context, but it is not within the scope of this article to provide a detailed coverage of these histories. In 1961, seven years after the 1954 Geneva Accords² officially ended French occupation of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) began illegally recruiting a “secret army” made up of Hmong, Mien, Khmu, Kha, and Lao soldiers to fight by proxy in an illegal war in northern Laos (M. Vang, 2021). In 1975, when the United States pulled out of Laos and ended the “Secret War,” tens of thousands of Hmong refugees fled by foot for fear of persecution, following military officials to refugee camps in Thailand (C. Y. Vang, 2020). These refugee camps were meant to be temporary spaces where forcibly displaced peoples from Southeast Asia could live until their resettlement paperwork was processed, and they could resettle in more permanent homes elsewhere—usually a Western country. Most refugees, however, were resettled only after years of being “warehoused” in refugee camps like objects or animals, often living in unsafe and unsanitary conditions (Espiritu, 2014, p. 56).

Between 1975 and 2006, more than 130,000 Hmong³ resettled in the United States as part of what policy makers called “one of the largest, most dramatic humanitarian efforts in US history” (C. Y. Vang, 2020, p. 33). Today, more than 300,000 Hmong people call the United States home (Budiman, 2021). However, the United States’s decades of denial of their illegal operations in Laos also denied Hmong narratives from this period and this place. This denial not only erased Hmong people from the U.S. archive and from “official” U.S. history—hence, erasing them from history books—but most importantly, it allowed the U.S. government to continually invalidate Hmong people’s wartime experience (M. Vang, 2021; M. D. Vang, 2021). Complex stories of
sacrifice and hope, displacement and survival, and resistance and justice have often been reduced to Hmong people as soldiers or as “not-yet-modern . . . rescuable subjects” (M. Vang, 2021, p. 17).

**Literature Review: Speaking Back to the Dominant Narrative**

Though a few Hmong scholars documented the Secret War and its impact on Hmong people in the 1980s, they appear as almost invisible chapters in conference paper collections that are overshadowed by white researchers studying Hmong people and Hmong language (Downing & Olney, 1982; Hendricks et al., 1986). The earliest study conducted by a Hmong person about the impact of the Secret War is most likely Bruce T. Bliatout’s (1982) study of Hmong sudden unexpected nocturnal death syndrome, where he investigated whether disruption of traditional Hmong practices (through forced displacement) contributed to the high number of deaths occurring among young, otherwise healthy Hmong men. To note, many of these early studies often objectified Hmong people and did not critique U.S. empire as much as they merely described what was already present in Western researchers’ documentation of the Secret War. Moreover, these studies, like all studies in academic spheres, privileged reading and writing, two forms of communication that were accessible to and used by only a small percentage of Hmong people at this time. They were also accessible to only English-speaking people already in academic spaces, which meant most Hmong people did not even have access to studies about their own people; thus, many did not even know what kinds of stories were being told about them even if they wanted to engage with them.

Today, however, we are starting to see documentation and critique by 1.5- and 2nd-generation Hmong refugees of their parents’ and grandparents’ lived experiences of the war made for popular consumption. These forms of documentation are usually based on memories that first-generation refugees pass on to the generations after (Hirsch, 2008). Mai Der Vang’s (2017, 2021) award-winning books of poetry, *Afterland* and *Yellow Rain*, exemplify this form of documentation. Furthermore, Vang and other Hmong writers like Hauntie (2017), Kao Kalia Yang (2005), and Soul Vang (Hmong American Writers’ Circle, 2011) who are writing about the Secret War and its impact are writing in response to the “threat of a Hmong disappearance from history and culture” (C. Y. Vang et al., 2016, xvii). Their work in creating an archive of memories outside of the “official” archive is counternarrative work that pieces together a secreted and fragmented part of Hmong history (M. T. Nguyen, 2012; Um, 2012; M. Vang, 2021).

Digital technology and the World Wide Web have made way for another form of Hmong counter-archiving. Compared to written documentation, video documentation on social platforms has allowed for a more multimodal telling that does not privilege reading, writing, or access to specific academic spaces. Hip hop artists—specifically, rappers—use YouTube as a tool to interrogate and challenge social and racial inequities, and to empower and reposition themselves to be critics of the world they live in. Through the music videos they upload, they engage with local sociopolitical issues that reflect global trends, coming to a “glocal consciousness” (Alim & Pennycook, 2007, p. 94). YouTube has made it possible for Hmong artists who began releasing music in the United States within the last twenty years to co-construct “a pan-Hmong identity” in the “digital diaspora” that is rooted in history, place, experience, and culture (Ó Briain, 2015, p. 290). Through performances of narratives based on their lived experiences and the lived experiences of their communities, they not only reject dominant narratives of the nation-state but also assert counter realities. Moreover, many marginalized, minoritized, and racialized groups
have been able to use the specific tools of YouTube’s platform to take up and disrupt spaces that have traditionally been closed to them (Kim, 2021).

The song “Hmoob Zaj” is a rap. Rap is part of hip-hop culture, a global style/genre that originated in the 1970s in the Bronx, New York, and has African American, Jamaican American, and Latino American influences (Akom, 2009; Petchauer, 2009). It was “borne out of resistance to dominant mainstream, predominantly White U.S. culture,” (J. Nguyen & Ferguson, 2019, p. 99) and has been adopted and adapted by Southeast Asian American (SEAA) youth as a “third culture” (p. 101) separate from their heritage culture and the mainstream culture. One can view this act as appropriative of Black culture, and in some cases that may be true, but another way to view this is as resistance to middle-class white culture and a move to identify with marginality. Many SEAA families live below the poverty level, which means many SEAA youth live in neighborhoods with a high number of African American and Latinx youth, and as a result of proximity and contact become familiar with and share an interest in hip hop culture (J. Nguyen & Ferguson, 2019). My intention in mentioning this is not to suggest that there were no racial tensions among African American, Latinx, and SEAA groups. Rather, as Shong Lee (2021) shows in “Hmoob Zaj,” there definitely were/are tensions, and these tensions should be examined closely. Alas, that is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, I seek to examine “Hmoob Zaj” as an oppositional narrative that speaks back to U.S. empire. In doing so, I center the relationship between Hmong and white hegemony instead of Hmong and other minoritized groups.

Theoretical Framework

I use a theoretical framework to ground my argument in an existing body of knowledge. Because “thinking from within Hmong positions . . . requires seeking sources outside of the colonized canon” (Vue & Mouavangsou, 2021, p. 269), I draw from Critical Refugee Studies, Hmong educational research, and Hmong cosmology to better understand how Hmong knowledge and epistemologies have been positioned by non-Hmong storytellers, and how Hmong storytellers can reposition Hmong knowledge and epistemologies. Narratives—both public and private and in all forms of media—have often presented refugees as already damaged and the empire as a benevolent humanitarian who is rescuing refugees (Espiritu, 2014; M. T. Nguyen, 2012; C. Y. Vang, 2010; M. Vang, 2021). Critical refugee scholars, instead, center the refugee as a social actor, a producer of knowledge, and a way of knowing (Espiritu, 2014; M. Vang, 2021). Ma Vang (2021) asserts in her theory of “history on the run” that Hmong refugee histories are unrooted to national boundaries and actually move with Hmong people, “embedded in [their] stories and embodied practices” (p. 8). As such, these practices can (re)map geography, revealing hidden histories that do not exist in any formal archive. One such example is *zaj qhuabke* or “the song that tells the way,” an extensive song sung at traditional Hmong funerals that reveals to the dead Hmong history tied to place, as well as the path back to the ancestors and rebirth (Her, 2005). Vang draws from Hmong cosmology to frame Hmong histories as “not lost” but “linger[ing] and wander[ing]” (p. 13), always present and waiting to be told, practiced, and known.

While Critical Refugee Studies is useful as a starting point to understand how Hmong knowledge and epistemologies have been invalidated by Western framing of the refugee as a passive victim of war, the discipline’s overt focus on the refugee, war, and forced displacement limits the extent to which we can move towards “a more liberatory and humanizing praxis of change” (Vue & Mouavangsou, 2021, p. 266). To move away from discussions of Hmong people as always and forever tied to war, displacement, and continued suffering, I engage educational
researchers Rican Vue and Kaozong Mouavangsou’s (2021) concept of Hmong epistemology, a “praxis of memory and culture” (p. 265) that centers Hmong lived experiences, art, culture, joy, and spirituality as the basis for Hmong knowledge production. Theorizing Hmong epistemology from within and “alongside” (p. 272) Hmong cosmology and creative agency removes the disciplinary boundaries that have positioned Hmong people as only the subject of knowledge. Such moves can propel us toward dismantling “distorted” (p. 265) ideas of Hmong people that have contributed to the miseducation of generations of Hmong Americans. More importantly, such moves can help us heal and imagine a future beyond war and forced displacement from within Hmong ways of knowing.

The theoretical underpinnings of frameworks by Vue and Mouavangsou (2021) and Ma Vang (2021) offer a lens through which we can interpret “Hmoob Zaj.” At the foundation of these frameworks is the idea of tus ntsuj plig—the soul—which is the grounding element of Hmong spirituality. Tus ntsuj plig lives in the body and can become lost or separated from the body due to illness, fright, or the malevolence of outside spirits. Such a case is called poob plig and, when it happens, can unbalance the physical body (Her, 2005). When we use a Hmong cosmological framework, we can see that running from war, political turmoil, state imposition, and colonial oppression and surviving in the Hmong diaspora can scatter tus ntsuj plig and fracture spiritual harmony. This logic demonstrates that Hmong knowledge is both embodied and spiritual, a theoretical lens that originates with and from within Hmong epistemologies and neither upholds Western ideals of knowledge nor positions Hmong people as subjects of study. This viewpoint can open new paths to create more relevant, hopeful, and liberatory Hmong narratives and knowledge that empower and engage Hmong youth to challenge normalized white hegemony (Delgado, 1989; Shi, 2022).

**Conceptual Framework**

The theoretical framework above allows me to explore broader themes that underpin my analysis of “Hmoob Zaj”; however, a conceptual framework focuses on specific elements of the song and illustrates the relationship among these elements. I use a narrative conceptual framework to demonstrate that individuals can transform snapshots of history into “a coherent narrative” (Ochs, 2004, p. 269). I draw from three areas of narrative study that I suggest work hand-in-hand to illustrate “HMong sentiments, attitudes, and practices” that reveal Hmong epistemology (Vue & Mouavangsou, 2021, p. 265). Richard Delgado’s (1989) work on counter-storytelling illuminates the critical stance “Hmoob Zaj” takes. Delgado argues that “much of social reality is constructed,” and as such, the stories we hear and how we hear them (as much as the stories we tell and how we tell them) can shape what eventually becomes common knowledge. Marginalized folks, therefore, must tell alternative histories and their lived experiences to act as a “counter-reality” (p. 2412) to normalized white hegemony. Counterstories and counter-storytelling repair the “(mental) violence” of internalized deficit images self-imposed through majority culture stories (p. 2437). They also build group solidarity, challenge what has become common knowledge, and provide an opportunity for the majority group to see how others live.

While counter-storytelling helps to explain the role power plays in shaping reality, it deals a rather light hand on the responsibility of those who listen to counterstories. Therefore, I engage testimonio, a concept used in Latin American studies to document and produce knowledge from within oppressed communities (Huber, 2009). Educational scholar Lindsay Pérez Huber (2009) and her participants defined testimonio as “a verbal journey of a witness who speaks to reveal the
racial, classed, gendered, and nativist injustices they have suffered as a means of healing, empowerment, and advocacy for a more human present and future” (p. 644). Testimonios are forms of knowledge—considerable truths in size and importance—produced orally with and from within communities. A testimonio “demands” radical listening and transformative action, and because of that, testimonios are seen as threats to “the very foundation of Western knowledge” (Cruz, 2012, pp. 463–464).

Counter-storytelling and testimonio offer a rich, radical, and liberatory concept of analyzing narratives told by oppressed and marginalized groups. Their macro view of narratives, however, hides the important language storytellers use to establish causation and time to reveal injustice and dismantle oppressive systems. Elinor Ochs’ (2004) ideas of event sequencing and human time, which she developed from analyzing the “universal narrative dimensions” (p. 269) of personal experience, illuminate the way storytellers use these two elements in effective ways. According to Ochs, narratives generally portray an “ordered sequence of events” (p. 270), so that the preceding event “gives rise to or affords the possible occurrence of the subsequent event” [emphasis in original] (p. 271). In this way, the storyteller demonstrates a causal relationship between the two events.

Ochs (2005) also asserts that narratives are situated in “human time, wherein the experienced present is tied to a remembered past, an anticipated future, and/or an imagined moment” (p. 273). While multiple temporal domains may crisscross during the telling of a narrative and may even interact to give rise to the relationship between these different temporal domains, narratives are generally future-focused. Though I am not conducting a discourse analysis of “Hmoob Zaj,” Ochs’ ideas help to provide a starting point and a structure for analyzing “Hmoob Zaj.” Together with testimonio and counter-storytelling, these concepts provide an interdisciplinary framework for storytelling that engages knowledge, power, and belonging—essential elements for analyzing a story that is told through rap, that diverges from the dominant story, and that is archived in a public space.

Methodology

In selecting a song for this study, I considered how popular the song was based on number of views on YouTube and how engaged the viewers were based on number of comments. These numbers are important in that they not only demonstrate an audience’s engagement with a song but also an audience’s interest in the song’s topic. While I examined several songs by Hmong American artists, including “Tseem Nco Tau,” or “Still Remember,” by Supryze (2020), and “Peb Roj Ntsha,” or “Our Blood,” by Sudden Rush (2021), I selected “Hmoob Zaj,” written and performed by Shong Lee, a Hmong singer and songwriter, because it has over 2.4 million views and 1,637 comments as of June 2023. In comparison, “Tseem Nco Tau” has 616,000 views with 358 comments, and “Peb Roj Ntsha” has 122,000 views and 170 comments. I will note, however, that “Hmoob Zaj” was uploaded to YouTube in 2019, a year earlier than “Tseem Nco Tau” and two years earlier than “Peb Roj Ntsha,” and this could be the reason for the higher numbers.

I also considered (a) whether the song’s topic, genre, and platform worked together to assert a critical stance that mobilizes its audience and (b) whether the singer produced Hmong knowledge that reveals injustices and does not adhere to white hegemony. First, “Hmoob Zaj,” not only documents Hmong history but also makes a critique of U.S. empire, which is a stance that invites close examination given the history of secrecy and one-sided documentation surrounding the Secret War. Second, “Hmoob Zaj” is a rap, a genre that often identifies and aligns with
marginality and resistance. Third, “Hmoob Zaj” is freely available on YouTube, Google’s vast
video platform, and can be viewed by anyone who has access to the Internet. Lee has the song set
as a public video, which means comments on the video are public and visible to anyone who comes
across the video. This form of open and verbal knowledge produced by someone from within the
Hmong community directly counters the written and inaccessible knowledge produced by Western
researchers mentioned earlier in the literature review.

The song is performed in Hmoob Dawb, and I have provided transcription using
Romanized Popular Alphabet (Smalley et al., 1990). I listened to the song multiple times in both
its original speed and 0.5-playback speed and transcribed the whole song as close to spoken speech
as possible for easier readability. I have also provided a full translation of the song in English
(available in the appendix). I divided the song into 12 verses (intro and outro not included) and
numbered each line to better manage and discuss my analysis. I utilize a form of textual analysis
that extracts meaning from the song and focus on various aspects of the lyrics, which, for the
purposes of this article, include linguistic features, narrative structure, and cultural references
(Smith, 2017). I then use the conceptual framework to offer analyses of these aspects, Lee’s
intentions behind their usage, and their impact on his audience. I include some of the top comments
from the video in the analysis and discussion sections to illustrate this impact. Top comments are
comments that have received a high number of “thumbs up” clicks or have had a lot of interaction
from other YouTube users. In the discussion, I use the theoretical framework to consider the
broader implications the song may have for Hmong storytelling and knowledge production in
general. While I tried to make contact with Lee to acquire additional context and to share my
interpretations (referred to as member checking or participant validation), I was not successful in
getting a response before completing this writing.

Analysis

In the following analysis, I demonstrate how Lee uses linguistic features, narrative structure, and
cultural references to design a testimonio that reveals U.S. injustices in Southeast Asia. The
analysis includes extracts from the song where Lee employs causation and human time to directly
incriminate the United States and, at the same time, build hope for Hmong futurity.

Narrating Causation

U.S. secrecy around the war in Laos, along with the positioning of refugees as rescuable subjects,
have invalidated Hmong stories. In “Hmoob Zaj,” Lee uses the Hmong subordinating conjunction
“vim” or “yeej vim yog”—because or because of—and the adverb “thiaj li”—then, so then, or
consequently—to show causal relationships between imperial and social encounters that led to
what he considers are important and momentous events in recent Hmong American history. He
uses vim or yeej vim yog nine times in the song to create an “ordered sequence” (Ochs, 2005, p.
270) of events with a causal relationship. Though I will not be able to go over each one, I will draw
on three examples to show how Lee uses this subordinating conjunction to “present a certain,
consistent logic of events” (Ochs, 2005, p. 279) that illustrates the United States’s undeniable role
in Hmong people’s current diaspora.

In Line 12 of Extract 1, Lee uses yeej vim yog to directly implicate U.S. empire in Hmong
people’s forced displacement from Laos and resettlement in the United States. He says, “yeej vim
yog li 40 xyoo dhau los cov Meska tuaj txog”—because about 40 years ago the Americans
arrived—connecting everything that happened afterward to the arrival of the Americans about 40 years ago. In fact, I would say Lee positions the United States as the sole instigator of all the negative and positive experiences Hmong people have gone through and at the same time positions himself as disaligned with the empire.

**Extract 1**

8 Lung li puag tham ub los txog tav no
9 Ever since a long time ago until now
10 Peb cov Hmoob yeej siv tag nhro peb lub zog khiav rog
11 Us Hmong have been using all of our effort to run from war
12 Yeej vim yog li 40 xyoo dhau los cov Meska tuaj txog
13 Because about 40 years ago the Americans arrived
14 Noog kom peb cov Hmoob ho siv peb lub dag lub zog
15 Asked for us Hmong to use our effort
16 Nrog lawv au tsav ua rog
17 With them to make war

Lee uses yeej vim yog in Extract 2, line 22, to show why Hmong people decided to join the United States’s war in Laos in the first place. He says, “yeej vim yog peb cov Hmoob txom nyem”—Because our Hmong people were poor—we joined the war, but it is clear from Lee’s lyrics that he charges the United States with taking advantage of Hmong people’s desire for political autonomy. He recounts the United States promising that (see Verse 1 in appendix):

Yog peb ua lawv mam rub ib tug zuj zus los ua tus coj
If we do it they will pull us one at a time to lead
Thiab los ua tus nom
And to become an official

Because of this desire, Hmong people almost had no choice but to join the fight, even “tus ruam”—the foolish—who Lee suggested in line 26 of Extract 2, was perhaps too foolish to carry his own gun, but did so anyway.

**Extract 2**

22 Yeej vim yog peb cov Hmoob txom nyem
23 Because us Hmong were poor
24 Thiab peb ho ntsaw ces
25 And we desired it, so
26 Tus hlob tus yau tus ntsa tus ruam
27 The elder, the younger, the wise, the foolish
28 Nyias ciaj li kwv nyias ib rab phom
29 Each carried their own gun
In Extract 3, Line 85, Lee establishes “Raug Nyab Laj muab tua”—*We were killed by the (North) Vietnamese*—as causation for “Peb thiaj li ua ib siab los hla tus dej Mej Koom”—*We made the decision to cross the Mekong River*. With this reasoning, Lee suggests that if Hmong people had not been being killed by the (North) Vietnamese as a result of fighting for the United States, they never would have left Laos in the first place, pointing the blame back on the United States. By using these subordinating conjunctions throughout the song, Lee continuously reminds his listeners of the United States’s role in the Secret War, the subsequent refugee crisis, and Hmong people’s current successes and challenges in the diaspora.

**Extract 3**

85 Raug Nyab Laj muab tua xwb yuav luag tuag tag
86 *We were killed by the Vietnamese, almost all died*
87 Peb thiaj li ua ib siab los hla tus dej Mej Koom
88 *We made the hard decision to cross the Mekong River*
89 Ya mus Thaib Teb los raw Nais Phoo kom tuaj txog hauv teb chaws Meska
90 *Fly to Thailand to follow Nais Phoo to reach the United States*
91 Ziag no peb thiaj li tuaj txog
92 *So now we have arrived*

**Narrating Time**

Ochs (2005) found that narratives are organized in human time, with a past, present, and future, though these temporal domains might intersect or appear together at any one time to show how the past connects to a possible future. In “Hmoob Zaj,” Lee takes his audience through three periods of time, intricately linking them together to share a counterstory and to present Hmong lived experience as a coherent sequence of events. These periods of time are linked to geographic location as Hmong people journeyed to the United States following the end of the Vietnam War. What I will call the “far past” is tied to China, Laos, and Thailand, which is pre-1975; the “near past” is tied to Hmong people’s first arrival in the United States, which is between 1975 and 2006, when the last Hmong refugees arrived; the “present” is physically tied to the United States and metaphorically tied to a present consciousness. Lee marks each of these periods with adverbial phrases of time that expand across several verses to create a logical sequence of events.

**Table 1.**

*Periods of Human Time in “Hmoob Zaj”*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time period</th>
<th>“Far Past”</th>
<th>“Near Past”</th>
<th>“Present”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calendar time</td>
<td>Pre-1975</td>
<td>1975-2006</td>
<td>Post-2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic location</td>
<td>China, Laos, Thailand</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adverbial phrases</td>
<td><em>Puag thaum ub</em></td>
<td><em>Yav puag thaum ub</em></td>
<td><em>Ziag no</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lee starts by taking listeners back in time with the first and second lines of the story (see Extract 1):

8    Txij li puag thaum ub los txog tav no
9    Ever since a long time ago until now
10  Peb cov Hmoob yeej siv tag nrho peb lub zog khiav rog
11  Our Hmong have been using all of our effort to run from war

Line 8 is a long adverbial phrase that has two smaller adverbial phrases—“puag thaum ub” and “los txog tav no”—embedded within it to show the period of time in which the story takes place. There is no way to know how far back Lee is taking his audience, but there is a sense of temporal domains connecting to show Hmong people’s “lub zog khiav rog” or effort to run from war. Historians, anthropologists, and linguists trace Hmong people back to the Yellow River Basin in China where they lived for thousands of years until they were pushed out by the encroaching Chinese empires (Yang, 1992). One could argue, then, that Lee may be referring to a much longer period of time than just when the United States arrived in Laos. “Puag thaum ub” intersects with “tav no” to show that Hmong people have been running from war for a long time and perhaps some are still running from war though it may not be a physical war.

Lee ends the “far past” in Thailand and transitions to the “near past” with the adverb “ziag no” in line 91 (see Extract 4). In Line 93 of Extract 4, Lee uses the adverbial phrase “yav puag thaum ub” with the subordinate clause “thaum nyuam qhuav tuaj txog” to establish the “near past” between 1975 and 2006, which are the periods in which Hmong people resettled in the United States.

**Extract 4**

89 Ya mus Thaib Teb los raw Nais Phoo kom tuaj txog hauv teb chaws Meska
90 *Fly to Thailand to follow Nais Phoo to reach the United States*
91 Ziaag no peb thiaj li tuaj txog
92 So now we have arrived

93 Yav puag thaum ub thaum nyuam qhuav tuaj txog
94 *That time long ago when we first arrived*
95 Yeej sib pab thiab yeej sib hlub
96 *Helped and loved each other*
97 Niaj hnuv laug xtchi niaj hnuv ncaws nhaps
98 *Laughed daily, played soccer daily*

This period was a period of intense transition for Hmong people, and Lee does not shy away from describing some of the social challenges of the time, including “plaub”—trouble—with “cov Khej Dub,” “Mev” and “Meskas”—Black people, Mexicans, and (white) Americans—which led to the creation of several Hmong gangs. He even shines a light on intergenerational conflicts in Verse 8 (see appendix), critiquing “niam thiab txiv”—parents—because they “coj kev cai nrjuj nrjuj”—kept tight to the old ways—and forced their daughters to marry at a young age. However, in Line 132 (see appendix), he uses the subordinating conjunction “vim”—because or because of—to connect all of these social issues to “txoj kev tso ya”—flying. Flying is a metaphor for Hmong people’s
forced displacement from Laos, therefore reminding listeners that the United States is accountable for causing Hmong people to take flight in the first place. In doing this, Lee shows that the past lingers and seeps into the present.

In Extract 5, Lee shifts to the “present,” which is marked in Line 138 with the adverb “ziag no”—nowadays. Extract 5 is not only a distinctive shift to the present time in the song but is also a distinctive shift to present awareness of the self in relation to the past (Ochs, 2005). In the very next line, where he says, “Peb tsis zoo li puag yav tag,” Lee asserts that even though the past lingers in the present, Hmong people are not the same. Through five similarly structured lines, Lee presents Hmong people as doctors, lawyers, gangsters, drug dealers, and even employees of the same government that came to Laos “40 xyoo dhau los” and caused “one of the largest, most dramatic humanitarian efforts in US history” (C. Y. Vang, 2020, p. 33).

**Extract 5**

138 Tiam sis ziang no xwb peb cov Hmoob pauv deb lawm
139 But nowadays our Hmong people have changed a lot
140 Peb tsis zoo li puag yav tag
141 We aren’t like that time that finished
142 Cov kawm tiav doctor thiab tau lawyer los kuj ho muaj
143 There are those who have become doctors and lawyers
144 Cov muaj nyiaj muaj txiaj vim txoij kev thawb yeeb thawb tshuaj los kuj ho muaj
145 There are those who have money because of pushing drugs and medicines
146 Cov tsis ua dab tsi iaug nttxhi noj nyiaj SSI tas li los kuj ho muaj
147 There are those who don’t do anything, smilingly living off of SSI
148 Cov ua laib kom txog hnuub tuag mag kaw hauv nkauj los kuj ho muaj
149 There are those who are gangsters until the day they die locked up in jail
150 Cov ua hauj lwm hauv teb chaws Mesaas rau lav thab npas los kuj ho muaj
151 There are those who work for the government in the United States

Lee makes two suggestions in this extract: first, that the past will always be part of Hmong identity and is something to be proud of; and second, that in the present, Hmong people’s identities do not have to be one-dimensional, tied to “soldier” or “refugee.” He insists that Hmong people can be anything they want to be, including gangsters and drug dealers, and it is this insistence that moves “Hmoob Zaj” from a counterstory to a testimonio.

**Narrating Collective Testimonios**

“Hmoob Zaj” is Lee’s testimonio, verbalized and entered into a public archive, and testifying makes Lee a witness to U.S. injustices. In Lines 160 to 165 (see appendix), Lee authenticates his testimonio by invoking his Hmong name (Xyoob instead of his Anglicized name Shong) and saying, “Zaj dab neeg ntawm no yog ib zaj dab neeg tiag tiag/Hais txog peb haiv Hmoob”—this story is a real story/about our Hmong people. The song evokes enough authenticity for users on YouTube to give him “mad props” (Tshajlis yaj, 2020) for “spitting real shit” (Tou Xiong, 2020).

Lee’s testimonio, however, is not the only one in “Hmoob Zaj.” The song also includes the testimonios of parents in Lines 48 through 62 (Extract 6) and soldiers in Lines 63 to 76 (Extract
7). In these testimonios, Lee speaks in the voices of witnesses who likely cannot speak for themselves because they are no longer living.

Extract 6

48 Txog tom tsev niamb thiab txiv twb npaj tua npua thiab qaib los hu yus plig thiab khi yus tes
49 At home mother and father already prepared to kill a pig and chickens to call your spirit and tie
50 strings on your wrists
51 Law haif tias
52 They said
53 Tub yog koj ho ploj vim txoj kev ua tsov ua rog
54 Son, if you disappear because of war
55 Thov koj paub thiab koj nco qab tias koj
56 Please know and remember that your
57 Chaw pw thiab koj lub tsev nws yeej tseem nyob ntawm no
58 Place of sleep and your home are still here
59 Yog tis pom koj los los
60 If we don’t see you return
61 ua npau suav rau peb xwb ces yeej zoo txaus lawm nawb mog
62 Dream to us, it will be good enough

In Lines 53 to 62 of Extract 6, Lee becomes the parents who speak directly to their sons, reminding their sons that even though they “ploj vim txoj kev ua tsov ua rog,” they still have a home. In this instance, “ploj” could easily mean to disappear or it could mean to pass away. If the latter, the parents are reminding their sons that their ntsuj plig have a home to return to, even if their bodies cannot return home.

Extract 7

63 Cov muaj poj niamb me nyuam ces lawv hais tias
64 The ones who have a wife and kids said
65 Me Maiv Paj txhob nyob tos kuv lawm nawb mog
66 My dear Maiv Paj, don’t wait for me, okay?
67 Vim sij hawm phom sij
68 Because the time is dangerous
69 Tseem tab tom nrog Nais Phoo ua rog
70 Right now I am making war with Nais Phoo
71 Xyov tiam no puas yuav muaj txoaj hmoo rov qab los cuag ntawm koj
72 I don’t know if, in this lifetime, my destiny will return me to you
73 Yog koj nyob tos tos tis pom kuv los ces coj cov me nyuam nej khiav nawb mog
74 If you wait and don’t see me return, take the kids, run, okay?
75 Lub sij hawm ua tsov ua rog nws yeej phom sij
76 The time of war, it is dangerous

Similarly, in Extract 7, Lee becomes the voice of soldiers speaking to their wives. In Lines 65 to 76, the soldiers remind their wives of the danger and unpredictability of war and encourage their
wives to “khiav”—run—if they do not return. While Lee (as parents) makes an indirect reference to Hmong cosmology in Extract 6 with “ploj,” he (as soldiers) makes a direct reference in Line 71 of Extract 7, stating, “Xyov tiam no puas yuav muaj txoj hmoo rov qab los cuag ntawm koj.” The words “tiam no”—this lifetime—and “txoj hmoo”—destiny—are direct references to Hmong people’s traditional belief in “renewal” (Her, 2005, p. 5). I argue that references to Hmong cosmology help to authenticate Lee’s narrative, especially in the eyes of his Hmong audience. Furthermore, by embodying the voices of the parents and soldiers, Lee’s testimonios on their behalf and in their voices evoke more of the “realness” respected in rap. One user, Hope Lee (2020), even commented, “You are a truly Hmong Blood. You bring the smile in our face when we listen to your music bc you really know what you singing about.”

**Discussion**

In this discussion, I use the theoretical framework to connect my analysis of “Hmoob Zaj” with broader discussions of Hmong knowledge production. One of the premises of Ma Vang’s (2021) theory centers on “colonial constructions” of Hmong people which frames them as “a people that needed to be saved and brought into modernity” (p. 19), first through militarization and then through the refugee resettlement process. These negative constructions of Hmong people, along with the secrecy around Hmong involvement in the U.S. wars in Southeast Asia, have invalidated Hmong knowledge and maintained harmful stereotypes of Hmong people. By recounting Hmong involvement in the Secret War and their subsequent resettlement in the United States from his own lived experience, Lee makes present and visible what has previously been intentionally absented Hmong history. He also asserts that Hmong history comes from Hmong people, not an archive; Hmong knowledge is credible in all the genres and forms Hmong people present it in; and Hmong lived experience is testimony of U.S. injustices.

In recounting a story that has been “secreted” by the U.S. government, Lee asserts a critical stance to challenge the dominant narrative (M. Vang, 2021). Though the existence of “Hmoob Zaj” in itself is a form of resistance, by choosing to tell the story in the Hmong language instead of English, Lee lends another layer of resistance to the telling. He “plays up” (Newman, 2005; J. Nguyen & Ferguson, 2019) this oppressed emblematic feature of his identity repertoire to “keep it real” (Newman, 2005, p. 403). Film composer and sound designer Nicholas Poss (2013), citing Geneva Smitherman (1997), wrote that the rapper is “expected to testify, to speak the truth” (p. 241) using his linguistic repertoire, which Lee successfully does by using subordinating clauses to establish a causal relationship between United States arrival in Laos and Hmong forced displacement, using three periods of time to link important events in Hmong history to U.S. imperialism, and using adverbial phrases of time to link the past to the present and the future.

“Hmoob Zaj” is Lee’s testimony. Although Lee is likely too young to have been part of the Secret War, he provides a verbal, first-hand witness of his experience in the United States. Lee also testifies on behalf of those who cannot because they are either too old or have perished, by embodying their voices. Lee’s testimony demands radical, action-oriented listening. It prompted user Each Cha (2020) to comment, “Hmong Story in one song. If my kid asks me, ‘Dad, what is Hmong?’ I’ll be like, ‘Sit down kid, and let’s watch Hmong Zaj on youtube by Shong Lee.’”

Radical, action-oriented listening includes taking radical action towards the self, and “Hmoob Zaj” invites listeners to build self-determination to not only reflect on their lives in relation to their past and their present but also in relation to oppressive powers. Lines 152 to 159 and the outro (see appendix) specifically speak to this invitation. Lee tells his listeners, “Txoj kev txom nyem yog 40
xyoo dhau los lawm/Txhob tu siab thiab tsis txhob quaj” — Poverty was 40 years ago/Don’t be sad and don’t cry. While the past is ever present (and Lee acknowledges this), he invites listeners to enact who they want to become despite oppression and despite a past that has often been positioned as shrouded in death, flight, and secrecy. He tells them, “You can do anything that you set your mind to/Stay focused, stay dedicated, and stay motivated/And don’t you for one second ever be ashamed of what you came from/And what you really are.”

“Hmoob Zaj” is “a published record that contributes to a body of knowledge generated from within a community” (Mangual Figueroa, 2015, p. 246). YouTube, unbounded by the physical and metaphorical walls of an “official” archive, has become a space for the collective memory-making of oppressed groups, allowing communities to “rewrite” their histories (Espiritu, 2014; Soukup, 2014). In such a space, Hmong histories and knowledge are not constrained to White normative ways of knowing, but produced experientially, collectively, and multimodally across generations and genres. Lee resists the colonial construction of Hmong people as not-yet-modern others by humanizing the Hmong experience. “Hmoob Zaj” shows Hmong people as parents, sons, wives, and daughters who “ntshaw” — desire, and worry, who “ua ib siab” — made the hard decision — to leave Laos and come to the United States where they “luag ntxhi” — laughed—and also had “plaub” — trouble— with other racialized groups. “Hmoob Zaj” shows Hmong people as more than America’s soldiers and more than refugees who needed saving.

While just about anybody can enter a story into YouTube, Lee (re)maps Hmong history by using (possibly China,) Laos, Thailand, and the United States as “reference points” so that Hmong refugees and their descendants can “reclaim histories and places necessary for survival and return” (M. Vang, 2021, p. 181). From a Hmong cosmological standpoint, such reference points are important to “txoj kev” — the way — back to the ancestors and “saum ntuj” — the upper realm (Her, 2005). Such (re)mapping, Vang argues, “makes present Hmong refugee epistemologies for the future in relation to the past” (p. 181). Such knowledge is embodied and spiritual and is an example of what Vue and Mouavangsou (2021) call “sources outside of the colonized canon.” This form of knowledge does not exist in textbooks (nor should it), and it demonstrates that legitimate, relevant, and hopeful narratives and knowledge can be produced by Hmong people outside of Western ideals of knowledge.

Lastly, as a form of first-person narrative that comes from within the community, “Hmoob Zaj” rejects harmful narratives about Hmong people and repositions them as producers of valid and valuable knowledge. This type of narrative can transform the schooling process by providing an inclusive, humanizing, and just understanding of Hmong history and by revealing the way dominant perspectives and ideals distort Hmong realities in order to uphold existing power relations (Huber, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Mangual Figueroa, 2015; Vue & Mouavangsou, 2021). Sources such as “Hmoob Zaj,” which are outside of the canon, invite students to critically examine their realities and the stories that they have been taught about themselves and others so that they can overcome White normalcy.

Futures

In this article, I have demonstrated Shong Lee’s use of narrative structures to design a testimony that speaks back to dominant and harmful stories about Hmong people, and in doing so to bear witness to U.S. injustices. Through “Hmoob Zaj,” Lee invites his audience to view the Hmong American story as a multi-dimensional, developing story of many events and experiences, not just war and loss. In fact, he insists there is also love, strength, ingenuity, and hope. While Hmong
people may have been separated from their history by space, time, minoritization, othering, and secrecy, Lee shows us that in the “digital diaspora” (p. 290), we can reclaim our history and, in doing so, reclaim ourselves and our futures.

“Hmoob Zaj” is an example of what Ma Vang (2021) calls “history on the run” (p. 8), history that is not in any formal archive but is just as legitimate, if not more. This history draws from the lived and embodied experiences of Hmong people and is filled with Hmong ways of knowing, being, and cosmology. It positions Hmong people as producers of knowledge, not just subjects to be studied, and offers a more just, liberating, and humanizing form of history and learning. As Delgado (1989) said, “Stories are the oldest, most primordial meeting ground in human experience. Their allure will often provide the most effective means of overcoming otherness, of forming a new collectivity based on the shared story” (p. 2438). Stories and knowledge that come from within marginalized and oppressed communities, then, are fundamental to educating a multicultural, compassionate, and socially conscious generation that can respond to current and future social challenges.

Notes

1. See appendix for a transcription of the full song. View the song on YouTube at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F7g_u-zNVHE&lc=UgweaZySpqFO3eWp8Ft4AaABAg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F7g_u-zNVHE&lc=UgweaZySpqFO3eWp8Ft4AaABAg).
3. This total includes the first wave of refugees who came after 1975, the second wave who came after the Refugee Act of 1980, and the third wave between 2004 and 2006 when Wat Thamkrabok, the last Vietnam War refugee camp, closed in Thailand.
4. Hmong artists include but are not limited to Tou Saiko Lee, Shong Lee, David Yang, Maa Vue, Chenning Xiong, Supryze, Kalia Universe, and Sudden Rush. These artists differ from pre-YouTube Hmong artists in that they use YouTube as a space to create a “third culture” separate from Hmong culture and mainstream white, middle-class American culture.
6. The authors use “Hmong” to intentionally bring attention to the two dialects and subgroups within the Hmong community in the United States (Hmoob Dawb, also known as “White Hmong”, and Moob Leeg, also known as “Green Hmong/Hmong Leng”) and the Hmong diaspora at large. I use “Hmong” when discussing their concept specifically and use “Hmong” with a lowercase “m” when discussing Hmong people in general. As a graduate student, my own understanding and ideas of “Hmong” is continuously developing, and I have not yet committed to a specific spelling.
7. While I wrote this as one soul, I will note that some Hmong shamans describe the Hmong body as having more than one soul. Some believe the Hmong body to have three souls, while others believe the Hmong body may have more than ten souls.
8. The Hmong language spoken in the United States has two dialects: Hmoob Dawb (White Hmong dialect) and Moob Ntsuab/Moob Leeg (Green Hmong dialect).

9. Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA), created between 1951 and 1953, is considered the most widely used writing system in the world for the Hmong language.

10. I want to note the limitations of using textual analysis for an oral story. This method may not capture the full range of meaning and artistic expression conveyed through the song’s audio and visual elements. However, it does offer a “bridge” to understand how this type of knowledge and performance can impact Hmong people and their relationships with systems of knowledge.

11. Unlike English, where time is encoded in the verb through its conjugation, and temporality may be marked by the verb and an adverbial phrase or word, Hmong verbs tend to stay the same regardless of time. Hmong, instead, uses adverbs and adverbial phrases of time to express temporality.

12. I use commenters’ public names as they were shown on YouTube at the time I was writing this article. These are not the same as their “handles,” which identify individual users and start with the @ symbol.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by funding from the Office of Research and Evaluation at AmeriCorps under Grant No. 22RE249214 through the National Service and Civic Engagement research grant competition. Opinions or points of view expressed in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position of, or a position that is endorsed by, AmeriCorps.

About the Author

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Appendix

“Hmoob Zaj”
Shong Lee

(English translations are italicized)

Intro

1 Hey yo, Lace
2 Turn my headphones up, man
3 I’ve been gone for way too long
4 Let me get in the zone real quick
5 This song right here dedicated to my Hmong people
6 Hmong pride ‘til the day we die
7 Let’s go

Verse 1

8 Txij li puag thaum ub los txog tav no
9 Ever since a long time ago until now
10 Peb cov Hmoob yeej siv tag nrho peb lub zog khiav rog
11 Our Hmong have been using all of our effort to run from war
12 Yeej vim yog li 40 xyoo dhau los cov Meska tuaj txog
13 Because about 40 years ago the Americans arrived
14 Noog kom peb cov Hmoob ho siv peb lub dag lub zog
15 Asked for us Hmong to use our effort
16 Nrog lawv ua tsog ua rog
17 With them to make war
18 Yog peb ua lawv mam rub ib tug zuj zus los ua tus coj
19 If we do it they will pull us one at a time to lead
20 Thiab los ua tus nom
21 And to become an official

Verse 2

22 Yeej vim yog peb cov Hmoob txom nyem
23 Because us Hmong were poor
24 Thiab peb ho ntshaw ces
25 And we desired it, so
26 Tus hlob tus yau tus ntse tus ruam
27 The elder, the younger, the wise, the foolish
28 Nyias ciaj li kwv nyias ib rab phom
29 Each carried their own gun
Verse 3

30 Hnub thib ib ces puag nram hav nyom
31 On the first day, at the grass field
32 Mus sim lawv cov phom
33 Went to test their guns
34 Tua xwb nrov npos npag
35 Shooting only, sounded boom boom
36 Nrov tshuav tuag tsis tau tua
37 Sounded, except for death, it has not killed
38 Hnov dua xwb pob ntseg lab
39 Hear again only, went deaf
40 Kawm tau ib vas thim
41 Practiced for a week
42 Ces kuj ho txawj thib tua phom ncaj
43 Then they know and can shoot straight
44 Meskas huis tias sawv ntxov tsees tag kis
45 Americans said immediately in the morning
46 es nej ho npaj mus tua Nyab Laj
47 you all prepare to go kill the Vietnamese

Verse 4

48 Txog tom tsev niam thiab txiv twb npaj tua npua thiab qaib los hu yus plig thiab khi yus tes
49 At home mother and father already prepared to kill a pig and chickens to call your spirit and tie
50 strings on your wrists
51 Law huis tias
52 They said
53 Tub yog koj ho ploj vim txoj kev ua tsov ua rog
54 Son, if you disappear because of war
55 Thov koj paub thiab koj nco qab tias koj
56 Please know and remember that your
57 Chaw pw thiab koj lub tsev nws yeej tseem nyob ntawm no
58 Place of sleep and your home are still here
59 Yog tsis pom koj los los
60 If we don’t see you return
61 ua npau suav rau peb xwb ces yeej zoo txaus lawm nawb mog
62 Dream to us, it will be good enough

Verse 5

63 Cov muaj poj niam me nyuam ces lawv huis tias
64 The ones who have a wife and kids said
65 Me Maiv Paj txhob nyob tos kuv lawm nawb mog
66 My dear Maiv Paj, don’t wait for me, okay?
67 Vim sij hawm phom sij
68 Because the time is dangerous
69 Tseem tab tom nrog Nais Phoo ua rog
70 Right now I am making war with Nais Phoo
71 Xyov tiam no puas yuav muaj txoj hmoo rov qab los cuag ntawm koj
72 I don’t know if, in this lifetime, my destiny will return me to you
73 Yog koj nyob tos tos tsis pom kuv los ces coj cov me nyuam nej khiav nawb mog
74 If you wait and don’t see me return, take the kids, run, okay?
75 Lub sij hawm ua tsov ua rog nws yeej phom sij
76 The time of war, it is dangerous

Verse 6

77 Peb cov Hmoob yeej tuag coob coob
78 Us Hmong, many died
79 Tiam sis peb tua nyab laj yeej tuag ntau tshaj
80 But we killed more Vietnamese
81 Yeej vim yog cov Meskas lawv tua tsis yeej lawv thiaj li tso ya
82 Because the Americans, they couldn’t win, they flew
83 Tso peb cov Hmoob nyob tom qab
84 Left us Hmong behind
85 Raug Nyab Laj muab tua xwb yuav luag tuag tag
86 We were killed by the Vietnamese, almost all died
87 Peb thiaj li ua ib siab los hla tus dej Mej Koom
88 We made the hard decision to cross the Mekong River
89 Ya mus Thaib Teb los raw Nais Phoo kom tuaj txog hauv teb chaws Meska
90 Fly to Thailand to follow Nais Phoo to reach the United States
91 Ziag no peb thiaj li tuaj txog
92 So now we have arrived

Verse 7

93 Yav puag thaum ub thaum nyuam qhuav tuaj txog
94 That time long ago when we first arrived
95 Yeej sib pab thiab yeej sib hlub
96 Helped and loved each other
97 Niaj hnub luag ntxhi niaj hnub ncaws npas
98 Laughed daily, played soccer daily
99 Yeej vim yog cov Khej Dub thab plaub
100 Because Black people made trouble
101 Peb cov Hmoob thiaj li ua tau ib pab laib
102 Our Hmong created a gang
103 Los ntaus Khej Dub ntaus Mev thiab ntaus Meskas
104 To fight Black people, fight Mexicans, and fight Americans
105 Pab ntaus ntawv muaj lub npe hu li Peace Mod
106 That group had the name Peace Mod
Verse 8

119 Yav puag thaum ub niam thiab txiv npaj nauj thiab coj kev cai nruj nruj
120 That time long ago mothers and fathers npaj nauj and kept tight to the old ways
121 Ntxhais xav ua dab tsi los lawv tsis kam thiab lawv tsis pub
122 Won’t let their daughters do anything
123 Peb cov ntxhais thiab li kwv taub ib lub maib
124 Our girls came up with an idea
125 Mam li dhia qhov rai thaum yav tsaus ntuj
126 Jumped out the window when it was dark
127 Niam thiab txiv tsis nyiam
128 Mothers and fathers didn’t like that
129 So they forced them to marry people’s sons

Verse 9

130 Thaum xav txog yus lub neej tawg tag vim txoj kev tso ya
131 When I think about it, our life was destroyed because of flying
132 Vim sij hawm thaum ntawv xwb yus tseem hlus thiab hlwb tseem taj
133 Because at that time we were still young and our brains weren’t developed
134 Yus ais nub yog me nuuam yaus nuuam qhuav muaj
135 We were only kids, only about
136 14, 15, 16 heev kawg ces kuj ho muaj 17
137 14, 15, 16 at most 17

Verse 10

138 Tiam sis ziag no xwb peb cov Hmoob pauv deb lawm
139 But nowadays our Hmong people have changed a lot
140 Peb tsis zoo li puag yav tag
141 We aren’t like that time that finished
142 Cov kawm tiav doctor thiab tau lawyer los kuj ho muaj
There are those who have become doctors and lawyers

There are those who have money because of pushing drugs and medicines

There are those who don’t do anything, smilingly living off of SSI

There are those who are gangsters until the day they die locked up in jail

There are those who work for the government in the United States

Verse 11

Relatives, younger friends, and younger sisters
Poverty was 40 years ago
Don’t be sad and don’t cry
Please wipe your tears

Verse 12

My name is Xyoob
This story is a real story
About our Hmong people

Outro

To all my brothers and sisters out there
You can do anything that you set your mind to
Stay focused, stay dedicated, and stay motivated
And don’t you for one second ever be ashamed of what you came from
And what you really are

Hmong pride ’til the day we die, baby