

Menyuam Laib Ua Laib [Gangster Youth Can Do It]: Queer and Trans HMoob Youth Storying  
Dab Neeg to Transform and Maintain Culture

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**Abstract**

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Racism remains deeply embedded in our society and education. Deficit language, devaluing of cultural assets, and assimilationist beliefs in an effort to maintain the status quo are still ongoing. But young people are resourceful and continue to find new ways to challenge and disrupt these occurrences while maintaining connections and roots to their heritage. In this dissertation, I introduce a theory of Menyuam Laib, which describes the different ways queer and trans HMoob youth maintain and transform their language and culture. In their pursuits, they are pathologized as “Menyuam Laib” (a gangster or bad youth) for what is perceived as non-normative practices. However, a theory of Menyuam Laib reframes and celebrates them as cultural reworkers who enact their history, language, and culture as sustenance; disrupt deficit narratives about themselves and their community; destabilize the status quo; and contest white-cisgender-heteronormative-patriarchal violence. By engaging in storying with five queer and trans HMoob

youth, we see how their lived experiences influence the dab neeg they pass down to the next generation. A theory of Menyuum Laib presented in this dissertation draws on multiple frameworks such as history on the run, queer refugeeism, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and HMoob youth reclamation to shed light on the ways queer and trans HMoob youth are sustaining and transforming their culture with dab neeg of their own. This phenomenon can inform and contribute to ways curricula and practices across all learning spaces can improve for queer Asian and Indigenous youth more broadly and for all young people whose lives have multiple intersecting identities. Finally, this project also has the potential to build upon and extend interrelated theories of HMoob youth, communities, and queerness, Asianness, refugeeism, and Indigeneity.

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## PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Dab Neeg: DA neng

HMoob: MUHNG

Niam: NEE-uh

Menyuam Laib: meh-NYUA LAI

Poj Laib: paw LAI

Thaub Laib: thao LAI

Txiv: TZEE

Kwv Txhij: koo ZIA

Cov Hluas: chaw HLUA

Cov Laus: chaw LAO

Txiv Neeb: TZEE neng

Hu Plig: HOO plee

Tshuab Nplooj: CHUA blong

Tshuab Qeej: CHUA keng

Xib Fwb: SEE foo

Pog: PAW

Paj Ntaub: BA dao

Khawv Koob: kaw CONE

Ua Neeb Saib: ua NENG shy

Kwv Tij: koo THEE

Neej Tsa: NENG cha

Cim: CHEE

Ntsiab Lus: JIA loo

Khi Tes: KEE thay

Phij Cua: PEE chua

Mej Koob: MEH kone

Paj: BA

Keej: KENG

Tub: Too

## UA TSAUG RAU [ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS]

Ua ntej tshaj plaws, kuv xav hais ua tsaug rau tus kuv hlub thiab tus kuv tshua, Ywj Pheej xeem Muas. Ua cas, ib ntsais muag xwb, wb twb laus zuj zus thiab twb muaj menyuum lawm. Ua lub neej mus kawm ntawv qib siab li no yeej tsis yoojyim, tab sis vim muaj koj thiab Hwjchim nrog nraim kuv, kuv thiaj li mus txog qhov kawg thiab thiaj li kawm tiav lawm. Txawm zoo thiab phem los, neb yeej nyob ntawm kuv ib sab. Lub sijhawm thaum kuv ntog, koj yog tus tsa kuv. Thaum kuv tsis muaj zog lawm, koj yog tus nqa. Thaum kuv muaj kev nyuaj siab, koj yog tus dim txhua yam. Ua tsaug uas koj tseem xais kuv los uas koj tus txij nkawm rau tiam no thiab. Kuv hlub koj heev.

Rau kuv niam thiab kuv txiv, Diav thiab Vam Huas xeem Khab, txij thaum kuv tseem yau los, kuv tau ntsib ntau ntau tus tib neeg uas txawj piav dab neeg, tiamsis, tsis muaj leej twg los piv tau neb ob leeg. Ua tsaug uas neb qhia txog peb HMoob lub neej yav tag los rau kuv. Neb yeej ib txwm hais tias neb zoo siab heev vim hais tias kuv yog thawj tug hauv peb tsev neeg uas mus kawm ntawv qib siab tiamsis kuv txoj kev txawj nste thiab txhua yam uas kuv paub yog los ntawm neb ob leeg txoj kev qhia. Txawm li ntawv los, kuv twb tsis paub npaum li neb thiab tseem xav los kawm ntawm neb mus ntxiv. Tshwj xeeb ntawm no, kuv xav hais ua tsaug rau kuv niam uas koj tseem teb xov tooj txhua zaus kuv hu. Txawm wb nyob kev deb thiab sijhawm txawv los koj tseem muab sijhawm los piav txog dab neeg HMoob thiab kab lis kev cai kom kuv tau taub. Cov dab neeg neb tau piav rau kuv, kuv yuav khaws lawv rau nruab siab ua khoom plig zoo mus txog hnuv kawg.

Rau kuv cov nus muag, Looj thiab Sua (Tis Nyab Looj); Ntxoo thiab Bobby (Txiv Laus); Sivyis thiab Oo (Tis Nyab Sivyis); Meejmom thiab Ntxawm (Tis Nyab Meejmom); Kuam; thiab Ntxawg, ua tsaug rau nej txoj kev txhawb nqa kuv txoj kev kawm ntawv qib siab. Vim muaj nej,

kuv thiaj li paub hais tias txoj kev sib hlub thiab kev sib pab los ntawm nus muag tseem ceeb npaum li cas. Kuv zoo siab tau los ua nus muag nrog nej sawv daws tiam no. Kuv zoo li ib tug noog uas ya tau siab heev yeebvim muaj nej cov nus muag ua cov huab cua pab kuv ya. Rau Ntxawg, ua tsaug koj tseem muab lub sijhawm thiab siv koj lub dag lub zog pab kuv txoj kev kawm ntawv qib siab. Koj kev txawj ntse siab tshaj kuv li. Yog muaj ib hnuv twg koj xav mus kawm ntawv qib siab, kuv paub hais tias koj yeej yuav mus deb tshaj kuv.

Rau Txiv Ntxawm Ntxoov Mas thiab Niam Ntxawm Ntxoov Mas, ua tsaug uas neb tau tu thiab hlub kuv ib yam li kuv yog nej yug. Kuv hwm thiab tshua neb ob leeg ib yam li neb yog kuv niam kuv txiv. To Maineng, Ge and Tina, Mailee, Zoua, Choua and Fel, I'm so thankful for our cousinhood. We were raised together, and each of us have grown so much in our own ways. Thank you for always cheering me on and being in my corner. To Benji, Natalie, Elaine, Zayn, Luka, Leah, Ellie, Keanu, Eleos, and Ariella, y'all give me inspiration every day to make this world a better place. I hope each of y'all grow up to be kind and loving to everyone you meet, in and outside of our clan. I hope each of y'all grow up to love and honor our language, culture, and traditions and enact these as sustenance within the creative praxis you have found for yourselves.

To my best friend I-Sha, thank you for all the laughter, even when it was through tears. Thank you for always reminding me why I started this journey in the first place whenever the road got tough and for never letting me find excuses to quit. We may be in different parts of the world chasing our dreams, but your love continues to nurture me every day.

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To my Django and Fam, my Asian Crit Collective, my Sib Hlub Circle, and my Lub Zej Zog Writing Fellows, thank you for the communal love and care. Our check-ins, our writing sessions, and our affirmations provided me with the energy and strength to keep going, even on days when I am most exhausted. Thank you for sustaining and nurturing my soul from across various parts of the country. Your love shows me that community can be on the run with us as well. I also want to thank the Gates Millennium Foundation, the UW Community Partner Fellows program, and the Lub Zej Zog Critical and Indigenizing HMoob program for their financial support on my journey. Your contributions made graduate school more accessible and feasible for someone who is a first-generation, queer HMoob refugee scholar. To my editors Dr. Vicky Xiong-Lor and Sandra Wissinger, thank you for proofreading my work and polishing it up so beautifully. I appreciate how thoughtful each of you were when collaborating with me to ensure that we are framing queer and trans HMoob youth, families, and communities with strength-based language.

And finally, my greatest gratitude of all, thank you *so, so, so* much to the five Menyuum Laib – Sai, KM, cher, Muun, and Ying. Without y'all's vast wisdoms, this dissertation could not

have come to life. Thank you for welcoming me into your hearts, for being vulnerable with me, and for entrusting me to capture your dab neeg and share them with the world. Y'all are brilliant souls whose magnitudes here on earth are incomparable. Continue to share your dab neeg so that you can mold justice and peace with them. The world needs more HMoob storytellers and cultural reworkers like y'all who ain't afraid to transform generations and chart new paths for us. It was an honor to sit at your feet and learn from each of you firsthand. I hope this second-hand serenade to the world is able to capture your wisdoms faithfully.

**KUV SAU DAIM NTAWV NO RAU [DEDICATION]**

to my queer and trans HMoob siblings  
and to all Menyuum Laib everywhere  
who are fearless in their reimaginings  
and unapologetic in their pursuits  
of what sets their hearts on fire  
this is my love letter to you

## PRELUDE

### HMOOB TERM FOR QUEER (BY NTXAWG)

People had asked me,  
“What is the Hmong word for ‘queer?’”  
And they are always questioning me when I say  
“I do not need one”  
They give a soft face, however, when I add,  
“Because my queerness is my role.  
My role to take care of my family,  
My community, and myself.”

Queer is an adjective to my experiences.  
Queer is me breaking apart the binaries and choosing what I want.  
Queer is a language I do not use nor understand,  
Rather to make peace offerings.

Txiv Neej is not always Man  
Poj Niam is not always Woman  
It can be masculine and feminine  
I am both, neither, and beyond  
If that is what it takes to reach what I need.

Kuv yug los tu, saib xyuas, kho,  
Rhuav tshem kev nyuaj siab kev ntxhov hnyo  
Rau kuv niam kuv txiv kwv tij neej tsa  
Rau txhua leej txhua tus haiv neeg Hmoob  
If this makes me queer, then so be it.

## TRACK 1

### PUAG THAUM UB – A LONG TIME AGO



*Figure 1 A HMoob paj ntaub (“flower cloth”) depicting HMoob people’s exodus from Laos to Thailand and the United States. (Photo courtesy of University of Oshkosh).*

#### Introduction

“Niam, koj puas kam piav ib zaj dab neeg rau kuv?” [*Mom, can you tell me a story?*]

“Koj xav hnov txog dab tsi, me naib?” [*What do you want to hear about, my dear?*]

“Piav seb peb HMoob 18 xeem pib li cas.” [*Please tell me about how the 18 HMoob clans came to be.*]

“Puag thaum ub, lub ntiaj teb raug dej nyab. Txhua yam muaj sia raug tuag tag. Tsuas yog muaj ib tug nus thiab ib tug muam uas tau nkaum hauv ib lub nruas loj loj heev. Thaum dej nyab mus txog ntuj ceeb tsheej, lawv muab hmuov lub ntiaj teb kom dej nyab ntwis mus. Thaum dej xau tag lawm, ob tug nusmuag tawm hauv lub nruas los. Tus nus thiab tus muam tau sib yuav ua niamtxiv. Tom qab ib ntus, lawv muaj menyuam, tab sis nws tsis zoo li ib tug menyuam mos.

Nws zoo li lub qe loj, tsis muaj caj npab thiab txhais ceg. ‘Tus menyuam no yog dab tsi?’ nkawv hais rau ib leeg. ‘Tej zaum nws yog ib lub noob me me. Cia wb muab nws ua tej daim.’ Yog li ntawd, nkawv thiaj muab tus menyuam txiv thiab pov mus rau txhua qhov chaw. Peb hnuv tom qab, lub zos vam meej muaj neej lawm vim 18 daim tig los ua cov 18 xeeb lawm. Tsis yog li ntawv xwb, tseem muaj qaib, muaj npua, nyuj, twm, nees, txhua yam. Muaj kab, nas, thiab noog thiab. Lub ntiaj teb no rov puv nrog tej yam muaj sia. Tus nus thiab tus muam zoo siab heev vim rov qab muaj txhua yam ntxiv lawm.” *[A long time ago, the world was flooded. All living things were killed. There was only one brother and one sister, who survived by hiding in a huge drum. When the flood reached the heavens, the gods speared through the earth to make the water flow away. When the flood was over, the children came out of the drum. Because they were the only ones left, the brother and sister married and lived together as husband and wife. After a while, they had a child, but it did not look like a baby. It looked like a big egg, without arms and legs. “What child is this?” the siblings asked each other. “Maybe it’s a small seed. Let’s cut it into pieces.” So, they cut the baby into 18 pieces and scattered it everywhere. Three days later, the village flourished with people. The 18 pieces have become the 18 clans. Not only that, but there were also chickens, pigs, cows, buffaloes, horses, everything. There are insects, mice, and birds too. The world is filled with living things. The brother and sister are very happy because they have everything back.]*

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As a young child, I was fascinated with and loved listening to dab neeg HMoob<sup>1</sup>. Unlike the books I was assigned to read at school, the dab neeg I grew up listening to were about people who looked like me and spoke the language I spoke. These types of stories were familiar and

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<sup>1</sup> Translation: “Hmong folk stories.” Pronunciation: DA neng MUHNG.

comforting to a refugee child, and stories like how the 18 clans in the HMoob<sup>2</sup> community came to be—like the one shared above—was one of many dab neeg my mom, Niam,<sup>3</sup> recited to me from memory.

Dab neeg HMoob varies in genre. Some come in the form of fables or allegories with moral lessons attached; others are lighthearted and entertaining. Then there are those that remember and recall historical events, both happy and painful. Niam shared that while dab neeg are usually passed down from Elders to young children, people also collected and gathered dab neeg along their travels. Regardless of the subject, Niam always encouraged me to find meaning in all the dab neeg I was offered. These stories can serve as cautionary tales and inform one's morals and ethics. They teach one how to be a good person and live life to the fullest. These dab neeg provided a framework for me to interact with the world and molded many of my beliefs today. I learned about the importance of protecting my family, honoring my ancestors, and respecting the land, animals, and spirits that surrounded me from the many dab neeg my parents shared. I also learned about my history, my people, and my culture. These dab neeg weren't just stories to me; they were mirrors that reflected my world, my beliefs, and my upbringing. At least they were supposed to.

I was in elementary school when I first heard my HMoob peers discussing and poking fun at the love story of seventeen-year-old Pa Nhia Xiong and twenty-one-year-old Yee Yang, whose double-suicide in Fresno, California, shocked our community in 2002. Their same-sex romantic relationship was described as “strange” and “not normal” by Pa Nhia's mother (Pha,

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<sup>2</sup> Pronunciation: MUHNG. “HMoob” is the Romanized Popular Alphabet written form of the anglicized word “Hmong.” The capitalization of the H and M signifies the two most widely spoken HMoob dialects: **H**moob Dawb and **M**oog Leeg. This is a form of self-identification among the younger HMoob generation. (Thao, 2019). I will be using “HMoob” and “Hmong” interchangeably throughout this essay.

<sup>3</sup> Translation: “Mom.” Pronunciation: NEE-uh.

2016), descriptions that were repeated by my peers. I remembered agreeing with these, that it wasn't normal that two women were in love. It wouldn't be until I was older and began exploring my queer identity that I started to question the stories I grew up with. If dab neeg are supposed to reflect life, then how come I never heard one that had two women falling in love or a man who dressed and behaved like a woman? If dab neeg are supposed to critique and provide social commentaries for future improvements, how come I never heard a story that included how to give our queer and trans<sup>4</sup> siblings the same love we give our heterosexual and cisgender siblings? I was already struggling finding books at school that had characters who looked like me. How come I am also struggling to find pieces of myself within the dab neeg HMoob that have been passed down from generation to generation? Did these pieces of myself not exist prior to me coming into being? Did these pieces of myself not manifest themselves within other people in my community? Does this mean there is something "strange" and "not normal" about me?

Meanwhile, as I was struggling to find stories that represented me at home and at school, the few LGBTQ+ stories that did get told more or less followed the same narrative: a gay HMoob person struggles with the clash of culture between their HMoob and queer identity and is, therefore, experiencing unhappiness (Boulden, 2009). White communities often latch onto these narratives to continuously attack the HMoob community and our culture without ever addressing systemic changes. These stories are then weaponized to highlight tensions between the queer community and the HMoob community, with most conversations focusing on and scrutinizing how the HMoob community is oppressive of queer identities (Yang, 2008; Boulden, 2009). After the shock of Pa Nhia and Yee's relationship and deaths subsided, little action was taken to address how to prevent such heartbreak from reoccurring. Instead, Pa Nhia and Yee's

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<sup>4</sup> Transgender. I will be using "trans" throughout this dissertation.

story became part of a larger list that continues to be used as evidence to paint the queer and trans HMoob community and the people within it as bleak and hopeless (Pha, 2016). HMoob scholar Kong Pheng Pha pushed back against these harmful single stories and comparisons, maintaining that the queer and trans HMoob community do not “contemplate sadness” every single day like how they have been falsely portrayed. Instead, he argued, “They exert agency and devise strategies to negotiate their sexual identity, ethnic identity, and gender roles in order to live happy and content lives” (Pha, 2016, 303–304).

It’s been over twenty years since Pa Nhia and Yee have passed away, and yet, the stereotype that queer and trans HMoob people are unhappy because our HMoob culture inhibits us from fully assimilating is still prevalent. These damaged-centered narratives are harmful, incomplete, and deny our community of agency, especially when told by those in position of power and privilege (Tuck, 2009). Even now as a doctoral student, searching for strength-based narratives about my community is difficult because the field of queer studies—including studies that focus on queer youth in learning spaces—disproportionately center white queer voices. While I do celebrate that the past decades have grown to include queer and trans Black and Latinx youth (McCready 2004; Pritchard, 2013; Blackburn & McCready, 2009), queer and trans Asian/Asian American students remain largely unexamined, including queer and trans HMoob youth (Ngo, 2012a; Ocampo & Soojinda, 2015). The ones that I have come across feature predominately gay HMoob men. The inclusion of queer HMoob women, transgender and nonbinary individuals, as well as sexually diverse folks, remain obscure (Thao, 2016).

Yet, despite how we may be framed by outsiders, I know my queer and trans HMoob community is powerful. We are not passive victims who only experience sadness and heartbreak. No. We experience light and joy; we find love and happiness; we push boundaries and demand a

seat at the table; and we dare to re/imagine and dream of a future where our community thrives and rises. The only difference is that we are condemned as Menyulam Laib<sup>5</sup> for daring to pursue what sets our hearts on fire because we unsettle the existing state of affairs and disrupt current knowledge. Knowing that my community is more than its tragic stories and that there are more dab neeg waiting to be shared with the world, I set out on my journey to collect and gather dab neeg from queer and trans HMoob youth who embrace being a Menyulam Laib. In doing so, I engaged a set of research questions to assist me in my learning, which I delve into in the following section.

### **Research Questions**

To learn more about how my queer and trans HMoob community embraces being Menyulam Laib, I designed a critical ethnographic study with five queer and trans HMoob youth. In the HMoob community, the concept of “youth” or “menyulam”<sup>6</sup> is not bound by age. While their ages ranged from 21–27, the queer and trans HMoob youth who are part of this project are considered “menyulam” within the HMoob community. This is because they are not married or seen as learned within the art of HMoob culture and traditions.

This empirical and conceptual project is guided by Indigenous methodologies (Smith, 2021), which center Indigenous people’s epistemologies and ways of knowing as the site of knowledge (Smith, 2012; Smith et al., 2018; San Pedro, 2021; Kropiniski, 2022) while challenging research that is dehumanizing (Paris & Winn, 2013; Blackburn, 2014). I approached this project with the framing that dab neeg are essential to HMoob culture and traditions and utilized this as a form of methodology, which I will explore further in Track 3. Not only is dab neeg how we pass down knowledge, but it’s also how we carried our history with us. Critical

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<sup>5</sup> Translation: “Gangster youth.” Pronunciation: meh-NYUA LAI.

<sup>6</sup> Translation: “Young person; youth.” Pronunciation: meh-NYUA.

ethnographic research can also provide powerful insights into people's lives while interrogating social structures that lead to experiences of inequity (Castagno, 2012; Bhattacharya, 2017). In pursuing such a project, I intentionally named how institutions and society shape queer and trans HMoob youth experiences and highlight youth's agencies and their response to such experiences (Castagno, 2012).

I was guided by the following research questions through this study:

1. What are the Menyuan Laib practices that queer and trans HMoob youth create or participate to discover (or uncover), embrace, and sustain their queer and trans HMoob identity and enact their history, language and culture as sustenance?
2. In what ways do queer and trans HMoob youth's dab neeg (i.e., culturally grounded stories and storying) create spaces to reinterpret and shift HMoob lifeways for the queer and trans HMoob community?

These questions assisted me with understanding how the experiences of queer and trans HMoob youth shaped the dab neeg they offer to the world. The first set of questions focused on how they sustain and rework culture to be more inclusive, exploring practices that may deviate from what our Elders approve of, while the second question analyzes how these experiences influence the different ways they story dab neeg and the content they explore within these dab neeg.

Answering these questions can shape how learning spaces and the people within them can be more culturally sustaining and responsive towards queer and trans HMoob youth and support how they engage with culture.

As a critical ethnographic researcher who is also part of the queer and trans HMoob community I struggled with the ethics of conducting research on my community (Crean, 2018) because such undertakings have been historically colonial (Smith, 2012), dehumanizing (Paris & Winn, 2013; Blackburn, 2014), and extractive (Tuck & Yang, 2014). I did not want to contribute further harm and worked to maintain a continuum of reflexive process as I grappled with power dynamics between myself and the five queer and trans HMoob youth (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009;

Powell, 2019). Throughout our time together, I sought to center relational responsibility between myself and my community by being as reciprocal as possible (Smith et al., 2018) and ensuring that I had “ears to hear” what my collaborators wanted from the project (McCarty et al., 2014). This meant we co-designed the project, coming up with the ideas together, and some of them took active roles in leading parts of our gatherings. I responded to feedback and suggestions along the way to ensure that each of us had ownership of the work. In doing so, I invited the queer and trans HMoob youth to be collaborators on the project design and execution, data collection and analysis, and member fact-checking and interpretation; for this reason, I refer to them as Menyuum Laib rather than “participants” to honor the active role they play in disrupting the norm of what we consider research.

### **Peb Vaj HMoob: Our Kingdom of the HMoob People**

All five queer and trans HMoob youth shared that their HMoob identity, traditions, and culture played a role in shaping their queer identity and how they embrace being a Menyuum Laib. To gain a better understanding of some of the cultural harmony and tensions that arose in their journeys, we first need to understand HMoob history, culture, and traditions, which I will delve into.

### ***Keeb Kwm: From the Mountains of Southeast Asia to the United States***

The exact origin of my people is unclear due to the lack of traditional archives; we’re often described as a stateless ethnic minority and an Indigenous group to Southeast Asia who have been historically displaced due to war, colonialism, and ethnic persecutions (see Figure 2) (Vang, 2020). Some researchers describe HMoob language as “exclusively oral” until the 1950s when Christian missionaries in Laos developed a writing system called the Roman Popular Alphabet (or RPA); others have argued that HMoob people had a writing system, but it became

lost or changed due to them needing to run away from ethnic persecutions and land displacement (Vang, 2020). Regardless, most accounts of our history, traditions, and culture are passed down orally from Elders to young children and therefore, written accounts of us started occurring only in the past half century.

Most scholars believe HMoob people's origins can be traced back to what is now considered present-day southwestern China (Chan, 1994; Hamilton-Merritt, 1993; Hillmer, 2010), although some scholars



*Figure 2 A map of HMoob diaspora in Asia. (Photo courtesy of keepinitrealevanston blog.)*

argue that we migrated from what is now present-day Iraq and Syria (Lo, 2001). Written records of HMoob people in Chinese texts refer to us as “miao,” a term that is now reserved largely for HMoob people although it was once used for any ethnic minority group in southern China (Hillmer, 2010). After centuries of enslavement and ethnic persecution by the Chinese armies, HMoob people rebelled between the 12th and 18th century. However, our small numbers and weapons compared to the Chinese army meant we were outnumbered and overpowered, and the majority of HMoob people either fled to present-day countries such as Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand or were killed in action. A third were captured and assimilated, although some still retained their miao identity (Lo, 2001). HMoob people who identify Southeast Asia as their homeland largely view the term “miao” as derogatory. Dab neeg from my dad, Txiv,<sup>7</sup> parallel this migration history from southern China to Vietnam and Laos. With his incredible memory,

<sup>7</sup> Translation: “Dad.” Pronunciation: TZEE.

Txiv is still able to remember six generations of our patrilineage's names in addition to four generations of our matrilineage's, all of whom were born and buried in the mountains of Laos. He shared with me sentimentally that he was unfortunately unable to recall the names of our ancestors that lived in what is now present-day Vietnam and Southern China. I assured him that his recollection of six generations of names was more than enough.

By 1955, political unrest grew throughout Southeast Asia, particularly in Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Even though the Geneva Conference of 1954 established Laos as a neutral party, the North Vietnamese Communist Party's military group, Viet Cong, had several military operations running in the country. Eventually, civil war erupted in Laos, with one side supported by Communist countries such as the Soviet Union and China, and the other supported by Democratic countries such as the United States, South Korea, the Philippines, Australia, and Thailand. After losing several major battles against the Viet Cong in Laos, the United States military recruited several Indigenous groups to engage in guerrilla warfare, which included HMoob people. The United States military falsely informed us that we were fighting to protect our way of life when it was really the United States' economic and capitalist interests in Southeast Asia we were fighting for (Vang, 2020).

Our role was to be a "secret weapon" as proxy soldiers to avoid sending more troops to fight in Vietnam because of anti-war protests occurring back in the United States (Vang, 2020). We also knew how to navigate the jungle terrain of Southeast Asia. Because our role was not disclosed to the public, the Laotian Civil War is commonly referred to as the Secret War among the HMoob community, which is how I will be referring to it throughout this dissertation. In exchange for our help, the United States military promised us land of our own, sovereignty, and financial assistance if we won the war against communism. Additionally, some scholars state that

the HMoob people were promised political asylum if the United States lost (Chan, 1994). General Vang Pao was recruited as the leader, and the Americans provided the HMoob people with training and weapons (Lo, 2001). At the height of our strength, the army amounted to over 40,000 soldiers. They fought against the Viet Cong and the Pathet Lao (Communist Lao) armies in attempts to stop communism from spreading throughout Southeast Asia. Unknown to us, however, the United States was decreasing their army and scaling back due to the intensity of anti-war movements back at home and a lack of progress on the battlefield. In 1973, the Paris Peace Accords called for the withdrawal of troops from Laos.

By March 1975, Viet Cong had successfully taken control of South Vietnam and focused their attention on supporting Pathet Lao. My people, recognizing that the United States' troops were returning to their country and shocked at being left behind, fled to Thailand as refugees (Chan, 1994); General Vang Pao himself escaped to Thailand in May 1975. Others chose to stay and surrender, while some hid in the jungles of Laos. Those who were captured were either enslaved, killed, or sent to re-education camps. Eventually, HMoob refugees in Thailand began seeking resettlement in other countries, in particular France and the United States (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993).

Although the Secret War officially ended in 1975, the persecution of my people for allying with the United States continued, and waves of HMoob refugees would arrive at their destinations throughout the next few decades. My parents and older brother, Looj, were actually born in Laos and made the treacherous escape to Thailand in 1988. Txiv fled to Thailand first and worked odd jobs to earn money to send back a guide for Niam and Looj, who was only a few weeks old. I still remember Niam sharing how dangerous the routes were and how terrified she was every time my newborn brother cried because it could bring about their deaths at any

second. To stop Looj's crying, the guide had no choice but to drug him with opium, which was inserted into his rectum. Niam said she still remembered crossing the Mekong River by boat and praying that she and my brother would be okay; she was especially heartbroken and terrified when she saw a woman sobbing over the loss of her child, who had been shot while strapped to her back as she was swimming to safety. Eventually, Niam and Looj reunited with Txiv in the Ban Vinai Refugee Camp, one of the largest camps for HMoob refugees, where my older sister Ntxoo and second-oldest brother Sivyis were born.

I was born in the smaller Ban Napho Refugee Camp in the Nakhon Phanom Province of Thailand in 1991; my family did not come to the United States until I was a little over a year old in December 1992. Even as a young child, Txiv would affectionately call me Napho and say to me, "Napho, koj puas paub koj yug lub zos Napho na?" [*Napho, do you know you were born in the Napho Refugee Camp?*]. This was how I knew, even at a young age, that I was a refugee. This knowledge was critical to me, because even as a young child, I saw and heard how refugees were treated and talked about on the news. I understood that my "alien" immigration status in the United States was fragile, similar to other refugees who were not protected or treated with respect like United States citizens.

Dab neeg like these are important to hear yet excruciatingly painful, and even though my parents are willing to share and pass these down to us because they firmly believe we should know our history, I can still hear the sadness and pain in their voices at recalling these aching memories. My people are typically excluded from many social studies/US history curricula, but one thing that is often included whenever HMoob people are discussed is the Secret War as the beginning of the most "modern" retelling of HMoob history. While I recognize the central role it played in shaping HMoob history and migration, war is not our beginning, and trauma does not

form the souls of my people. Our true origin, instead, can be found through our dab neeg, like the one I shared about how the 18 clans came to be. These dab neeg captures our history, the adaptability of HMoob people and the way we carry our language, traditions, and culture with us while on the run. Our dab neeg also showcases our resilience as we resettle into and make the United States our home.

Author Kao Kalia Yang's book *The Song Poet: A Memoir of My Father* (2016) captures the importance of dab neeg and its role in recording not just history but also maintaining our identity, cultural connections, and relationships with one another. Yang describes her father as a song poet who is learned in the art of kwv txhij<sup>8</sup> and was encouraged by family, friends, and lovers of his songs to record many of his dab neeg onto audio cassette tapes. These tapes were later distributed to the HMoob community, earning him a small amount of money to help purchase items for his family. In his dab neeg, he focused on life back in Laos and the life lessons he learned growing up.

Audio cassette tapes were one way HMoob Elders kept in touch and shared dab neeg with family members transnationally throughout the HMoob diaspora. A family member would record themselves first and share their dab neeg, then send the tape to a loved one to listen to and record their responses to send back. Most of the time, it was done directly on the same tape to save money. Sometimes the responses would override the dab neeg that had been previously recorded on the main track (Side A), and sometimes the responses were recorded onto the other side (Side B) of the tape. As previously shared, these tapes were not just a means of distributing our dab neeg for entertainment but also one way we maintained connections to one another and our

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<sup>8</sup> Traditional form of oral HMoob poetry. Pronunciation: koo ZIA.

heritage, which was why their role in capturing dab neeg was influential in my research project, as I will explore further in Track 3.

Since the first wave of HMoob refugees came to the United States in 1975, our community has grown. By 2010, the United States' census revealed that there are over 200,000 HMoob people living in the country, with the top three states being California (91,224), Minnesota (66,181), and Wisconsin (49,240) (Moua, 2010). Although the HMoob community back in Laos practiced a largely agrarian lifestyle, since resettling in the United States, many have branched out and explored other opportunities. Grocery stores, automobile shops, and restaurants run by HMoob families and clan members were among the first entrepreneurship in the United States for us (Dunnigan, 1982; Christian et al., 2008-2009), though there is still a large presence of HMoob families selling produce and flowers in farmers markets (Slocum, 2008). Community-based organizations and movements serving HMoob communities have also risen to bridge cultural and language gaps, including the nonprofit Hmong American Partnership in 1990 (HAP, 2024). In 2002, Mee Moua became the first HMoob American woman to be elected to a state legislature as a member of the Minnesota Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party (Vang, 2015a). Meanwhile, the film *Gran Torino* (2008), directed by Clint Eastwood, was the first film to feature HMoob American casts, although its subject and depiction of HMoob people and culture remains controversial (Yuen, 2008). Though HMoob community has come to adopt and observe US holidays, the celebration of the HMoob New Year in different cities throughout the country continues to be commemorated every autumn. These events have consistently drawn in thousands of HMoob and non-HMoob visitors every year, especially the week-long Fresno New Year held at the Fresno Fairgrounds. They are often used to showcase our language, clothes, and traditional activities, such as ball tossing and singing kwv txhiaj (Lani, 2018). But

while events like the HMoob New Year are embraced by non-HMoob people in the United States, not all practices and structures within the HMoob community receive the same warm responses.

### *Kinship and Marriage Practices*

Kinship plays an important role within the HMoob community and culture, even after resettling in the United States. As shared in the dab neeg above, we are divided into 18 clans, and members of the same clan system are seen as family members and cannot marry one another (Cha, 2010). These patrilineage clans, expressed as surnames, become the foundation of familial ties and provide both social and political support to one another; thus, strong connections to your clans are common and seen as necessary for survival. Even our introductions to other people emphasize our clan. For example, I would say, “Nyob zoo, kuv lub npe hu ua Duab xeem Khab” [*Greetings, my name is Doua, clan name Kha.*] Unfortunately, HMoob familial and social structures have come under scrutiny for being in tension with white, Christian, middle-class values. Our large family household, marriage practices, and patriarchal culture are often cited as “oppressive” and “abusive” (Lee, 2001), and our sexual practices are seen as deviant and non-normative (Pha, 2017).

Important events—such as weddings, divorces, marital disputes, funerals, celebrations, and vital family decisions—are collectively decided upon by the married men of the clan. While HMoob men may be positioned as the “official” leaders of their clans, it is HMoob women who elevate their clans socially and sometimes politically (Lee, 2016). If a family is hosting a celebration, clan families are expected to come early to help one another, and HMoob women are often the ones who make up these extensive support structures. Because of our emphasis on community, HMoob people, like other Asian communities, are concerned with “saving face.”

The “face” is the “collective property” of not only the individuals involved in a situation, but also their immediate and extended families—specifically for the HMoob community, our family and our clan are the face that we must carefully guard. Chang & Subramaniam (2008) explained that “saving face” is about reflecting on “both the individual’s achievements as well as on those of his or her family or group” and that “it is important for individuals to maintain or save face not only to preserve their own prestige, but also that of the family or group” (p. 127). The importance of the clan and the act of saving face to maintain a positive public perception was ingrained in my siblings and me by my parents when we were young.

Due to our historically agrarian lifestyle, HMoob people also favor having large families, with the average size of a HMoob household being 6.3 compared to the 2.6 average in the United States (Xiong & Xiong, 2010). Having a large family means children can assist with tasks around the house and farming and contribute to the well-being of the clan. It is common in a HMoob household to see multiple generations of family members dwelling together, with sometimes multiple wives married to the same husband because we have historically practiced polygyny. When they are older, children are expected to one day house and take care of their aging parents. Retirement homes are frowned upon as it is seen as cruel to abandon one’s parents.

When HMoob people first came to the United States, our practice of polygyny and understanding of kinship was in direct conflict with white heteropatriarchy’s understanding of kinship, monogamy, and marriage since you can only legally have one spouse at a time within the United States. General Vang Pao, revered as the leader of the HMoob community, had to “legally” marry one of his six wives in order to be accepted into white western culture, despite his multiple marriages being legal in HMoob culture. Vang’s choice to live with sixteen of his

twenty-six children, four of his six wives, and his eighty-eight-year-old mother under one household was seen as yet another example of HMoob men's hypersexuality and non-normative sexual deviance. Vang Pao's marriages, and by extension HMoob people's practice of polygyny, are "not normative within monogamous heterosexuality because non-monogamous and deviant genders, sexualities, kinship, and social formations are all inherently pathological within 'HMoob culture'" (Pha, 2017, p. 6).

While it would appear initially that HMoob people practicing monogamy would be a progressive move towards gender equality, critics of polygyny practices in the HMoob community were more concerned with controlling refugee bodies by forcing them to conform to the US' socially accepted practice of kinship and marriage practices, rather than it being about abolishing the ways polygyny has been used to abuse and control HMoob women (Pha, 2017). Interestingly enough, HMoob and other non-white non-monogamous marital practices are shamed, while white liberals' polyamorous relationships are admired for the way they challenge the constraints of heteronormative monogamous relationships (Zane, 2018). These tensions continue to contribute to the misunderstanding and vilifying of HMoob culture by outsiders.

### ***Birth Order, Gender Roles, and Responsibilities***

Different roles and responsibilities are attached to gender and birth order in the HMoob community. Traditional HMoob rituals and celebrations are gendered, with the married men taking on leadership roles in these spaces. During celebrations, men sit at the table while the women cook in the back and set the table for them. If slaughtering large animals such as cows or pigs is required of the meal, men are responsible for the killing while women prepare the dishes. Women also clean up after the men and usually eat in the kitchen informally along with children. During important events such as weddings, men are the ones negotiating with other

clans before agreeing on important elements such as the bride price, while women cook to feed them and other guests during said negotiations. These roles and responsibilities are taught to us when we are young, so to cross gender roles and boundaries often invites unsolicited criticism and policing from Elders.

Your birth order and gender can influence the expectation placed on you by immediate family members and the clan. For example, sons inherit the clan's name and carry on the family lineage. They are often seen as having authority over their sisters when making decisions on behalf of the family (Cha, 2010). The oldest son is especially revered as the leader of his siblings and expected to look after them and make decisions if anything should happen to the parents. Meanwhile, the youngest son is responsible for the physical and mental well-being of the parents after each older child is married, and most HMoob parents live with him and his family. On the other hand, the oldest daughter's role is to raise her younger siblings alongside her mother. While sons are expected to learn traditional values to become leaders in their clans, daughters are raised to be modest and polite, with the expectation that they will one day marry into another clan and carry on their husband's clan name. Therefore, they are expected to learn domestic chores to prepare them to be dutiful daughters-in-law (Lee & Tapp, 2010). After marriage, they become an "outsider" to their birth clan and become spiritually a part of their husband's clan. They can no longer return to their birth clan, even if they become divorced or widowed, because their spirit has already joined the ancestral lineage of their husband's clan. In such cases, single mothers and their children often become outcasts and are thus excluded from HMoob society since they no longer belong to a clan system. If the mother has a son, however, the father's clan usually takes him in, in order to continue his father's lineage, even if the mother and daughters are exiled. This does not necessarily mean daughters are loved less; many parents have voiced

that because they know their daughters will one day leave their birth clan and marry into another, they often show extra affection to their daughters (Cha, 2010). Despite the misconception that the HMoob community is resistant to change, Lee and Tapp (2010) noted that HMoob gender roles and responsibilities are likely to shift since the younger generation of HMoob people, in particular the women, either no longer practice them or are challenging them.

### *Spirituality and Religion*

Traditionally, HMoob people practice what has been described as a blend of shamanism and animism by anthropologists (Mayo, 2013). Our beliefs can be best understood within a cosmological dialogism in which “everything means and is understood in relation to a greater cosmology of life and death” (Jalao, 2001, p. 2). To us, the physical and spiritual worlds coexist, and one must live harmoniously with and respect fauna and flora because everything has a spirit (Conquergood, 1989; Xiong et al., 2004); any disrespect can lead to consequences in the afterlife or affect how and when you reincarnate.

Accordingly, the physical body and the human spirit must also remain harmonious to be intact. We believe that the human body contains multiple spirits (Lee & Tapp, 2010). Xiong et al. (2004) noted that, “The most common numbers attributed to this belief system are three, nine, and twelve, though some people refer to as many as twenty or even more than thirty souls. Whatever the number, the essence of HMoob spiritual tradition is that the souls and the physical body must function as a single unit to give life and health to the individual” (p. 441). Txiv, who is also a txiv neeb,<sup>9</sup> a shaman and healer who can access the spiritual world by performing trance-inducing rituals (Gerdner, 2012), once told me that the number of spirits within the body differs between male and female, with the male body containing nine spirits and the female body

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<sup>9</sup> A male shaman. A woman who is a shaman would be called “niam neeb.” Pronunciation: TXEE neng.

seven. I once asked him why there was a difference, and he explained that it's just how our bodies and spirits are. When there is a spiritual and physical imbalance, it can manifest as a physical illness; for example, "when a soul or souls are lost or taken by other spiritual forces, the physical body reflects this loss by becoming sick" (Xiong et al., 2004, p. 441). A txiv neeb is then called upon "not to overcome or defeat the spirits that have taken the soul" but rather to "engage in negotiation ([pauj] dab) for the person's soul" (Xiong et al., 2004, p. 445) by performing a hu plig<sup>10</sup> (Conquergood, 1989). By calling the soul back, the txiv neeb can heal the person not only physically but also spiritually. This calling of the soul to return home is crucial to one's overall health and outlook towards life; this is why during the HMoob New Year, we always call our souls home.

During the Secret War, Christian missionaries and churches volunteered to assist with resettling the HMoob people and introduced them to Christianity. The exposure to and learning about western practices and religions meant many HMoob people converted to Christianity and no longer adhere to traditional shamanic rituals and practices, especially when it comes to ailments since they may opt for western medicines. There are also practicing HMoob shamans and Christians who have blended practices from both religions and those who have converted to Christianity and converted back (Gerdner, 2012), though the exact percentages are unclear (Mayo, 2013). Despite misunderstandings about HMoob religion and spirituality (Conquergood, 1989), there is a growing interest among the younger HMoob generations to re/learn and sustain these practices (Xiong et al., 2004).

### **Significance of the Study**

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<sup>10</sup> Soul-calling ritual. Pronunciation: HOO plee.

Dab neeg are an essential part of HMoob identity. They carry our history, our traditions, and our heritage, and they offer words of wisdom to those searching for them. Nevertheless, they haven't always been inclusive of diverse gender identities and sexualities. By reading the dab neeg of queer and trans HMoob youth, we get to learn about how they experience the world and navigate and negotiate their racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities. Most importantly, we get to see the different ways they embrace being Menyuum Laib and how in their everyday lives they are disrupting deficit narratives about themselves while sustaining their language, culture, and lifeways. As HMoob scholar Kao Nu Moua frames it, "We must allow these new storytellers to narrate; this means we encourage and support new storytellers from these communities, we get out of the way, and we listen" (p. 128). While Elders may still condemn us for our practices, I hope that this dissertation can assist in reframing queer and trans HMoob youth who are not afraid to unsettle the status quo and subvert expectations. Their very existence is proof that their spirits are tenacious and refuse to be suppressed, even when others threaten them. Their contribution to HMoob lore demands that their hopes and concerns are taken to heart and that necessary changes are made to expand practices to be more inclusive.

As culture shifts in response to the community's needs and wants, I believe it is important for us to analyze and determine whether these new practices are strengthening the community or contributing to the erasure of it. In particular, we have to be more open to the new ways in which the youth who live in and learn from these communities are culturally reworking it to fit their needs. HMoob people are an ethnic group whose sovereignty is not tied to any nation-state, which provides us with an opportunity. This research's exploration of what it means for queer and trans HMoob youth to sustain and reimagine a language and culture that is on the run can provide us with insights on how these shifts can be made.

Culture is not static. Traditions and heritage are important to preserve, but transformations and interrogations are essential for futurity. Within the HMoob community, as our queer and trans subcommunity grows more visible, vocal, and active, the traditional gendered practices that have long been considered the norm will have to confront themselves on how to be more inclusive of same-sex relationships and marriage, and transgender and nonbinary individuals (Thao, 2016).

Analyzing, theorizing, and understanding the ways queer and trans HMoob youth sustain and rework culture to be more inclusive for their community can inform those who work with us on how to lean into these assets and strengths. For educators who are seeking to work with queer and trans HMoob youth, it is important to learn about how historical context and political status contribute to the minimizing of or complete erasure of HMoob agency, especially for youth who are living in the legacy of the Secret War. Reframing HMoob youth as active agents of change can encourage educators to think about how to best support HMoob youth learning and growth while being sensitive to cultural practices. In doing so, they can be co-conspirators with queer and trans HMoob youth by pushing back against deficit and binary homonationalist discourses and policies.

The stories that were shared during this journey; the learning and growth that we experienced; and the ways queer and trans HMoob youth are embracing being Menyuam Laib by negotiating their racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities can contribute to improved curricula and practices across all learning spaces for queer and trans Asian and Indigenous youth, and thus for all young people whose lives have multiple intersecting identities. This project builds upon the interrelated theories of HMoob youth, communities, and queerness; Asianness; refugeeism; and Indigeneity by offering insights and providing commentaries and critiques on the ways we

view community, cultural practices, and what it means to carry our history and traditions with us as displaced people on the run.

### **Offering of Guidance**

I conclude this track by offering guidance to readers on how to navigate the terrain of this dissertation, the same way dab neeg offer guidance to those who may need it. This dissertation is arranged like a music album that has been recorded onto a cassette tape. HMoob author Kao Kalia Yang organized her father's collection of dab neeg in her book *The Song Poet: A Memoir of My Father* like a music album to honor her father's love and labor in creating his record. I organized this dissertation in the same way to honor our oral history; our musical language and cim<sup>11</sup>; how our dab neeg were transmitted and shared via audio cassette tapes during the HMoob diaspora after the Secret War; and especially how our Elders are constantly practicing and finding new creative modes to pass down history, traditions, and culture. Our oral stories passed down from generation to generation continue to "track the presence of Hmong refugee epistemologies" across time and geographical borders (Vang, 2020, p. 4). With this concept of "tracking" in mind as well, I felt that calling each chapter a "track" would be twice as meaningful.

Each chapter is a track that is part of either Side A or Side B, with poems about HMoob identity and community making up the Prelude, Interlude, and Postlude. In music, Side A of an album typically has the primary songs that are expected to become hit singles, whereas the B side usually contains secondary songs. The categorization of tracks into Side A and Side B in this dissertation runs contrary to this logic; instead, it honors the practice of HMoob Elders using both sides of the cassette tape to record their dab neeg and responses to one another. I want to

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<sup>11</sup> Translation: "Tone." The HMoob language is tonal and has 8 different tones (Garelleck & Esposito, 2023). Pronunciation: CHEE.

pay respect to this form of “dialogue” through my arrangement by making Side B the response to Side A. Both sides are equally important and require readers to “listen” to all the tracks in order to fully understand and appreciate the dissertation as a “sonic” experience, which is precisely the nature of the dab neeg.

The Prelude, which you read upon opening this dissertation, featured the poem “Hmoob Term for Queer” by Ntxawg (Kha, 2018). In this poem, Ntxawg problematizes and challenges preconceived and biased assumptions about our queer and trans HMoob community, including how the lack of a queer nomenclature does not define our queerness. For this reason, it serves as the introduction to the themes and topics discussed in the tracks of Side A.

Side A of this dissertation—which contains this track as well as 2 and 3—establishes the foundation, framework, and historical context needed to understand the dab neeg of Menyوام Laib. Within Track 1, this one, I shared why I am pursuing this dissertation and provided background information about my people and our culture in order for readers to understand HMoob history, epistemologies and ontology. Following this is Track 2, “Kev Tshawb Fawb – Theorizing Menyوام Laib...and Other Tales,” where I conduct a review of the literature that has been produced on queer and trans HMoob youth. Since there is limited research about them, my literature review also draws from wider studies about queer Black and Latinx students to inform the conceptualization and framing of this project. I then explain how these historical contexts lead to the theorizing of Menyوام Laib, which describe the different ways queer and trans HMoob youth sustain, rework, and transform their language and culture to be more inclusive. In Track 3, “Piav Dab Neeg – Methodologies on the Run,” I explore how stories and storying are an important aspect of HMoob culture and traditions. Here, I delve into my journey of gathering with and learning from queer and trans HMoob youth.

The Interlude features the poem “The Day I Learned to Speak My Grandmother’s Tongue” by Pacyinz Lyfuong and describes the author’s celebration of her HMoob identity and her appreciation for HMoob language and culture as sustenance (Lyfuong, 2019). This transitions and introduces us to the themes of the tracks in Side B.

Side B contains the dab neeg of the Menyuum Laib, which are the responses to the events that were discussed in Side A. In Track 4, “Lub Neej Menyuum Laib – The Life and Times of Menyuum Laib,” I share the life stories of five queer and trans HMoob youth with an emphasis on the different ways they are enacting and embracing being a Menyuum Laib in their everyday lives. I then highlight the themes that connect these dab neeg and discuss how the practices of Menyuum Laib align with or diverge from those of our Elders’ fugitive ones. In Track 5, “Menyuum Laib Cov Dab Neeg – Storying Superhero Stories,” I share the dab neeg that four of the five Menyuum Laib created and discuss the themes that arise from them, including how they use dab neeg to expand and critique culture and traditions. Finally, in Track 6, “Nrhiav Ntsiab Lus – Wisdoms and Learnings from Menyuum Laib,” I offer guidance to HMoob community members, to educators, and to co-conspirators who wish to serve and work with queer and trans HMoob youth. Here, I discuss how these wisdoms imparted by Menyuum Laib can inform and transform culture and practices within our community and across different learning spaces, as well as interrelated theories and disciplines.

The Postlude, which features the poem “Peb Yog (We Are)” by Kevin Yang and wraps up this dissertation, expresses the beauty of being HMoob, highlighting our strengths, our flaws, and our tensions (Yang, 2015). This serves as an ode to my queer and trans HMoob community; it is a reminder that despite the way others may perceive and treat us because of our “non-normative” Menyuum Laib practices, we are still authentically and unapologetically HMoob. It is

my hope that these dab neeg, wisdoms, learnings, implications and recommendations provide a starting point for HMoob community members, educators, and co-conspirators to radically love and support Menyuan Laib on their journey as they unsettle the world.

## TRACK 2

### KEV TSHAWB FAWB – THEORIZING MENYUAM LAIB... AND OTHER TALES

*“Menyuam laib ua laib [Gangster youth can do it].”*

*– HMoob Youth Proverb*

#### Introduction

I was a first-year doctoral student when the COVID-19 pandemic erupted throughout the world and disrupted life as we know it. Most of the spaces that I was a part of switched to remote learning to honor social distancing. During this time, my mental health plummeted from the increased isolation, so I attempted to find a community to anchor me as I navigated through life. That longing was what eventually led me to Zoo Heev Circle,<sup>12</sup> an online space that centers Hmong/Southeast LGBTQ+ individuals and their stories. At last, I had finally found a community for myself—a community where I could share and pour all of who I am and know that I would receive the same amount of love and nurturing back.

Being with Zoo Heev Circle breathed new life into me as I continued my PhD journey. As I fellowshipped with queer and trans Southeast folks from various parts of the United States, I was reminded of how queer and transgender Black and Brown youth must often seek and/or create spaces for themselves to find community and belonging (Kumashiro, 2001), especially when programs like the Gender Sexuality Alliance<sup>13</sup> (GSA) continue to center whiteness (McCready, 2004; Blackburn & McCready, 2009; Mayo, 2015). Therefore, learning more about

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<sup>12</sup> Pseudonym.

<sup>13</sup> Some clubs still use the name Gay-Straight Alliance.

what spaces queer and trans PGM<sup>14</sup> youth utilize is important to support their racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identity development.

The goal of this qualitative study was to examine and theorize understanding of the different ways queer and trans HMoob youth work to sustain their language, culture, and lifeways while lovingly critiquing their community and resisting the white gaze. Studies about the LGBTQ+ HMoob community have been produced by both HMoob and non-HMoob researchers. However, few have focused on the LGBTQ+ HMoob community's experiences as students in K–12 spaces. My project was not designed to address the gaps in that literature; rather, it was designed to disrupt and counterbalance the current lack of asset-based studies focusing on queer and trans HMoob youth in education (Kumashiro, 2001). The implications from my study will inform HMoob community members, co-conspirators, educators, and those who work with or serve queer and trans HMoob youth on how to better support them across different learning spaces. In the following sections, I detail some of the literature and theory that has guided me in this project and created the grounds for my own theoretical contributions.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Racism in the United States' Education System***

It is important to understand the prevalence of racism throughout the history of the United States' education system, among other systems, where violence and injustice are also present, to fully take in the experiences at the heart of my dissertation. The United States' education system has undergone numerous changes since it was first formally implemented. Before settlers colonized the country, North America's First Nations and Indigenous people

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<sup>14</sup> People of the Global Majority. I use the term "People of the Global Majority" or PGM to represent Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, Pacific Islander and multiracial communities who belong to the global majority. This naming unsettles whiteness as the center of race relations and transcends geographic boundaries when it comes to community and belonging (Campbell-Stephens, 2020; Washington et al., 2023).

learned within their families and community, and with and from the land (Fullerton, 2021). However, settlers assumed that First Nations lacked formal education and viewed them as “primitive” (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). With the invasion of settlers, schooling was arranged primarily through church-supported schools, local schools organized by towns or groups of parents, and tuition-based schools for wealthy families, among others. The young, white, and wealthy boys were taught classics and humanities, subjects from which many children were excluded on the basis of income, race, ethnicity, gender, and geographic location. The first public school, Boston Latin School, was founded in 1635 to serve the New England Colonies, while children in the South were educated through private tutors, tuition-based schools, and parent-organized schools. Rural areas, however, often lacked the resources of larger towns and cities to organize schools for their children (Kober & Rentner, 2020).

When schools took on more formalized processes, concerns were raised about what the purpose of education should be. In 1787, before the legislature of Virginia, Thomas Jefferson argued that public education should serve all white children, but that only the brightest young male students would be encouraged to further their education in grammar schools and colleges (Anderson, 1988). Jefferson, like the other Founding Fathers, was an enslaver who believed that education should teach young children to be democratic citizens who would participate in civic engagement and socio-political events (Kober & Rentner, 2020). This vision was not extended to enslaved people, who needed to be “contained” in order to uphold Virginia's “peace, prosperity, and ‘civilization’” (Anderson, 1988), nor to Native students, who were viewed as “primitive” and needed to be “civilized” first (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). This shielding of white children from the violent subordination of enslaved children and the assimilation of Native

children became the basis of the American educational system, especially as they continued to steal land and people.

Enslaved people were viewed as property, and many states passed anti-literacy laws that legally forbade them from reading and writing. Anti-literacy laws continued to be enacted between 1740 and 1843 in predominantly Southern states, even after slavery was legally abolished (Maddox, 2022). The Reconstruction Era brought the first system of taxpayer-funded schools that were segregated by race (Zuczek, 2015). Samuel Chapman Armstrong, a former American soldier and general during the Civil War, founded the first normal school for Black educators, which would later be known as Hampton University. He advocated that its model of teaching Black educators to teach Black students to accept subordination was the best course of action (Anderson, 1988). Rather than teach the humanities, Black students' coursework focused on unskilled farm, manual, and domestic labor. Though Black teachers were trained and prepared to teach this ideology through Hampton University, many widely rejected this model. Instead, they sought to incorporate a classical curriculum and supplemented it with materials that included Black history, experiences, and knowledge. Racial segregation in schools between Black and white students would continue until it was legally abolished during the Civil Rights Movement, though Black students in the South did not receive a universal secondary school education until as late as 1968 (Anderson, 1988).

In contrast to the subordination ideology for Black communities, the ideology for First Nations children focused on assimilation through American Indian boarding schools. Richard H. Pratt, an army veteran of the American Indian Wars and cultural genocide, created the motto "Kill the Indian, save the man" and opened the first federally sanctioned boarding school, the Carlisle Industrial Training School, in Carlisle, Pennsylvania (Smith, 2007). Under this

educational system and ideology, Native students were forcefully taken from their reservations and lived in boarding schools that were far away to limit influence from their families and tribes (Adams, 1995). This assimilationist ideology was built on the belief that it was the responsibility of white teachers to “civilize” and assimilate Native students by eradicating their cultural, spiritual, and religious practices (Smith, 2007). Children were forced to cut their hair, wear American-style uniforms, forbidden to speak in their language, and replace their tribal names with English ones. Although Native students were taught the same curriculum as white students, boys were often taught manual labor or farming and girls were trained to do domestic work. Violence was inflicted to control Native students, and the poor conditions of these schools resulted in many children contracting illness and diseases (Lajimodiere, 2014). In 1968, President Lyndon Johnson terminated these schools, but it wasn’t until 1975 with the passing of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act that tribes and parents were guaranteed the opportunity to determine the future direction of their children’s education (Bowker, 2007).

These three distinct approaches to education continue to have influence over our educational system today, where Black, Native, Latinx, migrant and bilingual students are treated as intellectually inferior and deemed “at-risk” compared to their white counterparts (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The increasing pressure to pass standardized tests has been used to compare and contrast the educational trajectory of young people and the quality of their schools to one another, as well as being used to frame Black and Brown students as “falling behind” (Ladson-Billings, 2007). On the other hand, Asian students are praised as the “model minority” when compared to Black, Native, and Latinx students. The “model minority” trope—which aggregates all Asian ethnicities into a monolith and is cast within ideologies of antiblackness—perpetuates

the idea that Asian families have attained economic and social mobility because their cultural values prioritize education (Chun, 1980; Chang & Au, 2007/2008; Lee, 2009). Teachers who believe Asian students are not “underrepresented” because of their economic and social success (Wing, 2007) often do not offer extra support to or check in with students, both outside and in the classroom (Sue et al., 2007; Hartlep, 2014). This often creates barriers for Asian students participating in diversity, equity, and inclusion opportunities or having access to resources (Adler, 2004; Ocampo & Soodjinda, 2015).

The model minority myth is also used to instill fear among white families by demonstrating how “foreigners” came to take over America’s educational system and economy (Ng et al., 2007). The duality of being both a model minority and a perpetual foreigner, especially for those who are emerging English speakers, continues to impact the ways Asian students are racialized and treated inside and outside of the classroom, including HMOob students. The constant comparisons among different groups of students create further racial division and competition, especially when it comes to having access to and equal distribution of resources within education.

As PGM youth make up more of the student demographic in public schools, the disproportionality between white teachers and PGM students remains. In the 2017–2018 school year, 79% of public-school teachers were white and non-Hispanic, and 76% identified as female (NCES, 2022a). In comparison, 54% of students identified as PGM in the 2020–2021 school year, with Hispanic students making up the largest racial group at 28% (NCES, 2022b). Despite attempts by teacher education programs to minimize racial biases among educators, studies demonstrate that white teachers still hold and perpetuate racist beliefs about PGM students by assuming they are academically unmotivated, disproportionately subjecting them to disciplinary

actions at a higher rate, and even over-identify Black boys for Special Education and maintain deficit beliefs about their parents and community (Wang et al., 2021; Aloï & Bialka, 2022).

### *Recentering and Revitalizing Language and Culture as Sustenance*

The violent mistreatment of Black and Brown students prompted many families and community members to enact educational spaces and sociopolitical movements that were more responsive. One of the most instrumental shifts in education came in 1995 when Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings coined the term “culturally relevant pedagogy.” Drawing on strength-based approaches when studying African American teachers’ success with teaching African American students, Ladson-Billings sought to push back against damage-centered scholarships by asking what these teachers were doing right as opposed to what the students were doing wrong. Her work and subsequent follow-ups challenged (white) teachers to be responsive to the cultural and racial identities and needs of their students; to support students by reframing them as scholars with an eye toward success; and to encourage students to critically analyze their communities and social stratosphere. In a study with 25 high school students who enrolled in a five-week summer seminar that focused on the sociology of education in Los Angeles, mathematics pedagogy was paired with culturally relevant pedagogy to center students’ frame of reference. Through this approach, students were able to analyze statistics and data to make claims about inequitable educational opportunities in Los Angeles and used quantitative evidence to support their claims (Enyedy & Mukhopadhyay, 2007). Additionally, when culturally relevant pedagogy is informed by the young people who partake in its spaces, their cultural assets can influence the curriculum to be tailored to their funds of knowledge. Hip hop pedagogy, for example, is one way educators can adopt art-based approaches when working with young people (Alim, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Although the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy has shifted and evolved over time (for better or for worse), teachers still struggle to adopt the framework (Iv, 2017). Many still erroneously assume that to be culturally relevant is to only acknowledge students' cultural and ethnic holidays and popular culture (Irvine, 2010) or that the adoption of this framework requires one to identify with and be a member of their students' community (Milner, 2011). In a literature review about culturally relevant pedagogy, studies found that race—and addressing racism—was often missing in the curriculum (Young, 2010; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Iv, 2017). When race is centered—alongside sex, gender, class, and other social identities—teachers can move away from just inserting one or two lessons about these pockets of intersectionality into the curriculum. Instead, they can address them throughout the school year. In doing so, teachers are not merely adding to the “gap in knowledge” but rather “disrupt[ing] the knowledge that is already there” (Kumashiro, 2001, p. 34). And while educators must be open to the different modes that young people use to engage with their culture and language, practices must be selected with care and intention. Hip hop pedagogy may be useful for some communities to reclaim culture and disrupt white supremacy (Alim, 2009), but it should not be adopted by teachers merely in an attempt to “‘motivate’ ‘poor,’ ‘urban,’ and ‘at-risk’ students” (Ladson-Billings, 2017).

The evolution of culturally relevant pedagogy—and the way it has been taken up and interpreted—has inspired other frameworks to emerge and informed them along the way in an effort to be more purposeful about whose culture should have relevance in the classroom, including culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Gay, 2002; Paris, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Building on the strength-based approach of culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogies sought to incorporate the

multiculturalism of youth, especially that of Black and Indigenous youth whose lives, communities, and cultures have been systematically and intentionally excluded and harmed within education (Mensah, 2021). Increasingly, these frameworks have also taken on a more politically active approach to disrupting systems of oppression. Culturally sustaining pedagogy's offer of "loving critique" argues that it is not enough to normalize the learning, experiences, and culture of PGM and systemically excluded students; we must actively work to sustain them, which in turn disrupts white supremacy (Alim et al., 2020; Freidus, 2020). In doing so, culturally sustaining pedagogy emphasizes the importance of recentering and revitalizing the language, cultures, and lifeways of young people across multiple learning spaces by divesting them of whiteness and settler logic. Recentering and revitalizing language and culture is a practice that has occurred and been documented in various communities, where students, families, and educators collaborate on the best ways to approach it. These different approaches vary depending on the context, but snapshots of culturally sustaining pedagogy have included the different ways Indigenous mothers pass down knowledge to their children at home; teachers providing opportunities for students to translanguage in the classroom; and students tackling and addressing systemic oppression through theater and art-based pedagogy (Irizarry, 2017; Wong & Peña, 2017; San Pedro, 2021). Centering relational responsibility when carrying out the work of sustaining means we must take the work a step further and rethink the ways we engage and connect with one another as humans (Paris, 2011) and with the land we are on (Smith et al., 2018; Paris, 2021).

Racism remains deeply embedded in our society and education. Deficit language, the devaluing of cultural assets, and assimilationist beliefs in an effort to maintain the status quo are still ongoing. But young people are resourceful and continue to find new ways to challenge and

disrupt these phenomena while maintaining connections and roots to their heritage. As young people continue to engage with multiple forms of intersectionality while navigating power structures, these pedagogical frameworks have expanded to include the “cross-pollinating” of dis/ability, socioeconomic class (specifically in relation to capitalism), gender and sexual identities, the immigrant and refugee status of youth, and other forms of social and political identities across learning spaces (Waitoller & Thorius, 2016; Alim et al., 2017; Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2018; Harkins Monaco et al., 2022). Our white, enslaving, land-thieving Founding Fathers may have believed that social responsibility and civic engagement should only be taught to the brightest white, male students, but young people from all backgrounds and cultures have always sought knowledge about and exercised their civic and communal responsibilities within and far beyond education. In the next section, I provide this historical context with respect to HMoob students and communities.

### ***The Mis-Education of the HMoob*<sup>15</sup>**

When HMoob people first came to the United States in 1975, public schools viewed HMoob students as “illiterate” because they did not read or write according to white supremacy standards since many didn’t have the opportunity to attend formal academic institutions. Placed into English Second Language (ESL) classes, HMoob students were isolated from other students in an attempt to assimilate them. Even within integrated school systems, HMoob students were viewed as academically poor and not college material, so public school administrators did feel it was important for HMoob students to receive their diplomas, but for the purpose of entering the workforce to do manual labor as opposed to entering the realm of higher education (Vang, 2005).

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<sup>15</sup> The naming of this section comes from Dr. Kaozong Mouavangsou’s work with HMoob youth who experienced imperialist and assimilationist education. She describes this violence as the *Mis-Education of the HMoob*, which itself uses the theoretical framing of and pays homage to the work of Dr. Carter G. Woodson’s 1933 book, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*.

The first wave of HMoob refugee students were subjected to literacy tests—both in refugee camps and in schools—in an effort to prepare them for American “civilization,” often being described as “non-literates.” These tests usually assessed their writing and reading performance in English (Downing & Olney, 1981) and ignored the ways HMoob people, as I will further describe and enact throughout this dissertation, historically practiced other forms of literacy through dab neeg,<sup>16</sup> kwv txhiaj,<sup>17</sup> tshuab nplooj,<sup>18</sup> tshuab qeej,<sup>19</sup> and other forms of whistle language (Vang, 2018).

Education is still intentionally weaponized by teachers as a tool for American imperialism to further assimilate HMoob students, especially when instilling American citizenship, beliefs, and patriotism. Mouavangsou (2016) argues that this intentional “mis-education of the HMoob” is meant to create division within the HMoob community by pitting first and second generation HMoob refugees and immigrants against second and third generation HMoob Americans. When it comes to studying the history of the Secret War in particular, one will find that crucial anecdotes about the HMoob people’s role in assisting the United States military by navigating the harsh jungle terrain and participating in guerilla warfare remain obscure, incomplete, or have been erased altogether. The truth is that the HMoob people were used to justify the United States’ involvement in the Secret War, as they were labeled “primitive” people who needed to be saved. While Elders continue to pass down these oral wartime stories, young HMoob students often find these stories contradict those they learn at school (Mouavangsou, 2016).

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<sup>16</sup> Translation: “Folk stories.” Pronunciation: DA neng.

<sup>17</sup> Traditional form of oral HMoob poetry. Pronunciation: koo ZIA.

<sup>18</sup> Translation: “Leaf blowing.” Pronunciation: CHUA blong

<sup>19</sup> Instrumental storytelling by playing the qeej, a HMoob wind instrument. Pronunciation: CHUA keng.

The few times that HMoob students are included in discourses about education, we are often discussed in deficit language that positions us as “counternarratives” to the model minority myth (Lee, 2007; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Moua, 2009), because while Asian culture is synonymous with model minority success, HMoob culture is blamed for not “allowing” HMoob students to fully assimilate into white-cisgender-heterosexual-patriarchal culture (DePouw, 2012). Although HMoob students view education as an opportunity to mobilize socially and economically (Goldstein, 1988), we still get blamed for our schools’ lack of support and our teachers’ lack of cultural competence. In a 2003 essay by HMoob scholar Christopher Thao Vang, HMoob students were described using the following language:

1. “Hmong students have a tendency not to ask for help and are likely to not voice academic problems because they feel that teachers, as authority figures, should not be bothered. They also feel that their actions could be considered intrusive and disrespectful. Asking for help can be humiliating.
2. Most Hmong students are culturally reserved and sometimes appear to be passive-obedient and compliant. They just wanted to go along with the flow because they are shy and want to show respect to others.
3. Some Hmong students isolate themselves socially and academically from other student groups. It is [important] that Hmong students learn how to develop dependent and independent study skills needed for academic success.
4. Some Hmong students may deny they have difficulties in school because they do not like making mistakes; failure brings [shame] and humiliation to their families. Hmong students should know that mistakes and failure are part of a learning process. These inadequacies may easily depress feelings and put Hmong students in a fight-or-flight mindset.
5. Some Hmong students may appear academically competent but may not be competent cognitively or may be poorly prepared. Oral proficiency in English may not be sufficient for academic success.
6. Many Hmong students lack academic background and academic support at home since most parents are illiterate in English and in Hmong. Students may feel helpless and hopeless, and school may become unimportant to them. Academic barriers can lead to [dropping out of school].
7. Some Hmong students are unmotivated toward school activities because they do not have support boosting their efforts and self-esteem. They do not see themselves as heroes, but loners.
8. Many Hmong students struggle in English, math, science, and social studies classes because they lack study skills, language capabilities, and [academic] support. Their

reluctance to articulate these problems to teachers could be due to [the fact] that teachers will consider them less intelligent.

9. Many Hmong students rarely express their feelings, thoughts, [opinions], and concerns in class because they have learned not to question adults and authority figures.
10. Only a few Hmong students are assertive enough to advocate for their needs; however, many of them are silent students and sit in the back of the class. Silent students often fall through the cracks, failing to acquire academic skills.” (Vang 2003).”

Vang went on to praise teachers as authority figures who “should be aware that Hmong students may be a bit slower in responding to a question or trying to make a point and should encourage them to speak up and share their perspectives in class” (Vang, 2003, p. 14). He continued to frame teachers as saviors who should guide HMoob students’ assimilation in order to achieve academic, social, and behavioral success.

While I agree that teachers can be important mentors and influences in a student’s life—I myself have credited teachers for their enormous impact on my life—Vang’s blame on HMoob students and our culture as deficient while ignoring the history of racism in our educational system is deeply flawed. Instead of analyzing the ways HMoob students’ cultural assets are being depleted through assimilationist ideologies, he instead infers that our culture inhibits us from fully participating academically and socially, and that teachers should facilitate our assimilation. This idea frames HMoob students and our culture as pathological in an attempt to obscure the ways race and racism within our education is violent against HMoob and other refugee and immigrant youth (DePouw, 2012). Success, for example, is often attributed to our English language ability, participation in higher levels of education, and status in higher education (Xiong, 2012) instead of the ways HMoob students navigate racism at school to survive and thrive. Studies about second-generation HMoob students continue to heighten damaging discourses, especially when it comes to truancy, dropout rates, delinquency, gang involvement, and intergenerational conflict (Ngo & Lee, 2014).

Additionally, HMoob parents are often framed as inhibitors to their children’s successful

assimilation in schools. Like their children, HMoob parents stress the importance of obtaining college degrees. However, family obligations for HMoob students remain a critical issue, creating tension among the students' different priorities (Lor, 2017). Children are still expected to come home after school, and daughters are to complete domestic chores, which can limit opportunities to participate in after-school clubs or community-based organizations (Lee, 2001). Older siblings are expected to take care of and help raise their younger siblings, especially if both parents are working. What the expectations for HMoob children are is something educators need to be aware of to better support students, especially since it may clash with students wanting to do an afterschool activity. This clash of priorities is the result of an intergenerational misunderstanding, not HMoob culture deliberately keeping children from their studies and social experiences, which is often how it is framed (Bahrassa et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Additionally, a student's socioeconomic status may require them to step up to be the caretaker while both parents are working. Because of this, teachers tend to view HMoob parents as "deficient" because they do not attend school conferences or participate in Parent-Teacher Organizations (PTOs). These deficit assumptions have led some HMoob students to believe that our parents do not care about our education compared to white parents, who are more involved in PTOs (Adler, 2004). These framings ignore the fact that schools do not provide HMoob interpreters, which is something that limits parents' participation and even their understanding of how the school system works. This means the bulk of translating often falls on HMoob students to translate for our parents (Rick & Forward, 1992); HMoob interpreters are still unavailable in many schools with a large population of HMoob students (Tibbet, 2014). These studies also do not take into consideration the ways PTO involvement and other after-school activities do not provide flexibility for working HMoob parents, whose work hours may not align with these

events. This “clash” between trying to uphold the cultural values taught by parents and becoming “Americanized” by socializing in schools remains a conflict between HMoob students and their parents and acculturation in HMoob students is still the topic most widely studied by scholars (Lee, 2002; Su et al., 2005; Lee et al., 2009; Bahrassa et al., 2012; Her, 2014).

Strength- and asset-based research about HMoob students has sought to reframe us as organizers and cultural leaders. This research analyzes the ways HMoob students organize with one another and across communities to sustain our language, culture, and lifeways. At a West Coast university in the United States, when HMoob students felt that their racial identity was being used to further the institution’s diversity agenda without any support for or input from them, they organized to raise awareness about the issue. Not only did they curate cultural and social events to challenge stereotypes about their community, but they also conducted community outreach and coalition building for cross-ethnic and racial solidarity. When HMoob students requested their university implement a Hmong Studies curriculum and were denied, they organized and executed a one-unit course on the history of the HMoob experience for themselves and others (Vue, 2021). Similar stories of collective mobilization and disrupting white supremacy appear across multiple locations throughout the Midwest as well (Ngo, 2015; Pha, 2020). These stories demonstrate the ways HMoob students disrupt institutionalized racism and build coalitions with various communities to protect ourselves because the United States’ education system does not prioritize our well-being.

Instead of demanding that HMoob students accept assimilation as the only way to be “successful,” educators and scholars need to consider the ways that different generations of HMoob students of varying citizenship statuses experience a heterogeneity of cultural experiences instead of just essentializing a culture as pathological (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Educational policies, pedagogy, and practices need to take into consideration how to incorporate HMoob culture into the curriculum so that we feel seen and validated, and so assimilationist ideologies that continue to harm HMoob students are disrupted (Mouavangsou, 2012).

### *In Search of Supportive Spaces*

Educational institutions are not only detrimental to young people's racial identities and development; they also harm gender and sexually diverse youth, including queer and trans HMoob youth who are navigating their racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities. Scholarship focused on queer and trans students within the K–12 curriculum disproportionately centers white students' experiences. Although studies focusing on the experiences of queer Black and Latinx students have emerged in the last decade (Brockenbrough, 2016), very few include Asian Americans (Narui, 2011). The misconception that PGM folks cannot be queer contributes to the invisibility of queer and trans Asian Americans (Weitz, 2015). Since there is limited research on queer and trans HMoob youth, my literature review draws from the wider queer and PGM literatures to inform the conceptualization and framing of this project.

Discourses on queer students in school often pivot their focus on bullying and victimization (Kosciw et al., 2012). This is because half of students who report being bullied identify as queer (Wiest et al., 2016; Robinson & Espelage, 2012). They tend to experience verbal harassment, physical abuse, and cyberbullying (Bidell, 2016). Transgender youth are considered more vulnerable because of their gender identification, with many having experienced transphobic remarks and/or misgendering (Kosciw et al., 2012). School policies also contribute to the marginalization of transgender students by refusing to allow them to use their correct names and pronouns, forcing them to use restrooms and lockers inconsistent with their gender identity, and preventing them from wearing clothes that correspond with their gender expression

(Sadowski, 2016). Queer and trans students are reluctant to report their bullies to staff, citing repeated lack of intervention and consequences (Bidell, 2016). Studies found that even school personnel have participated in and/or perpetuated bullying by using biased language, victim blaming, minimizing bullying as “kids will be kids,” and/or outing “closeted” students to their parents (Pritchard, 2013; Blackburn & McCready, 2009). Additionally, classroom teachers are resistant to teaching about LGBTQ+ topics, equating them to sex and thus deeming them inappropriate for school in general (Mason, 2008) or confining these topics to something considered more appropriate, like a health class (Thein, 2013). But health classes in schools have yet to include (positive) queer relationships and sexual practices in their curriculum (Donovan & Hester, 2008). In a survey for high school students across the United States, only 12% said their sex education class covered same-sex relationships (Jones & Cox, 2015), while less than 5% said it included positive representations (Kosciw et al., 2013).

The voices of queer and trans youth and their experiences with bullying are crucial in understanding ways to best support them. Additionally, we must acknowledge the ways in which systemic structures (curriculum, practices, and educational policies) perpetuate and enable harm and violence inflicted upon queer and trans students and thus continually push them out. In response to the growing visibility of queer youth and in hopes of providing a safe space for them, there has been a rise in GSAs in schools. Usually advised by staff, students participate in social activities, discuss their identities and sexualities, and form friendships and allyships. Some are even political and engage in protesting against policies that threaten their communities. In schools where GSAs are present, queer students report feeling safer and feeling a better sense of belonging. There is also an increase in attendance and school involvement, as well as staff providing more advocacy and intervention against bullying (Bidell, 2016).

Although GSAs provide a safe space for some, not all queer and trans students find them accessible. This is particularly true for queer and trans PGM youth, who may be seeking support that addresses the ways racism, sexism/genderism, and heterosexism impact one another (Pritchard 2013; Ocampo & Soodjinda, 2015; Kean, 2020). In his study with queer Black students, McCready (2004) learned that they do not participate in GSAs or similar after-school clubs because of its predominantly white, cis-women membership. The lack of cultural competence and sustenance in schools might explain why queer and trans PGM students—including HMoob youth—tend to prefer out-of-school spaces and/or online peer support groups instead, where they feel safer to discuss topics that speak to their intersectional identity and cultural heritage. Community-based organizations (CBOs) have been instrumental in supporting PGM students’ identity development and exploration. Citing the CBO’s curriculum and staff as diverse and supportive (McCready, 2004), parents of PGM students are also critical of how the lack of racial identity inclusion in school curriculum, disproportionate surveillance of PGM students, and cultural incompetence of school staff creates a hostile (un)learning environment (Yull et al., 2014). When utilized effectively, CBOs can and are able to broker a relationship between schools and PGM communities (Wong, 2010; Baldrige, 2014). In using a culturally relevant pedagogy, CBOs have been able to interrupt “patterns of educational inequity and continue to do so under the current educational policy climate” by advocating for PGM families (Baldrige et al., 2017, p. 381).

Shades of Yellow (SOY) was an informal social support group formed in 2003 by two HMoob American gay men Phia Xiong and Xeng Lor in St. Paul, MN. Meetings were held over “potluck dinner, a volleyball picnic, or a casual meeting over coffee” (“Shades of Yellow,” 2017), even after they became formally incorporated in 2006. SOY’s mission was “to cultivate a

community of empowered HMoob LGBTQ and allies to challenge what we've known and ignite positive cultural and social change,” with a vision where “HMoob LGBTQ and allies are liberated and celebrated for who we are” (“Shades of Yellow,” 2017). The group organized a variety of events for their members that challenged the contemporary HMoob understanding of gender and sexuality. This included celebrating Pride Fest with a picnic, organizing an annual New Year’s party, and curating a drag show. They also hosted a recurring community dialogue called *SOY Stories*. In response to the fluidity of their members’ gender identities, gender-neutral pronouns were used during their pageant contest, and it was at the 2011 New Year Celebration that the first transgender beauty queen, Summer Thao, was crowned (Pha, 2017). These events were also instrumental in brokering a conversation about queerness between Elders and young people (Glover, 2018). One SOY member called attention to the fact that SOY was one of the few spaces of refuge: “[My friends and I] have to be ‘straight’ at school and only feel comfortable being ‘out’ when we have SOY meetings in my apartment or at a [gay] friend’s house” (Mayo, 2013, p. 86).

During the political battle to legalize same-sex marriage, Minnesota was one of the states where a ballot initiative, 2012 Minnesota Amendment 1, sought to establish the definition of marriage as being between one man and one woman (Pha, 2019). Members of SOY organized with the MidWest Solidarity Movement (MWSM), a collective of Southeast Asian LGBTQ+ community organizers, to defeat Amendment 1. When it was struck down on Election Day on November 6, 2012, in Minnesota, a celebration was held at the state capitol in St. Paul on November 8, 2012. It featured one of the founders of MWSM, HMoob activist Chong Lor, as a speaker, who expressed gratitude to the organizations that helped make it happen: “Working with Minnesotans United for All Families has allowed me to take that personal narrative and turn it

into radical action. With the tools of community organizing, I was able to work in my Hmong community to mobilize them to take action against this hurtful amendment, which was led by Hmong LGBTQ leaders at the forefront of this Hmong political landscape” (Pha, 2019, p. 261).

With the rise of social media, many queer and trans students have also sought support in digital spaces to build communities, learn more about themselves, and socialize with those who share their identities (Paradise, 2016; Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017; Erlick, 2018). Tumblr is especially known for its thriving queer community (Zamanian, 2014). PGM youth deem Tumblr safer to be out on compared to other social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter due to Tumblr’s anonymity (Cho, 2018). Facebook and Twitter have been known to out queer and trans individuals by suggesting known people for users to add and facilitating family members stalking one another (Miller, 2017; Cho, 2018). These two features of social media are particularly distressing for queer and trans youth, and unfortunately, even websites aside from these platforms where queer and trans youth come together pose similar, and perhaps even worse, threats due to the fact that bigoted people target these online spaces. In his work with queer HMoob men, Mayo (2013) documented the experiences of two queer HMoob users on the website HmoobBlog.com who faced threats of violence and physical harm from local HMoob users from their schools. They feared that their identities would be found and outed to the HMoob community. Nevertheless, there continues to be a growing active queer and trans HMoob community online, especially on Facebook. The different responses from queer and trans HMoob youth when faced with racism and heterosexism was what inspired me to theorize the framework *Menyuam Laib*,<sup>20</sup> which will assist us in understanding the different practices they enact when up against white supremacy.

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<sup>20</sup> Translation: Gangster youth. Pronunciation: meh-NYUA LAI.

## Theorizing Menyuum Laib

In 2013, after much internal debate with myself, I made the major decision to shave one side of my head while leaving the other shoulder length. It was a daring and risky move that invited in (unsolicited) criticism from my Elders. In HMoob culture, long black hair is a sign of femininity, beauty, and innocence, which in turn speaks to the person's respectability (Xiong, L., 2018). To go against such standards was not only an act of defiance but also a rejection of HMoob conformity. My desire to shave one side of my head was for personal reasons: 1) to break free from the traditional mold of what makes HMoob women "respectable", and 2) to align my gender expression with how I was feeling internally. I had always known I was queer, even back in high school, but it was in college that I was able to truly explore my queer identity openly without fear or shame. Shaving one side of my head was my first open attempt at this embrace, especially as I began to lean more towards identifying as nonbinary and using they/them pronouns. I felt having one side shaved gave me the confidence to explore what being androgynous could look like for someone like me.

When I returned home that year for the holidays and Niam saw my hair, to no one's surprise, she criticized me for going against the traditional beauty standards of a HMoob woman and presenting myself as a menyuum laib, a gangster. "Koj twb mus kawm ntawv siab es ua cas koj tseem yuav txiav koj cov plaub hau li ib tug menyuum laib thiab?" she protested. "Leej twg yuav qhuas koj lawm no?" *[You have a high educational background. Why would you cut your hair like a gangster? Who will respect you now?]*

"Niam e, txhob txhawj txog kuv os," I responded, and then cheekily added, "Koj tsis hnov lawv hais los, 'menyuum laib ua laib' ne." *[Oh mom, don't worry about me. Didn't you hear them say that 'gangster youth can do it'?]*. After I said that phrase to Niam, she lost her

patience with me and walked away, all while muttering about how I'd put my respectable future in jeopardy.

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“Menyuam laib ua laib” [*Gangster youth can do it*] is a reclamation statement used by the younger HMoob generation whenever Elders criticize us, especially over things they do not approve of. Whether it is the clothes we wear, the hair we choose for ourselves, or the actions we take in pursuing our dreams, if any of it is disapproved of by the Elders or challenges traditional values, they call us “menyuam laib” or similarly gendered terms like “poj laib” (gangster/bad woman) and “thaub laib” (gangster/bad man), even if the things we are doing have nothing to do with being in gangs or criminal activities (such as me shaving one side of my head). It was this shared experience with other HMoob youth that influenced me to theorize and name my learning with queer and trans HMoob youth as “Menyuam Laib” to honor those who are not afraid to challenge and unsettle knowledge, traditions, and practices.

A theory of Menyuam Laib was conceptualized from theories that were formed by three particular Elders, who theorized within critical Hmong studies, queer studies, and educational theory. Their theories are: Dr. Ma Vang's *History on the Run*, which problematizes the ways deficit ontological framings of HMoob people continue to have negative repercussions for our HMoob community and how we are reclaiming our narratives through “fugitive” practices (Vang, 2021); Dr. Kong Pheng Pha's work around queer refugeeism, which analyzes the way “refugee” status impacts racial, gender, and sexual formations, as well as belonging and politics specifically for queer and trans HMoob refugee communities in the United States (Pha, 2017); and Dr. Django Paris's culturally sustaining pedagogy, which argues that schools and educators should sustain the languages, literacies, and cultural practices of Black, Indigenous, Latinx,

Asian and Pacific Islander communities (Paris & Alim, 2017). Additionally, a theory of Menyuam Laib was also inspired by HMoob youth's reclamation of pejorative language that has been used to subjugate and undermine them. Together, these four sources of inspiration informed my theory, Menyuam Laib, which will deepen our theorizing and understanding of HMoob epistemologies and sociopolitical movements, especially the different ways queer and trans HMoob youth take it upon themselves to sustain and transform their language and culture.

### *A People on the Run*

The first framework, History on the Run, examines how HMoob refugees carry their history with them in ways that are unrecognizable to the United States' government and military and thus cannot be traditionally archived. As a people whose sovereignty is not tied to any nation-state, HMoob people are "fugitives" since we have always been "on the run" owing to colonialism and land displacement. The development of a traditional writing system perhaps would not have been possible or was lost while fleeing persecution. This means that written records of HMoob people are sparse. However, while our history may have bypassed traditional archiving, our oral stories passed down from generation to generation continue to "track the presence of Hmong refugee epistemologies" across time and geographical borders (Vang, 2021, p. 4).

Unfortunately, white supremacy worships the written word (Jones & Okun, 2001), which contrasts HMoob people's oral culture (Lo & Pha, 2018). Therefore, most written accounts occurred after HMoob people encountered French colonialism in the 1950s and began soldiering for the United States military during the Secret War. These encounters—coupled with HMoob people's exodus from Laos to Thailand and to the United States after the Secret War—are often positioned as the "beginning" of "modern" HMoob history retelling by non-HMoob scholars,

whose early anthropology work influenced the way HMoob people are positioned ontologically by outsiders (Lee, 1998). Being a stateless ethnic minority group, refugees, and Indigenous people racialized as Asian (American) impacted the ways HMoob people were constructed. By the time HMoob people came to the United States as refugees, our culture was seen as primitive and premodern because of the lack of opportunities and access to formal education back in Southeast Asia. Our oral culture was seen as a deficit since it meant we did not read or write according to western standards (Faller, 1985). This view was weaponized to create ongoing stereotypes and the romanticization of needing to bring a “primitive” population into the “modern” period (Lee, 2002; Vang, 2012). Because HMoob people’s role in the Secret War was kept a secret—hence the name—many HMoob veterans and refugees could not apply for veteran status and/or medical benefits since their names had been either redacted from official documents or not recorded in the first place. They were also not allowed to give formal interviews discussing their roles and experiences in the war. This forced silence further erased our roles and rendered us as passive “premodern” subjects.

To push back on these deficit narratives and inaccurate depictions that illustrate us and our culture as “primitive” and “barbaric” while elevating the United States’ government as justified “saviors,” HMoob people engaged in “fugitive” practices to pass down our history, experiences, and roles in the Secret War. These practices are described as “fugitive” according to Vang because they directly challenge the United States government’s definition of “official” documents and constructed narrative of us. Instead of formal interviews and written records, for example, HMoob people use dab neeg and textile work such as paj ntaub<sup>21</sup>—like what we used to do in the past to carry our history with us—to challenge and disrupt the nation-state’s deficit

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<sup>21</sup> Flower storycloth. Pronunciation: BA dao.

and white-savior narrative (Vang, 2021). These works continue to challenge the “official knowledge” of the curriculum used in schools during a time when Critical Race Theory is being acknowledged and the history of race and racism is being confronted (Harrison & Brinegar, 2021; López et al., 2021).

### *Living in the Legacy of the Secret War*

The intersection of race, gender, and sexuality further exacerbates negative stereotypes for the queer and trans HMoob community. Because HMoob men soldiered for the United States’ military as proxy, they are viewed as “perpetual warriors” who are naturally aggressive (Schein & Thoj, 2011) while HMoob women are framed as both unintelligent “victims” of an oppressive culture and lazy “welfare queens” (Lee, 2001; Lee, 2004; Vang et al., 2016). Different cultural practices—such as polygyny and having a large family—and religious beliefs—such as shamanism and animism—were also in direct contradiction with white, middle-class Americans’ understanding of sex, kinship, and Christian values and were used to further negative stereotypes. These stereotypes—along with the lack of translatable queer nomenclatures in the HMoob language—have been weaponized by academics and the media to create tragic stories about the queer and trans HMoob community that affirm homonationalist discourses that posits HMoob culture as too primitive, therefore inhibiting queer and trans HMoob individuals from fully participating in or assimilating into queer culture and community in the United States (Pha, 2017). These assumptions ignored the fact that the queer and trans HMoob community and culture have existed and thrived for years prior to our exodus, even if we were not visible and didn’t have nomenclatures for these identities (Yang, 2008).

Queer refugeeism recognizes the ways the (imagined) experiences of queer and trans refugees are discussed in binary terms (Held, 2022). This harmful oversimplification pits the

cultures and practices of the refugee’s country of origin against the host country—with the former being oppressive, heterosexist, miserable, discouraging of visibility, unsafe, and violent, and the latter being liberating, LGBTQ+ tolerant, a place of happiness, encouraging of visibility, safe, and kind (McGuirk, 2018; Saleh, 2020). As discussed in the previous tracks, HMoob people’s understanding marriage, kinship, and gender roles and responsibilities contradict white, middle-class, Christian values. Thus, HMoob practices and customs are cited as examples of abuse towards HMoob women and the queer and trans HMoob community by framing HMoob culture as inferior to white, middle-class, Christian culture. Queer refugeeism, thus, examines how “refugee” status has social, political, and legal dimensions and how these dimensions have influenced racial, gender, and sexual formations within the host country (Held, 2022). While second and third generation queer and trans HMoob youth may not identify as refugees or immigrants like their first and 1.5 generation counterparts (Vang, 2010), they are still descendants of refugees and living in the legacy of the United States’ Secret War. HMoob youth continues to engage in political movements and oppositions to anti-immigration and deportation laws and policies, including protesting the deportation of Southeast Asian refugees (Pha, 2020). Queer refugeeism, therefore, considers how “refugee” status impacts queer and trans HMoob youth to contest and resist the perpetual victimhood stereotype and its stigma while their understanding of socio-politics and citizenship influence how they remake culture and belonging within HMoob diaspora on their own terms (Pha, 2017).

### *Youth as Cultural Reworkers*

Across different learning spaces, young people are often described as “future” and “aspirational” leaders (Moya, 2017); however, culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) reframes them as *cultural reworkers* who are already confronting and re/defining their language, cultures,

and lifeways (Paris & Alim, 2017). The increasingly pluralistic nature and global interconnectedness of communities and cultures have provided new ways for youth to locate themselves and interact with each other, as well as re/define their cultural consumptions (Alim, 2009). When educators implement a curriculum that centers youth's frame of reference, their current lived realities and languages, especially those of PGM students, they feel empowered to tap into their funds of knowledge (Stevens, 2016) and are more willing to engage authentically with classroom materials (Irizarry, 2017). On the other hand, CSP also reminds us to pause and reflect while we are engaging in cultural consumptions and re/production to not propagate inequities and other forms of exclusion (Paris & Alim, 2017).

The problem is that nation-state schools' curricula and practices are still rooted in assimilationist and imperialist beliefs that seek to transform refugee and immigrant youth from "outsiders" into citizens of the host nation (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2018). When HMoob students first enrolled in school, they were isolated and placed into ESL classes (Vang, 2005). The purpose of these classes was to instill in young HMoob children white, middle-class American values, language, and citizenship (Inui, 1998; Ngo, 2013). As a deterritorialized subject, however, the HMoob people's understanding of home, community, and belonging is forged transnationally by a "collective identity based on memories of a shared past" rather than in relation to a physical homeland or nation-state (Vang, 2010, p. 3), even if some of these nation-state may be named or alluded to within our dab neeg. The increased access to and connectedness because of the internet and social media platforms throughout the HMoob diaspora—particularly the United States, France, Laos, and Thailand—continue to fuel a collective transnational and global sense of identity and community among the younger generations who are living in the legacy of the Secret War (Lee, 2006; Rios & Watkins, 2015;

Pha, 2017). CSP reminds us that as refugee and immigrant youth continue to engage in global cultural re/productions and community building, educators need to recognize and engage students' transnational knowledge and experiences to prepare them to engage with a globalized world (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2018).

### ***Reclaiming Menyuum Laib***

Because this theorizing drew from HMoob youth's reclamation of the term "menyuum laib," it's important to understand what this term means within the context of HMoob language and culture. The first word "menyuum" can be understood as "child(ren)," "young person(s)" or "youth" in the HMoob language. HMoob people's understanding of youth is not bound by age. Instead, young people are conceptualized as those who "generally have not married and/or [are] considered too young to be taken seriously in their understandings of 'Hmong culture'" (Pha, 2017, p. 36). Therefore, "menyuum" can also be used pejoratively to describe young people who Elders view as "immature" and "ignorant" of HMoob culture and practices since the rite of passage into HMoob adulthood is often marriage, which would require you to step up and begin learning about HMoob culture and traditions. So, even though I was only a few years older than the Menyuum Laib whom I was seeking to learn from, my role as a doctoral candidate and researcher at an R1 university meant that the Menyuum Laib often treated me with the same respect as they do Elders because I was learned about HMoob culture and traditions, spoke HMoob with more fluency, and was seen as a knowledgeable scholar, even though two of the Menyuum Laib were graduate students themselves. Additionally, shortly after we began our journey, I also became pregnant and later gave birth. This meant that even though I was not married, my pregnancy meant that they also saw me as an Elder because I was no longer a "menyuum" by having a menyuum myself. The use of "Menyuum" in naming the theory is

linked to CSP's reframing of youth as cultural reworkers to push back against these deficit assumptions and instead, pivots young people as leaders and central collaborators of their movements (Paris, 2021). This means listening to and respecting the ways HMoob youth use language, engage with and question their culture, and rework culture on their own terms to contribute to HMoob diaspora (Pha, 2017), while practicing critical reflexivity to not reproduce hegemonic harm and violence (Paris, 2021).

The second word, "laib," has multiple meanings within the HMoob community. It can be loosely understood and translated as an adjective to describe a person being "bad" or doing "bad" things by HMoob standards. It can also be translated as a noun to denote a "gangster," "fugitive," or "criminal," although one does not necessarily have to be part of a gang or have a criminal background to be labeled a "menyuam laib" ("gangster youth") in HMoob community. The inclusion of "laib" in the naming of the theory was informed by the Elders who undermine young people when their actions do not align with what Elders deem as "respectable." It was also informed by history on the run's conceptualization of HMoob people as fugitives. When the first wave of HMoob refugees came to the United States, there were racial tensions in the neighborhoods they were living in. HMoob gangs were started in response to these racial tensions for protection and belonging, as well as to resolve the cultural and identity conflicts experienced by predominantly Asian youth (Xiong, 2002; Lee, 2020). HMoob and Asian youth, especially those who are refugees and immigrants, are often expected to code-switch and perform differently when crossing racial and cultural boundaries. While American values encourage independence and individualism, HMoob culture practices "filial piety," the "Confucian ideology that places emphasis on [...] respect for the elderly, and subordination to the father and parental care" (Lor, 2017, p. 3). This phenomenon creates "a sense of duty" for the

younger generations to “assist others and to take into account the needs and wishes of the family [first] when making decisions” (Lor, 2017, p. 2). This emphasis on family, kinship, and familial ties is still integral to many families that are part of the Asian diaspora, including HMoob people in the United States (Ngo, 2012a).

When trying to navigate different expectations, HMoob and Asian youth may seek out spaces that provide comfort to alleviate these tensions, including gangs (Lee, 2020). A theory of *Menyuam Laib* neither glorifies nor romanticizes gang involvement; however, it does acknowledge the ways HMoob youth have historically organized and sought out peer support groups for themselves in order to address racial, ethnic, and cultural tensions (Lo, 2018) and uses this historical framing to understand the ways queer and trans HMoob youth seek protection and belonging as they navigate racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities and formations.

Additionally, people who have taken up non-traditional practices or lifestyle choices have been disparaged and treated as either a “*poj laib*” (“bad woman”) or “*yawg laib*” (“bad man”). Me shaving one side of my head is one example of this; another example would be choosing a career that is considered “non-traditional” such as singing, or engaging in practices that is considered “non-normative” such remaining unmarried. These choices in particular are often ridiculed by Elders in the same way they would a gangster (Her, 2017), though HMoob women receive the bulk of these criticisms and social isolation (Lopez, 2021). A theory of *Menyuam Laib* recognizes how queer and trans HMoob youth’s expansion of gender identities and

expressions, sexualities, and same-sex relationships and sexual practices are pathologized as “menyuam laib.” That is because our queer bodies and “non-normative” movements challenge and contradict traditional understanding, practices, and respectability. A theory of Menyuam Laib problematizes and rejects this pathological assumption and treatment of queer and trans identities as inherently malicious, deviant, and in tension with HMoob culture (Pha, 2017; Lopez, 2021) by reclaiming queer and trans identity as one of the inherited “fugitive” strengths and assets from our



Figure 3 An event poster from the Southeast Asian Student Union at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay reclaiming the term "laib" (gangster). The event is titled, "Kuv Ua Laib: I Am a Gangster / I Can Do It." (Photo courtesy of Pagnia Xiong.)

ancestors. That is because the word “laib” can also mean “to be able to” or “have the ability to accomplish something” (i.e., “Kuv ua laib” can be translated as “I can do it”). HMoob youth are increasingly reclaiming this definition of “laib” as a form of self-empowerment when their non-traditional journey and practices have been criticized by Elders (see Figure 3). This reclamation is celebrated with the phrase “Menyuam laib ua laib” (Xiong, P., 2018), and a theory of Menyuam Laib recognizes and respects the way young people see themselves and reclaim deficit terms for empowerment. Throughout this dissertation, I will thus call my collaborators Menyuam

Laib to honor their role in destabilizing traditions and norms to make spaces more inclusive and expansive for queer and trans identity.<sup>22</sup>

### *Towards a Theory of Menyulam Laib*

Taken together, the strength-based approaches of history on the run, queer refugeeism, and culturally sustaining pedagogy, and the ways HMoob youth reclaim the term “menyulam laib” for empowerment influenced my theoretical framework, a theory of Menyulam Laib, which I have built from my previous research with queer and trans HMoob youth to analyze and understand the sociopolitical movements of queer and trans HMoob youth. A theory of Menyulam Laib, therefore, describes the different ways queer and trans HMoob youth maintain and transform their language and culture. In their pursuits, they are pathologized as “Menyulam Laib” for what are perceived as non-normative practices. However, a theory of Menyulam Laib reframes and celebrates them as cultural reworkers who transform culture to be more inclusive, disrupt deficit narratives about themselves and their community, destabilize the status quo, and contest white-cisgender-heteronormative-patriarchal violence. Additionally, I argue that since HMoob culture is already cast as “non-normative” through the lens of white, middle-class Christian values, then the “non-normative” practices that Menyulam Laib enact are merely the inherited gifts and extensions of our Elder’s fugitive ones.

Additionally, I recognize that western scholars often treat and claim that the absence of queer nomenclatures in HMoob language as evidence of our heterosexism. I argue that this racist assumption erases the historic and agentic ways queer and trans HMoob folks were already enacting and embodying queerness without labels. I may not have grown up with these particular

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<sup>22</sup> I recognize that while the term “Menyulam Laib” is technically gender-neutral, it is most commonly used to describe HMoob men and boys who are part of gangs. I intentionally reclaim this term within this dissertation to be inclusive of our trans siblings, whose self-identification extends beyond gender binarism. In doing so, I hope to push the boundaries and disrupt preconceived notions of what it means to be a Menyulam Laib.

stories, but dab neeg passed down from parents to children within other HMoob families have included HMoob men and women who never marry (a practice that is considered non-normative) and HMoob women who dressed and “behaved like a man” (Her-Lee, 2006; Yang, 2008). While these dab neeg may not directly name queer identities, relationships, and practices, a theory of Menyulam Laib recognizes how these inherited dab neeg provided a glimpse into the ways queer and trans HMoob individuals possibly negotiated with, navigated, and challenged socio-political norms through their own Menyulam Laib practices in our history. Though scholars attempt to use the word “nkes”—the phonetic spelling of “gay” in the HMoob Romanized Popular Alphabet—to talk about gay and lesbian individuals (Yang, 2008), queer and trans HMoob youth use a variety of words and descriptors for themselves (Pha, 2017; “The Cedar Cultural Center,” 2022; Khan-Schwartz, 2022). A theory of Menyulam Laib respects these diverse forms of self-identification and embraces the belief that the “absence of nomenclature is itself an act of queerness” by living without labels (Pha, 2017, p. 280).

### **Reimagining Queer and Trans HMoob Youth**

It is a disservice to young people to not acknowledge the ways schools and after-school programs have been historically created and run by adults to surveil and control young people, especially children from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Halpern, 2002). Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell declared in their book *The Art of Critical Pedagogy: Possibilities for Moving from Theory to Practice in Urban Schools* that, “Urban schools are not broken; they are doing exactly what they are designed to do” (2008, p. 1). By “actually functioning quite well in a state-sponsored system rooted in White supremacy, settler colonialism, and human subjugation,” schools continue to exert control over young people’s bodies by rewarding those who follow order while punishing those who question authority (Stovall, 2016).

Even though education has shifted and evolved, so have our students. Educators must re-evaluate learning spaces that push out queer and trans PGM students and understand the issues that queer and trans HMoob youth face culturally to create a supportive environment that nurtures their intersectional identities. Knowing the history of racism within the United States' education system and its role in shaping how communities are framed is crucial to understanding why sustaining and reimagining language, culture, and heritage is so important to queer and trans HMoob youth and how they and their allies push back against these deficit discourses. It also helps us to understand the different Menyulam Laib practices queer and trans HMoob youth employ when disrupting deficit knowledge.

In the following track, I talk about how I invited and engaged in a study with a small group of queer and trans HMoob youth. Together, we learned about different Menyulam Laib practices they create, engage with, and participate in to rework culture to be more inclusive, humanize themselves and their community, and disrupt white-cisgender-heteronormative-patriarchal violence.

### TRACK 3

#### PIAV DAB NEEG: METHODOLOGIES ON THE RUN

*“Story as currency. Story as inheritance. Story as legacy. Story as both foundations and scaffolding for the work of lifetimes.”*

– Kao Kalia Yang

#### Introduction

That day, the sun seemed especially hot and intense. A slight breeze rustled the leaves on the trees but did not blow strong enough to cool the beads of sweat that had formed on my forehead and neck. It was summer break, and children were playing outside. I was riding my bike, racing against my siblings and cousins up and down our block. Despite all my efforts to pedal, I came in last and reluctantly had to get off and pass the bike over to one of my cousins. Among my siblings, cousins, and myself, there were about twenty of us playing outside, but only five bikes, so sharing was expected. A drop of sweat ran down my face, and my hair stuck to my skin. I wiped my forehead and fanned myself with my hand.

“I’m gonna go inside and get some water,” I announced to no one in particular. Waving their hands at me carelessly, my siblings and cousins began another round down the block while I made my way towards my house, which was only a few feet away.

Entering the house through the back door to avoid trampling dirt onto the living room’s carpet, I noticed the house seemed oddly quiet and empty even though Niam<sup>23</sup> was home. Usually, she’d be in the living room sewing paj ntaub<sup>24</sup> on the couch while a HMoob-language movie was on in the background. Shrugging this off, I went into the kitchen and reached for a

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<sup>23</sup> Translation: “Mom.” Pronunciation: NEE-uh.

<sup>24</sup> Flower storycloth. Pronunciation: BA dao.

cup to pour myself a glass of water when I heard the sound of someone crying softly. It was an older woman's voice; one I did not recognize. Realizing it was coming from Niam and Txiv's<sup>25</sup> bedroom and seeing that the door was slightly ajar, I tiptoed over and stopped nearby to listen.

"Txij thaum nej ncaim peb mus lawm," the woman was saying through tears, "peb yeej nco nco nej heev os. Rov qab los tuaj xyuas peb thiab nawb mog." *[Ever since you all have left, we missed everyone so much. Please come back and visit us.]*

I peeked inside. Niam was sitting on the bed, facing the large stereo that sat on top of the dressers. An audio cassette tape was playing, and the woman's voice was coming from the tape. She was recalling recent events and even through the tears, I could hear that her voice had the same sing-song quality that Niam often utilized whenever she told dab neeg.<sup>26</sup> It was familiar and comforting, but emotional and heartbreaking when paired with quiet sobs. I watched Niam wipe her tears as the tape came to an end. She sat quietly for a moment, perhaps lost in thought and still thinking about the woman's words and stories, until I interrupted her. Being the child that I was, I bluntly and curiously asked without thinking, "Niam, koj quaj los?" *[Mom, are you crying?]*

Niam jumped at the sight and sound of me but otherwise did not seem upset that I had seen her during a moment of vulnerability and privacy. Niam wasn't an especially affectionate person, so I was surprised when she held her arms out to me. I walked over, and she wrapped me, sweat and all, tightly against her. "Koj tu siab os?" I asked, noticing her red eyes and tear-stained cheeks. I touched her cheek to wipe them away. *[Are you sad?]*

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<sup>25</sup> Translation: "Dad." Pronunciation: TZEE.

<sup>26</sup> Translation: "Folk stories." Pronunciation: DA neng.

Niam chuckled and shook her head, grabbing my hand gently. “Kuv tsis tu siab os, me naib,” she responded, sniffing. “Kuv mloog ib tug phauj piav nws lub neej rau kuv xwb os.” *[I’m not sad, my dear. I’m just listening to an aunt telling me stories about her life to me.]*

I asked why she wasn’t talking to the aunt on the phone instead since it would be much quicker than listening to tapes. Niam explained that doing long-distance calls costed too much, especially when talking to folks overseas in Laos and Thailand, so HMoob people resorted to recording themselves on audio tapes and sending them to loved ones for them to listen to and then respond. Niam and this particular aunt had been sending the same tape back and forth for several years now, recording their responses over each other’s again and again when necessary to save money. Each of the tapes were roughly 30 minutes to an hour long, and the dab neeg they shared ranged from entire life stories to snippets of fond memories, even childhood tales. Sometimes these dab neeg had been sent to Niam because her aunt wanted to ask her about a particular person or topic, but most of the time, these dab neeg were shared freely from Niam’s heart without necessarily following any linear trajectory.

“Kav tsij mus ua si,” Niam said at last, pulling her arms back. She brushed my hair with a smile and gently pushed me towards the door. “Kuv yuav teb tus phauj no os.” *[Go on and play. I am going to respond to this aunt.]*

“Aws, ua li os,” I answered. *[Okay.]* As I got up and made my way towards the door, I looked back. Niam took the tape out of the stereo, flipped it to the other side, and re-inserted it back in. Pressing play and record at the same time, she took a deep breath as if to collect herself and spoke.

“Nyob zoo os, phauj,” she began, her voice in the same sing-song quality, “ntawm nov yog Diav os. Kuv txais tau koj daim kab xev lawm os.” [*Hello my dear aunt. This is Dia. I have received your cassette tape.*]

### **The Role of Dab Neeg in Our (Hi)Stories**

#### ***Stories and Storying Within Indigenous Communities***

I share the above vignette to highlight the ways in which HMoob Elders were able to stay connected and share stories with one another after our exodus from Laos to Thailand and eventually to other parts of the world. Like our history, our dab neeg followed us on the run and were still important aspects of how we shared knowledge (Stevens, 2008; Lee & Tapp, 2010). Further expansion of the diaspora, however, meant that the mode in which these stories got transmitted shifted. Before the advent of social media platforms like YouTube and TikTok, the cassette tape method, like what Niam and her aunt used, was one of the most prominent ways to capture and share music, stories and messages of love with family members who were forced to separate due to the legacy of the Secret War (“Hmong Museum,” 2024). This practice highlights the ways in which stories can be utilized to re/connect with one another across the globe to nourish a community that transcends nation-state geographical borders.

Dab neeg were essential parts of my childhood. Their history, fiction, fables, and allegories serve as cautionary tales to frame our morals and ethics (Jalao, 2001). Dab neeg were also a way for refugees to connect with the land family members were currently on throughout history. As displaced people, the different places and spaces we came from or occupied dictated what we shared, how we shared, and to whom. As Tuck (2015) posits, “In their endurance, stories reinforce connections with people and places and suggest appropriate actions and relationships, including with land” (p. 132). I was especially drawn to stories and storying not

only because of their role in preserving and passing down our traditions, history, and folk stories, but also for their role in locating us across different geographical locations throughout time. Stories are, therefore, a way for Indigenous communities to reclaim their existence, identity, and narratives, since most stories about us are often told by colonizers/settlers (Chan, 2021). Furthermore, HMoob scholar Pa N. Vue (2023) argues that HMoob narratives produced by HMoob youth within the United States go beyond merely describing events that have occurred, as is the case with those of the Elders. These narratives often critique the United States' empire and describe their personal interpretations of their experiences.

When utilizing these stories to create a methodology, it was extremely important that I approached this praxis by grounding it in the four R's of Indigenous postsecondary education: 1) respect for Indigenous students' culture, 2) relevance to Indigenous students' culture, 3) reciprocity to ensure that all those involved in the study could benefit from the knowledge being shared, and 4) responsibility for the well-being of others, especially when it comes to socio-political accountability (Tuck, 2015; Windchief & San Pedro, 2019). Indigenous studies scholar Jo-Ann Archibald (2015) adapted the four R's and applied them to Indigenous "storywork," focusing on respect, reciprocity, responsibility, and reverence. She uses "reverence" instead of "relevance" to "signify a deep respect and honor to stories and their use" (Archibald & Parent, 2019). I apply these same principles to dab neeg, along with the added R of "reverence", whose role in shaping and reshaping HMoob culture, identity, and values continues to be an integral part of HMoob epistemologies. In the next section, I explore the role of dab neeg in our lives today and its role in carrying our history on the run.

### *Between the Living and the Dead*

As a doctoral student, learning to conduct research is one of the top priorities of graduate school. Since day one, I've read about countless methodologies and weighed their strengths and setbacks. I was also fortunate enough to have been invited by my doctoral advisor Dr. Django Paris to learn from educators and leaders in the Tulalip Tribes and experienced first-hand how to do research that is both humanizing and relational (Paris, 2011; Paris & Winn, 2013; Blackburn, 2014). When it came to selecting a methodology for this project, I initially thought of approaching this as a case study framed by Indigenous methodologies, doing semi-structured interviews and focus groups. It wasn't necessarily because I was particularly drawn to these procedures but because these were methodologies that I'd read about extensively, utilized in the past, and felt most comfortable conducting. Case studies are the best fit for projects that are in-depth and multi-faceted since they allow the researcher to understand a complex issue in its real-life context, learn about a unique phenomenon (Crowe et al., 2011), and understand how and why such a phenomenon occurs (Yin, 2003), which was what I was attempting to do with this dissertation. Through interviews, I could remain focused on the topic I am interested in learning more about while the five queer and trans HMoob youth provided meaningful narratives for me to analyze in a casual, informal setting; this allowed me to shape our interview similar to a conversation as opposed to a one-sided questionnaire or survey (Yin, 2009). Additionally, the flexibility of conducting semi-structured interviews allowed the flow of the interview to be authentic and organic according to the narrative of my participant, allowing me to ask questions that generated the information I was searching for as they went along telling their story. It also allowed me to explore concepts or discover information that I had not yet thought of (Gill et al., 2008). However, even though I utilized these tools and approaches, I was not satisfied with merely doing interviews and focus groups to facilitate my learning. There seemed to be

something missing, and this tension unnerved me. I had to step back to reflect on why western research methodologies that have been proven to be (and here I am using this term carefully) effective in the past could not work for this particular project. After pouring over texts that described HMoob culture and practices to see if I was missing anything and talking to Dr. Paris, I was finally able to put my finger on why I was feeling conflicted: semi-structured interviews and focus groups cannot fully capture the potential and power of dab neeg and do them justice because these western methodologies fail to take into account the depth and extent to which dab neeg are intimately woven into HMoob ontology and epistemologies.

While the term can be loosely translated as “folk stories,” as I mentioned above, “dab neeg” is understood as both history and fiction, with no distinction made between the two sometimes. Breaking down the word into its two parts can further help us with understanding its relation to HMoob ontology and epistemologies. “Dab” means “ghost” and “neeg” means “human.” The juxtaposition of these words—literally “ghost human”—is at the core of how the HMoob people view the world: the world of the living is inextricably linked to the world of the dead and, by extension, spiritual beings. As previously discussed in Track 1, my people’s beliefs and practices can be understood within a “cosmological dialogism in which everything means and is understood in relation to a greater cosmology of life and death” (Jalao, 2001, p. 2). To us as HMoob people, the physical and spiritual realms (including the ghosts of those who have passed on) coexist and cannot be divorced from one another. Disrespect to other humans, spirits, or the land can result in losing one’s spirit, which can manifest itself as physical ailments and possibly lead to death. Deep sorrow and dissatisfaction with the events in our lives can also contribute to this loss (Xiong et al, 2004). The only way to remedy this would be to have a

shaman perform a hu plig<sup>27</sup> to call the soul<sup>28</sup> back home to rest (Conquergood, 1989). Our dab neeg, thus, operates within the same paradigm. Many of our stories speak to the importance of navigating relationships between ourselves and spiritual beings, as well as how to be a good and kind person so that our spirits will be content even after death.

Dab neeg can also be understood as a cultural practice that perpetuates cultural identity, values, beliefs, and history (Vang, 2013). HMoob scholar Ly Chong Thong Jalao posits that dab neeg can aid in the “slow and careful nourishment” of one’s sense of ethnic identity within the “spaces created and imagined through those Hmong folktales and the dreams to which they gave rise” (Jalao, 2001, p. 1). This “creation and re-creation of ethnicity” (Jalao, 2001, p. 4) through dab neeg can be spaces for youth to re/connect with and reimagine their ethnic identity, much like how I was craving stories that mirrored my own lived reality. Building upon this, I argue that dab neeg can also assist in the re/creation and reworking of language and culture since they create the framework in which language and culture materialize and are understood. How dab neeg are told, by whom, and to whom they are told creates the context for understanding their meaning. In her study with HMoob women, Vang (2013) learned that dab neeg were often shared to reinforce and police gender roles and identity; this was especially heightened for HMoob women, specifically when it came to expectations associated with what is considered an ideal and respectable HMoob woman (which I shared in Track 2). However, while HMoob women may not always agree with the dab neeg’s gender reinforcement message and may dispute them within other spaces, Vang noticed that they continue to pass dab neeg down as it contributes to the overall survival of HMoob identity and culture. Within this framing, the

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<sup>27</sup> Soul-calling ritual. Pronunciation: HOO plee.

<sup>28</sup> The word HMoob people use for spirit is “plig” while souls can be referred to as “tsuj plig.” I use the word “soul” and “spirit” interchangeably within this dissertation as a recognition to how our humanity (soul) cannot be divorced from our spiritual practices. I recognize that not every culture views them the same.

storyteller is an active contributor who thoughtfully determines which dab neeg and messages should get passed down, especially when it's a question of sustaining HMoob culture and identity. From this, we can surmise that through the years, certain identities and practices might have been omitted in attempts to so-called preserve HMoob identity and culture. If dab neeg can be spaces to dream and reimagine ethnic identity while perpetuating (ideal) cultural values, beliefs, and history, then they can also be spaces for us to reimagine how these practices can be more inclusive to gender and sexually diverse individuals.

As mentioned in Track 2, there continues to be a misunderstanding that being queer is a recent and Americanized phenomenon within the HMoob community, even though stories about queer relationships, bodies, and non-normative practices have cropped up every so often within the dab neeg that have been gifted to HMoob children (Yang, 2008). Despite the lack of traditional archives, these stories serve to remind us that we have existed prior to coming to the United States and prior to learning about words like “queer” or “LGBTQ+.” So, too, has our community been aware of queer bodies and relationships prior to meeting queer white people. While it doesn't necessarily mean that our lives were accepted without prejudice, it does push back against the narrative that “[t]here are no GLBT Hmong people” (Ngo, 2012b). By creating dab neeg that center queer identities, experiences, and relationships, not only are we contributing to HMoob cultural identity and community building, but we are also calling home the souls of our ancestors who have been left deliberately out of these stories. In the next section, I share how I came to my journey of storying with five queer and trans HMoob youth, whom I will refer to as Menyuum Laib to honor their role in de-stabilizing traditions and norms to make spaces more inclusive and expansive for queer and trans identity.

### **Portraits of Menyuum Laib**

While I was certain I wanted to explore dab neeg as a methodology, I was still unsure about how to approach it, since Indigenous methodologies are often co-constructed with and receive approval from those we are seeking to learn from (Tuck, 2015). It made me nervous to know that I did not have a concrete plan, but then I remembered Niam explaining to me how folks back in Laos would collect dab neeg whenever they traveled. Whether it was a long walk to the neighboring villages or a simple stroll to the river to gather water, folks didn't necessarily seek dab neeg out just because. Instead, the dab neeg were offered to them and came during moments when someone needed guidance. I had to reframe my mindset and, like my ancestors before, wait for the dab neeg to come to me organically while I continued on my journey. In doing so, I turned my attention to building and nurturing relationships instead.

Initially, I approached Zoo Heev Circle,<sup>29</sup> an online space that centers Hmong/Southeast LGBTQ+ individuals and their stories, as a possible site for me to ground my dissertation. Zoo Heev Circle was a space that I became acquainted with during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. I appreciated their pedagogies and practices and was eager to learn more about their work in supporting queer and trans HMoob individuals. I asked the facilitators for permission; however, when they relayed this to the Executive Director of the nonprofit organization Nurturing Youth that oversaw Zoo Heev Circle, my request was turned down. I was sad but respected their decision. After discussing alternative options with Dr. Paris, I pivoted my plan towards creating a space of my own instead and inviting queer and trans HMoob youth to join us. Thus, I crafted an invitation and shared it on various social media platforms, in the hopes that queer and trans HMoob youth would be drawn to the project and respond. My dear friends and colleagues who

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<sup>29</sup> Pseudonym.

saw the invitation shared and reshared it within their spaces and with their own groups of friends. Five people responded to my invitation: Sai, KM, Muun, cher and Ying.<sup>30</sup> Three were folks I had already had the pleasure of meeting within Zoo Heev Circle, and two saw the invitation on social media and were curious about my project. In the following subsections, I am honored to share the portraits of the five Menyuam Laib who were kind enough to join me in my learning and share their wisdom.

### *Introducing Sai*

Sai (they/them) is a community advocate and artist. Currently, they serve as the Queer Justice Coordinator and one of two facilitators of Zoo Heev Circle, which provides support services for LGBTQ+ HMoob and Southeast Asian communities. Sai intentionally centers communal healing within their work as an act of resistance against white-cisgender-heteronormative-patriarchal violence. Throughout the years, they have collaborated with other activists to foster and nurture spaces that speak to holistic wellness, healing, and mindfulness by leaning into ancestral wisdom, decolonization, and radical joy.

### *Introducing KM*

KM (she/her) is a writer and spoken word artist who believes storytelling is an essential tool in collective healing and bridging humanity. KM is one of two facilitators of Zoo Heev Circle. She was drawn to this role and the “sacred hidden” space of Zoo Heev Circle because of its emphasis on supporting queer and trans HMoob/Southeast Asian communities, which was something she craved when she was younger. Currently completing her bachelor’s in English and having published multiple essays for her school’s newspaper, KM hopes to create more spaces for HMoob writers and spoken word artists to collaborate and support one another.

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<sup>30</sup> All pseudonyms.

### *Introducing Muun*

Muun (they/them) is an artist and activist who blends art with scholarship to inform their practices and approaches to HMoob history, identity, and culture. A current graduate student, Muun feels it is important for HMoob youth to recognize that art, such as manga and anime, can be a space for creative expression and cultural reimagination, especially for queer and trans HMoob youth who are looking to re/connect with their heritage. Muun also believes art can be a site of possibility when restorying HMoob history, especially when it comes to the Secret War. Muun plans to open a collaborative art space one day to nurture young artists' exploration of racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identity.

### *Introducing cher<sup>31</sup>*

cher (they/them) is a storyteller and educator who believes uplifting the voice of youth can be the tool and vehicle by which we bring about community change. In and out of the classroom, they engage students with their own stories and collective storying in order to decolonize how we think of stories so that they can better reflect the diverse world in which young people grow and live. They were also the advisor to the Middle Eastern and Asian Club at the school where they used to teach and acknowledge the importance of building racial and cultural affinity spaces so that young people can find a safe space to have fun and express themselves, all while creating a sense of community.

### *Introducing Ying*

Ying (they/them) is a community advocate and model. Their work with Lub Suab,<sup>32</sup> a nonprofit organization, focuses on creating and adding a HMoob language course into the K–12

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<sup>31</sup> cher intentionally chose not to have their name capitalized, which I will honor throughout this dissertation.

<sup>32</sup> Pseudonym.

curriculum within the state they reside. Apart from community advocacy, Ying is also a model who has done numerous fashion shows wearing HMoob clothes that their friend designed and re/imagined in order to push the boundary of what is considered masculine and feminine. Their modeling career and use of fashion as a means of gender performance challenges the gender binary and its place within community and culture (Lynch et al., 1996).

## **Methodologies on the Run**

### *Designing the Project*

In this section, I share how I came to design my project collaboratively with the Menyulam Laib. I met with each of them individually first to explain the purpose and intention behind my dissertation and to answer any questions they may have had before accepting the invitation. I nervously explained that I did not have a set list of activities or interview questions to frame the dissertation. Instead, we would be generating ideas based on the activities we pursued together. Again, although I knew I was interested in pursuing dab neeg as a methodology, I was unsure of how to approach it and did not bring this up during our initial meeting, as I wanted to wait until we met as a group to discuss how to do this collaboratively. After my first meeting with cher in January 2023, however, they sent me a follow-up email suggesting the idea of writing stories:

*So I love romance novels. I don't read them much anymore because grad school has me very busy, but I still love romance in the media I consume. When I was first exploring my queerness, I did it predominantly through queer romance novels which I could check out through digital library systems. That way I could keep it a secret from my family as they wouldn't randomly see a book with two men on the cover lol. [...]*

*I think it would be really fun to imagine and write HMoob queer romance stories. We could even treat it as almost like Dungeons and Dragons where we co-create a fictional world together and then create characters and imagine what their lives are. They can have sad stories, happy stories, and everything in between. And I dunno. If anyone wants to publish their work afterwards, I think*

*that would be great for representation as there currently exists basically nothing as far as queer HMoob stories.*

*These can of course be multimodal projects. There's nothing saying they have to be novels. I personally have been dabbling in playwriting and screenplay writing the past year. I just think that having queer people express their greatest desires for sexual, romantic, familial, and platonic intimacy is so powerful. I don't know if I'd go as far as to say it's manifesting better lives for ourselves, but [...] it's at least empowering us to take control of our stories and realize what we are worth and what we deserve in all these different types of relationships.*

Already drawn to dab neeg, I immediately fell in love with how cher recognized that storying can be a platform to “empower us to take control of our stories.” Their love and recognition of the power of story was the same as that of our Elders, who sought to challenge deficit discourses about themselves through the fugitive practice of dab neeg. Excited by this idea, I emailed cher back, responding that I was thrilled and would love it if they could share this with the other Menyulam Laib; cher agreed enthusiastically.

When we gathered to meet for the first time as a group on Zoom, I once again explained the scope of my project before passing the mic to cher. As cher explained their approach to storying, it became clear to me that the others were just as excited about this activity as I was when cher brought it up. As the conversation continued, the approach began to shift and take on different forms based on the feedback of the group. Instead of writing romance novels for the queer and trans community, for example, Sai suggested creating stories for young children so they could learn more about gender fluidity and sexual diversity within a creative and age-appropriate medium.

“As we’re talking about stories and creating things,” Sai began, “for me anyway, I’ve always loved opportunities for healing and creating stories, [especially] stories that speak to you [when you’re a] child. So I was thinking [for this activity] maybe sending supplies to folks and creating your own version of a children's story. There’s like this book I created a couple of years back. It’s called *As You Are*. Wait, let me go find it.” Here, Sai paused to search for their book.

They held it up to the camera for us to see. “I created a story about how back in Laos, there’s like two kids experimenting with gender fluidity [and] gender presentation,” they explained, “and then incorporated some lessons or small teachings that I [would have] want[ed] for either myself as a child or what I imagine what that would look like in the future to the kids in my life when I share these stories. So, creating HMoob children's books that would be [about] something you really care about, that could be something [we do together].”

“I really like that example,” Ying responded excitedly to Sai. “Cause you know what I always would want? I always think [in my] head [when I] daydream [that] one of those HMoob [people] was like [a] Marvel<sup>33</sup> character, or like a superhero, you know. And then, if you guys know Hey Billy [a HMoob podcaster], I've had discussions with him, and there’s like... not like a deity, but like spirits that we call [on] for help [called] Nkauj Yaj Yuam and Nraug Yaj Yuam, which are like gay peacocks, right? And I was like oh, we could make it like a superhero story to learn more about these deities. Children can learn and explore what these are in these books too!”

The enthusiasm was overwhelming, and I quickly suggested that we blend the two ideas by creating superhero stories with young children as our intended audience. “It doesn’t have to be in writing either,” I said. “We can explore different ways of telling stories. How would y’all like that? Some options would be, like, to do it in the style of paj huam<sup>34</sup> or sewing paj ntaub.”

“Ooh!” KM piped up. “I like that! I really like the idea of creating art together cause that’s what I’m feeling is, like, the main theme under all these topics and ideas that [have] been thrown around. I feel like [creating art and telling stories], cause that's how our people have

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<sup>33</sup> An American comic book publisher. Spider-Man, X-Men, and the Fantastic Four are some of Marvel’s most popular intellectual property.

<sup>34</sup> HMoob oral poetry that uses a specific rhyming pattern and scheme (“Paj Huam,” 2022). Pronunciation: BA hua.

always told stories. I think it'd be cool to do a paj huam. I don't think I've ever heard a queer paj huam. And I love writing, too. I am a spoken word and poet artist. So yeah, anything with writing would be great.”

“Yeah, I like that idea too,” Muun chimed in. “I know, for me personally, I love drawing. I would love to do something like anime drawing if that’s okay with y’all.”

The others immediately agreed, each sharing their disappointment with how so many news stories on the queer and trans HMoob community were covered from a deficit perspective, positioning queer and trans individuals as victims, or framing them as struggling between two “opposing” cultures. Through the dab neeg to be created from this project, these queer and trans youth would be able to flip the script and challenge these narratives by crafting characters who have agency and whose queer and trans identities are a source of empowerment, not victimization.

After agreeing to write superhero stories, we decided to explore different modes of storying and agreed to focus on sewing paj ntaub, drawing in the style of anime, and crafting paj huam. Each of the Menyuum Laib can then decide what form to ultimately pursue for their final dab neeg. Paj ntaub and paj huam are traditional forms of HMoob storytelling that we were all familiar with, but few dabbled in. We selected them to give ourselves the opportunity to engage with these ancestral and fugitive practices. Drawing anime and creating a storyboard, however, was new; while we watched and consumed anime growing up, many of us have never actually drawn them—let alone drawn. This remixing of traditional and contemporary approaches to storying thus became a common theme for the queer and trans HMoob youth when enacting Menyuum Laib practices.

### *Storying Dab Neeg*

Over the course of half a year, we met several times as a group on Zoom for 90 minutes to practice each of the artforms while creating our stories. The first gathering focused on designing a paj ntaub that represented our superhero's symbol. To prepare for it, I bought and sent HMoob paj ntaub kits to each of the Menyulam Laib, and we practiced sewing paj ntaub designs together. The activity also required us to research a history of HMoob textile designs, their motifs, and meanings. The second gathering focused on illustrating our superhero. Muun, who draws manga-style art, led the introduction and explanation of what anime is and how to create a story panel. Additionally, I sent each of the Menyulam Laib a beginner's guide to drawing manga. Our last gathering centered on crafting a paj huam that represented our superhero. We went over the rhyming scheme and pattern, then wrote a practice paj huam to share with one another. None of the Menyulam Laib were required to use any of the materials I sent them; however, they were available in case someone might need guidance.

During our time together, we shared check-ins and life updates to ensure that everyone was being taken care of and nourishing themselves. Muun's birthday also coincided with one of our gatherings' dates, so we sang them a happy birthday song as well (which I happily lead). Being in-community was comforting for many of us, since it gave us the space to disclose some of our thought processes and challenges in creating our stories, including how some of us struggled to select what qualities we wanted our superhero to have while others were unsure of what lesson they wanted their dab neeg to illuminate. We also discussed HMoob culture, spirituality, and practices, and the role they played in influencing our worldbuilding, if at all, as well as our hopes and dreams for the future as we created dab neeg together. Even reflecting back on these moments now as I write this dissertation brings joy to my heart.

### ***Collecting Dab Neeg***

In addition to our group meetings, I met with each of the Menyulam Laib twice to listen to their dab neeg. Resembling my ancestors who collected dab neeg along their wearisome travels and shared them with their community, I was excited at the prospect of being able to collect dab neeg from the Menyulam Laib and add it to my rich collection. After deciding on the gatherings with the Menyulam Laib, I contemplated how I would go about collecting their dab neeg in a way that was authentic and familiar to our HMoob community. I was reminded of Niam, who recorded and shared her dab neeg via cassette tapes with her aunt back in Laos. The dab neeg she shared were not structured into one coherent story, nor were they linear. Unlike interviews, they weren't framed or guided by questions either, at least not all the time. Instead, Niam shared a dab neeg because the time and place called for her to share it with her aunt, and vice versa.

Leaning into this ancestral practice, I approached collecting the dab neeg from the Menyulam Laib about their life experiences in the same way. In place of cassette tapes (because I did not have a stereo that could play them), I chose Zoom to record our stories. I prepared no questions, although I did write down a few topics that we could explore together. These listening sessions ranged from 90 minutes to two hours each and were shared over a meal. It was intimidating to not have a structured interview, but the freedom to tell and listen to the dab neeg that felt right within the moment was powerful and liberating. Not only did I learn so much about how they each embodied being a Menyulam Laib within the different ways they sustained and reworked culture and practices, but this journey also provided me the opportunity to experience how dab neeg were collected and shared by Niam and other HMoob Elders.

### *Honoring Dab Neeg as Data*

After every listening session and gathering, I wrote down my thoughts and emotions. I also transcribed all listening sessions and gatherings recordings, where I translated anything that

was said in the HMoob language to ensure that I was interpreting each story correctly within the context of our conversation. I also preserve as much of their language as possible. This means that even though all the Menyuum Laib were born in the United States and would more often than not be described as Hmong Americans, they used the term HMoob and Hmong American interchangeably to describe themselves and their peers. As such, for consistency throughout this paper, I will be referring to them as simply HMoob. The different life lessons within the Menyuum Laib's dab neeg—both life stories and superhero stories—shaped and reshaped the research questions for this project, which I shared in Track 1 but will reshare here as well:

1. What are the Menyuum Laib practices that queer and trans HMoob youth create or participate to discover (or uncover), embrace, and sustain their queer and trans HMoob identity and enact their history, language and culture as sustenance?
2. In what ways do queer and trans HMoob youth's dab neeg (i.e., culturally grounded stories and storying) create spaces to reinterpret and shift HMoob lifeways for the queer and trans HMoob community?

To answer these questions, I tried approaching and analyzing the dab neeg via the methods that I have been taught in graduate school, which was to code them. I tried approaching my analysis with a mix of line-by-line and *in vivo* coding, since line-by-line coding can assist us in looking closely at what participants say while *in vivo* coding helps preserve participants' language and meaning (Charmaz, 2006). However, when I began reading the Menyuum Laib's dab neeg, it became apparent that analyzing their dab neeg via the traditional coding analysis method was disingenuous for this project because I felt I was exerting my voice and understanding of their dab neeg over theirs. Instead, I approached the dab neeg like how I approached understanding all the stories I grew up reading and listening to as a voracious lover of stories, which was analyzing them thematically instead. Timothy San Pedro shared in his book *Protecting the Promise: Indigenous Education Between Mothers and Their Children* (2021) that he actually abandoned western forms of coding and analysis when he was writing and analyzing

the family stories that were shared by Indigenous mothers. He argued that using qualitative software like NVivo coding “ripped and stripped” the stories of their content, only to be put back together by him as the researcher (San Pedro, 2021, p. 17). Such protocols center the researcher and analyst’s perspective on *what* stories should be shared and *how* they are shared and storied back together. Like San Pedro, I did not feel comfortable with the stripping away of the Menyulam Laib’s dab neeg into “codes”. Instead, I honored what San Pedro suggested, which was to decenter myself as the researcher and keep their stories as intact and whole as possible. This meant that even though many of our listening sessions were in dialogue form and the Menyulam Laib also asked me a lot about myself, I omitted many of my questions and comments and only kept the ones that served the dab neeg (San Pedro, 2021).

Additionally, the traditional structures of qualitative academic papers usually have a “Results” section with quotes from participants as evidence to support their claims. I felt uncomfortable with this, since I did not want to just pull quotes from the Menyulam Laib to support whatever claims *I* was making. I wanted readers to actually read about the life of the Menyulam Laib, not just quotes. So, I initially wanted to organize each of the Menyulam Laib’s life stories and superhero stories together into their own track, because I wanted to set them up as being in dialogue with one another (i.e., Track 4 would focus only on Sai’s life story and superhero story). I would then provide a separate track analyzing their life stories and then another analyzing their superhero stories, since this was still a dissertation, and it was still required of me to provide my interpretation. I eventually grouped the Menyulam Laib’s life stories into one track and their superhero stories into another, because while reading and analyzing them with the Menyulam Laib, I realized how similar the themes running through each

of them were and felt that the life stories and superhero stories each needed their own tracks dedicated to them.

To ensure that I was interpreting their dab neeg correctly, I shared my writing with the Menyulam Laib to minimize inaccuracies by having them review the content and provide feedback so their dab neeg remained as truthful as possible (Creswell, 1994; Tuck, 2015). Interpreting the dab neeg together was done over Google Drive, since I had just given birth and was focused on recovery. The Menyulam Laib wrote comments and offered loving critiques and words of affirmation when necessary. They also corrected quotes that were incorrect. Working on this collaboratively meant that I also needed to be open to when they disagreed with how I interpret their dab neeg.

Even after partnering with the Menyulam Laib and attempting to push back against what is considered traditional western forms of research, my insecurity with (lack of coding and fear of being judged for not using traditional methods of coding continued to haunt me as a doctoral candidate. Even though I initially wrote this section using the language of the academy when it came to coding and analyzing data, my dissertation Committee—in particular Dr. Washington, who brought this up during my defense—actually recognized the sharp contrast of this section compared to the other parts of the dissertation and questioned these jarring differences, especially the lack of my authentic voice. It was then that I explained that on my journey, I actually struggled with coding using western forms of research and actually approached it via my thematic analysis. Dr. Paris shared that Indigenous methodologies and researchers have always challenged the coding analysis that is often used within the academy. My Committee shared that stories themselves are data, and that I should not feel pressured to code them in order to present them as “data” or be seen as a “reliable researcher” (Murveit et al., 2023). Therefore, while I did

provide my own understanding of the Menyulam Laib's life stories and superhero stories within this dissertation, I do want to reiterate the words of Murveit et al. that "Indigenous people do not need outside academics to speak on their behalf" (p. 181) and therefore, present the superhero stories to you as they were offered to me without restorying them. I rewrote this section to update my journey. I hope that my experience with western forms of research can help inform other HMoob and non-HMoob researchers hoping to explore dab neeg from the HMoob community by reminding them that they can break away from and challenge western forms of research by centering the voices and stories of the HMoob community and respecting them as data.

### **Menyulam Laib Singing Dab Neeg**

The sharing and collecting of dab neeg with and from Menyulam Laib demonstrated just how important stories and storying have been for queer and trans HMoob youth. From the perspective of someone who has read extensively about western forms of research that are oftentimes colonial (Smith, 2021), dehumanizing (Paris & Winn, 2013; Blackburn, 2014), and extractive (Tuck & Yang, 2014), I realized that writing superhero stories influenced by our own experiences was an unconventional approach that didn't fit neatly into the western concept of research. Our approach may have been "non-normative" from the western researchers' perspective, but nothing represented the substantial fugitive practices of my HMoob people better than to use dab neeg to disrupt research that is dehumanizing. Our characters and worldbuilding were reflections of our own experiences, morals and ethics, and vice versa; just because the content of our stories may differ slightly and the approach to storying is new does not mean they contribute any less to our cultural identity, value, beliefs, and history. Our style may render us Menyulam Laib by Elders, but these practices, too, are simply reflections and

extensions of our Elders, who gifted us these creative modes to continue their legacy and craft our own fugitive ways.

In reflecting back on my gathering and learning with the Menyuam Laib, it was astounding to see how Sai—without knowing about the content of cher’s email—was already living and embracing what cher hoped our stories would do, which was take control of our stories. The conflict I experienced with western forms of research, the pivot to nurturing relationships instead of focusing on design only, and the patience to wait for a dab neeg to offer itself to me connected in ways that I could not have foreseen for this project. Niam was correct about dab neeg; they will come into your life when you need them most, and from my gathering with Menyuam Laib, storying dab neeg is more relevant now than ever before as HMoob community, culture, and practices continue to shapeshift on the run.

## INTERLUDE

### THE DAY I LEARNED TO SPEAK MY GRANDMOTHER'S TONGUE (BY PACYINZ LYFUONG)

The day I learned to speak my grandmother's tongue  
    An Eastern wind shifted the earth  
While the western walls were whisked away...  
And the mountains of Laos rose on the horizon,  
    Roaring with the sound of river dragons  
    Splashing rainbow tail waves  
    Across oceans of opium poppies  
    Just awakened from their slumber  
    By the baby chick with no feathers  
    Hiding under the house board floor  
    Waiting to teach the next generation  
That to live means to save the most vulnerable  
The day I learned to speak my grandmother's tongue  
    I tied my own tongue upon the eight tones  
    Of the Hmong language  
Stumbling upon words like a baby, like it should be  
    Restoring back the balance between the ages  
    As I freed my grandmother's voice  
    To rise clearly, to rise wisely  
Mighty like the elders' powers should be  
And my fears faded away, like the black spots on her skin  
    Revealed for their true glory, as battle scars  
    From a life lived completely  
    And I found the ultimate truth  
    That I will not escape my nature  
    That I am a rock from the old mountain  
    A strong Hmong woman  
Carved from another strong Hmong woman

## TRACK 4

### LUB NEEJ MENYUAM LAIB – THE LIFE AND TIMES OF MENYUAM LAIB

*“Initially, they thought that I was a girl that wear the dress, and they was like, how could they allow a woman to show her titties off right? But then the conversation went back with, ‘No, that’s a man, right’? And I’m just like, ‘Bitch! You’re all wrong! I’m both.’”*

—Ying

#### Introduction

In this track, I share the dab neeg<sup>35</sup> from five queer and trans HMoob youth who embrace being a Menyulam Laib. By reading about their life stories first, we address the research question: *What are the Menyulam Laib practices that queer and trans HMoob youth create or participate to discover (or uncover), embrace, and sustain their queer and trans HMoob identity and enact their history, language and culture as sustenance?* Like the dab neeg of our ancestors recorded onto cassette tapes, you will notice that these dab neeg were not re/constructed to be linear nor with specific references to time, although some dates are used to provide context. Again, I did not approach these dab neeg with any formal interview questions. I simply asked the Menyulam Laib to share dab neeg that spoke to the topic of sustaining and reworking language and culture, although I did offer guiding questions to help reorient the stories if the Menyulam Laib asked for any.

In the following sections, we see the different Menyulam Laib practices queer and trans HMoob youth have created or participated in. We also see how these practices and pursuits are similar yet different from those of our Elders. As community members and educators seeking to

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<sup>35</sup> Translation: “Folk stories.” Pronunciation: DA neng. “Dab neeg” are usually described as folk stories, with ghosts and spirituality woven into the tales; “neeg neeg” would be the term to describe life stories most “accurately.” However, HMoob people use “dab neeg” to refer to both folk and life stories, and I will be doing the same within this dissertation to be faithful to and honor the way we use language within our everyday practices.

work with and support queer and trans HMoob youth, let's look at the ways we can build infrastructures that will support the exploration, interrogation, and reimagination of their racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities.

### **KM Lub Neej – KM's Life Story**

#### ***Cooking and Eating Together for Nourishment***

“I would say, home...not that it was not safe,” KM opened up to me, carefully selecting her words to make sure that I did not misunderstand her. “But it was like uncharted territory because nobody in my family, at least that I know of as of right now, has been open about their sexuality, or like their preferences and stuff like that, too. And so, I think, because I was not sure how to navigate it at home, I feel like college kind of gave me the opportunity to let me navigate it outside of home.”

Like many queer and trans HMoob youth who are exploring their gender and sexual identity, college presented itself as an opportunity for KM to learn more about and embrace these topics with peers her age, something she felt she didn't have access to within K-12 spaces. KM knew since she was young that she was queer without fully knowing the language to name her sexuality. She recalled how, after voicing that she missed a friend after she stopped seeing her back in middle school, another friend “jokingly” asked her, “Are you bi<sup>36</sup> or something?” At the time, KM denied her friend's allegation, but when reflecting back, she felt that even though she may not have necessarily had feelings for that friend, her queerness was perhaps already manifesting itself. By the time college came around, KM felt that even though her university was not too far away from home, it provided enough space for her to start a new chapter in her life and explore her identity. But what was it about college that made it different from K-12 spaces?

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<sup>36</sup> Short for “bisexual.”

“Hmm...” KM chewed on her food for a bit while pondering the question. “I would say, for sure, the independence of being away from home, and learning how to navigate things or sitting with myself more, too. It gave me the time to be like, ‘Okay, I need to confront this.’” KM also credited her friends, many of whom she was able to build and foster a “home away from home” community with. They gave her the space and time to process her emotions and thoughts as well. She chuckled. “A lot of us are queer now or at least identify as queer,” she said with a laugh, “but at the time, even when we didn’t know or weren’t out, we supported each other and were always open, honest, and just inclusive. I really liked that.”

She shared that something as simple as going to each other’s college dormitory or house to cook with and for one another made some of the biggest impacts on her life. “Some of us lived in dorms,” KM explained, “and you know how we have access to a kitchen? We would invite each other over and hang out and cook.” Cooking and eating together within the HMoob community are very intimate experiences because of our clan system, as described in Track 1. Cooking is one way we bond with and get to know the families within our clans. HMoob people also eat communally at the dining table together. You are invited and expected to eat at the table with others, and the way we invite guests to eat is reflected with the phrase, “Los noj mov os” [*Please come eat (at the table)*]. However, it’s also important to note the use of the terminology: “los” not only means “to come” but specifically “to come home” (as opposed to “to come visit,” which uses a different word). Therefore, not only are we inviting you to come eat, but the word implies that you are coming home to eat with us as a family. And while nowadays HMoob people use their own individual plates or bowls to eat, there were times back in Laos and Thailand when a whole family would share a single bowl of rice, soup, or an entrée dish. This intimate experience requires one to physically and emotionally be present in order to enjoy the

food and each other's company. Having this experience with her college peers was physically, emotionally, and spiritually nourishing for KM.

“Cooking together is very nurturing, you know,” KM explained. “We cooked HMoob food with each other whenever we could. And then we would spend time together and talk about things. It felt very safe for me to open up to them.” The many moments bonding over buying ingredients, prepping them, cooking, and learning new dishes made it easier to forge relationships with one another. KM described these moments as “sacred,” acknowledging that such intimate moments don't just happen over time; they take careful nurturing to build and sustain. These friendships formed the foundation for KM to be able to not only open up about her queer sexuality, but to eventually attend events on campus with her friends to learn more about it. “You feel you can trust someone once you've done something as sacred as cooking a home dish for each other,” KM explained. “So, you know, I know I could trust my friends because we [...] make sure to, not just take care of, like, each other's physical health but also our mental, emotional, and spiritual [well-being] too.”

### *Fostering Communal Spaces to Story*

Back when she was in high school, KM's English class read the book *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a 1967 novel by Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez. The book follows seven generations of the Buendía family as the world shifts and changes in response to colonialism and the aftermath of post-colonial times. The family's struggle to maintain their culture and history resonated deeply with KM. “This book made me think about being alone and being sad,” KM recalled, “because I realized how much I didn't know about our culture, or our history.” Growing up, she attended predominantly white schools in the suburbs and felt isolated culturally from other HMoob youth her age. Such experiences made her feel alone, and she was

envious of HMoob youth who had access to one another. “[What happened in the book] could end up happening to us or our people,” KM explained. “After the Secret War, we came here, but some of our younger generations don’t know [the] HMoob [language] or follow HMoob traditions anymore. I resonated with the loss of culture so much. Growing up, I’ve been isolated for so long from HMoob people that reading this made me want to connect with the HMoob community more so that I don’t lose that connection.”

As she grew older and began forming friendships with other HMoob youth her age, she began to seek out spaces and nonprofit organizations that supported HMoob community. “I think I was just wondering where my people are,” KM shared. “I wanted to know what the work they were doing was, so that was how I found out about Nurturing Youth.” Nurturing Youth is a nonprofit organization that KM was drawn to because its mission and work addresses gender-based violence in the HMoob community through HMoob-centric practices while respecting our culture and epistemology. She also appreciated Nurturing Youth’s Zoo Heev Circle,<sup>37</sup> a biweekly support space on Zoom for LGBTQ+ HMoob and Southeast Asian community members to come and explore topics related to gender and sexuality, issues impacting LGBTQ+ folks, community building, social support and healing. Many of their events include the note: *This event is exclusively for Southeast Asian LGBTQ+ folks that centers their experiences. Please be mindful and respectful of that when thinking if this space is for you.* “I first attended Zoo Heev Circle as a participant in July [2020],” KM shared. “It started off like, yeah, I want to be with my people, and I want to be surrounded by those who look similar to me and identify the way I do or understand how I identify. And so, I started attending them more. And this is something that I began to treasure so much.”

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<sup>37</sup> Pseudonym.

KM was especially drawn to the pedagogy of storying within Zoo Heev Circle. “I just love how their stories were my stories, you know?” KM explained. “Like, we share life stories, and I can go, ‘Hey, that’s me too! I went through that.’ So then, I began to think to myself, maybe I should take it to the next step and actually help [give back to] the space because I never had a space like it before. And...I don’t know. Something about it...I just became attached because it was something I’ve been searching for [for] so long, and I hope I can help out however I can to grow it and offer it to someone else who may need it.”

Currently, KM is the co-facilitator of Zoo Heev Circle. Individuals must register in advance for events and be vetted first before entering to ensure that the well-being and safety of its members are not being compromised. KM recognized that the space may not be for everyone but wanted to share that it was there and available if anyone ever feels alone. “Maybe it might change one day,” KM said to me, noting that the people who attend the space change and shift depending on the topic, the month, and the time. “Maybe it might look different. Who knows. But for as long as I’m here, as long as I’m still able to hold onto this space, I want to nourish it, and I hope others can find it just as healing as I have.”

### ***Using Spoken Word to Reclaim Identity and Heal***

The COVID-19 pandemic shifted a lot of things for people. For KM, she shared that the closing down of brick-and-mortar buildings in favor of social isolation and quarantine gave her the opportunity to confront her bisexuality. “I struggle to talk about my feelings,” KM explained, “so what I don’t want to say or don’t know how to say, I do it through my poetry.”

Growing up, KM recalled that HMoob oral poetry and storytelling was one of the most vivid things she remembered from her mom, whom she credits for instilling in her the love of storytelling. “I remember my mom vividly telling my siblings and me how she got to America,”

KM explained. “Some of the foundation of my love for storytelling comes from her. She was so open about [her experience].” Eventually, KM began to explore her own ways of storytelling in the form of spoken word, a word-based and oftentimes theatrical performance art where speakers engage in various topics through the use of wordplay, repetition, alliteration, and intonation. KM’s poetries were initially meant for her, as opposed to for an audience. She shared that writing gave her the opportunity to work through some of the stresses and struggles in her life and helped make sense of them. She began to explore queer identities, relationships, and the emotions she was feeling when navigating these through her poems. By the time her first queer relationship ended in college, KM had turned to spoken word to cope with the loss and heal.

“There was a lot of fear entering the relationship,” KM said. “We were both closeted and looking back, there was a lot of internalized homophobias.” KM paused for a moment to gather her emotions. “Sorry...,” she apologized, looking away.

“You don’t have to apologize,” I responded. “Take your time.”

KM gave a small smile and sniffed. “The fallout was the catalyst for me,” she continued, “to really start exploring HMoob and queer identities in my poems. I think...it was the only way to make sense of my emotions. So, I did a lot of thinking, a lot of writing. It was very healing for me.” The more she wrote, the more she also felt encouraged to attend spoken word events to listen to and learn from other artists. Sometimes she attended these events with friends, sometimes she went by herself. Eventually, she opened up to her friends about her own writings, and they encouraged her to continue.

Initially, KM didn’t share her poems publicly because they were personal. However, an opportunity arose that she couldn’t turn down. “There was an open mic that happened last November [2022] for HMoob women,” she recalled, “and it was the first time I was able to share

my poetry piece about my first relationship, which I haven't shared publicly at all. I've only shared it with just a few friends, so that at this event, I was able to share it for the first time with the community." KM beamed shyly at me. "[Sharing] felt very nice," she admitted, grinning happily. "I wanna continue doing that. I want to continue going to other events where I can share [my poems] because I feel like I'm ready, and I have a lot of content that I've made since then. It's just not out there yet, and I'm just like, 'Okay. I needed to get it out there.' But I'm also a perfectionist because I want to make sure it's done well. I [want to] present my art [in] the best way that I can, or [at least] in a way that I'm satisfied with."

### **Muun Lub Neej – Muun's Life Story**

#### *Using Anime to Explore Queer Identities and Relationships*

Muun first discovered manga and anime when they were in middle school and began exploring online communities, especially the social media platform Tumblr. "Manga" are printed Japanese comics and—within the context of Japan—usually refers to all types of comics. Similarly, "anime" is the Japanese word for "animation" and usually refers to any type of animated cartoons. However, "manga" and "anime" are also generally used worldwide to distinguish Japanese comics and animation—that is, those that are produced within Japan—from western animation and those produced outside of Japan. Anime and manga have also been recognized for their distinct style, regardless of the origin (Onemu, 2020). When talking with Muun, they simply refer to the artform as "anime," and I will be doing the same throughout this dissertation.

Looking back, Muun jokingly acknowledged, "I definitely wasn't supposed to be watching anime", since topics covered in anime can sometime be dark and were probably more suitable for high school students. However, it was this artform that set them on the path to

learning more about queer identities and relationships. “I saw a panel [on Tumblr] and it was of these two girls as a couple,” Muun recalled, “and I was like, ‘Oh! That’s so cute!’ And then I would follow the tags,<sup>38</sup> and then I would see more of these drawings, like two guys as a couple. So, I would follow the person who posted [them] and then reblog [them] myself. And eventually, those [people] would be my friends who I would talk to. I think I was 14, 15 at the time [when it started].”

Many of the anime genres that Muun consumes can be categorized as yaoi (relationships between two boys) and yuri (relationships between two girls) (Wellington, 2015).<sup>39</sup> I asked Muun what it was about anime that specifically caught their interest, when compared to American-style cartoons. “Hmm, good question.” Muun pondered for a bit. “There was just...something about Asian media, or just something about, like, specifically Japanese anime that wasn’t all about ‘I’m queer and I’m gonna make it all about politics.’ It was really subtle but [anime shows] still talked about it, versus a lot of American media, which babied the topic or made it very explicit and tried to say, ‘This is what a gay couple is’ and it’s usually portrayed really badly. There is something about [the portrayal of queer characters and relationships in American media] that just didn’t resonate with me because there’s like, no nuances and culture. I love how family is really important and centered in anime ‘cause I grew up in a family, a community, that is very communal. I love how [Japanese anime] have diverse characters. I love the way they drew from Asian folktales and fairytales, which is similar to the HMoob stories that I grew up [listening to]. I saw myself a lot within these TV shows, [which was] missing in American ones.”

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<sup>38</sup> Short for “hashtags,” which is when a word or phrase is preceded by the symbol # (i.e., #Anime), which classifies or categorizes the accompanying text to make it easier to search on social media platforms (“Hashtag,” 2024).

<sup>39</sup> “Yaoi” and “Yuri” are also referred to as “boy love” (BL) and “girl love” (GL).

Because their family and HMoob community are very communal, Muun found it comforting that queer characters in anime did not have to leave their families when they came out or began a relationship, a stereotype that is often emphasized in American television shows with the concept of “chosen family,” which is when nonblood-related friends become surrogate families by filling in the roles normally filled by family members (Blair & Pukall, 2015). Studies have shown that the “chosen family” concept often champions western individualism that juxtaposes familial bonds, which Tan (2011) argued is “an overly individualistic and indulgent behavior that threatens familial ties” (p. 867) for many queer and trans Asian individuals who grew up communally and do not wish to leave their community behind. Representation within anime led to Muun searching for and finding support within the online anime community, which, as time went on, became a space for Muun to “freely express [themselves]” when it came to their gender, sexuality, and artistic creation, especially mid-way through college.

The more Muun engrossed themselves deep into anime, the more they began to challenge expectations about gender and sexuality, first by dressing more androgynous and later, taking up the mantle and creating their own characters and stories. While they initially did it for their own recreation, they eventually began sharing their characters and stories on their Tumblr page. One day, a friend saw a comic page that Muun drew and reblogged the post. At the end of the post, the friend attached her own comic strip, extending and adding onto the story. “It was almost like a game of the one sentence story [where you keep a story going by having new people add onto what the previous person has said],” Muun laughed. The move was a delightful surprise, and Muun enjoyed it so much that they added another comic panel after the one their friend created and reblogged it back. “And we kept going back and forth,” Muun remembered. “Like, she would have the characters go to school early, and I would make them get a donut or something.

A lot of people really liked it and began retweeting it on Tumblr. That was a really fun, positive experience, and I really love creating the story back-to-back with someone else.”

Their love for anime as a platform to tell queer stories influenced Muun to begin thinking about how to utilize the platform to tell HMoob-centric stories, especially those that are set after the Secret War. “My grandma told a lot of these stories for me growing up,” Muun said, “and I really want to capture them down and tell them one day to the younger generation, but like, in anime style. I think that’d be a really cool way to continue telling our stories and the stories of our Elders.” They add that they also want to explore themes outside of refugee and queer stories, including those of addiction and gang violence within the HMoob community and use art as a platform to showcase empowerment and resistance to systemic violence.

### *Channeling Art into Resistance*

When Muun was younger, they struggled with being the oldest HMoob daughter in their family because of the expectations and roles tied to their gender and birth order (which I discussed in Track 1), so much so that they did not want to be HMoob. “I think I romanticized being East Asian,” Muun said to me. “Like, instead of HMoob, why can’t I be this other one, right?” Because many of their online friends were people of color, Muun reached out to them to talk about and work through some of these tensions, many of whom also shared similar sentiments. “We began talking about race and intersectionality a lot,” Muun said, “and 2018 was when I really began to explore it more because at the time, I wasn’t too educated about it.”

By the time they got into college, Muun began to attend workshops around racism and found support in Black and Latinx communal spaces. “I found that I was uncomfortable around white queer people or spaces that had mainly white queer people,” Muun explained, “because it felt like... it reminded me of theater. Like, I had to perform a role before them because there are

stereotypes, they would say.” Muun noted how many of their experiences as a queer HMoob person—like familial bonds and recognizing that being queer is still seen as being “Americanized”—was something that white queer folks could not relate to. “But when I’m around queer POC, it was different,” Muun recalled. The conversations Muun had with their friends—in particular around race, social class, socioeconomic status, and immigration status—were helpful in giving Muun the tools to navigate their identity. “They understood where I was coming from, and it helped me reflect on my own position as a queer HMoob person,” Muun said. “I realized that there is beauty in my community, and our stories, and it was very empowering.”

As Muun reflected on HMoob history, their family’s legacy, and the position HMoob people have been forced into within United States’ politics, they began to channel resistance against white-cisgender-heteronormative-patriarchal violence through three different forums. “The first and most important one is my individual art,” Muun shared with me. “I create a lot of drawings and visuals, and I try to portray just how diverse and beautiful our queer HMoob community is. I draw a lot of inspiration from, like, our culture, our clothes, our folk stories.” Muun explained that they take great care to ensure that their art illustrates the beauty of their community and themselves authentically. “The clothes we wear are cultural signifiers, right? And so, when I’m drawing, I make sure to look closely at the patterns and how [they] can connect with my queerness. And I share these with other people on social media so that they can see themselves too.” Muun especially wants to break down the stereotype that to be queer means being Americanized and wants to let other queer and trans HMoob people know that we can and do exist unapologetically.

The second way Muun wants to challenge white-cisgender-heteronormative-patriarchal violence is through academia, especially within research. As a current graduate student, Muun recognized the lack of support and spaces for queer and trans HMoob graduate students within higher education and educational studies. “I want more queer and trans HMoob people to go to higher education and talk about us,” they explained. “I don’t want other people to talk about us because they never do it right. I want us to make a difference. I want us to advocate for ourselves. But it won’t happen until we put the right support in place so that we feel like we belong in higher education.” Muun hopes to be able to delve into more of their community within their academic work and is still exploring ways to do this.

And finally, Muun hopes to one day open their own art gallery to showcase queer HMoob history. “I want to have it display all the different types of ways that queer HMoob people have portrayed themselves,” they said, “how they see themselves and what they would wear. I want to have a conversation about these topics and how to better support our queer HMoob community.” Muun envisioned this to be a collaborative effort among multiple artists, with support from HMoob community members. “I can’t do this alone, you know,” they said. “We are very communal, and I hope to make [this collaboration] more communal. For now, as I’m thinking this, it’s still very individualistic which I don’t like. So yeah, I want to open my own art gallery one day.”

“I hope you do!” I encouraged them as our time together began to wind down. “I would love to come see it and support other queer HMoob artists too.”

“Well, we’ll see first,” Muun stopped me, chuckling. “[That is] if I don’t end up being a boring professor first.” And with this, they laughed ruefully.

### *Finding Community Within Theatre*

Muun was in high school when a friend, who they initially bonded with over their shared love of anime, invited them to join the theater club. “I’m a quiet person,” Muun admitted, “and he was like, ‘Do you want to join theater?’ And I was like, ‘What’s that? I don’t know, that’s weird.’ But it was him that convinced me. He was like, ‘Just come for one practice and see.’ And I think it took [me] a while to warm up [to it]. But then I saw that there is something really liberating to embody someone that’s not yourself...in a way that *is* yourself.” Muun chuckled. “I ended up liking [theatre]. It was a place where I saw my best expression because we played games and did a lot of storytelling.”

Within this space, Muun was able to connect with other young people who, like themselves, may not have been out but whose mannerisms and personality challenged socially constructed views of what is considered masculine, feminine, heteronormative, and queer. It was also the first time that Muun was able to connect with queer HMoob youth. “I knew they were gay the moment I met them,” they laughed. “I felt like my gaydar was going off. But it felt good to be surrounded by queer HMoob people [even if none of us were out] ‘cause a lot of my friends were BIPOC.”<sup>40</sup> Theatre students in this space were animated, dramatic, and unapologetic. Muun explained that they seemed to “jump” and “soar” whenever they performed on stage, which gave Muun the confidence to do the same. They described the people in theater as having come from “all different walks of life” and yet, within this space, they were able to come together to “start singing different musical songs or play games and do warm-ups and talk about our interests, which is usually anime. That was everybody’s thing.” Some of the games and warm-ups that Muun recalled included an improvised game called “Yes and,” which had the students stand in a

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<sup>40</sup> Black, Indigenous, and other people of color; often used when talking about Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, Pacific Islander, and multiracial communities. The Menyuan Laib used this term when talking about the aforementioned communities, therefore, throughout this track of the dissertation, I will be doing the same to ensure the language I am using reflect theirs.

circle, one student shared a statement, and then the next student agreed with “Yes and,” followed by their own continuation of the story. Muun reflected that these activities were probably what inspired them to incorporate a similar format with their Tumblr friend when they started co-writing and drawing their comics back and forth together since it was more fun to create stories and bounce ideas off of each other rather than do it alone.

For their first musical, Muun played a villain who is a guy and was thrilled by the experience of exploring what it would be like to be more masculine. Being a part of the theater had helped them become more open. However, they also became conscious of how theater kids were viewed by other students in their school. “I think one important life lesson [I’ve gained from performing] would be that no matter where we are at, we still are good artists and that we all have our own talent,” Muun shared. “That it’s okay to be different. It’s okay to be weird, and you will always find a group of people who are okay with being off like you. Not everyone’s gonna get you, you know?”

Muun was part of a post-secondary enrollment options (PSEO) program through the local state university, which allows high school juniors and seniors to take classes at the university for both high school and college credit. The group of students who were also in the PSEO with them started a group chat and began making fun of the theater students who Muun was close friends with. “I found myself feeling scrutinized for just existing in both worlds,” Muun shared, frowning slightly, “because I never was just a nerd. I was a really good student, but I wasn’t like...hmm...prim and proper. I was very much also like your artsy theater kid. Like, very out there, very loud and boisterous. And I think it engaged me to people who were similar, but others also ousted me very much because it’s like, ‘You’re different. You’re a little weird.’ Well, so are my friends. We would sing our freaking songs in the lunchroom, which is weird, but we didn’t

care. We sang songs from [the musical movie] *Grease*. We practiced our scripts real quick and [got] into character.” Muun reflected back on these memories and smiled warmly. “I think the biggest lesson I learned was not caring about what others think, because in theater, there was unconditional acceptance. It’s warm, it’s familiar, and very encouraging. And I preferred that because it really shaped me into who I am and the stories that I want to tell.”

### **cher<sup>41</sup> Lub Neej – cher’s Life Story**

#### ***Re/Learning HMoob Spirituality***

cher grew up in a HMoob Christian household and was actively involved with their church as a young child. HMoob Christian culture, they explained to me, has its own unique set of customs, norms, and jargon that distinguishes itself from HMoob shamanism and practices. Instead of clan leaders, for example, HMoob families who are Christians revere their church’s pastors as leaders of their community. These are usually HMoob men who are acknowledged as the Xib Fwb.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, instead of relying on one’s clan to assist them and their family during large-effort events such as weddings or funerals, HMoob Christians relied on their church members as extended support systems. Church activities also meant having more opportunities for youth to engage with one another. At one point, cher explained, they were at their church “four or five times” a week. “Going Friday night to do small group stuff, going to worship, teaching Sunday school. I was super active,” they explained. “My sister used to make a joke that [I], as an individual, didn’t see gender when I interacted with people because I used to have a lot of girl friends. I wasn’t trying to date them and stuff, like the other boys. I was just...friends with

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<sup>41</sup> cher intentionally chose not to have their pseudonym capitalized, which I will honor throughout this dissertation.

<sup>42</sup> A “master” or “teacher” who is skilled in a specific art. Pronunciation: SEE foo.

a lot of girls. I think, for a lot of my life, people knew that maybe I wasn't the most cisgender or the most heterosexual person because of my mannerisms too."

While cher credits their church for instilling in them the love and importance of having community as a strong foundation, cracks began to appear as they grew older. "The politics was not jiving with how I was growing as an individual and the way I was, you know, seeing the world," they revealed, sharing that although they tried to ascribe to what is expected of HMoob boys and masculinity, their actions have always challenged such assumptions. These cracks solidified as they began to question their gender and sexuality, experience college, attend a nondenominational, predominantly white church on their campus and mingle with peers from different religious groups.

The transition from attending a HMoob church to one on campus that was predominately white was "jarring," but not necessarily in a bad way. cher shared that their campus offered a "queer student of faith support group," something that they were not used to. "I was wrestling a lot with like, how do I match up my kind of Christian identity with, like, my LGBT identity?" cher shared. "Because I do want both of these things to coexist together, and I see plenty of examples of people who are Christian and also queer. And I was like, I want to be one of those people, or potentially be one of those people. But I didn't know how to, like, reconcile the two, since I had always just learned from my church that being queer is like a sin, and it wasn't."

Through their engagement with their campus' church and its members, cher began to interpret the Bible in their own way. They critiqued the Bible's teachings and recognized the ways heteropatriarchy was pervasive and promoted among churchgoers, especially when reflecting back on their HMoob church and its structure. "Currently, I'm no longer affiliated with any church," they informed me, "and I also no longer identify as Christian in particular. I more

so identify as kind of like, agnostic or spiritual.” cher’s spiritual journey has been a path of healing for them, especially as they began researching more about shamanism and the spiritual aspect of it.

“When I was reading about how our physical and spiritual self needs to be aligned in order to be healthy, it made perfect sense for me,” cher responded. “Like, this is the story of every queer HMoob person ever!” cher and I erupted into laughter. “We struggle through severe anxiety or depression because we feel that some parts of our identity do not align with each other,” cher went on, “or how many of us have experienced physical ailments due to the pain we were feeling about our identities clashing like this? So, to read [that] it’s because we need to look into ourselves both physically, emotionally, spiritually...it was healing. I’m still learning more, though.”

cher is careful not to call themselves a practitioner of HMoob shamanism since they are still learning more about it and may not always be educated about its roots and traditions. They shared that they also want to be careful not to misappropriate the teachings in any way. However, they feel that leaning more into and reframing what spirituality means to them and their queer HMoob identity has been a step forward in nurturing and reconnecting back with their roots in ways that they were unable to before. “You know, I may not always have the language to articulate how I’m feeling,” they shared, “but my body and spirit is still remembering all these ancestral practices from even back in Laos. And I think that is beautiful.”

### *Nurturing Educational Affinity Spaces*

cher describes their suburban high school growing up as “really white.” They added, “I think there were like 10 HMoob students.” cher noted that their parents were decisive about the neighborhood and school that cher and their siblings were going to attend, since, as cher

reflected, “There is a lot of racially coded and class coded stuff within our neighborhoods. [My parents] saw proximity to whiteness as being better.”

Because their high school was predominately white and they were part of the few Asian students enrolled, cher felt pressured to live up to the “model minority” myth by being a top student: school teachers and leaders asked cher to be a part of different race and racism retreats; they were chosen by the principal to represent their grade level and the wider HMoob students when it came to discussing said issues; and since cher was part of the Asian Club, though they noted that it was made up of mainly HMoob students, they also gave school-wide presentations about HMoob people. Reflecting back, cher shared, “I didn’t identify as [being] pressured at the time. I thought that I was truly just doing my part and a lot of students were like, ‘Oh, you’re in theater and you’re good at giving presentations, so keep doing it.’ [But looking back], the school actually was just taking advantage of me in the way that, you know, white institutions take advantage of the free labor of people of color and queer folks. And you know it’s kind of a double-edged sword, because on the one hand it did stress me out a lot, and it was, you know, really tiring. But, on the other hand, like I had so much stuff to put on my resume even just going into high school or going into college.” To be chosen to represent HMoob and Asian students was also an interesting concept to cher: while they were being tokenized by white people as “authentic” representations, they were actually struggling with their ethnic and racial identity at the time. Even though their church back at home was HMoob, cher felt there was always a disconnect between their experiences and “authentic” HMoob culture since they were not necessarily practicing or learning about HMoob spirituality, customs, and traditions. “Looking back now, that doesn’t make sense, right?” they said to me with a laugh. “Because like, we’re HMoob and we’re Christian. So of course, it’s [already] HMoob culture because *we* are

participating in it, and *we* are transforming it in our own ways. But at the time, I didn't see it that way. I saw it as kind of a very white, American thing." I appreciated cher for recognizing and problematizing the essentialization of HMoob identity and culture with our animist or shamanist practices only, since there are many HMoob people who may not necessarily practice these anymore but are still very much HMoob.

cher described this period in their life as having very "internalized racism" and experiencing "double consciousness." The latter is a term coined by W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) in his book *The Soul of Black Folks*, which described "double consciousness" as the "struggle African Americans face to remain true to black culture while at the same time conforming to the dominant white society" (Gringas, 2010, p. 83). This internal conflict followed them to college, where they actively hid their HMoob identity. "I would go by my institutional name, Anthony,<sup>43</sup> instead of my name now," cher shared, "and I would be like, just call me Asian Anthony because it's easier to pronounce. And you know, we have like seven or eight different Anthonys already so even for a while, I was Asian Anthony because we also had a white Anthony and a Latino Anthony. But all that began to change once I started pursuing education and student teaching."

By the time they had their first student teaching placement, they were still not open about their race and sexuality. By the time they went to their next placement, "It, like, flipped a switch." They realized the impact of how much teacher identity played a role in not only building rapport with students but nurturing affinity spaces that could be safer for students from historically excluded backgrounds. cher credited their cooperating teacher as having a profound impact on the way they engage race, gender, and sexualuality through education. "She's a straight and cisgender woman, but she just really uplifted queer identities in a way that I had

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<sup>43</sup> Pseudonym.

never experienced before,” cher added, ““cause, you know, my parents were like, not down with the gays. So, she kinda filled in that role.” This teacher also encouraged them to explore different pronouns, affirmed their diverse sexual and gender identity, and protected and defended them when conflict arose. This in turn led cher to being more open about their identity, exploring culturally relevant pedagogy within their teaching, and inviting more dialogue with students about racism, microaggressions, and intersecting identities.

“It was really like a rebirth for me,” cher shared. “I began using my HMoob name. I explain that I use all pronouns. And I tried to wear all my clothes that have HMoob symbols or words on them. I tell my students that I’m HMoob and that it’s an important part of who I am. I was able to leverage my HMoobness and queerness as strength instead of hiding them.” This led to building stronger rapport with students and eventually, cher went on to be the advisor for the school’s Middle Eastern and Asian Club. cher recalled that as an openly queer educator, students were excited to learn from them since students were unable to engage with queerness and LGBTQ+ topics within the school’s curriculum. To avoid tokenizing their students the same way they were by their school’s administrators, cher is careful to invite young people to talk about different topics that they are interested in or passionate about rather than assign it to them simply because of their cultural heritage. Many choose to utilize the club’s platform to talk about and raise awareness of the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality, especially within the Asian diaspora in America. “The students are so much more thoughtful,” cher praised, with warmth in their voice. “They were so excited and so thoughtful of each other. And they recognized that we can still be proud of being Asian but also have pride in our ethnicity. It really is a wonderful space.”

### *Creating and Sharing Collective Stories*

“I find art and performing very healing,” cher shared, a warm smile spread across their face as they revealed their love for theatre and the performing arts to me. When I asked if cher saw themselves as an artist, they clarified that they saw themselves as “more of a storyteller.” “Especially when I was younger, and we lived near my cousins,” cher explained. “We would come together a lot and play. See this house here?” cher directed me to the photo of their old childhood home. “It was such a big yard that when [my cousins and I] went to go play outside, we had all this space. And I’m very thankful for that. It was just like truly a time of a lot of imagination.”

As a young child, cher and their cousins would often play together—in their backyard, at the park, or at each other’s houses. “We [would] play, like, tag and lava monsters. We would also just sit there and imagine stories and different worlds and stuff.” What intrigued cher the most about these forms of imagination and storytelling was that it was a collective group effort. “My creativity has always been fed by different people throughout my life,” cher acknowledged, “and at this episode of my life, it was definitely my cousins, who [were] feeding a lot of my creativity and a lot of my storytelling. For example, I have an older cousin who still does a lot of storytelling [and does it through] Dungeons and Dragons actually.” Dungeons and Dragons (or D&D) is a collective role-playing game that requires members to work together and explore a shared imagined universe while solving tasks, engaging in combat, exploring, and gathering treasure and knowledge. This type of storytelling was what inspired cher to continue exploring what the role of collective storytelling might look like one day. “I love collaborating,” they said, “like collaborative storytelling. Even to this day, I think it’s way more fun than individual storytelling [because] I just get to learn more about different worlds. When I was younger, it opened me up to more possibilities and then I was introduced to different types of stories, like

anime and manga. [...] Back in high school, [my cousins and I] started to write this graphic novel called *Caramel Cafe*, and it was a mix between the *Boxcar Children* and *Nancy Drew*. So, it was like these teenagers who worked in a cafe, but they weren't just cafe workers. They also kind of solve crimes and help people with problems and stuff, so you could hire them to help you through things and whatnot. We started writing that back in kind of like late middle school going into high school.” cher sighed with a smile on their face. “We still hold onto that dream of starting a cafe someday.”

But while cher still participates in theater and different forms of storytelling, they shared that their cousins aren't as active anymore. “I actually brought [the story that I created for this project up] to [my cousins] because I was like, ‘Oh, yeah, it's a story about cousins who all inherit a different clothing item from their grandma,” cher explained, “and then all those different clothing items give them different superpowers. And I told them about it, and I was like, ‘Oh, we should collaborate on this story because it's literally about cousins, about us. And they were like, ‘Oh that'd be really cool’ but I think I'm the only one who maybe has the time to devote to these kinds of creative projects, which is totally fair since I'm getting a PhD in HMoob stories.”

Through collective storying, cher hopes to decolonize how stories are created and shared, especially for young people who are looking to represent themselves and their communities through their stories. They believe stories can be one way students can empower themselves. They disclosed that they want to keep nurturing young people's explorations of storytelling beyond the classroom. “One day I want to open a nonprofit community center for nerdy HMoob kids who like to play video games and watch anime and read manga,” they explained. “And, if they want to share their stories and creative artwork, then they can too. [...] I think theatre can

also be great. I want to write a play one day and have HMoob youth perform it. I think [theatre and plays] can really help us, just like, embody and have more empathy for the characters and stories that we are portraying [and] hopefully portray[ing] with care.”

### **Sai Lub Neej – Sai’s Life Story**

#### ***Radical Care for Others***

Taking care of others—whether it was emotionally, physically, or spiritually—was a calling Sai felt compelled to accept in their early twenties, coinciding with when they were also re/exploring and re/learning more about themselves as a queer and trans HMoob person. “I got to that point of hitting that spot in my life where I [felt] I could start to really take on being a caretaker for other people,” they explained to me, “and do it so with a lot of great care and intention that felt very meaningful [and] not from a place of codependency, as I had been operating from, just because I learned that from my own family.” Sai parlayed this care into being a massage therapist and focused on building and nurturing relationships with people that were built on trust, respect, and consent.

But the lessons learned have been much more than what Sai initially expected: the journey led them to re/explore their heritage and roots in ways that made them reflect on their community. “What I learned so much about,” they shared, “is reconnecting to a sense of cultural practice about what care is through body work healing [and] tapping into some of my own ancestral lineage when it comes to what practices we have done to take care of our bodies, our spirits, [and] each other. That was the gateway for me to really start caring for people in different ways intimately.”

When Sai’s sister was pregnant with twins, for example, they supported her through the body aches, pain, and transformation. It is an ancestral practice for family members to be

caretakers for one another, especially for those who are pregnant, and Sai learned that doing such work requires being vulnerable and intimate. During the process, Sai learned about traditional HMoob medicinal, physical, and spiritual practices—something that was missing in educational spaces and curriculum since “no one teaches you these things.” They added, “You have to actively pursue it yourself—and that’s gotta change.”

It was also this experience that made Sai realize how these types of care and intimacy—like massage therapy—were missing in queer and trans communities and spaces because of how inaccessible they can be economically, gender-inclusively, and sexuality-inclusively. This learning led Sai to offer sliding fees for massages and free massage therapy altogether for other queer and trans people, starting first with friends and loved ones, then extending the offer to local community members. Sai did this for three years. “It allowed me to really see the kind of need there is in taking care of this part of our community,” they shared. “Through those massage care [and] services, I got to converse with these folks, [got] to hear about their life stories, about what family backgrounds they [came] from [and] economic backgrounds. It taught me how to handle these stories with care and confidentiality.”

### *Storying for Connections and Healing*

Creating spaces for different types of stories is important. “It’s the place of archive,” Sai explained. “It’s a place of play. It’s imagination, and it’s the place of reference where you can see yourself, when you have stories that reflect you and stories that dream for you as well.” Sai grew up listening to stories from their Elders, like their parents and especially their Pog.<sup>44</sup> One of the colorful stories that their mom shared was the importance of companionship and harmony between animals and humans. “She had a pig back in Laos that she befriended,” Sai said with a

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<sup>44</sup> Translation: Paternal grandmother. Pronunciation: PAW.

chuckle, “and that was like her friend growing up. They were buddies, and they would go on these adventures.” These stories taught Sai to appreciate the simple things in life.

But stories can also be painful. Many stories Sai grew up listening to were about the Secret War and HMoob’s people exodus from the Southeast to the United States. While Sai appreciates these stories and their place within HMoob community, they also recognize the danger and limitation of always using war and violence as the beginning of HMoob history. They know HMoob stories encompass so much more than the war: there are also stories of love, healing, and dreaming that have been underutilized and undershared. “Stories give me a very nuanced and a deeper understanding about what it means to be a human,” they explained, “what it means to see myself. Because when we see ourselves, we begin to heal and dream of possibilities.”

It is with this pedagogical foundation that Sai, as the Queer Justice Coordinator for the nonprofit organization Nurturing Youth, curated a space called Zoo Heev Circle for queer and trans HMoob/Southeast Asian folks. The space is described by Sai as a “haven” for communities that have been historically excluded. In this space, queer and trans HMoob/Southeast Asian members meet biweekly to bond and share stories about their life experiences. Topics include how to nurture and sustain healthy relationships (familial, romantic, platonic, etc.), coming out to one’s family, and celebrating the New Year. These stories have been personal, emotional, and life-changing. Sai explained that every meeting always begins with a review of the community guidelines. “It’s important for us to remember what these community guidelines are,” they said, “because we get different people from all over the country. [...] I’m, like, very protective of this space. It’s important that it remains true to our community and its initial purpose.”

Sai shared that though members predominantly join from the Midwest, they have also connected with folks from the East and West coast as well to “really come together and just fellowship with each other in a safe space.” Having such a space, especially during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic when social isolation and distant learning was required, was crucial for survival. Many members sought out the space to counter loneliness and find a sense of community. “It’s been a space, especially during the pandemic, [for] people to learn who’s in their communities,” Sai shared with me, “to connect with them, and find support when things like isolations were being felt because [...] inequities were being heightened, [along with global] uprisings [for Black lives]. We’re still facing those very things.” Sharing stories, bonding over the love of food, and learning from and with one another has been one way to combat these systemic disconnects and begin to heal.

The diverse range of ages within these spaces lends itself to intergenerational connections and learnings, which have also been powerful. Sai was especially excited to connect with older queer and trans HMoob folks—whether it was as colleagues or as members of Zoo Heev Circle—because they never thought that they, as a queer and trans HMoob person, would be able to experience life as an older person. “I never thought I’d see myself at 28. I didn’t know if I was gonna make it to this point, and when I did, I was like, *I don’t know what to do now!*” they said as they laughed, “and I need people who are here living, who have gone through this, to bounce off these questions [of] navigating family, navigating into my own worthiness, and how to sustain ourselves economically.” It is through this storying and sharing that they have been able to learn more about HMoob history, HMoob queerness, and how to blend spiritual traditions and practices with contemporary ones. “We have conversations about what it is like bringing your partner home to your family,” they shared. “Especially as a queer person. Like, what are the

ceremonies like? The spiritual practices? The ancestral connections? What does all these mean when you're queer? I'm learning this from them.”

Sai hopes other young people can also re/connect with their racial and ethnic heritage and not have to feel like their queer identity and racial/ethnic identity are in competition with one another. “It is one of my hopes that a lot of queer and trans folks will get to re-tap back into the spirituality that makes most sense to them,” they explained, sharing that ceremonies like calling in one's spirit during the New Year are important for spiritual, physical, and emotional healing in the HMoob community, especially to make sure that the person is healthy and intact before starting the new year. However, Sai gently explained that not every queer and trans HMoob person has access to safety and ceremonies like the HMoob New Year, which was why it was important for Zoo Heev Circle to celebrate this. These intentions are important for Sai to understand and pass down, and they want to carry on these practices moving forward with care. “There's been a lot of religious traumas, especially for our people who have been displaced,” they said, “and in doing my own research, I've been wanting to learn more about indigenous spiritual practices that predate colonialism. I want us to have a space to talk about [them] without feeling shame because maybe we have forgotten them or maybe we were forced to not practice them. [...] I hope this can slowly begin to change as we relearn more about them.”

### *Passing Down Pog's Wisdom*

“There was this park behind my house,” Sai recalled. “It was this grand thing, even though it was so run-down. It was so janky, but it would be where all the kids in the neighborhood come to. That'd be where my grandmother sometimes took [me and my siblings].” To Sai, this park and their house contained some of their earliest memories of challenging gender

roles and norms through play and creation, with their Pog often watching and encouraging them to live out their dreams.

Pog was already in her 70s when she began caring for Sai and their siblings. Even though Sai was assigned male at birth, the different roles they took on when they played with their siblings—whether it was as humans or animals—explored a range of gender identities. “[My siblings and I] would be villains or sometimes we would be Sailor Moon or some adaptation of it,” Sai laughed. “It was so cool, and [Pog] never stopped us from becoming whatever we felt like becoming.” They wore a variety of feminine and masculine clothes and costumes to bring their characters to life, and mimicked and mirrored both male and female adults when it came to mannerisms, gender roles, and norms. At one point, their Pog even made them dolls with feminine HMoob outfits for them to play with, even though dolls are often traditionally associated with girl’s play. “I really learned a lot from her about the importance of affirming love,” Sai shared, “and giving space for someone to just grow into who they are and be who they are, especially [when it comes to] agency in a child.”

When looking back on these memories with fondness, Sai shared that they want to pass down their Pog’s wisdom of letting young people explore different gender identities and sexualities in safe and affirming spaces, with families as the foundation of support. As more HMoob youth come out and their parents are searching for ways to support them, Sai recognized the need to educate and build tools together as a community to dismantle the white-cisgender-heteronormative-patriarchy. “I hope to cultivate this kind of environment for families that are navigating these sorts of relationships,” they shared. “If they have queer children, if they have queer people in their family, these are the really brave conversations that can be points of entry so that we can be in better relationships with each other and ourselves.”

Sai rejects the white supremacy belief that HMoobness and queerness are in competition with one another, and they believe that familial connection and support is one way to address and disrupt these myths. “I would rather be in good unison with each other than in constant combat, in constant disarray,” Sai opined. “A lot of these conditions are created by the shit that we have to live in: white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy. It’ll take the death of me to ever allow for those systems to make me think that I can’t have joy with myself and people. I can’t allow myself to forget how important joy and healing is. We’re in a place and time where [there are] beautiful opportunities to build for a future where we can start to create languages and tools that are cross-cultural, where we have queer and trans people who are supported, and they feel seen and loved. And families are very much a part of that support network for us. I believe we can work through these together, not apart.”

### **Ying Lub Neej – Ying’s Life Story**

#### ***Sustaining Language and Culture with Lub Suab***

Ying is part of Lub Suab,<sup>45</sup> a nonprofit organization that is fighting to have the HMoob language be incorporated officially into their state’s school curriculum. They first became involved in this movement when the CEO of Lub Suab, who was Ying’s middle school teacher, invited them to join the work. Ying explained that their desire to be a part of Lub Suab evolved from a personal journey of discovering how to embrace their queer and HMoob identity without feeling like they had to choose one over the other. “[Doing this work] has helped me reflect on what I want to show people,” they explained, “that being queer does not deny you of your HMoobness. I used to struggle to see how they were connected and [for the longest time], I stepped away from the HMoob community because I could not see how they work together. I felt

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<sup>45</sup> Pseudonym.

like I needed to learn more [about being queer] 'cause being HMoob was something that I was already doing. But now, doing this work [with Lub Suab] has helped me embrace both.”

In addition to working with school district councils to discuss why offering HMoob language courses is critical to supporting HMoob identity and culture in their state, Ying also organized events for Lub Suab. They curated a gala to raise funds to support HMoob language work and connect with teachers and community organizers across the state. This was critical to learn about teachers’ perspectives on integrating HMoob language into the curriculum. This was followed by the I Strive Summer Camp, which piloted a camp for HMoob specialists to teach HMoob language courses. The curriculum was research-based and included the collaboration of classroom teachers and researchers. However, despite its success, it was difficult to pay HMoob teachers since they were viewed as “specialists” and not necessarily “licensed teachers.” “It was so bogus how they treated our teachers,” Ying explained, shaking their head disappointingly. “These HMoob teachers were experts but because it’s not an ‘official subject,’ funding these positions was difficult. It is now part of our work in Lub Suab that in addition to making HMoob language a part of the curriculum, that we also create a license to teach HMoob language and pay teachers fair wages.”

“Sustaining HMoob language is not the only way to support HMoob culture,” Ying explained. “You have to have dialogues about other topics as well, [and] this is important.” Within this realm of advocacy, Lub Suab organized a Men’s Health Forum to discuss how to address HMoob masculinity. Ying emphasized that it was important that the keynote speaker was a HMoob man who was considerate of mental health and did not adhere to toxic HMoob patriarchy. “We found someone who is queer, and he was the keynote speaker,” Ying explained, “so that was amazing. We had a lot of folks join us to learn about why toxic masculinity and

patriarchy needs to be abolished.” Ying smiled, reflecting back on their accomplishments. “I know that it’s only one way to sustain language and culture,” they shared, “but it’s so, like, important to deconstruct these, you know? And not be afraid to be the one to do it also.”

### *Expanding and Challenging Gender through Fashion*

“Let’s see if I can send the photo to you,” Ying said as they grabbed their phone and began searching through the photo app. *Ding!* I received a notification on the Facebook messenger app, indicating that I had received an attachment from them. I pulled it up to take a look. The photo was taken during a fashion show, where they had been the last model to walk the runway. They were wearing a white dress, bare breasted with their arms out in a pose and the skirt flaring up in the iconic style of Marilyn Monroe. A large hat, reminiscent of our HMoob people’s hat from present-day southern China, covered their face (see Figure 4).



*Figure 4 Ying walking for a HMoob fashion show and wearing a white dress and hat.*

“Oh my gosh!” I exclaimed excitedly, awed by the boldness displayed. “I love it!”

“Thank you, thank you,” Ying humbly acknowledged, beaming.

The comments under the photos, however, were in distress: “Is this who we should be allowed to represent HMoob people?” one Facebook user demanded. “How did HMoob boys come to this?” another wanted to know. “Oh look. He looks like he was raised by a single mother,” another presumed.

Chuckling, Ying shared that while most were strangers who were simply offended by the picture, some of the commenters were people Ying knew in real life and had shared spaces with. But the comments didn't bother Ying, who excitedly reminisced about the event to me. "It was very uplifting for me," they described. "I remember when I was on the stage. Girl, like it was crazy! I was like the last model, and everyone was screaming, and it was just something that was never before seen. Yeah...I really enjoyed that experience." A triumphant smile appeared on Ying's face as they reflected back on the moment with pride and no regret.

It was important for Ying to center their HMoobness within queer spaces, and vice versa. "When I became more involved in the queer and trans BIPOC scene," they explained, "I began doing a lot of voguing and like, dancing and walking in the ballroom. So, I did that for a few years, and I enjoyed it, but I remember wanting to be able to express myself within HMoob spaces too. So, when I heard bout [the fashion show], I was excited! It's my people, and we are QUEENS, and we get to be able to go on a runway. And I wanted my people to understand that more and see more of who we are as a community, [especially] in queer spaces like ballroom."

Challenging gender norms and roles through fashion was not something Ying thought they would be doing; their work initially encompassed more direct organizing and protesting. But when they submitted a photo of themselves for a modeling contest and received a call back to join the fashion show, Ying knew they couldn't turn it down since they wanted to challenge themselves to do something they had never done before and to spark conversations among the HMoob community. Ying shared that the photo, their boldness, and the particular outfit affected HMoob men the most, a result they were not surprised by. "Initially, they thought that I was a girl that [wore] the dress," Ying recalled as they laughed, "and they was like, *How could they allow a woman to show her titties off, right?* But then the conversation went back with, *No,*

*that's a man, right?"* Ying laughed and snapped their finger, "And I'm just like, 'Bitch! You're all wrong! I'm both.'"

By participating in the fashion show, Ying demonstrates that the boundaries of HMoob fashion—and by extension, HMoob queerness—are ever evolving, changing, and expanding. "We're queer, so we can be dramatic," they admitted while chuckling, "but our outfits have come a long way and it's gon' be forever changing." It was important for Ying to display that HMoobness and queerness were not mutually exclusive, that fashion can be one possible way to embrace that relationship. "Our clothes used to be so vibrant," Ying surmised, "and this was before French colonialism. Now they're dark and bland, [which] are the results of French patriarchy. I want us to go back to our roots, to being bold and dramatic. We're HMoob. We're not boring, and our fashion definitely shows that."

### ***Using Social Media to Learn and Re/Produce Knowledge***

Spiritually and religion—in particular Christianity within the United States—has often been weaponized against queer bodies, relationships, and practices in attempts to silence our community, but Ying has actually leaned into HMoob spirituality for queer empowerment, exploration, and understanding of themselves, their identity, and their relationship to their community. "Do you have Tik Tok?" they asked me. Tik Tok is a social media platform where users create, share, and watch short-form videos.

"I don't," I answer honestly. "I'm not too savvy on Tik Tok. I'm a bit old school."

Ying laughed. "That's okay," they said. "So, I have a Tik Tok, right? And I've talked to Lub Suab and how they feel if I talk about the things we do in my content. And they go, 'Yeah, go ahead. Like, do what you gotta do to represent yourself.' So, I make a lot of Tik Toks talking about HMoob history and lately, I've been getting into HMoob shamanism." Here, they

interrupted themselves and asked if I had ever heard of Hey Billy, a HMoob content creator. I responded that I had through the social media platform Facebook, but that I did not follow his work too closely. Ying explained that Hey Billy, a young HMoob shaman, often talks about and attempts to build an understanding of the connection among HMoob spirituality, shamanism, and queerness for the younger HMoob generations.

“My sister is a shaman,” Ying shared, their voice warm with pride and respect. “She was born with the gift, so shamanism plays a huge role in my life. I disagree that shamanism is seen as a religion; it’s more of a way of life to me. Kinda like an ethno-religion. HMoob people don’t just believe in it. We LIVE it! Even many HMoob Christians now still do in some ways.”

HMoob Christians, Ying explained, still participate in many of the practices that stem from shamanism. One example they shared was the use of honorifics like the term “dab laug,” or maternal uncle, when addressing extended family members. “The ‘dab’ part of dab laug simply means spirit or ghost,” Ying explained, “and it stems from how we are connected spiritually or have ancestral spirits protecting us, you know, even if we may marry into other clans and into their clan’s ancestral spirits.” These practices, Ying concluded, are why they feel shamanism is more of a way of life.

“The reason why I [started] look[ing] into shamanism [on Tik Tok] is because it really does explain how and why people move anthropologically,” Ying shared. “We interpret [new] things based on our understanding. If shamanism is a reactive religion, how would the spirit feel if a man marries a man? A lot of people would say it’s taboo, but like, when I asked them why and have they ever seen it be done before, they say no. It’s all about fear instead of understanding because it’s out of the ordinary. I want to approach it with understanding and not fear.” Ying appears to be more spiritually in tune than most young people their age, though they

shared that they don't necessarily have the gifts of a shaman like their sister. "[My gifts do not manifest themselves] very strongly," Ying said as they laughed, "but I am learning how to say a few khawv koob."<sup>46</sup> "So even though I am spiritually inclined," Ying went on, "I don't have the gifts like my sister. I won't say that I could become a shaman, because I can't see [apparitions and have visions] but I can sense things. It's still new to me. But you know, me leaning into shamanism has helped me learn more about my queer identity."

Using social media to educate themselves about HMoob shamanism has been life-altering. "[I learned through these videos on Tik Tok that] the foundation for HMoob shamanism," Ying explained, "is all about balance, right? If you're a boy, [when doing a traditional HMoob soul calling ritual, the family] kills a girl chicken for you. If you're a girl, they kill a boy chicken for you. [Even the honorifics] that we used [are] all about balancing the feminine and the masculine." When calling out to spirits for protection, for example, shamans often call out to Nkauj Yaj Yuam and Nraug Yaj Yuam, spirits who appear in the form of peacocks. "Nkauj" is a feminine honorific while "Nraug" is masculine; "Yaj Yuam" simply means peacock. Ying learned that both the Nkauj Yaj Yuam and Nraug Yaj Yuam appear as brightly colored peacocks within the spirit realm to shamans, denoting that both are male birds. "It's not about [physical] gender or that you're necessarily a woman," Ying explained, "but rather, [whether] you embody the energy of femininity or masculinity. It's about balance."

Learning about these details and sharing them among HMoob youth on popular social media platforms is important because, as Ying shared, there have been many trans HMoob people who were ill and reached out to a shaman to perform an ua neeb saib<sup>47</sup> for the shaman to

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<sup>46</sup> Khawv koob are the learned words and incantations believed to have supernatural powers that anyone can use and utter in rapid succession to draw spiritual protections to themselves. Pronunciation: kaw CONE.

<sup>47</sup> A ritual in which the shaman journeys into the spirit realm to see and understand what might be causing the ailment. Pronunciation: ua NENG shy.

better understand how to heal and support them. Some of these instances were shared as dab neeg by Hey Billy on Tik Tok. During one particular ritual, a shaman discovered that the trans person's spirit was actually feminine and thus needed to align their physical body to match their spirit in order to heal. "It doesn't necessarily mean you're a woman," Ying explained, "but that you embody the spirit of femininity. And how you respect your feminine spirit —whether you identify as a trans woman or not—is your choice but you have to respect that. If you [get called] by the wrong name, you will feel sick 'cause you're disrespecting your spirit. So of course, calling this person a woman will make them feel better because the term aligns more with their spirit. [...] But you can always do nonbinary, too, which is still more aligned than being called a man. Isn't that amazing?"

Ying stressed the importance of having a platform like Tik Tok and Facebook to share important cultural information like this, especially how it relates to gender and sexuality. "The more I understand shamanism [and learn more about it via social medias like Tik Tok]," Ying shared, "the more I understand being queer. Being HMoob is so gay, and I love it!"

### **Discussion**

In this track, we read about the life and times of queer and trans HMoob youth who share how they are embracing Menyulam Laib practice. I shared three different stories from each of the Menyulam Laib to demonstrate the different ways they enact their history, language and culture as sustenance, rework language and culture, disrupt deficit narratives about themselves and their community, destabilize the status quo, and contest white-cisgender-heteronormative-patriarchal violence. From the stories shared, we see that each of them embraces being a Menyulam Laib in similar yet diverging ways from our Elder's fugitive practices. In this section, I will highlight the major themes that arose across these different stories.

### *Honoring Dab Neeg as Testimonies and Inherited Gifts*

Stories and storying are important practices within Indigenous communities, and the Menyuum Laib shared that dab neeg and creating dab neeg played a role in their personal and professional lives. Some of the dab neeg were passed down to them from an Elder: KM explained that her mother's love for dab neeg was what inspired and influenced her to become a writer while Muun and Sai shared that it was their grandmothers who were the storytellers in their families and often spoke about life in Laos. On the other hand, Ying identified Hey Billy, a shaman and content creator on the social media platform Tik Tok, as someone whose dab neeg about spirituality and its relationship to queerness were educational and influential. Meanwhile, cher did not identify an Elder or any other person as the storyteller in their life; rather, they created stories as a young child collectively with their cousins. The Menyuum Laib taking story to heart is culturally consistent with how the HMoob people in general take dab neeg very seriously, as it is how important historical information is passed down.

In contrast, outsiders often question HMoob storytellers' expertise and accounts of historical events. Dab neeg from HMoob Elders are often treated as secondary knowledge or minimized as folktales when compared to "official" historical accounts of the Secret War. Radiolab, a podcast that claims to "ask deep questions and use investigative journalism to get the answers" did an interview with HMoob author Kao Kalia Yang and her uncle, Eng ("About Radiolab," 2021). Radiolab claimed that they wanted to talk to Yang's uncle about his experience during the Secret War, in particular his encounter with what was referred to as "yellow rain." According to Uncle Eng (with translation provided by Yang), the "yellow rain" was a chemical that was dropped from the sky by planes and inflicted excruciating pain on the people, the animals, and the environment. Radiolab dismissed the dab neeg, claiming that they tested the

“yellow rain” and found it to be bee feces. Uncle Eng and Yang tried explaining for two hours that HMoob people have extensive knowledge about the local bees, having harvested their honey for centuries. They argued that bee feces could not have caused the extensive damage that “yellow rain” did, nor could it have caused so many survivors to have post-traumatic stress disorder. When Radiolab continued to deny that “yellow rain” was anything other than bee feces, Yang ended the interview immediately:

“My uncle says for the last twenty years he didn’t know that anyone was interested in the deaths of the Hmong people. He agreed to do this interview because you were interested. What happened to the Hmong happened, and the world has been uninterested for the last twenty years. He agreed because you were interested. That the story would be heard and the Hmong deaths would be documented and recognized. That’s why he agreed to the interview, that the Hmong heart is broken and our leaders have been silenced, and what we know has been questioned again and again is not a surprise to him, or to me. I agreed to the interview for the same reason, that Radiolab was interested in the Hmong story, that they were interested in documenting the deaths that happened. There was so much that was not told. Everybody knows that chemical warfare was being used. How do you create bombs if not with chemicals? We can play the semantics game, we can, but I’m not interested, my uncle is not interested. We have lost too much heart, and too many people in the process. I, I think the interview is done.” (Yang, 2012).

Uncle Eng and Yang’s heartbreaking conversation with Radiolab demonstrates just how frustrating it is when dab neeg from HMoob Elders are dismissed and/or minimized, especially when compared to “official” accounts and records. Radiolab’s role in actively perpetuating false narratives about our people, gaslighting Uncle Eng’s memories and expertise, and weaponizing “western science” to undermine our Indigenous dab neeg mirrors the historical and current racist treatment of Indigenous people and the dismissal of our knowledge by the United States government and military. We continue to be treated as inferior, even when we have more extensive knowledge than they do about our own people, the land and water, and the animals that share these spaces with us.

But while Radiolab may have dismissed Uncle Eng's story and refused to acknowledge Uncle Eng and Yang as experts and knowledge holders, it is clear in listening to the Menyulam Laib talk about the dab neeg in their lives—whether in reference to the Secret War, to spirituality, or to queerness—that these dab neeg are more than just counterstories or personal narratives: these dab neeg are our testimonies and are inherited gifts from our Elders. As Sai explained, “[Dab neeg is] the place of archive. It's a place of play. It's imagination, and it's the place of reference where you can see yourself, when you have stories that reflect you and stories that dream for you as well.” The Menyulam Laib's love for and appreciation of dab neeg are poignant and powerful, and during our time together, they referenced many of these dab neeg as influential within their work and their lives. Their treatment of these dab neeg clearly contrasts with Radiolab's treatment of them. The Menyulam Laib repeatedly referenced the presence of their Elders' dab neeg in their lives when sharing their life stories, especially as they pertained to the Secret War. Not once did they acknowledge their school's narrative on the Secret War; instead, their memories and knowledge shared for the purpose of this dissertation came from their Elders' dab neeg, which speaks to how they view the United States' imperialism.

Like the Elders who gifted the dab neeg to them, the Menyulam Laib shared that they hope to pass their own dab neeg down to the younger generations, even if the medium used to transfer them may be different. Muun, for example, wants to utilize manga and anime as a platform for telling stories about the Secret War. Their plan to open a communal art gallery also speaks to the way they are thinking about how to support young HMoob artists' exploration of stories via art. Similarly, cher wants to open a nonprofit to foster a space for young people to story and share their creations with one another. Ying, on the other hand, is exploring what the role of social media might be in transmitting, preserving, and producing HMoob history,

language, and culture. Sai feels it is also important to not only pass down their Pog's dab neeg but also her wisdom in ensuring children can play and explore gender identity and expression in safe and affirming spaces. Like our Elders before us, the Menyuam Laib are constantly thinking about how to support HMoob youth and what knowledge and dab neeg to gift to them. We also see the ways the Menyuam Laib actively contribute to the passing down of cultural identity, values, beliefs, and history (Vang, 2013). However, unlike our Elders who may have omitted certain identities and practices in attempts to so-called preserve HMoob identity and culture, the Menyuam Laib expand upon the principles of traditional dab neeg and re-center queer and trans HMoob individuals as the protagonists or as having positions of power in their dab neeg.

Dab neeg are important and essential aspects of our community, culture, and history. The Menyuam Laib's love and appreciation of dab neeg as testimonies and inherited gifts demonstrate the importance of treating stories from Indigenous communities as history, as research, and as knowledge. It also demands that our people be respected as knowledge holders and experts. As the Menyuam Laib continue to question cultural practices and traditions, the content within these dab neeg will shift and evolve in response (as seen with the dab neeg they created via this project).

### ***Practicing Communal Love and Radical Self-Care***

A thread I noticed being woven through each of the Menyuam Laib stories is the importance of practicing communal love and radical self-care. HMoob cultural practices have always emphasized the importance of putting community first and protecting the "face" of your clan, sometimes to the detriment of our souls. However, within these dab neeg, we see how queer and trans HMoob youth work to foster spaces and practices that are healing for our community without giving up our well-being.

As co-facilitators for Zoo Heev Circle, Sai and KM go to great lengths to maintain a safe space by protecting their and members' identities and well-being. Not only is there a note attached to every event to remind readers that Zoo Heev Circle is for LGBTQ+ HMoob and Southeast Asian community members only, interested members must also register in advance and then be vetted by the facilitators before joining the space. Sai also brings attention to the community guidelines at the beginning of every meeting to remind members and ensure that they are being respectful. The guidelines not only ground the practices within Zoo Heev Circle but are also a living document that shapes itself to the needs of its members. These efforts highlight how thoughtful and careful KM and Sai are with their intentions to ensure that Zoo Heev Circle continues to center and serve LGBTQ+ HMoob and Southeast Asian community members; as KM explained to me, “[A]s long as I’m here, as long as I’m still able to hold onto this space, I want to nourish it, and I hope others can find it just as healing as I have.” Their pedagogical practice of utilizing dab neeg as a starting point for conversations and sharing these dab neeg themselves before inviting others to open up illustrate the importance of personal connection when building community, especially for queer and trans youth who may be seeking spaces like this online and onground. I was especially touched when Zoo Heev Circle hosted a New Year Celebration because they recognized that not every queer and trans HMoob person has (safe) access to ceremonies. KM and Sai’s sharings could have easily monopolized the space and made it about them, but how and what they choose to share actually opened the space for others to feel comfortable in sharing as well. This communicates Sai and KM’s refusal to just be seen as impersonal facilitators; instead, they are members of their community as well, and they see the stories of their community members as their own. The protection of their community is also the protection of themselves, and vice versa.

Similarly, cher, as the advisor for the student organization Middle Eastern and Asian Club, made sure to share personal stories about themselves first to build connections with their students. Their emphasis on informing students about their pronouns and use of clothes to celebrate their heritage and gender identity was able to open conversations with students about these topics, and cher made sure to also lean into students' strengths and cultural heritage when determining what topics to explore. I also noted how, while cher was considered a top student back in high school and was often selected to present on behalf of their community by default, cher is careful not to replicate the same pressure and harm to their students. White people and institutions often expect PGM individuals to perform (free) emotional labor. This act is due to the wider societal expectations white people have of PGM communities to lead diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) opportunities without necessarily providing resources or structures in place to support them (Vigil et al., 2023). It's also important to acknowledge how cher's cooperating teacher when they were a student teacher was instrumental in advocating for them. This care from the teacher not only influenced the type of curriculum and pedagogy cher utilized within and outside of their classroom but also how they approach advocating for and protecting students.

While Zoo Heev Circle and the Middle Eastern and Asian Club focus on forming personal connections for support, the nonprofit Lub Suab's love for HMoob students and families translates to organizing public and educational events. The fight to have HMoob language be included as part of the state's official curriculum is a confrontation and challenge to the United States' assimilationist education. I admired how Lub Suab created their own summer camp in response to their critics to showcase how much students want a HMoob language course; however, Ying did share that it was difficult to find funding due to HMoob language not

being officially recognized as a classroom subject. Ying's comments about how Lub Suab is now working to ensure fair wages for their teachers highlights how systemic transformations are necessary to maintaining and sustaining these efforts. Additionally, their Men's Health Forum was both a celebration and deconstruction of HMoob masculinity. Ying was careful to share, "We had a lot of folks join us to learn about why toxic masculinity and patriarchy needs to be abolished. It's so important to deconstruct these, you know? And not be afraid to be the one to do it also." Their recognition that these conversations may be difficult and messy but necessary demonstrate how they are willing to call in their community to talk about such issues, even when they may be the recipient of hate messages and violence for doing so. However, Ying refuses to let the scrutiny overwhelm them and actively works to protect themselves. Them stepping away from the HMoob community to gather themselves and nurture their well-being by surrounding themselves with love and joy via friendships, ballroom culture, and voguing was an act of radical self-love to protect their peace.

I also want to highlight how KM and her friends used cooking and food as a pedagogical practice to facilitate and nurture friendships. In HMoob community, food has always been one way to bring a community together and can be used for many purposes: general consumption, for medicinal purposes, and as a cultural, spiritual, and religious practice to honor our ancestors. The "chicken diet," for example, is something commonly recommended specifically for those who have just given birth to heal the body physically, emotionally, and spiritually, especially when paired with medicinal herbs (Yang, 2020). The "chicken diet" is also a commonly prepared dish to be eaten regularly but not always with herbs unless they are needed. Dishes used for cultural, religious, and spiritual practices also require specific handling and preparation; the "chicken diet", for example, must be prepared by someone other than the birthing person for 30 days,

usually their partner. This intention is to ensure that the one who has just given birth can focus on healing.

While food plays an important role in our community and cultural practices, most studies on HMoob people's relationship to and connection with food tend to only focus on the correlation between our diet and health concerns (Perez et al., 2006; Cobb, 2010; Yang, 2020). What's missing within these studies is how cooking together in HMoob culture, as demonstrated by KM's story, is a pedagogical practice of connecting with and caring for one another. As KM emphasized, "[c]ooking together is very nurturing." Her emphasis on the act of "cooking" as opposed to merely "eating" or just food in general within her statement illustrates the importance of actively learning, engaging and doing the activity together. And while she may not necessarily cook with her clan like how our Elders did in the past, these practices are still important to pass down as young people build friendships and take care of one another in and outside of our respective clans.

Practicing communal care and radical self-love are not mutually exclusive. So often, we are expected to light ourselves on fire in order to keep others warm because the "face" of our clan and community are framed as more important, but these dab neeg showcase how queer and trans HMoob youth refuse to engage in practices that are detrimental to their soul. Instead, they demonstrate the importance of ensuring your own well-being first before nurturing others. Whether it is through personal connections or educational events, it is clear what message the Menyuum Laib wants to pass down to future generations: that your love and care for others should mirror your love and care for yourself.

### *Re/Learning Ancestral Practices and Spirituality*

Religion and spirituality were topics that each Menyulam Laib brought up, especially when discussing how Christianity is weaponized to police and control queer bodies and practices. Due to the constraints of this dissertation, however, the stories from Muun and KM about the role of Christianity in their lives were not included in their dab neeg above. I did, however, include those of Sai, Ying, and cher, whose re/learning about ancestral practices and leaning into shamanist and animist spirituality for empowerment and understanding reflect the different ways young people are engaging with the aforementioned topics. Their involvement also illustrates how, despite misunderstandings about HMoob religion and spirituality (Conquergood, 1989), there is a growing interest among the younger HMoob generations to re/learn and sustain these practices (Xiong et al., 2004).

Teachings about shamanism, animism, and protective incantations—such as khawv koob—are usually passed down from an Elder to a young person whose shamanic gifts have begun to manifest themselves. While Txiv explained to me that anyone can learn khawv koob, only those who were born with gifts can become shamans. However, this does not deter the Menyulam Laib from learning about spiritual and ancestral practices. cher, Ying, and Sai share that they lean into them to understand themselves better as a queer and trans HMoob person. For example, I shared in Track 1 that in HMoob culture, it is believed that the female body and the male body have different spirits; these differences are often weaponized to reject trans people's existence by arguing that even if we may change our physical appearance to align more with the gender we identify with, our spirits are still male and female. However, Ying pushes back against this by explaining how it's not about presenting your physical body and spirit as one gender or the other; rather, it's more about the energy you feel within your body physically, emotionally, and spiritually and whether it aligns more with feminine or masculine energy. Ying is also careful

to note that being feminine or masculine does not equate to being a woman or a man. Similarly, cher also shared that it's about ensuring your body and spirits are aligned so that you don't fall ill from the imbalance. This reframing of spirituality to empower themselves and their queer and trans identity are important aspects of how young people are re/learning spiritual practices and interpreting and applying them to inform their current lived realities. Within their dab neeg and practices, they did not change the lore of our spiritual practices to fit our lives, but rather honor the lore the way it is and simply reframe how queer and trans HMoob's lives, ways of being, and practices already adhere to HMoob epistemology, ontology, and cosmology. Their application of HMoob epistemologies, ontology, and cosmology to understand and explain their queer and trans identity demonstrate the ways Menyuum Laib actually understand HMoob culture and traditions more than Elders give credit to them for.

Additionally, Ying and Sai are passionate about transferring these practices and this knowledge into their professional lives as well. Ying's use of Tik Tok to learn about and re/produce knowledge about spirituality demonstrates the different and new ways young people consume and distribute knowledge and information among themselves. Ying recognized that there are misconceptions about HMoob shamanism and sought to engage with social media to educate both our community and outsiders on the topic. Similarly, in their professional work as a massage therapist, Sai understands that taking care of the physical body is just as important as being emotionally, mentally, and spiritually healthy. They also recognize the ways in which queer and trans BIPOC communities do not have or are often denied access to these types of resources and care. When they perform body massages, especially to queer and trans BIPOC individuals, they make sure to listen to them and take note of the things they share about their pain so that they know how to approach the massage with intent and care, in an effort to not dismiss their

concerns. Unfortunately, 47% of LGBTQ+ folks still experience gaslighting from their medical doctors, and their concerns about their health are often dismissed or minimized (Mastroianni, 2023), especially those who identify as BIPOC and LGBTQ+ (Casanova-Perez et al., 2021).

Queer and trans HMoob youth's re/learning, understanding, and application of ancestral practices and spirituality demonstrate the different and new ways in which young people interact with their world and apply this knowledge. While our Elders may claim that young people are uninterested in learning about HMoob culture and practices, these dab neeg from Menyuum Laib prove otherwise. Young people are simply engaging with them within the context of their current lived realities. Whether or not Elders agree with these new forms of engagement, interpretation, and application of HMoob ancestral practices and spirituality remains to be determined.

### **Sitting with the Dab Neeg**

The dab neeg the Menyuum Laib shared within this track presents some of the Menyuum Laib practices KM, Muun, cher, Sai, and Ying lean into when maintaining and transforming language and culture. Across their dab neeg, we understand how important dab neeg are to them, not just in learning more about their history and culture but as a pedagogical practice to re/imagine and disrupt the status quo, even when doing so may invite criticism. Their emphasis on not just caring for our community but for ourselves, too, challenges the HMoob cultural practice of putting your clan and community before yourself. My hope is that the union between communal love and radical self-care is passed down so that we can have both healthy communities and individuals. I also really appreciate how the Menyuum Laib lean into HMoob epistemologies, ontology, and cosmology for understanding and strength when re/interpreting ancestral and spiritual practices and religion to make sense of their queer identities, especially if

they have been weaponized against them in the past. These reclamations demonstrate the intelligence, wit and resilience of our community.

I do want to be cautious when describing these practices as part of HMoob shamanism and animism, at least for now. It isn't because I don't see them as such, but because, similar to cher, I, too, want to be mindful of the distinction between reclamations and misappropriations, the latter being easy to slip into if one is not critical, careful, and intentional. As previously stated, religion was a topic that came up in all of the Menyua Laib's dab neeg; out of the five, Ying was the only one who described themselves as practicing shamanism and animism growing up, sharing that their sister is a shaman. Sai, cher, Muun, and KM grew up attending HMoob churches and practicing Christianity. cher, who grew up within the HMoob church, was the only one to explicitly state that they are no longer part of the church. They also stated that their learning about HMoob shamanism and animism practices is something they want to be gentle with, which I feel we all ought to do as we are exploring how HMoob shamanism and animism can look and feel within the context of our current lived realities.

In concluding this track, it is my hope that the dab neeg shared and their common themes offer a glimpse into how HMoob youth continue to carry our history, language, and culture with them while committing themselves to interrogating and disrupting institutions and systems that seek to dehumanize them and their community.

## TRACK 5

### MENYUAM LAIB COV DAB NEEG – STORYING SUPERHERO STORIES

*“My hope with Zong's Tale is that it brings about an enjoyment for what mysteries lie in our culture as Hmong people, and fosters compassion for those on their courageous quest to find what home means to them.”*

– Sai

#### Introduction

In the last track, we read about the life and times of five Menyuum Laib who are reworking and transforming culture to be more inclusive for our queer and trans HMOOB community. In this track, we will be reading the dab neeg<sup>48</sup> they created during our journey together and some of their thought processes behind-the-scenes when creating these dab neeg. I feel it is important to recognize that dab neeg do not have to necessarily be polished and perfected in order to be shared. I communicated this to the Menyuum Laib, whose dab neeg manuscripts were at varying stages of completion. Therefore, some of the dab neeg shared are complete while others are still “on the run.” I also want to be transparent and state that I did not edit or revise any of the dab neeg in this track. How the readers are reading them is how they were offered to me by the Menyuum Laib; the only “revision” I made was a bit of formatting to fulfill the required guidelines of submitting this manuscript to the academy. The dab neeg, with their unique content, language, word choice, grammar, punctuation, style, and form, are solely from the heart of each Menyuum Laib.

I also want to share that this track does not contain Ying's dab neeg. During the writing process of this dissertation, when I asked the Menyuum Laib to submit their dab neeg for me to

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<sup>48</sup> Translation: “Folk stories.” Pronunciation: DA neng.

read and analyze, Ying stepped away from the project to prioritize their family and well-being. I included their life story in the previous track to still honor my learning with them and their contributions to this dissertation. I am honored to have learned from the Menyuam Laib about disrupting research that is dehumanizing and respecting the Menyuam Laib practices of enacting radical self-care. I fully respected Ying's decision to focus on themselves and their family during this time and will be focusing on the dab neeg KM, Muun, cher, and Sai crafted and shared.

By reading the dab neeg they created and their intentions behind them, we will be addressing the research question, *In what ways do queer and trans HMoob youth's dab neeg (i.e., culturally grounded stories and storying) create spaces to reinterpret and shift HMoob lifeways for the queer and trans HMoob community?* In these sharings, we see how their experiences navigating race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality as queer and trans HMoob youth impact the different ways they story dab neeg and the substance they choose to focus on. We also see how these queer and trans HMoob youth's dab neeg either parallel or conflict with those of our Elders—or even other Menyuam Laib. As we take in each of these dab neeg, let's consider how we can incorporate and address the different themes and messages they offer into our everyday practices and spaces.

## **KM's Superhero Story**

### ***Behind the Scenes***

The following section is an excerpt of KM's dab neeg, which is the final battle scene between two former friends, whose similar goals of but diverging approaches to HMoob history and liberation create conflict. When asked about the artistic process behind its creation, KM shared: "My untitled story is inspired by the ideas of Marvel<sup>49</sup> and has been a creative outlet to allow my imagination to flourish on what Hmong superheroes could be like. This story is drawn from my own life experiences on navigating identity. While also, drawing in on my understanding of how my Hmong community and folks view our complex history. I address important themes of time, history, culture, reality, grief, and generational trauma. My hope is that this story allows folks to reflect on historical trauma and ultimately, how we make peace with a past we cannot amend."

### ***Untitled***

#### **Synopsis:**

Paj, Hmong American superhero, and her Hmong superhero friends find themselves at a crossroads with another hero, Keej. Keej shares their plan to undo history and to return the Hmong people back to their original state of peace before chaos and the Secret War. Paj and her friends are immediately torn between ethics and morals with the proposition of the unstoppable Keej.

#### **Context:**

Paj and her friends are trying to stop Keej who is creating a spiritual realm opening to

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<sup>49</sup> An American comic book publisher. Spider-Man, X-Men, and the Fantastic Four are some of Marvel's most popular intellectual property.

go back in time to change history. The opening is at the top of one of the mountains in Laos. After battling her way up the mountain, Paj successfully makes it to the top and meets Keej.

**Final Battle Monologue:**

“Keej!” shouted Paj as she finally took her first step on the top of the mountain. As Paj limped, closer to the ancestral portal, the whirlwind of spirits started to dance faster. The spirits of the Ancestors completely covered and protected Keej’s body, making it impossible to see them in the tornado of souls.

“Keej, please, listen to me,” Paj pleaded as she walked closer. Glancing from the corner of their eyes, Keej noticed Paj’s war-torn state of body. But Keej ignored Paj and gasped for another large breath of air before transitioning their song onwards to the final verse.

“I want to change the past too,” Paj blurted out loud to which caught Keej by surprise.

*‘Seriously?’* Keej thought to themselves.

“I’m so sick and tired of people only associating us from the war. That the world only knows us because of it,” Paj yelled through the barrier of souls. Keej wasn’t sure what to make from such a statement, given that Paj had spent the last few weeks expressing such opposing opinions. “Our people did not deserve the trauma they went through. I believe you, like I told you before, when you saw how beautiful and peaceful it was in the mountain villages. I believe everything you saw and experienced. But Keej, to hurt and destroy people too? Is it worth it to restore our people’s peace by hurting others in the same ways we have been hurt? I believe our people can have paradise again. But I don’t think it’s by going backwards. I think Hmong people can have peace right here, right now and for the future. And I think that’s worth protecting and fighting for. It’s ok to feel sad, it’s ok to feel hurt; I sometimes still do.”

Holding back tears of grief they weren't expecting, Keej wanted to stop playing. Keej wanted to tell Paj how sad, lonely, and frustrated they have been.

"Keej, all of this grief is the result of how much we love," Paj said in almost a whisper. "We can't get certain things back. But that is why we honor our ancestors and those moments that once mattered."

"But it hurts. Being Hmong is painful and I hate it!" Keej screamed, finally letting go of their instrument.

"I know it is," Paj tenderly said.

"Why did we have to go through so much?"

"I don't know either Keej, all I know is that it was not ok."

Keej clasped on their knees with their head bowed down. Paj crouched down to meet Keej's eyes, lifting their head up with her hand. The two ex-best friends looked each other in the eyes, with sadness and grief all at the same time, and immediately held onto each other. Keej held onto Paj until the spirits went back home to their slumber and the sunlight pierced through the gray skyline.

## **Muun's Superhero Story**

### ***Behind the Scenes***

For their dab neeg, Muun utilized a multimedia approach to storying by writing a paj huam<sup>50</sup> and illustrating one of the characters (see Figures 5, 6, and 7). The paj huam, “written from the perspective of one of the sisters,” sings a song about two siblings’ love for one another.

Muun shared regarding their dab neeg: “I was inspired to write this as a way to showcase my own transition. I am inspired by the Mulan Chinese story. I think every retelling is a powerful display of gender across femininity and masculinity. I tried to mimic the original Chinese poem with a Hmong paj huam but I struggle with words so I kept it as a simple poem. I think little words have big things to say! I don’t really have a singular takeaway but I loved myths and fairytales. They are such big ways to showcase stories and life lessons we learn through. I hope that people reading can see the simple, fairytale like style and how it plays against gender oppression.”

### ***Ode to My Dear Sister***

Mother has one son

Mother has one daughter.

When we were young,

Sister would drum.

Brother would hum.

He wore sister’s skirt

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<sup>50</sup> HMoob oral poetry that uses a specific rhyming pattern and scheme (“Paj Huam,” 2022). Pronunciation: BA hua.

He wore sister's shoes  
He bore mother's rage  
As she saw she had no son.

Whispers from the mountain side,  
Say the Chinese come to take a bride.  
The men come down, they take a daughter  
Refusal, begins a slaughter.

Mother said,  
"No one will know if one is gone."  
Brother said,  
"No one will know which one is one."

Brother cuts sister's braid.  
Sister ties brother's waist.  
Sister feels so numb,  
While brother continues to hum.

Mother has one son,  
Mother has one daughter.

When dawn arrives,

No family survives.

Brother rode away in a skirt.  
Clean, white, and bore no dirt.

Before he left,  
He had one request.

When he enter the chambers come,  
And they find no breast.  
“Sister, continue to run West.  
For I can be a woman,  
In my final rest.”

Mother has no son.  
Mother has two daughters.

She wore my skirts.  
She wore my shoes.  
I hear her hum,  
When I drum.

*Muun's Illustrations*



Figure 5 This illustration depicts a paj ntaub nplooj, a design that appears on the “brother”’s sash.

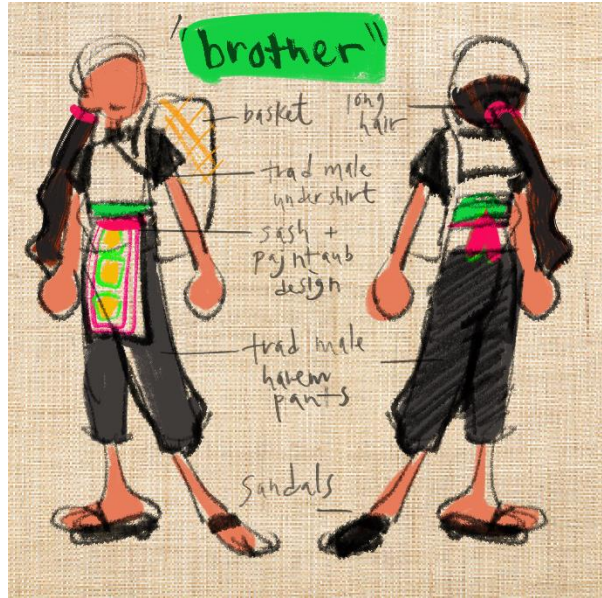


Figure 6 This illustration depicts the “Brother” in the dab neeg before their transition. Note the sash with the paj ntaub nplooj design.



Figure 7 This drawing depicts the trans sister after the transition, wearing the same sash with the paj ntaub nplooj design.

## cher's Superhero Story

### *Behind the Scenes*

cher's superhero story spanned 10 episodes and nearly a hundred pages; due to the constraints of this dissertation, I was unable to include their entire story. Instead, I shared the prologue—which is written in the style of paj huam—and the first two episodes—which cher describes as a “story word vomit”—for readers to enjoy. cher wrote for the synopsis: “Four cousins are drawn back together when their eldest uncle passes away suddenly. The death is ruled an accident, but the family knows better than to believe what they're told. Thus begins a quest for self-discovery, unraveling the ball of lies, and understanding the true power of Cousins.”

When describing their thought process behind its creation, cher stated, “My inspiration came from my long, long, long history of writing stories often with my cousins. One of the biggest things I wanted to explore in writing this piece, though, was this idea healing from trauma through cousinly connection. My cousins are super important to me both past and present. Unfortunately, I don't think America takes cousin relationships very seriously. But like the person my dad is closest to is his cousin. And so it's not that surprising that one of the people I'm closest to is my cousin.

As for the format... I just needed to get something turned into you so you could do some analysis lol. I wrote that big ass document which I call a ‘story word vomit.’ This is a very normal part of my creative writing process where I just let myself write down whatever comes to mind without worrying about if it sounds pretty or if it makes sense. It's an outline basically. But when I start them, they usually go on for a LONG TIME. I think the one I sent you is literally like 20,000 words which is a lot of words lmao. I could've written it as a more traditional

narrative like a novel, but then you literally would've never seen it because my perfectionist side would've come out and prevented me from ever submitting anything. So the word vomit was the best option if I actually wanted to get my ideas down and share them.

I hope what people take away is that cousins can change the world for each other. Like in my email explanation to the piece, this story specifically covers my past issues with suicidal ideation. And what I learned while writing the piece is that the world would be a worse place if I did take my own life. Maybe everybody else would be okay, but it would've had a deep impact on those closest to me (AKA, my cousins). And so I would hope that people who ever read this would understand that they're important. It's just capitalism and hyper-individualism that makes us feel like we don't matter. The ending of this story do be kinda sad though because the main character ends up just kinda floating in outer space watching his cousins live their lives. I wrote the piece at a time in my life when I felt like I was just sort of watching my cousins move through life. But since then, I've gone really hard in the opposite direction and have tried to really be a part of their lives. So I think if I had the chance, I would rewrite the ending a bit to reflect that.”

*And So, the World Screams*

A woman

Flies ‘cross the seas

On foot flees

The wars weaved

In tapestries

On her back

Her children stacked

Ib puas npib  
The final fee  
The wings of  
Lub tsho, the dove,  
Can fly them  
Sau ntuj, heaven  
Listen, call  
To lub kaus mom  
Reveals truth  
Show us  
Txuj siv holds  
Nothing can unfold  
Tightly bound  
All can be found  
Ntawd lub xauv  
Names disavowed

**Episode 1: The almost 10-year latehomecomer**

August is at the Madison airport waiting for Anderson to come home from his med school graduation. Though it's a joyous occasion, the mood is sullied by Laug Nhia's funeral the upcoming week. Conveniently, Anderson's parents have already rented out a large church for the graduation party which is now can be used for the funeral instead.

While waiting for an uber, Anderson expresses nervousness about going back home. August says it's nothing to worry about and that people will just be happy to see him back

especially now that he's a doctor. August notices that Anderson's glasses are all scratched up. August offers to fix the glasses which Anderson is nervous about since they're out in public and someone could see. He does agree, though, and August fixes them back to new. Anderson makes a joke about how ironic it is that he became the doctor and not August.

Upon arriving, Ada somewhat gives the cold shoulder to Anderson right away. August says that she's still just a bit shaken since she was the one who was closing up the shop with Laug Nhia the night he had his accident.

At the church, people are busy following Alexis's orders to get the place into shape for the funeral. Despite the practically zero budget, Alexis has still managed to turn the place into a thriving environment to celebrate Laug Nhia's life. They meet Carl, Alexis's fiancé. He leaves to look for a ladder to put up some higher decorations. When it's just the three of them in the sanctuary, Alexis floats up and puts up the decorations by herself. Carl returns with a ladder not too long after and is surprised to see them all up already. When he asks them how they did it, Alexis just tells him to go set out tables downstairs for the meals. August and Anderson are surprised she's never told him about her abilities given that they're engaged and all. She brushes it off, though, and just says it's not important. She adds, "Besides. That's basically all I can do these days. My flying days are behind me."

The family decides to do a dinner at Puj's house. The three remaining uncles, their wives, and all the cousins are there. Ada is busy cooking with her mom, so the three cousins head upstairs to Ada's room just for a quiet space. It's just like they had done growing up. The room is almost exactly the same. Ada joins them, telling them she doesn't actually live here anymore. Alexis then flings a dusty cover off Ada's piano. They all beg for her to play a song like she used to, but she just keeps saying she hasn't touched a piano in almost ten years. Alexis remarks that

her talent will never go away especially because she was good enough to get into music school back then. Ada reluctantly agrees and plays them a song. When she finishes, the cousins clap for her. They then get called down to dinner.

As the OG's talk at the main table, the cousins are relegated to the living room coffee table just like when they were kids. They overhear the OG's conversation and make small comments here and there. Throughout their conversations, there's still a lot of unspoken tension between Ada and Anderson. Alexis doesn't seem to pick up on it because she's never been the most "present" person with her head always wandering off in the clouds, but August definitely notices right away. As the cousins are helping to clean while the OG's reminisce some more Ada cuts herself while washing a Hmong knife. Anderson offers to look at the cut, but Ada rejects him and goes to August instead. August is able to heal her wound. Anderson is still surprised though. He always thought she was invincible. She says offhandedly, "A lot has changed since you left." Anderson takes this personally and tells her to grow up and just say what's on her mind. Alexis slides in before it erupts into a fight and suggests they all go play Super Smash Bros or something. Anderson just says he's leaving and that he'll see them all tomorrow. Ada gets annoyed that he's running away from fights like he always does. As anger fills her, she goes to slam the door but rips it clean off its hinges. Ada's parents come out to see what all the commotion is and scold Ada for destroying Puj's house as they thought she had grown out of this kind of behavior. Anderson's parents tell him to come back into the house immediately, but he taps into his dormant power and commands everybody not to follow him. August watches the family walk back inside in a daze and is surprised Anderson's powers didn't work on him. August ends up following Anderson anyways.

Anderson is deep breathing in his car when August taps on the window and nearly gives Anderson a heart attack. Anderson unlocks the door for him and is also confused as to why August wasn't affected by his command. August doesn't know and asks why Anderson lied about his abilities fading. Anderson reveals he thinks of his abilities like a drug. An addiction. They allowed him to get whatever he wanted whenever he wanted, but that wasn't the kind of life he wanted to live. He wanted to be a hard worker and prove himself to the world. August tries to convince him that he has nothing to prove and that just being himself is enough. Anderson laughs and says he wishes he could hang onto that kind of naivety and innocence. Anderson then asks if August wants to go get a drink. August says he doesn't drink but will just come hang out with Anderson.

## **Episode 2: Like Old Times**

August and Anderson make their way to a downtown bar that was Alexis's go-to spot when she was technically underage still. Anderson isn't very impressed because it mostly just seems like white kids from UW. But he figures that's exactly Alexis's crowd. Inside, Anderson gets himself a drink. August just gets a Sprite, and the two of them manage to find a booth. The music booming upstairs makes it difficult to hear each other, but there's not much to be said. A few more drinks later, and Anderson wants to dance, so they head upstairs.

Anderson, now fairly drunk, keeps reassuring August, "This isn't like a normal thing for me. I don't think this all the time." August doesn't mind too much though. Anderson ends up bumping into a group of drunk guys who look like they're looking to fight. They call Anderson a bunch of racist terms. When August tries to intervene, the drunk white guys then start calling August a bunch of homophobic slurs because of his xauv. Anderson gets mad and takes the first

swing, completely missing and falling over himself. A bouncer grabs Anderson before the fight can go any further and tosses him and August out despite the drunk white guys being the main aggressors technically. They're not done yet though. The drunk white guys follow Anderson and August back to their car at the top of a parking structure. Anderson tries to protect August just like he used to when they were younger and gets punched hard in the stomach. August bends down to pick Anderson back up so they can run. The white guys approach. Alexis and Ada come flying in out of nowhere. Ada tackles the main aggressor down and holds him up with one hand around his collar. He starts panicking and lashing out, but his blows have no effect on her. Ada tosses him aside like he's a ragdoll. Alexis stands between the two other white guys and August. She frowns with disgust, disappointed in a younger version of herself for flirting with guys like this for free drinks. She waves them away which sends them flying back. The three of them all scramble to their feet and stumble away having lost their pride.

August thanks the girls for coming to rescue them. Though, for Alexis and Ada this is nothing new. She curses under her breath. She then picks up Anderson and throws him in the back of his car. Ada drives them to Anderson's parents' house. While in the car, August leans forward into the front of the vehicle and asks, "Why did you both lie about not having your abilities anymore?" Alexis defends herself and says she never lied about not having abilities. She just lied about the extent of said abilities. Ada remains silent all the way until they pull up to Anderson's house. She says, "When Puj died, I tried my best to finally live a normal life. Laug Nhia and I were just running the store. I didn't need to be strong or indestructible. I could just be myself. We didn't have Puj constantly hanging over us, making us paranoid that puab yuav tuaj." Alexis comments she always found Puj's messages to be very scary. Yet, she still admits that she

never stopped practicing her abilities which is why she's not able to push and pull objects to and away from her instead of just flying now.

August makes a comment that they can't let Anderson go home like this. Ada says she doesn't care about his image as the perfect son and says they should ditch him. Alexis flies herself and Ada back to Ada's house. August drives himself and Anderson to his house. August's mom isn't home because she's a nurse and often works the night shifts. August puts Anderson in the guest room and heads to bed for the night.

In the morning, Anderson wakes up with a bad hangover which he knows will be rough since they'll be at the church all day for Laug Nhia's funeral. August offers to cure his hangover, but Anderson says he needs this to learn from his mistakes. They get a text from Ada in their old cousin group chat asking everyone to meet at Perkins which used to be one of their go to spots because it was cheap. The two boys make their way to Perkins and meet the girls.

Things are still a bit tense especially because Anderson doesn't remember most of what happened last night. They have to explain that the girls came to save them. Anderson reluctantly thanks them. They order their food. Alexis still has all their favorite dishes memorized and orders for them, suggesting she can write it off as a company expense since the family is technically her "client" for this event. As they're waiting for their food, Ada puts a silver coin on the table. The cousins are all confused as to why she has one of Laug Nhia's special coins. She then explains to them that this coin was gripped tightly in Laug Nhia's fist when she found his body. She suggests that his death wasn't an accident like the police report said. Anderson and Alexis are immediately suspicious of this accusation. They've managed to be under the radar for this long, why would the CIA be coming after them now? Ada doesn't know why or how, but she's worried that they're all in danger. She suggests it might be safer for them all to stick

around Madison for a bit longer after. Alexis is the first to object, mentioning that she has multiple events to get back to in addition to planning her own wedding. Anderson agrees since he'll be starting his residency very soon. August is on the fence about it all, but he trusts Ada because she has a strong intuition for these kinds of things. Though, Ada does say they have to keep this on the DL since the parents are still grieving.

At the funeral, Anderson and Ada are asked to be greeters and usher guests where to sit and such. Alexis is running around. August isn't given a job to do and is instructed to mostly just stay out of the way. When August's mom, Hlee, arrives, she says hi to all the cousins and greets them warmly. The other aunts and uncles are a bit colder to her but in very passive aggressive ways. It's like that midwestern nice kind of cold where they're cordial but are just doing it for saving face. Hlee and August take a seat together towards the back. When August goes to the bathroom, he overhears two of his uncles, Chua (Tsuas) and Houa (Huab) who are Ada and Alexis's dads respectively, making offhanded comments about how Hlee isn't even technically part of the family anymore. August works up the courage to enter the bathroom anyways. The two uncles almost immediately quiet down and greet him. Laug Chua makes a comment about August's xauv, joking that young Hmong generation doesn't even understand the meaning behind them and how they've just become another useless accessory. August just remains silent as the two uncles leave the bathroom.

When August heads back to the sanctuary, Hlee is talking with some of the aunties. They very sneakily chastise and judge her for even making an appearance. When Hlee starts crying, they judge her for always playing the victim. August tries to stand up for Hlee, but the aunties aren't having it. The rest of the cousins come to their rescue and send the aunties away. They comfort Hlee and tell her not to pay any mind to the judgmental aunties. Ada then notices an old,

tall white man standing at the entrance. She hones in on him because her intuition tells her he's suspicious. She approaches and greets him with the cousins trailing behind. He introduces himself as an old friend of Laug Nhia. He doesn't give his name but just hands over a single silver coin. It's an exact replica of the silver coin Ada found in Laug Nhia's hand which shocks the cousins. They ask for his name, but he just says he needs to go. Anderson uses his abilities to force a name out of him. He reveals himself to be Paul Smith and then leaves. Ada tells Anderson to keep him there longer, but Anderson warns that commanding someone this old can really destroy their mind and body if he's not careful. With this second coin, though, it really does seem like the death wasn't an accident.

## Sai's Superhero Story

### *Behind the Scenes*

The final dab neeg in this track is Sai's play, which follows the story of orphan teenager Zong. Sai explained further: "This short story was written as a coming-of-age theater sketch for sheros with elements that crossed folktale mysticism and real-world events of Hmong people's plight with the Secret War. I was always inspired by Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* film as child that portrayed compelling young heroines and its expansive representation between the spirit & physical realms. It fed my imagination in how I wanted to tell stories that offered captivating life tales while examining value systems when it comes to human nature and societal expectations. My hope with *Zong's Tale* is that it brings about an enjoyment for what mysteries lie in our culture as Hmong people, and fosters compassion for those on their courageous quest to find what home means to them."

### *Zong's Tale*

#### Cast

**Su** – dragon, takes on the form of androgynous young person

**Zong** – orphan, teenage girl

**Tub** – a small pig companion of Zong

**Auntie Mouachao** – older woman who cares for Zong

**Stranger** – person with no regard

**Narrator** – story guide

#### Prologue

**Narrator:** There once was a dragon that was brought to the Mekong River in the jungles of Laos by the Heavens. This dragon was to be a guardian for the surrounding area and its creatures that lived in it. For ages, it protected nature around the Mekong River and had become accustomed to calling that place home. And when humans seem to dare cross into the territory, the dragon sought to get rid of them before they could defile its sanctuary.

This dragon around this part of the Mekong River became to be known as Su.

#### Act I

**Narrator:** Su is resting upon a tree top lying on its side by the Mekong River. We hear the dragon humming a sweet melody.

**Su:** (sweetly humming) Hmmmmm... hmmmmm.... (break into hearty laughter and sit up) wahahahaha! Ah this is life! So sweet and pleasant with the sun beaming down onto us on such a perfect day. Nothing could ruin this---

*Enter Zong through the brushes swiftly, seemingly lost and upset*

**Zong:** (breathing fast) Urggghh! It's a deadend! Where's Tub...!

**Su:** Gah... Just great! I was just enjoying my day so far when a pesky human child had to show up. Has this one come to defile the forest like all the others hm!?

(Su observes Zong with suspicion) Maybe the tigers will have themselves a snack heheh.

*As Zong paces around the enclosure near the Mekong River bank, she becomes overwhelmingly frustrated and lets out a cry in her upset.*

**Zong:** (kneels into a cradle/squat position) I just wanted to let her know I can do this! To take care of myself and Tub... now that mom and dad are gone.

**Narrator:** Zong notices a bird egg that had fallen onto the ground near her. She goes to pick up the egg and cradle it in her hands.

**Zong:** I guess you must be lost too huh? Your parents would be sad if they lost you. Let's take you back home. (brushing the egg with her finger as to console it, she looks for the nest)

**Su:** Huh how strange. She's just a child and yet even in her fit, she cares about an egg that fell out of its nest. I wonder if she might be a little different -- eek! (scurries for cover as Su hears something come up the tree)

**Narrator:** Zong climbs the very tree Su is on to return the egg to its nest. As she does so, Zong catches a glimpse of Su but is unsure of what she saw. Before she can look further, Auntie Mouachao enters the scene.

**Auntie Mouachao:** Oiyuh! Zong, there you are! I was so worried about you! What are you doing up there? Come down from there before you get hurt. (goes to help Zong down)

You shouldn't run off like that without me. I'm here to look after you!

**Zong:** I went off to get Tub... (sigh). But he's not here.

**Auntie Mouachao:** Sh Shh... you hear that?

I think I hear something over there.

*Auntie Mouachao points to a nearby brush where a soft gruntle comes from as Zong heads over.  
Upon reveal, Zong finds Tub grubbing on bits of the floor!*

Ahaha see! We can do this together! Found this little piggy!

**Tub:** OINK! OINK!

**Zong:** THERE YOU ARE! I'm so glad you're okay. We found you!!!

**Auntie Mouachao:** Alright now. Los Los! Let's go home.

*Auntie Mouachao puts an arm around Zong comfortingly as they all walk together.*

*Together they walk out of the scene. Su peeks its head out from the tree top to confirm they are gone.*

**Su:** Whew I'm glad they're gone! Those bunch were so nosy! Coming in just as I was having my moment in this beautiful weather. Hmph! (crosses arms in annoyance)

Then again, that young girl showed compassion and courage for nature. And the other one to that young girl... and well, that pig - just being a pig.

*Stranger comes through from another brush sloppily with a piece of chicken in one hand and scratching his butt with the other.*

**Stranger:** (belches) Mmm-mmm! That was tasty. I need to wash myself after eating so good!

*The stranger proceeds to toss the chicken bone at the tree where Su is, picks his booger and wipes it against leaves, and splashes into water of the river as he cleans himself.*

**Su:** Oiiii! I've had enough disturbances today, especially from the likes of humans like this! I'll show him. (smirks and takes out a mask to put on before going down the tree)

*Su sneaks through the waters towards Stranger and scares the human with a jump from underneath the surface. The Stranger screams and runs off, leaving the dragon in great delight.*

**Su:** Wahahah! That should teach that filthy man! He better not return to this place again hmph! (taking off the mask, Su becomes stuck in thought for a moment)

I wonder if I will see those others again...?

## **Act II**

**Narrator:** We cut to a year older Zong doing labor in the fields with Auntie Mouachao as Tub follows Zong around.

**Auntie Mouachao:** Zong, I think that's enough. Why don't you go and rest.

**Zong:** No, that's okay Auntie! I can keep going. You work hard, so I want to help out. Plus, I got Tub by my side. You go ahead and take a rest.

**Auntie Mouachao:** He sure has grown to become attached to you. With you here, he's become a lot more manageable! And to think I was looking to butcher him before you got here ahahah.

**Zong:** Tub is such a good boy, Auntie! He has helped a lot to get me through this past year with the passing of my parents.

*Tub comes to Zong in search of affection. She rubs his face before patting the side of his pot belly.*

**Tub:** Purr.... I mean, OINK!

**Auntie Mouachao:** You know, worried about you when you first were brought here. I felt as though you didn't trust anyone, so I had you look over Tub to get your mind focused on caring for something. And you've done such a great job, my dear. I appreciate how you've helped around here. Your parents would be proud as well.

*Zong softly smiles as she shys away. Auntie Mouachao pats her on the back and they begin to giggle in delight while continuing to work in the fields.*

*Stranger enters the scene running frantically and alarmed.*

**Stranger:** AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH! (panting)

**Tub:** GRRR- I mean, OINKKK!

**Zong:** What is it? Did you see a ghost?!?

**Stranger:** Haven't you heard? War has broken out and soldiers were seen coming to the village!

**Auntie Mouachao:** Are you sure? I didn't think it would reach here!

**Stranger:** What part of (imitates) "soldiers were seen coming to the village" don't you understand, old lady?!?

**Tub:** HIS- I mean, OINKKK!

**Zong:** Yeah, don't talk to my Aunt like that when you reek of the monkeys you wrestle with all day!

**Auntie Mouachao:** Zong, how could you say that. You forgot to add he looks like one too!

**Stranger:** (teeth clenched with fists in the air) Grrrr! Well I'm getting outta here! You all can stay for all I care!

*Stranger scurries off into the distance, leaving behind Zong and Auntie Mouachao.*

**Zong:** Auntie, this is bad...

**Auntie Mouachao:** We have to start packing. Put your things down and let's grab what we can before we leave.

*Zong looks at Auntie Mouachao as her aunt places her hand on Zong's back.*

**Auntie Mouachao:** What are you thinking, Zong?

**Zong:** I think I know where we can go - across the river from back then.

**Auntie Mouachao:** The Mekong River. I've heard people crossing it to find refuge... let's go then.

**Zong:** Yeah... (pauses for a moment)

We all will make it.

**Tub:** Mmh! Oink!

*Together, they exit off the scene.*

### **Act III**

**Narrator:** The majestic dragon lies on top of the very same tree top twiddling a stem of leaves while evening comes.

**Su:** It has gotten quite noisy in the world of humans lately... even the skies sometimes fill with large metal birds that are loud and leave behind smog. They do not seem to bring life but rather, death.

(tosses aside stem of leaves)

*Enter in Zong, Auntie Mouachao and Tub through the brushes.*

**Zong:** I can hear the river. We're here!

*Su sticks its head out from the tree top and soon recognizes Zong, along with Auntie Mouachao and Tub.*

**Su:** It's that human girl from before! And that old woman and piglet too! Are they looking to escape from all the recent noise I've been hearing? Surely, they must know that the river doesn't always guarantee such safe passage.

**Auntie Mouachao:** Zong, we should cross before it gets too dark. There were trails of smoke in the sky from villages on our way here.

**Zong:** We stick together like always, right? Come get in my basket, Tub.

**Tub:** Aws. Oink.

*Tub climbs into Zong's basket that she carries on her back.*

**Auntie Mouachao:** (whispers) Just have to get to the other side. Here we will use this to help us along.

*Auntie Mouachao grabs ahold a piece of wood towards the water. They nod at each other in anticipation and slowly enter the Mekong River together.*

*Su climbs down and spies from a distance.*

**Su:** What! So reckless! To think they are willing to go into the Mekong River by themselves. They'll be engulfed by the merciless water. (desperately and dramatically sneaks to next shrub)

(Pulls out binoculars) Not like I care though! That girl is so nosy! Sneaking in on me like last time...

**Auntie Mouachao:** Are you both doing alright, Zong?

**Zong:** Yes, we're good Auntie.

**Tub:** oink...

**Auntie Mouachao:** Please be careful my girl. This current is stronger than I thou—

*Auntie Mouachao suddenly slips off the branch and starts to be carried away by the current.  
Zong goes after her to save Auntie Mouachao.*

**Zong:** Auntie! (huffing)

Hold onto me!

**Narrator:** Zong grabs a hold of her and looks for anything to help. Spotting another piece of wood, she carries Auntie Mouachao towards it. After getting Auntie Mouachao onto it, Zong notices Tub is missing. She sees him struggling to paddle along the river having gotten out the basket.

**Zong:** I'm coming, Tub!

**Tub:** Wahhh - OINK!

**Auntie Mouachao:** (gasping for air) Zong...!

**Su:** Aiyuh! How am I supposed to get back at her if this goes wrong! (puts on mask)

*Zong catches up to Tub and holds onto him with one arm as she tries to swim back. She is feeling exhaustion settle in though and is losing against the current.*

*The dragon runs towards the Mekong River as it magically transforms into a young person defying physics and dives in for Zong. Su gets her and Tub, taking them to land on the other side of the river, and places a now unconscious Zong onto the ground while gently setting Tub near.*

**Su:** This child! Always trying to help everyone else! Why must you put yourself in danger just to save that old woman? And this piglet??

**Tub:** Sniffle... sniffle... oink!

**Su:** A troubling child you are... though your heart is pure and filled with much love. (sigh)

*Tub nudges softly at Zong to stir her consciousness. As he does so, she comes to slowly seeing both Tub and Su (in human form).*

**Su:** Uhhhh... (turns to the side and begins to slightly panic).

**Zong:** (slightly coughs) Who are you?

**Su:** (Turns around, realizing she's up) Oh! I am uhmmmm...

(clears throat) Just a passerby..er.

**Zong:** How did you-- we get here? Did you save me?

**Su:** (lets out of puff of air) Me? Save you?? I don't know how I would be able to do that! I mean do you know-- I don't know!

**Tub:** Uhhh... oink!

**Zong:** You seem a little familiar. I don't know where, but I think we've crossed paths before. You feel warm.

**Su:** (Surprised, smiles a bit and calms down) You may not be so bad afterall. I'm glad you're ok.

*Auntie Mouachao enters from a distance and calls out to Zong, which cues Su to hurry off.*

**Auntie Mouachao:** ZONG! Thank the heavens you're okay! (runs to embrace Zong)

**Zong:** I'm so happy to see you, Auntie! Are you alright?

**Auntie Mouachao:** Thanks to you my girl! I was able to get onto this side and just kept looking to find you no matter what. I don't know what I'd do without you!

**Zong:** I think someone saved us, Auntie. It felt like I was being carried so gently here.

*Tub rubs his head against Zong's leg as to relieve and comfort the ordeal they all been through.*

**Auntie Mouachao:** Well, where are they?

**Zong:** They were just here but gone now...? I wonder where they went off to.

**Auntie Mouachao:** It's said that there lives a dragon in this river... maybe it took pity on you for your selfless acts. Either way, it's a miracle! We must get going now. I'm just so glad you're safe. (hugs Zong one more time)

*Auntie Mouachao pats Tub, and then wraps an arm around Zong to begin walking off. Zong pauses and looks back quickly to the Mekong River.*

**Zong:** Thank you. Whether dragon or person, I'll never forget you or this place once called home. All the sad and happy memories will carry us through what is to come. Goodbye now.

*Zong picks up Tub close to her, and they all leave. Su enters back in afterwards, checking to see if the coast is clear.*

**Su:** Humans are most peculiar. Many of them can be mean-spirited, destructive, and just plain awful.

But that girl... she's a demonstration that people can be kind, caring, and deeply giving.

May your travels be kind to you on your journey, little one. You belong here and this will always be your home, waiting for you whenever you come back. Be guided by ones who care for you, and the spirits of loved ones who will always watch over you.

**THE END**

## Discussion

In the above subsections, I shared each Menyulam Laib's thoughts and intentions that went into crafting their superhero story, as well as the dab neeg themselves. We see that there are different ways they chose to story their dab neeg, whether in a narrative format, as a paj huam, as a play, or even, in the words of cher, a story with "word vomit." In this section, I share how these dab neeg create spaces to reinterpret and shift HMoob lifeways for the queer and trans HMoob community.

### *Locating Queerness Within HMoob History*

Historically, our dab neeg have only represented heteronormative relationships and practices and cisgender identities. Though scholars point out that there have been dab neeg about HMoob men and women who never married (a practice that is considered non-normative), or HMoob women who dressed and "behaved like a man" (Her-Lee, 2006; Yang, 2008), it is still very rare to have queer and trans individuals in them and name these practices as such in these stories. One of my favorite things about storying dab neeg with queer and trans HMoob youth was how they used dab neeg to map our queer and trans HMoob existence across space and time as a people on the run, similar to how our Elders did. The Menyulam Laib leaned into this strength to locate queer identities, relationships, and practices within HMoob history via their own dab neeg. In doing so, they also push back against erasure and subvert the passivity trope that follows our narratives and reposition queer and trans HMoob characters as having agency and being in positions of power.

In Muun's dab neeg, the ode is written from the perspective of a cisgender sister who is honoring her "brother." The year is unknown, but it is implied to be set during Chinese colonialism, referencing the dab neeg from our Elders who recounted Chinese subjugation and

ethnic persecution. The “brother” in this dab neeg is actually a trans woman<sup>51</sup> who “wore sister’s skirt” and “wore sister’s shoes.” However, these “non-normative” practices meant that the trans sister often “bore mother’s rage / As she saw she had no son.” When the village is forced to give up a daughter as a kidnapped bride to the Chinese armies in exchange for safety, it is the trans sister who sacrifices herself in her cisgender sister’s place, assuring her sister that doing so meant that the trans sister “can be a woman, / In my final rest.” The trans sister tapped into her trans identity as a source of power to protect her cisgender sister, ultimately becoming a superhero in her sister’s eyes for her sacrifice. While readers may interpret and parallel the trans sister’s sacrifice to the deficit narrative about queer and trans HMoob people and how we can only find happiness and peace in death, I actually read it as the opposite: the trans sister is the one with agency. The trans sister’s sacrifice was not because she was unhappy, but rather, because she wanted to protect her sister. She knew that obeying the Chinese army’s demand was the only way to protect her village, since she alone could not fight and defeat them. The mother was not going to fight for the cisgender sister’s safety. In fact, the mother was ready to sacrifice the cisgender daughter and even claim that “[n]o one will know if one is gone.” Therefore, the trans sister’s decision to wield her transness to protect her cisgender sister and replace her as the kidnapped bride is a reminder of how our queer and trans identities and roles within our family and community can be sources of empowerment, liberation, and protection—for ourselves and our community as queer and trans individuals by —challenging and disrupting cultural norms. I also appreciate Muun having the trans sister rely on her intelligence to protect her family against the Chinese army instead of mere brute physical strength. This detail demonstrates the ways our

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<sup>51</sup> I understand Muun did not use the term “trans woman” in their story, and I want to acknowledge the ways in which being queer within HMoob culture does not need to be named. Instead, it is about our practices, which I will delve into further later in this dissertation. Because the characters have no names and there are no mentions of who is older or younger, I use the term “trans sister” and “cisgender sister” to differentiate between them.

people have relied on our aptitude in order to escape persecution and run away, as opposed to fighting back since our numbers were smaller and we did not have access to the same weapons.

Similarly, cher, KM, and Sai use the exodus of HMoob people as the backdrop for their dab neeg. Sai's play follows an orphan girl, Zong, as she attempts to cross the Mekong River with her Auntie Mouchao and pet pig Tub as the Secret War spilled near their village. Su is a dragon who is the protector of the Mekong River and who takes on a human form as an androgynous person. This insertion of a dragon has ties to HMoob spiritual practices, whose role in shaping HMoob history and mythologies is especially poignant. For example, it is believed that a dragon was the cause of the world flooding and thus sets off the beginning of HMoob history. This demonstrates the ways queer and trans identities have always been a part of our history and spirituality, such as in the spiritual beings who guard the land and water we call home. On the other hand, while KM and cher's individual dab neeg still use the Secret War as part of their framing, their dab neeg mainly explore the legacy of the war and its impact on survivors, our descendants, and the HMoob community as whole. This inclusion shows how the Secret War impacted queer and trans HMoob folks' lives, and that we, too, experience these historical events and the pain of having to run again, just like everyone else. The restorying of HMoob history with queer and trans characters demonstrates that queer and trans HMoob people's history *is* HMoob history.

### ***Critiquing Colonialism and Imperialism***

While our Elders' dab neeg described what happened during and after the Secret War, the Menyuum Laib's dab neeg can be read as critiques of colonialism and imperialism, whether or not they were intended as such (Vue, 2023). Muun's paj huam follows a HMoob family and the difficult decision they must make in order to protect themselves and their community against

colonialism and subjugation from Chinese soldiers, who employ sexual violence to intimidate and control the community. Their dab neeg parallel the stories from our Elders about how we were constantly on the run throughout history to escape ethnic persecution in what is now present-day Southern China. Muun shared that they were inspired by the Chinese ballad of Mulan for its exploration of gender identity and performance, yet their decision to have Chinese soldiers be the villains was interesting to analyze. In the ballad, Mulan is a woman who disguises herself as a man and joins the conscription army to take her aging father's place in the battle against an invading nomadic tribe. She returns home after a distinguished and prolonged military career, revealing her identity only after her comrades came to visit her, so I can see where Muun drew inspiration about gender identity and performance. However, the thread between being inspired by an influential historical Chinese figure who joined the military to stop an invading army and using this inspiration to story about how Chinese soldiers violated a HMoob village demonstrates how empires can be both influential and problematic in shaping society and the stories we tell. Muun's artistic choice centered the perspective of Indigenous communities who have been colonized, persecuted, and displaced by Chinese armies. In doing so, Muun reminds readers that there are two sides to every story when it comes to war, and that, often, history is written by the victors. On the other hand, this dab neeg shows how history can be reinterpreted and even rewritten to show the truth by queer and trans HMoob youth.

Likewise, KM, cher, and Sai's dab neeg can be interpreted as critiques of the United States' imperialism and empire. In her story, KM does not position the protagonist and villain within the "good vs evil" trope; instead, she adds nuance by having the protagonist Paj understand the villain Keej's perspective and intention in wanting to turn back the hands of time, to before HMoob people helped the United States' military. Paj explaining that she, too, is "so

sick and tired of people only associating us from the war” because the “world only knows us because of it” displays how the Secret War and the United States’ control of the narrative continues to negatively impact the way our community is framed. It also critiques how the Secret War is still positioned as the “beginning” of our history even when we have repeatedly explained and our dab neeg have demonstrated that it is not. Similarly, cher’s story follows the struggle of four cousins in the United States who attempt to understand and make sense of HMoob culture and identity after the death of their uncle, a respected Elder. Throughout the story (including the chapters that I could not include in this dissertation), we see how HMoob Elders treat young people, with one even criticizing the main character August’s choice to wear the xauv, our silver HMoob necklace, by claiming that “young Hmong generation doesn’t even understand the meaning behind them and how they’ve just become another useless accessory.” Later, August gets attacked by a white racist person who spits homophobic slurs at him for wearing the same xauv. cher’s story documents the expectations and adversity second and third generation HMoob American youth face when navigating different spaces and cultures in heterogenous communities compared to what our Elders experiences back in Laos or Thailand, where our community was more racially and ethnically homogenous. August and his cousins’ experiences shed light on the ways second and third generation HMoob Americans are criticized by Elders for not being “HMoob” enough yet are attacked by racist white people for not assimilating enough.

These tensions and conflicts can be found across many communities that are part of the Global Majority, especially those who came to the United States as refugees and immigrants, and/or were forced to come as enslaved people. However, when PGM communities openly criticize the United States’ empire and its history of racism, we are often told to “go back” to our country or leave. This framing completely absolves the United States of responsibility and

attempts to overshadow how their imperialistic and capitalist interests are the reasons why so many communities cannot simply “go back.” Sai’s dab neeg ends with Su, the dragon, noting how perilous the exodus will be for Zong, Auntie Mouachao, and Tub, but also reminding them that the land and water they are forced to leave behind because of the Secret War will always be their home, stating, “May your travels be kind to you on your journey, little one. You belong here and this will always be your home, waiting for you whenever you come back. Be guided by ones who care for you, and the spirits of loved ones who will always watch over you.” Su’s message to Zong and her companions also serves as a message to our HMoob community and represents what we understand home and homemaking to be as a people on the run. In contrast, KM’s story has Paj comforting Keej while explaining, “I believe our people can have paradise again. But I don’t think it’s by going backwards [in time]. I think Hmong people can have peace right here, right now and for the future. And I think that’s worth protecting and fighting for. It’s ok to feel sad, it’s ok to feel hurt; I sometimes still do.”

These two messages—that the mountains will always be our home and that we can’t go back because it is no longer the same place we once knew it to be—seem like competing messages, but they coexist. Together, they beautifully encapsulate the mixed emotions within our community, especially in rethinking our understanding of home and our connection to the land and water. I find both to be true: that we and our spirits can and should still be able to remember and honor the mountains as our home while knowing we may never get to experience the lush beauty of the jungles, drink from the rushing rivers, or hear the birds and insects sing as described within our Elders’ dab neeg. Like what Paj said to Keej, “[A]ll of this grief is the result of how much we love[.] [...] We can’t get certain things back. But that is why we honor our ancestors and those moments that once mattered.” Honoring and recognizing places as ancestral

lands and home doesn't necessarily mean we want to or can "return" or "go back," and the two can coexist.

### *Sustaining and Transforming HMoob Language, Culture, and Practices*

Dab neeg are used as a practice to perpetuate cultural identity, value, and beliefs, and the dab neeg from the Menyuum Laib lean into HMoob epistemologies and practices to influence their worldbuilding. Utilizing HMoob spirituality, cultural values, and understanding of our relationships to each other, the land, and spirits, the dab neeg from the Menyuum Laib can be understood as both sustaining and transforming HMoob language, culture, and practices.

In Sai's play, the portrayal of the dragon Su—whose human form is an androgynous person—as the guardian of the Mekong River is critical and raises interesting points about HMoob people's understanding of relationships among humans, animals, spiritual beings, and the land and water. In the play, Zong, Auntie Mouachao, and their pet pig Tub struggled to cross the Mekong River and nearly lost their lives when trying to flee, but Su stepped in to save Zong and Tub after they got separated from Auntie Mouachao. In an earlier scene, Su transformed into their human form to scare off a person who was soiling the water, but they chose to save Zong and Tub because they thought they "may not be so bad afterall." This demonstrates the importance of maintaining reciprocal relationships within Indigenous communities, not just with each other but also with the animals, land, and water. For HMoob people, the Mekong River was historically a body of water that was a source of water for our crops, animals, and ourselves. However, when we fled the war, the Mekong River became an obstacle that stood between persecution and refuge ("Hmong Museum," 2024). As part of nature, the Mekong River simply exists and is not defined by the human concepts of good and evil. If we see something as "good," we will continue to respect it, like how we respected the Mekong River as a source of life. Once

we see something as “evil,” however, we will treat it with malice even if it isn’t, just like how the Mekong River became an obstacle and a symbol of death for those who were fleeing persecution.

We see in Sai’s story that Su the dragon does not treat humans and animals as inherently evil; instead, Su treats them based on how they treat the land and water. Even while watching Zong, Aunt Mouachao, and Tub escape, Su doesn’t scorn them for leaving and reminds them that the place will always be home, if and when they chose to come back. As an Indigenous community that has resettled onto other Indigenous communities’ land, it’s important to remember that we must respect the animals, land and water we are on and maintain spiritual harmony with our environment, including the flora and fauna that calls these environments home. Just because they aren’t necessarily our “ancestral homelands” doesn’t mean that we still don’t sustain these practices. Sai’s dab neeg serve as a reminder to continue these reciprocal relationships.

Additionally, when reading Sai’s dab neeg as allegories for queer and trans identities, I argue that the Mekong River is also a symbol of how gender identity and sexuality are a natural part of life. These identities are not inherently “good” or “evil” but get pathologized and cast as such if they are seen as obstacles. However, just like how Su treats humans based on how they treat the land and water, I argue that our queer and trans HMoob community operates similarly. We are open to those who respect us but will not hesitate to protect ourselves and our community from those who seek to dehumanize us and cause harm. Relationships ought to be reciprocal and require ongoing effort to maintain. Being in good community with one another also demands the same attention, and just like how the Mekong River nurtured our lives and crops, queer and trans HMoob people nurture our culture, traditions, and lifeways.

As previously discussed, KM also played with the idea of “good vs evil” in her story. I honestly feel like by refusing to make Keej the villain in the story, or evil just for the sake of being evil, was a wonderful choice and makes him a relatable antagonist, especially because Keej’s reason to open a portal to turn back time has good intentions. Instead of having Paj engage in a battle with Keej, Paj instead negotiates with and approaches Keej from a place of compassion and love. This negotiation is similar to that of HMoob shamans with spirits in HMoob religious and spiritual practices. As previously mentioned in Track 1, whenever there is an imbalance between our physical and spiritual self, it can manifest as ailments. A shaman is then called upon “not to overcome or defeat the spirits that have taken the soul” of the person who is ill but rather to “engage in negotiation ([pauj] dab) for the person’s soul” (Xiong et al., 2004, p. 445). KM’s decision to have Paj negotiate with Keej—even if Paj may not have all the answers—demonstrates the ways negotiation within HMoob culture and practices is seen as an intelligent and powerful tool, not just for shamans to utilize but for all HMoob people to practice since negotiation is required within many formal events and ceremonies, such as weddings and funerals.

The cultural practices of nurturing relationships and familial bonds are also explored in cher’s dab neeg, with their depiction of kinship and familial bonds seen in the relationships between the cousins and cher sharing that they “don’t think America takes cousin relationships very seriously.” As mentioned in Track 1, HMoob people’s understanding of kinship and family is in relation to our clans, which is very different than white, Christian, middle-class family’s understanding of family. In cher’s story, some of the cousins’ powers are not as strong as they used to be, with one sharing, “When Puj died, I tried my best to finally live a normal life. Laug Nhia and I were just running the store. I didn’t need to be strong or indestructible. I could just be

myself. We didn't have Puj constantly hanging over us, making us paranoid that puab yuav tuaj." Here, we see that one cousin stopped practicing their power because an Elder passed away and they no longer had someone reminding them to practice their powers. Rather, the cousin saw this as an opportunity to "live a normal life." I read the cousins' powers and usage of said powers as metaphors for how young people no longer adhere to or continue cultural practices because there are no Elders to guide or facilitate them. So often, young people see Elders as the producers and keepers of knowledge and traditions. When an Elder passes away, young people may be at a loss for how to continue these cultural practices or struggle to identify who will lead the next generation. As cher's dab neeg progresses, we see how the cousins returned to their roots as they found support in one another, which demonstrates how important it is for HMoob youth to sustain and transform culture and language not just with Elders but with one another as well.

We also see that within KM's story, she used the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) when writing HMoob names and words (i.e., Paj, Keej, etc.). cher uses English names but does imbed HMoob language and words. Both KM and cher incorporate HMoob names, words, and phrases without italicizing them as well, which disrupts the common practice of italicizing when writing in languages other than English for English-speaking audiences. Sai has HMoob names for their characters as well but spelled them using the anglicized way (i.e., Zong, Su, Mouachao, etc.) although the pig's name, Tub, is in RPA ("Tub" means "son" in HMoob). cher also wrote in the Moob Leeg<sup>52</sup> dialect. For example, while Pog is the Hmoob Dawb dialect for paternal grandmother, Puj is the term in Moob Leeg. Even though Hmoob Dawb is the most widely spoken dialect and often the dialect we use when writing HMoob RPA, I appreciate cher

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<sup>52</sup> "HMoob" is the Romanized Popular Alphabet written form of the anglicized word "Hmong." The capitalization of the H and M signifies the two most widely spoken HMoob dialects: **H**moob Dawb and **M**oog Leeg. This is a form of self-identification among the younger HMoob generation. (Thao, 2019). I will be using "HMoob" and "Hmong" interchangeably throughout this essay.

recognizing the beauty of honoring the Moob Leeg dialect within their dab neeg. These different reclamations within the Menyuum Laib’s dab neeg demonstrate the importance of sustaining HMoob language, especially as it relates to names. Names have meaning and the ways they are pronounced within HMoob language change when anglicized because of the loss of tonations and inflections. The HMoob language is tonal and has 8 different cim, or tones. The inclusion of HMoob-language names and phrases in these dab neeg means we get to see how young people—especially those who may have an “American” name as their first name and a “HMoob” name as their middle name—acknowledge the weight their names carry, both when written and spoken in (RPA) HMoob and in anglicized English. These centering and normalizing the spelling and pronunciation of HMoob names, words, and phrases within English-written stories are powerful. These moves, in addition to refusing to provide translations of said words and phrases, position HMoob readers as the intended audience and consumers of these dab neeg.

### ***Re/Constructing HMoob Gender Identity and Roles***

The way HMoob gender identity and roles are re/constructed within the Menyuum Laib’s dab neeg is powerful. Sai’s story involves a young girl who is an orphan living with her aunt. In the HMoob language, the honorifics you use to address your extended relatives depend on whether they are from your father’s side (kwv tij<sup>53</sup>) or your mother’s side (neej tsa<sup>54</sup>). They also change based on their birth orders in relation to your parents. Sai doesn’t use any HMoob honorifics in their story; the aunt is simply referred to as “Auntie Mouachao” with no mention of whether she is Zong’s kwv tij or neej tsa and no acknowledgement of her relation to Zong’s parents or clan. While it isn’t rare to have a matriarch in the household, orphans are usually taken

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<sup>53</sup> Translation: Paternal relatives. Pronunciation: koo THEE.

<sup>54</sup> Translation: Maternal relatives. Pronunciation: NENG cha.

in to be raised by married uncles from the kwv tij side. Very rarely will an unmarried woman be expected to care for orphans, especially considering the fact that women are supposed to marry out of and leave their birth clans. However, during the exodus from Laos to Thailand, it was common for many husbands to leave first and then send a guide back for the wife and children. Txiv did this when he escaped to Thailand first and sent a guide for Niam and Looj. Sai's take on this historical context and changing the matriarch to be a seemingly unmarried aunt who is responsible for an orphan girl speaks to the ways women often took on the physical and emotional labor of raising children while ensuring their survival during war because the men were recruited as soldiers. It also rejects the narrative that HMoob women were simply the collateral damage of war and reframes them as having agency (Vang, 2015b). As I mentioned before, unmarried, older women are often criticized and asked constantly by Elders when they will get married because to be unmarried is a "non-normative" practice that is often disparaged. The decision to have an unmarried, adult woman protecting a young girl (and later have the androgynous dragon save the girl from drowning) disrupts the ageist and sexist treatment of HMoob women. By reframing women and trans people as the guardians (of either a child, the land or bodies of water), Sai's dab neeg demonstrate the ways they are protectors and guardians of the younger generations and by extension, the future.

Similarly, Muun's reconstruction of HMoob gender and identity positions the trans sister as the protector of their family, although I want to be clear that Muun did not actually use the term "trans" to describe their character. Sai also refrained from describing the dragon within English-language identity such as "nonbinary," instead writing that Su "takes on the form of androgynous young person". This speaks to the ways HMoob language do not have queer nomenclatures since being queer is more about our roles and practices within our families and

community. In the beginning of Muun's poem, we see how the "brother" is criticized by the mom for not adhering to the traditional norms and understanding of HMoob masculinity. This reverence of sons over daughters is common within Asian family households that practice filial piety since it is expected that sons expand and contribute to the well-being of the family while daughters eventually marry out and leave. Additionally, the poem does not mention a father; single-family households with a matriarch are often looked down upon in HMoob community. The absence of a father means it is even more crucial that the son step up to be the patriarch of the family. Muun's paj huam provides social commentary on how these practices harm not only daughters but also sons and transgender children who are forced into gender roles. By writing how the "brother" "bore mother's rage" for not adhering to the traditional norms and understanding of HMoob masculinity, we see the ways these gender roles and expectations box children in and limit their expressions and explorations. The mother was also quick to give up the cisgender daughter to protect the village, speaking to the ways in which daughters are expected to be patient and self-sacrificing for the well-being of the clan. Muun's refusal to let the cisgender daughter be taken away critiques this practice. Their choice to have the trans sister take the cisgender sister's place as the kidnapped bride reimagines a trans person's role and place within HMoob familial practices, as well as the different responsibilities and power one has access to. While the trans sister understands that her village cannot win against the Chinese army, her trans identity provided her access to the power and tools needed to reject gender roles and norms, something the cisgender sister was unable to do. The trans sister's rejection of the mother's decision to have the cisgender sister be sacrificed demonstrates how the trans sister understood HMoob gender roles and norms and was able to negotiate with and navigate them in ways that her cisgender sister couldn't. By fully embracing her trans identity and wielding it to

buy some time for the cisgender sister to escape, the trans sister was able to ensure the cisgender sister's survival; in fact, as we learned later in the story, *only* the cisgender sister survives.

Within Muun's dab neeg, trans identity is a source of power utilized by trans people whose role is to defend their family and their community. It doesn't solve the entire issue, but it can provide protection. Additionally, I want to call attention to the ways Muun portrayed trans people in the dab neeg. Muun had the trans sister sacrifice herself as the kidnapped bride in the end but refrained from describing the process as "tricking" the Chinese armies or similar words that involve deceit, since some readers may interpret the trans sister as "fooling" the Chinese armies by taking her cisgender sister's place as the bride. So often, trans people— especially trans women—are accused of "tricking" men by not disclosing that they are trans. This argument is used to justify violence toward trans women. However, Muun writes how the mother was angry "As she saw she had no son." This illustrates how the mother recognizes her daughter's identity even if she may not support it and even if the daughter was still referred to with the pronouns "he" and "him." Muun ends the paj huam with the lines, "Mother has no son. / Mother has *two daughters*. / *She* wore my skirts. / *She* wore my shoes. / I hear *her* hum, / When I drum." I italicized the "two daughters" line and the pronouns "she" and "her" in the stanza to draw attention to how the trans sister did not "trick" the soldiers with her gender expression: she *is* a daughter. Additionally, I also appreciate the depiction of the trans sister as a Menyuum Laib whose trans identity is able to transform, shape, and reject gender roles. Often, trans women are criticized for still having access to male privileges because they were likely socialized as boys when younger and tend to still be perceived as boys, even long after their transition. However, we saw in Muun's dab neeg that the "brother" experienced mother's rage because "he" did not embrace traditional masculine ideals. This pushes back against the misconceptions that trans

women have access to male privilege because of how they were socialized. Instead, by ending the paj huam with feminine pronouns and affirmations, Muun is letting readers know that trans women are women, and that just because the wrong gender was assigned at birth and perhaps at one point, they did experience male privilege, it does not mean that a trans woman is any less of a woman (Dommu, 2017).

In cher's story, we see how the cousins—both men and women—must work together to solve the mystery of their uncle's death. While the main character is a queer HMoob man (or at least, it's his perspective we are following), the different roles each of the cousins play are equally important to the narrative, and their reliance on each other is heavily emphasized, like when the Ada and Alexis save August and Anderson from physical violence. cher's play with gender roles and responsibilities here positions the roles of HMoob women and HMoob men as equal while also normalizing queer HMoob men's involvement with HMoob traditions and culture. So often, gay HMoob men are disparaged for seemingly not continuing their lineage and are therefore deemed failures in the eyes of the Elders. However, we see within cher's story how the cousins' engagement and practice of their powers varies and how only by coming together to support one another are they able to solve the mystery of their uncle's death. Not only is cher empowering women and queer men in their story, but they are also deconstructing HMoob masculinity by showcasing how HMoob men, especially those who are cisgender and heterosexual, can share or divest from power and privilege.

These different re/constructions of HMoob gender identity and roles offer critiques and insights into the different ways gender roles and responsibilities can change and be reframed within HMoob culture, especially when moving away from gender binaries. HMoob men may still be seen as leaders of HMoob community and clans, but we see that within these dab neeg, it

is the women and queer and trans individuals who are the protectors of their families and who play active roles in shaping the narratives and trajectories of the dab neeg. Within dab neeg HMoob, the roles of women are often diminished or erased, especially their role during the Secret War (Vang, 2015b). By bringing women and queer and trans folks to the forefront and redefining HMoob men's masculinity, the Menyuum Laib demand that these roles and responsibilities be revisited so they may shift and change in response to the community.

### **Reimagining the Possibilities with Menyuum Laib**

The different ways in which queer and trans HMoob youth story dab neeg and the different themes and topics they contend with within these stories can shed light on the ways HMoob language, culture, and traditions can be sustained and transformed. The inclusion of queer and trans HMoob characters not only locates us within the history of our dab neeg but positions us as leaders, cultural protectors, and defenders. These reframings push back against and disrupt deficit narratives of ourselves and our community as HMoob queer and trans youth.

Additionally, these dab neeg serve not only to tell stories about our past, present, and possible future like those of our Elders, but to also critique colonialism and imperialism. These dab neeg were especially critical about the United States' empire and the role it played in the deficit framing of HMoob people. In doing so, the Menyuum Laib demonstrate that dab neeg can be both sources of knowledge and testimonies, and that HMoob storytellers—regardless of age—are keepers and cultural reworkers of HMoob language, history, and lifeways (Vue, 2023). In the next track, our final one, I will delve into the different wisdoms and learnings from the Menyuum Laib and the implications they have for our HMoob community, our educators, and our co-conspirators who serve and work with queer and trans HMoob youth, as well as interrelated disciplines.

## TRACK 6

### NRHIAV NTSIAB LUS – WISDOMS AND LEARNINGS FROM MENYUAM LAIB

*“I may not always have the language to articulate how I’m feeling, but my body and spirit is still remembering all these ancestral practices from even back in Laos. And I think that is beautiful.”*

– cher

#### Introduction

Outside, the rain is pouring, and the sky is pitch black. It is nearly 3 a.m. on a Friday morning, and I am sitting at my desk, fervently typing away on my worn-out laptop. Regretting the deadline I’ve set for myself, I pause and stretch my neck, trying to get rid of the stiffness and aches that have come to settle on my shoulder. Needing a break from writing, I open a folder on my desktop and find myself looking at the various audio recordings that I have saved there. Clicking on one of the icons, I listened as my interview with KM began playing.

Sometimes when I need a break from the stress of dissertation life, I find that relistening to these recording sessions and re-immersing myself back into the different stories the Menyuum Laib shared can be uplifting, similar to how Niam would often replay her cassette tapes from her aunt to relisten to the dab neeg. Their tranquil voices are soothing, their stories comforting. Though spoken predominately in English, the few HMoob or HMoobglish<sup>55</sup> words that were said make the Menyuum Laib sound just like our Elders. The words are like music, especially when spoken with different cim.<sup>56</sup> These words pull at my heartstrings and remind me of home more than ever during a time when I feel most isolated on this doctoral journey. Other nights, I read

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<sup>55</sup> Hmonglish. A mix of HMoob and English (Vang, 2023).

<sup>56</sup> Translation: “Tone.” The HMoob language is tonal and has 8 different tones (Garelleck & Esposito, 2023). Pronunciation: CHEE.

the stories they have crafted in various forms, whether it is a play or a poem, to remind myself that there is wonderful, beautiful, and critical work that is being done by our community.

It's been over a year since I began this dissertation journey with the Menyulam Laib and yet, I can still hear our laughter as we swapped life stories, roasted each other for our sometimes-questionable choices, and engaged in self-deprecating jokes as if it were yesterday. All HMoob storytellers narrate stories the same way, don't you know? The Menyulam Laib and I joked that we could still hear the almost-comical drawn-out exaggerations in our Elders' tonations as they narrate the setting and establish the mood of a story; or perhaps it was the subtle change in pace as they describe the characters and their actions shift the journey; maybe it was the different inflections during splashes of dialogue to bring everything to life. Whatever the style and form, we lovingly mimicked our Elders and laughed, recognizing the familiar and unique forms of HMoob storytelling structure and scheme that we have come to know, love, and respect. We recalled how there were stories with fantastical elements—like humans interacting with talking animals and spiritual beings—and those that were grounded in painful memories—like crossing the Mekong River to escape ethnic persecution in Laos and traveling at night to avoid being captured. With each story, a life lesson was taught, a caution was issued, or an explanation for the world was offered.

It is a testament to the love and labor of those who came before us that we as a stateless Indigenous community was able to find ways to carry and pass down our stories throughout time while navigating and transcending nation-state borders, politics, and belonging. This journey has afforded me the opportunity and the privilege to connect with and learn from five of the most brilliant minds and hearts in this world. I was able to witness how each of them embodied the unbroken fugitive spirits of our ancestors by channeling their love for the queer and trans

HMoob community into the various Menyulam Laib practices they engage with. I was also fortunate enough to be able to learn more about how important stories are to HMoob community and how they can be used to rework culture to be more inclusive. Being in Seattle and away from my home in Minneapolis, a central location to (queer and trans) HMoob community and activism, has been difficult for me, yet this project provided me the opportunity to re/immerse myself into my community, my culture and re/visit my childhood dab neeg.

As I reflect on my growth as a scholar, as a member of the queer and trans HMoob community, and as a person, I thought about the ntsiab lus<sup>57</sup> I have gained from the Menyulam Laib along the way and how instrumental these life lessons have been in shaping who I am today and the future person I will one day grow into. Murri, an Indigenous Australian visual artist and activist, once stated, “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” I share these ntsiab lus with hopes that our HMoob community, our co-conspirators, and our educators will keep Murri’s message and those from the Menyulam Laib at the forefront of their thoughts and center of their hearts while they foster spaces of love and affirmation for queer and trans HMoob youth today and tomorrow.

### **Offerings to Our HMoob Community**

#### ***Queering Cultural Spaces and Practices***

Suggestions like “create spaces by and for queer and trans HMoob youth” at first glance seem like the logical response to a dissertation that is advocating for why spaces created by and for queer and trans HMoob youth are crucial and necessary. However, whenever we talk about creating spaces by and for a group, we sometimes assume or imply that this is a new space that is

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<sup>57</sup> Translation: “Wisdom or meaning.” Pronunciation: JIA loo.

being created: a *new* student organization at a school, a *new* nonprofit within a community, a *new* affinity group at work, etc. I want to be cautious when saying “create spaces by and for” because it can quickly become a euphemism for “pushing out” or having someone absolve themselves of responsibility from supporting these spaces because they are not part of said group. It’s easy to start a new group from scratch and begin from there; it’s harder to look at existing spaces and determine how to (sometimes) disrupt and expand those beyond what they have grown into.

Communal gatherings such as the HMoob New Year celebration, ceremonies like weddings and funerals, and rituals like hu plig<sup>58</sup> and khi tes<sup>59</sup> are important moments (for those who still practice shamanism or follow some parts of HMoob culture) that often require an Elder who is learned in the intricate language of our rituals and songs. Within these spaces, small details about your identity dictate where you sit, how you are spoken to, and what roles and responsibilities are required of you. These spaces are also where gender identity and roles are passive-aggressively policed. So, what happens when someone’s identity disrupts these enforced roles and unsettles the atmosphere? Do we sit at the table with the men or in the kitchen with the women when our face may be feminine, but our clothes are masculine? Should men still shake our hands and greet us if we wear a suit and tie but have long hair and wear makeup and earrings? Whose clan offers the phij cuam<sup>60</sup> if their daughter marries another clan’s daughter? Can a man be a mej koob<sup>61</sup> and sing at a wedding ceremony if he is trans?

It seems easy to suggest that the queer and trans HMoob community simply needs to create their own space if they want to have access to ceremonies and rituals. It’s the queering of

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<sup>58</sup> Soul-calling ceremony. Pronunciation: HOO plee.

<sup>59</sup> Hand-tying ceremony. Pronunciation: KEE thay.

<sup>60</sup> Equivalent to a dowry. Pronunciation: PEE chua.

<sup>61</sup> Negotiators who represent each of the spouses’ clans during the wedding ceremony to mediate and discuss important topics like the bride price, dowry, offerings, etc. The role of the mej koob has always been performed by (married) men who are skilled in traditional wedding songs. Pronunciation: MEH kone.

these already existing spaces that is dangerous. It is dangerous because it requires time, effort, and conversations; dangerous because it demands that HMoob women, queer and trans individuals, unmarried folks, young people, those with dis/ability, and those who have been historically excluded have a seat at the table and be the ones holding the mic when making decisions; dangerous because interrogating rituals and ceremonies that hold a lot of weight in many HMoob families' hearts and spirits means recognizing that our queer and trans individuals—who are some of our most vulnerable siblings—will be opening themselves up to harassment, bullying, and intimidation from those who will not agree. Change is difficult, slow, and scary, but it is time to queer these spaces and practices to be more inclusive for gender and sexually diverse people and queer relationships. We need to re-assess our ceremonies and rituals to determine how to rework them so that our queer and trans HMoob siblings don't feel like they have to leave our community to find support elsewhere. We need to change who can take on what roles and responsibilities so that all members of our community feel empowered to answer their gifts without wondering if their gender or sexuality will be weaponized against them.

I don't assume that this will be an easy conversation or change; in fact, I fully expect pushbacks and refusals, especially from HMoob men because for so long, they have been the ones in power making decisions and determining the outcomes. I anticipate disagreements, especially if and when it means requiring a group to give up or share power. That is okay. Pushbacks and refusals are part of the journey when it comes to charting a new path. Our language, traditions, and culture have survived and thrived even during the bleakest years, and that is the beauty of our culture: it's not static. It moves, changes shape, and runs with us, and it's time we let it run toward its full potential.

### *Celebrating Menyuam Laib as Cultural Reworkers*

It is a common criticism from HMoob Elders that young people, especially second and third generation HMoob youth, are too “Americanized” and do not want to learn and pass down HMoob language, traditions, and culture anymore. Queer and trans HMoob people whose gender identity, gender expression, and relationships challenge HMoob people’s understanding of sex and kinship are disparaged for “learning” how to be gay from Americans and the West. It’s difficult to want to stay where you are not wanted, and I do believe these critiques are misguided, fail to address the bigger issues at hand, and don’t allow for any sort of constructive solutions to the problem the Elders are trying to address. The root issues Elders are concerned with stem from American-born HMoob people becoming the majority population in our community. They fear that speaking HMoob and performing rituals and ceremonies will become less and less common, especially as HMoob people intermarry into other communities, cultures, or religions. This shift is part of a larger conversation that I unfortunately will not be able to get too deep into due to it being outside the scope of this dissertation. However, while concerns about our language and culture are warranted, accusing young people of abandoning their heritage and framing them as bad when they do try to embrace it in their own way is not the answer.

All the Menyuam Laib who are part of the project would most likely be described as second or third generation HMoob Americans who were born and raised in the United States, many of whom disclosed that they are insecure about their lack of fluency when it comes to speaking, reading, and writing HMoob. Growing up, Muun admitted that they struggled with identifying as HMoob and even wanted to be a different race or ethnicity at one point, while Ying immersed themselves within non-HMoob BIPOC communities for a while to explore their queer identity since they felt the HMoob community was not safe for them. Their honesty in disclosing

these feelings to me provided me with a small window into a few of the reasons why it seems inevitable that HMoob language and culture are fading away, and it has nothing to do with the younger HMoob generations not wanting to learn HMoob language and culture. It's because the HMoob community can be restricting to folks who may not conform to HMoob ideologies. It's also because the Elders' treatment of young people who do want to be involved and learn about our culture can be spiritually depleting.

When HMoob members leave our community, I don't necessarily believe it is because they do not love being HMoob, but rather, it is because our community can sometimes be restricting for those who do not conform to traditional understandings of gender identity and expression, and/or participate in heteronormative relationships. Walking away from something and letting ourselves have some breathing room to feel and reflect before we can come back sometimes feels like the right choice, similar to Ying's journey. I have found that many HMoob Americans share these same insecurities, frustrations, and concerns, regardless if they are second or third generation HMoob or whether they're queer or not. Elders can sometimes also make hurtful comments and jokes about young people's fluency and use of HMoob language, even if they truly believe they're just correcting us. However, making fun of someone's fluency can be detrimental and if we want to encourage young people to re/learn HMoob language, then we need to teach them in ways that are not rooted in humiliation and criticism.

One of the biggest issues we need to address is how HMoob Elders fail to recognize and appreciate HMoob youth's interactions with culture within today's climate. We are living in a different country, among different communities, with different expectations and cultural exchanges. It is unfair and unrealistic to expect culture and traditions to continue in the same fashion as they did back in Laos or Thailand; after all, they certainly didn't stay the same at all

while our ancestors were on the run. If we are going to criticize and claim that young people do not want to learn HMoob language anymore or pass down culture and traditions, then we also need to look at how Elders are treating young people when instilling language and beliefs. Experiential learning and oral history are two ways we have always passed down our practices, and I appreciate that, but I also feel like Elders need to be more open with how young people learn and consume knowledge and information in this day and age. My parents used to always tell me, “Just watch and learn” or “Just do it and learn” whenever it came to HMoob culture and practices, which isn’t inherently malicious, but there is a difference between mimicking someone’s movements and words and understanding why we revere these practices. I’m someone who likes to observe a bit before I do something. I also ask a lot of questions; and when you are in HMoob spaces, sometimes Elders don’t allow questions to be asked or even mistakes to be made without drawing attention to your mistakes or accusing you of defying them. I can still remember being red in the face when I didn’t know how to properly butcher a chicken and was criticized by an Elder in front of my aunties—*when I was in middle school!* It was a humiliating experience. For HMoob youth who may not speak HMoob or understand what’s going on during a ritual, getting called out feels terrible. Sustaining language, traditions, and cultures is vital and important, but refusing to let them evolve and grow in response to the people who live and breathe them is detrimental and constricting.

Therefore, instead of criticizing queer and trans HMoob youth as simply “gangster youth” for the different practices they’ve engaged in or found for themselves, let’s instead reframe how we view young people’s interaction with culture and traditions. Let us celebrate Menyuam Laib as cultural reworkers who are constantly negotiating with culture and its boundaries, who are charting new paths for our community, and who are not afraid to explore

and experiment. As we can see from reading their life stories, the Menyulam Laib are re/exploring and re/learning ancestral practices. They are applying the frameworks of HMoob epistemologies, ontology, and cosmology to make sense of, understand, and explain their queer and trans HMoob identity. Additionally, they can explain these within ways that HMoob Elders are able to understand since they were the ones who taught and instilled these beliefs and values in the Menyulam Laib. That should demonstrate just how deeply learned the Menyulam Laib are within HMoob culture and traditions. It is time we respect them as culture reworkers and knowledge holders and producers. Additionally, I never once doubted any of the Menyulam Laib's love for our community, and their dab neeg can attest to that. How they choose to show their love manifests itself very differently: fashion, voguing, ballroom dancing, theatre, spoken word, crafting a children's story with queer and trans superhero characters, etc. Some of these activities are different from what we as a HMoob community are used to, but we must acknowledge their roots in the queer community—a community many of our siblings also belong to. Instead of mischaracterizing queer and trans HMoob as too “Americanized” and therefore not wanting to learn about HMoob language and culture, let's lean into the new ways they *are* remixing traditions and contemporary arts and sociopolitical movements across communities. Let's listen to what it means to be a queer and trans HMoob person who vogues; let's support the artist who produces poetry celebrating queer love; let's cheer for the designer who is reinventing how HMoob clothes can look on queer HMoob bodies; let's watch a play that has queer and trans HMoob characters who love and laugh the same way you and I do.

As second and third generation HMoob Americans grow older and become the majority of our population in the United States, it is important to recognize that their stories are HMoob history; their reworking of culture is still HMoob culture. Instead of criticizing queer and trans

HMoob youth for diluting HMoob language and culture, let's lean into the ways Menyuaam Laib are enriching it by celebrating who they are and learning more about the different practices they either create or find for themselves to appreciate their history, language and culture as sustenance.

### *Listening to Dab Neeg from Menyuaam Laib*

Song poets are respected and understood by HMoob community members as people who have mastered the art of storytelling, such as kwv txhiaj<sup>62</sup> or paj huam.<sup>63</sup> In her book about her father, *The Song Poet: A Memoir of My Father*, HMoob author Kao Kalia Yang describes the role of song poets in HMoob culture, stating: “In the Hmong tradition, the song poet recounts the story of his people, their history and tragedies, joys and losses; extemporizing or drawing on folk tales, he keeps the past alive, invokes the spirits and the homeland, and records courtships, births, weddings, and wishes.” These different forms of traditional storytelling are often associated with the style that our parents listened to and used when we were kids, filled to the brim with ornate HMoob language, complex rhyming schemes, and clever and intricate metaphors. The words these songs call forth onto our Elders' lips are carefully curated and crafted; they unsettle emotions, stab holes in threadbare lies, uncover the truth, and summon justice. Stories from queer and trans HMoob youth prove that the next generation of youth has inherited the fugitive gifts of storytelling from our ancestors, yet we as a HMoob community have not honored young people as song poets the same way we do our Elders.

The love and respect the Menyuaam Laib have for the HMoob stories and song poets they grew up listening to and the care and intent they have poured into creating their own dab neeg

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<sup>62</sup> Traditional form of oral HMoob poetry. Pronunciation: koo ZIA.

<sup>63</sup> HMoob oral poetry that uses a specific rhyming pattern and scheme (“Paj Huam,” 2022). Pronunciation: BA hua.

demonstrate how much HMoob youth values stories and storying. As I previously shared, I came to this project hoping to explore storying with queer and trans HMoob youth because stories have always been a large part of my HMoob identity. However, I was pleasantly surprised that other young people feel just as strongly as I do. While cher may have been the one to officially put forth the suggestion of writing stories, others were just as quick to add their own ideas and helped shape the project to its final form. They all also suggested exploring and learning more about different forms of storying, which was how we ended up experimenting with traditional forms of HMoob storying like paj ntaub and paj huam in the first place while also learning about other cultural forms of storying, such as manga. Further dialogues during our one-on-ones also revealed how important stories were for them growing up. They recall with fondness the song poet of their family, what specific stories were shared, and what lessons they learned from listening to these stories.

So often we get lost in all the stories we are reading and hearing about that sometimes we forget why a story exists and whom it exists for. cher introduced the possibility that stories could be one way we can take control of our narratives in this world, while Sai recognized that stories have the potential to be educational and start dialogues about important topics, especially when consumed by children. By creating stories that introduce HMoob children to queer and trans HMoob superhero characters and draw on HMoob traditions, culture, history, and spirituality, the Menyuum Laib hope to normalize queer identities and portray them as complex, fully realized human beings to disrupt stories that focus on victimhood. Their stories—whether grounded in realism or fantasy, both of which resemble those of our Elders—also offer social commentary about our relationships to land, animal, spirits, and one another while critiquing the impact of war, land displacement, and colonialism on our people.

While the Menyulam Laib may not have sung kwv txhiaj or freestyled paj huam romantically in HMoob like our parents did when we were kids or in their younger days, their dab neeg are infused with their souls the same way Elders created our genealogy with their own souls. The forms and language may have evolved and shifted over time, but the love and labor are still the same. They are intentional about what kind of stories they want to tell; they are careful about who they want to write these stories for; and they are thoughtful about what messages, hopes, and dreams they want to include when passing down their legacy. And similar to Kao Kalia Yang's father, the Menyulam Laib keep the past alive with their dab neeg. With them, they invoke the spirits and the homeland, and will one day record courtships, births, weddings, and wishes with them.

### **Offerings to Our Educators**

#### ***Nurturing Culturally Sustaining and Affirming Spaces***

For educators who work with and serve HMoob students, their families, and communities, one of the biggest lessons we can learn from the Menyulam Laib is the importance of culturally sustaining and affirming spaces, especially when up against whiteness (Carter, 2007; Yosso & Lopez, 2010). Curating art-based spaces that reflect young people's cultural heritage and language can be powerful for providing the tools needed to address harmful narratives about young people and their communities (Shirazi, 2019; Mastas, 2021; Moore and Paris, 2021). All the Menyulam Laib shared that they were drawn to stories and storying while disclosing how each of them engaged with the arts in different ways: illustrations (Muun), theatre (Muun and cher), spoken word (KM), storying (Sai and KM), and fashion (Ying). When culturally sustaining art spaces are implemented, young people are able to explore and develop their relationship with the arts via their cultural connections rather than through the traditional

western perspective (Pepler et al., 2023). The Menyuan Laib's passion for the arts also translates to their love for their community. Muun shared that they want to open a communal art gallery one day for queer and trans HMoob youth to share their different art projects, while cher is considering creating their own nonprofit organization one day for HMoob youth to have a space to gather and fellowship with one another. They also want to write a play about the HMoob community and have HMoob youth perform them to learn about our history and develop their sense of empathy. Similarly, KM wants to find more resources to support rising HMoob writers, Sai wants to write developmentally appropriate stories that explore gender identities and queerness for children, and Ying wants to continue to generate critical conversations about HMoob clothes and gender via fashion, voguing, and ballroom culture. These different aspirations demonstrate the ways young people are already engaging with different forms of art. Nurturing these creative engagements within culturally sustaining art spaces will support queer and trans HMoob youth as they work to transform language and culture for themselves and their community.

Additionally, cher also acknowledged how racially and/or culturally affirming spaces like the Asian Club they were a part of when they were in high school or the Middle Eastern and Asian Club they advised when they were teaching can be crucial to young people's introduction to and exploration of topics that aren't accessible within their school's curriculum. Studies demonstrate that affinity spaces, especially those that address racial or gender identities, are instrumental in improving young people's mental health (Carter, 2007; Myers et al., 2019; Clonan-Roy et al., 2021). Additionally, where schools have GSAs or GSA-adjacent student organizations available, the school climate is described as more inclusive, and the staff and students are more willing to stand up against bullying and harassment (Marx & Kettrey, 2016).

Nonprofit organizations that work with the LGBTQ+ community, such as SOY for the Hmong LGBTQ+ community, have also proven to be effective. However, as evidenced by cher's personal life story, tokenizing students who are part of these spaces is harmful and denies them their agency and consent. Instead, cher posits that we must *invite* young people to talk about topics that are important to *them* and not necessarily expect young people to provide free labor to address racial injustices and/or speak on behalf of their community. cher's recognition of youth's consent and agency even within culturally affirming spaces is crucial. In her work with Black girls, scholar Jazmen Moore (2023) argues that Black girls' refusal to participate in compulsory school learning environments and the rigid rules within them—even within chosen spaces—is a form of self-protection against the ongoing misogyny against Black girls in schools and an act of reclamation to center their humanity. cher and Moore's reframing and understanding of refusal as an act of agency validate the ways we as educators must respect refusal as part of the ongoing consent process with young people and follow their lead when working to address injustices.

Culturally sustaining and affirming spaces can provide young people with access to peers, curriculum, pedagogies, and adults who care about their well-being and humanity. These spaces can also nurture or provide them with the tools and language to tell Indigenous and culturally grounded stories while navigating and interrogating deficit and harmful narratives about themselves and their communities (Moore & Paris, 2021). When spaces are informed by queer and trans HMoob youth's funds of knowledge (Pauly et al., 2019), we can lean into and support the different Menyuam Laib practices that nurture their souls and community.

### ***Implementing Culturally Sustaining School Curriculum and Culture***

Providing spaces for young people is crucial and affirmative, but not enough within education. Implementing a culturally sustaining school curriculum and culture is vital. The work

of Ying and Lub Suab shows how important it is to offer classes that reflect the language and culture of students. Lub Suab's unapologetic challenge of an assimilationist and imperialist educational system that was not built to center HMoob youth speaks to the ways communities recognize and are concerned with the depletion of cultural assets grade by grade, year by year. The state's refusal to adopt HMoob language as an official class—and thereby, refusing to recognize HMoob language teachers as “real” teachers—despite having one of the largest populations of HMoob communities and students speak to the ways education is still being weaponized to maintain the status quo and remove students from their community, both metaphorically and literally.

Schools need to ensure that their curriculum and culture respect and reflect the diverse world that young people are growing up in. This means that curriculum and lesson plans about the Secret War need to be completely replaced to include accurate depictions of the United States' capitalist interest in Southeast Asia, HMoob people's role as allies and proxy soldiers, and how the legacy of the Secret War impacted HMoob families and communities. Educators need to collaborate and, like I did throughout this study, sit at the feet of HMoob community members and honor them as experts and knowledge holders by respecting HMoob people's ways of knowing and building reciprocal relationships. This would include inviting them to share their *dab neeg* and talk about the importance of ceremonies and rituals while compensating them for their time, expertise, and knowledge. Remember that these are not merely counterstories to our current curriculum; these are our lived experiences and testimonies. Educators need to revere our *dab neeg* and storytellers as such. We also need to honor the languages students speak at home and the practices they engage with to learn more about their culture and history. However, providing dual language curriculum or offering different language courses in schools should be

about the importance of sustaining languages as opposed to being part of an effort to “ease [students’] assimilation into a mainstream education that furthers the interests of the officially bilingual nation-state” (Velasco, 2022, p. 15). Indeed, while the United States Department of Education (2023) is calling for more bilingual education, white children from higher socioeconomic households are usually the ones praised for being multilingual. Conversely, children who are multilingual and PGM, emerging language learners, or come from refugee and immigrant families are often denied the same admirations (Flores et al., 2021). If we are going to posit that being multilingual is an asset, then we need to first reframe PGM multilingual students and emerging English speakers with strength-based language.

Education also demands that teachers be culturally sustaining or adopt similar practices without providing the necessary training, resources, and support for them to learn these practices and implement them with fidelity (Velasco, 2022). Ying and Lub Suab’s work with HMoob language speak to this tension. It was difficult for Ying and Lub Suab to find funding to appropriately compensate HMoob language teachers for their expertise, knowledge, and teaching credentials. Their struggle wasn’t because they couldn’t find HMoob language teachers, but rather because HMoob language is not considered part of the curriculum. Therefore, HMoob language teachers were only considered “specialists,” not necessarily licensed teachers, which impacted how much they could be financially compensated. Too often, we’ve heard stories about PGM educators who are hired for DEI roles or required to perform DEI duties and tasks without necessarily providing them with the infrastructure needed to succeed, which sets them up to fail. Additionally, many of these DEI initiatives were repeatedly carried out without the input of students and still centered whiteness in the curriculum, including courses like Ethnic Studies (Stone, 2023). If the United States is going to push for more dual language or have schools offer

more language courses, they need to ensure that teacher candidates are trained to be licensed to teach HMoob language and are being supported and set up to succeed, while being compensated fairly for their expertise. This means we also need to analyze how higher education is supporting Hmong Studies Programs or HMoob students who are looking to become licensed and certified teachers of the HMoob language. Students also need to be included in the conversation and have an active role and voice when schools are designing possible courses and practices and hiring new employees to teach and lead these courses by annually assessing feedback to ensure that PGM youth remain at the heart of these implementations to decenter whiteness (Stone, 2023).

### **Offerings to Our Co-Conspirators**

#### ***Practicing Reciprocal Relationships***

Although I know educators can definitely be co-conspirators, I'm using this term within this section to name non-HMoob community members whose work may not always directly involve queer and trans HMoob youth but can still impact them and their community. This includes artists, policy makers, administrators, and tech workers, to name a few. Often, queer and trans HMoob youth are ridiculed for the different Menyuam Laib practices they have found or created for themselves. It is my hope that co-conspirators seeking to learn from and work with them frame their approach by practicing reciprocal relationships. Three of the five Menyuam Laib who joined me on my learning knew about my project prior to my invitation because we were already sharing spaces with one another nearly a year before my dissertation began. When they heard about my project, they were excited by the idea of it. They shared their joy in knowing a queer and trans HMoob scholar who is writing and learning about the queer and trans HMoob community. This speaks to the importance of centering and building relationships authentically first before engaging in any projects or research. I encourage community members

to first ask if they can join spaces and/or ceremonies with queer and trans HMoob youth to learn from them within these spaces.

I also want to remind co-conspirators that if they are refused, that they respect refusal as part of the ongoing understanding of consent between ourselves and communities. Just like how Zoo Heev Circle issues a reminder that all of their events are for LGBTQ+ Hmong/Southeast Asian individuals only, I, too, want to remind co-conspirators that they are guests within these spaces and that it is okay to recognize when certain spaces are not meant for them to be a part of. This is why being reciprocal is so important; we need to nurture these ongoing relationships and make sure that we are enacting care first before anything.

Additionally, we as HMoob queer and trans youth also want to inform co-conspirators about the danger of framing us with deficit language and as passive victims. As you can see from reading the dab neeg, queer and trans HMoob youth and their community are resourceful and tenacious. Instead of focusing on how our HMoob culture and community is inhibiting us from assimilating, emphasize the wonderful and brilliant work the community is already doing to address differences and navigate challenges. Our communities are more than the damage-centered stories that are often painted for us by outsiders or even by folks within the many communities we are a part of who didn't even bother to listen and learn from us. As previously stated, we can still discuss important issues without casting blame on communities and viewing culture as deficit. Both valuable discourse and respect for the culture can coexist.

### ***Enacting Responsibility to Protect Queer and Trans HMoob Youth***

Power and privilege differ vastly among people, communities, and social groups. Co-conspirators should therefore analyze and understand their own positions, privileges, and power first before seeking to work with queer and trans HMoob youth and their communities. This

doesn't necessarily mean the work can't occur parallel to this assessment, but the more we understand our own positionality in relation to others, the more we can lean into it to determine how we can either 1) access it to support queer and trans HMoob youth's sociopolitical movements and organizing, or 2) divest from it to support equity work.

Some of the most profound ways co-conspirators can influence change is through policies, advocacy, and loving critique. This means protecting queer and trans HMoob youth and advocating on their behalf when you see injustices, even when the injustice is done by people from your own community or someone you know personally. Some examples may include affirming gender identity and pronouns (i.e., acknowledging trans women as women), protecting trans kids when it comes to locker and bathroom access and safety, and pushing back against deficit narratives. As discussed in previous tracks, trans women are still accused of having male privilege, benefiting from male privilege, and falsely tricking others by not disclosing that they are trans, which Muun addressed in their paj huam. These criticisms and the violence they provoke are rooted in biological essentialism, which is the belief that "gender is a discrete and dichotomous social category (i.e., one can be either a girl or a boy, but not both, nor somewhere in between), and that gender is inborn, biologically determined, immutable, and informative of categorical properties" (Gülgöz et al., 2019). We need to protect trans kids by disrupting these violent narratives, and part of that disruption is to especially ensure that Black and Indigenous trans women are protected (Simpson, 2020). And of course, any advocacy for queer and trans HMoob youth needs to align with, respect, and be sensitive to HMoob people, culture, and practices to ensure that respect and reciprocal relationships are being maintained.

While I and the Menyuum Laib encourage co-conspirators to sit at the feet of young people and follow their lead, I also want to share that it is the responsibility of co-conspirators to

also lead this work within their own community and critically engage with these conversations to decolonize education and disrupt white-cisgender-heteronormative-patriarchal violence. It is not the responsibility of queer and trans HMoob youth to educate others about our humanity and agency. We should not and do not need to convince you of that. Instead, partner and collaborate with us so that we can do this work together and support one another in our liberation.

### **Future Research Recommendations**

#### ***Centering HMoob Knowledge, Ways of Knowing and Inquiry***

As with all studies, future research is needed to revitalize and co-create more knowledge and understanding. My recommendation for those seeking to learn from queer and trans HMoob youth, families and community is that HMoob knowledge, ways of knowing, and inquiry is centered and worked into one's methodologies. Western forms of research and theorizing cannot encapsulate the breadth and depth of HMoob people's understanding of the world and the way it shapes our practices because they were not informed by HMoob epistemology and ontology nor were these forms of research and theories designed with us in mind. Previous research about the HMoob community has also been harmful and deficit, including the work of HMoob researchers who use the language of the colonizers to describe HMoob youth within damage-centered language.

One of the most widely read, assigned, and cited research methodology books about HMoob people is *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* by Anne Fadiman, which portrays cultural conflict between a HMoob family and western American doctors as they tried to help Lia Lee, a young HMoob girl who was diagnosed with epilepsy. Most reviews I've looked into described Fadiman as "sympathetic" to both HMoob families and western doctors and applaud the book for the way it has changed medical practices. I disrupt this narrative to argue that while

Fadiman's book did inform doctors about how to be more culturally responsive to HMoob epistemologies within the field of medicine and healthcare, it did little to change the lives of the Lee family or how outsiders view HMoob people, culture, and customs. In fact, I argue that Fadiman's book perpetuated further racist and biased assumptions. Some reviews about the book made derogatory remarks about HMoob culture and the different spiritual practices we perform, informed by Fadiman's writing. In an incredibly racist review, Richards (2010) wrote, "Though animals of all kinds are killed and served up on menus across the West, the concept of murdering a domestic pet for the purpose of curing a crazy child will disturb many American readers (I am living proof)." Even though communities and cultures across the globe slaughter animals for meat consumption, HMoob people sacrificing one's "pet" (which Richards purposely used to draw images of savagery and barbarism, along with reducing Lia's health condition to her simply being a "crazy child") was where Richards and Americans drew the line when it came to empathizing with the situation and respecting HMoob traditions and practices. This is even though America itself has long been known and criticized for their unethical practices of factory farming, while HMoob people's practice of animal rearing has been free-range and grass-fed. Meanwhile, Fadiman's life has been transformed by this book: she's been invited as an expert to speak many times about HMoob people, most likely received monetary compensation, and she even won nationally coveted prizes. In sharp contrast, when Lia Lee passed away in 2012 at the age of 30 after being in a persistent vegetative state for nearly 26 years, her death received little attention (Fox, 2012). Fadiman's treatment of HMoob people is at best paternalistic and at worst racist; it is rooted in the white supremacy notion that HMoob people are in dire need of being saved from savagery. She even described these very real HMoob people she used in her book as "characters" since they played "literary roles" in a narrative, *her* narrative (Lilly, 2010), which

begs us to consider who research ultimately benefits and the lack of relationality, reciprocity, responsibility, and respect for Lia Lee, her family, and our community and lack of reverence for our dab neeg (Keane et al., 2017).

The Menyulam Laib's dab neeg and the growing body of research towards HMoob-centered inquiries is evidence that HMoob youth who grew up in the United States hearing dab neeg and learning from Elders are critically engaging with and critiquing the different ways our people, community, history, and practices are being framed (Xiong & Mouavangsou, 2023). I know that there have been sociopolitical movements to make spaces in academia more inclusive for HMoob scholars whose work challenges hegemonic discourses (Lee et al., 2018), including when scholars from the fields of anthropology, English, ethnic studies, gender and women's studies, queer studies, and history came together to confront of the "ghost of Fadiman" in order to determine how to advance the field of Hmong Studies ("5th Hmong Studies..." 2019). While this dissertation may have centered queer and trans HMoob youth voices to shed light onto their lived experiences, I also leaned into my HMoob Elders' wisdoms to help frame and informed this project, including the wisdom imparted by Niam, Txiv, Dr. Ma Vang, and Dr. Kong Pheng Pha. Intergenerational connections are critical and vital when sustaining and reworking culture. Critical HMoob scholar Thong Vang (2023), who theorize HMoob Eldership as Pedagogy, share that it is important to recognize how our "elders' daily life and activities" are "acts of teaching and learning opportunities" because they are crucial to passing down history, language, culture, and traditions. There is much wisdom for us to learn from our Elders, and I know there is much our Elders can also learn from our young people. Yet, Elders continue to look down on and mistrust young people and the (sometimes new) way they interact and interrogate language, traditions, and culture. Meanwhile, young people continue to be miseducated about our history,

language, culture, and traditions as well. Only by coming together and listening to one another can we learn how to best support queer and trans HMoob youth and their reclamation of history, language, and culture as sustenance and interrogation of the world.

Xiong & Mouavangsou (2023), who co-edited a collection of essays that spoke to the importance of sustaining HMoob-centered inquiries, posited, “We, as HMoob scholars, believe in our knowing, are inspired by each other, and can effect change. When we believe, we also engender change [...] by departing from such cyclical colonial violence of miseducation and racism to amplify a new turning point” (p. 4). It is my hope that as more HMoob scholars enter graduate school and engage with research that disrupts the western understanding of it, there continues to be critical mentors, peers, and spaces that will nurture and affirm them on their journey as they grapple with these displays of downright disrespect. I also hope new research continues to inform practices and policies that center respect, reciprocity, relevancy, and responsibility when it comes to the HMoob community.

### ***Respecting (Queer and Trans) HMoob Youth as Knowledge Producers***

This study was co-designed with five queer and trans HMoob youth between the ages of 21–28, many of whom have graduated or left their university. Two of them were in graduate programs at the start of the project. Because youth is not bound by age itself in HMoob culture, I chose to focus on adults who are considered “young people” in the HMoob community. I recognize that the term “young people” encompasses different age groups depending on the culture. Therefore, in relation to the western idea of youth, research can focus on HMoob students in K–12 public schools to gain insights into their experiences, especially as more young people identify as being on the LGBTQ+ spectrum. Young people have a wealth of knowledge and lived experiences; it is time we respect them as knowledge producers instead of seeing them

as empty vessels that need education to fill them up (Freire, 1970). A report by the nonprofit PRRI shared that in 2024, 28% of Gen Z identified as LGBTQ+, compared to 16% of Millennials, 7% of Generation X, 4% of Baby Boomers, and 4% of the Silent Generation (Deckman et al., 2024). As more and more young people identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community and queer identities and relationships become normalized, we need to continue to learn more about how queer and trans HMoob youth respond to the current sociopolitical climate.

I also look forward to seeing how HMoob affinity groups—especially those at four-year universities—respond to and address the needs of the queer and HMoob community, if at all. The five Menyuan Laib I learned from shared that they did not disclose their queerness to friends and family until college; some explicitly shared that they intentionally waited until college to come out because it felt safer to do away from home. Learning more about why college is considered safer to queer and trans HMoob youth and what support groups they are seeking out will help us continue to find the best resources to support them.

Finally, in most studies focusing on LGBTQ+ HMoob individuals, gay HMoob men tend to disproportionately self-select themselves as participants. This is by no means their intention. I purposefully focused on queer and trans HMoob individuals as a whole and outlined this specifically when I sent out my invitation. All the Menyuan Laib who responded to my invitation identify as either cisgender woman, trans, or nonbinary and used a variety of pronouns, including the singular they/them. As more studies are produced about the LGBTQ+ HMoob community, I hope that researchers remain conscious about having diverse members of our community be a part of projects and reach out as much as possible to our trans siblings, whose voices are silenced the most.

### *Considerations for Interrelated Theories and Disciplines*

This project demonstrates just how important Indigenous stories are, especially when told by Indigenous communities themselves. Queer and trans HMOob youth live complex and intersectional lives, and this project reflected that. Therefore, I share these considerations for interrelated theories and disciplines, particularly the fields of Asian American studies, queer studies, critical refugee studies, and Indigenous studies.

The field of Asian American studies has been criticized for its preoccupation with citizenship and belonging, specifically within the United States' borders (Hsu, 2008). In the past two decades, Asian American studies has expanded its discipline to begin discussing and exploring settler colonialism among Asian diasporas and consider how Indigenous studies can contribute to this understanding. This was predominately in response to the Kanaka Maoli scholar-activist Haunani-Kay Trask describing non-Indigenous communities, including those from Asia as “settlers of color” because of how they contribute to the erasure and dispossession of Native Hawaiians, even as they themselves experience exclusion and unfair work labor treatment. The field of “Asian settler colonialism studies”—coined by Candace Fujikane, Jonathan Okamura, and Dean Itsuji Saranillio (Asian American scholar-activists in and from Hawaii)—was therefore meant to “grapple with Asian American attachments to the settler state even as it demands forms of ethical accountability and Asian-Indigenous solidarity” (Ghandi, 2022, p. 1067).

Despite these distinctions being made in research, there is still a lot confusion as to what makes someone Indigenous or a settler, especially within the different nation-states that have formed due to war. Within Asian American studies, Indigeneity tends to focus on Asian-Indigenous relations (i.e., Asian diasporic communities and their relationships to Indigenous

communities, particularly within North America) instead of the Indigenous Asian communities themselves, which ignores and erases Indigenous Asian communities within the United States, like the HMoob people who are Indigenous to Southeast Asia. The region of Southeast Asia itself further exacerbates the issue. Chua and Idrus (2022) argue that, “The main characteristics of internationalized definitions of Indigenous people—territorial precedence (as preinvasion and pre-colonial societies), territorial continuity, sociocultural and ethnic distinctiveness, and marginalization by dominant others [...]—are not easily found in Southeast Asia, where successive waves of migration make it impossible to demarcate ‘natives’ and outsiders, and where displacement and domination are less the legacy of a rupturous white settler–colonial ‘event’ than of national and regional politics” (p. 8). This is even more troubling when Indigenous Asian communities are forced to leave their homelands to resettle into other nation-states and are labeled as refugees and denied of their Indigeneity because of political status, like the HMoob people (Mostiller, 2022). Asian American studies still treat the concepts of Indigeneity and refugeeism as two distinct and mutually exclusive categories. However, doing so contributes to the erasure of Indigenous Asian communities, especially considering how many of these communities are not even seen as Indigenous within their nation-state. HMoob people, for example, are not considered Indigenous within China because China does not recognize Indigenous people, instead viewing them as an “ethnic minority.” Mostiller (2022) argued that “How minority communities are labeled determines the degree of protection they receive domestically and internationally” (p. 114) and demonstrates how the misrecognition of Cham people contributes to cultural loss and land dispossession in attempts to assimilate them. Similarly, HMoob people are often discussed as refugees and part of the Asian American community and diaspora within the United States, but not discussed as Indigenous Asians whose

ancestral homeland spans across multiple present-day nation-states. I hope Asian American studies, Indigenous studies, and critical refugee studies can address how to make spaces for these conversations; otherwise, the lack of them will continue to contribute to the global vanishment of Indigenous (Asian) communities.

Additionally, queer studies have also troubled the concepts of “belonging” within Asian American studies because queer and trans bodies are often treated as outsiders, even as folks migrate to new spaces in search of queer desires and belonging (Otalvaro-Hormillosa, 1999). In the United States, Asian/Asian Americans are already viewed as perpetual foreigners, but when queer bodies and relationships are thrown into the mix, we are viewed as foreigners within our own homes too (regardless of whether “home” is our body, a country or simply, our home). As a “non-normative” ethnic group, the HMoob people needing to live life on the run demonstrates the ways in which our community is already “queer” because our understanding and remaking of home and belonging is not tied to any nation-state, even if we recognize the Kingdom of the HMoob People that is spread across various countries within Southeast Asia. The Menyuum Laib’s dab neeg also demonstrate the ways they understand home and belonging by recognizing that while we can’t “go back” home, we can still honor our ancestral homelands. Their rejection of the United States’ homonationalist imperialism highlights how they refuse to let the media and government use them and their communities to further their own agendas on the concepts of belonging and citizenship and absolve the United States of its responsibility in creating the situations that made HMoob people refugees in the first place.

Moving forward, I hope the fields of Asian American studies, queer studies, critical refugee studies, and Indigenous studies can come together to determine how to make space to talk about and consider how Indigenous Asian communities are often erased or made invisible

because of their overlapping political statuses. As discussed within the literature review, HMoob students and their culture are framed as “counternarratives” to the model minority myth for Asian students but also viewed as “primitive” because of their Indigeneity, while also being treated as lazy refugees who are stealing resources from white Americans. HMoob culture and queer culture are already discussed as being in conflict with one another; we should not need to also feel like our Asianness, refugee status, or Indigeneity minimize or deny us of our other political statuses, which continue to shape how we are framed by outsiders.

While Indigenous methodologies honor stories as data, I hope these interrelated disciplines continue to lean into how stories and storying within diasporic Asian communities, like dab neeg for the HMoob community, can be sites of learning and meaning making when addressing the complexities of these political statuses, as they intermingle with racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identity and formations. I would love to see storyworking being woven into these interrelated theories and disciplines to illustrate how stories continue to nurture and nourish communities that are diasporic, whose sovereignty is not tied to any nation-state, and whose languages have been historically oral. Additionally, the creation of Indigiqueer by Cuthand (Plains Cree) in 2004 mean that we also need to collaborate with queer and Indigenous youth who choose to name their own identity rather than fully identifying with colonizers’ identities (Romero, 2023). While the topic of queer nomenclatures was not brought up in the Menyuum Laib’s dab neeg, I discussed how queer and trans HMoob youth use a variety of descriptors for themselves in Track 2 (Pha, 2017; “The Cedar Cultural Center,” 2022; Khan-Schwartz, 2022). Ntxawg, the song poet who wrote this dissertation's Prelude, “Hmoob Term for Queer”, also discussed how not having a word for queer in the HMoob language was not an issue since being queer is more about our roles, our practices and our love for our community rather than just a

name. This was demonstrated within Muun and Sai's dab neeg, both of whom refrained from using language like "trans" or "nonbinary", choosing instead to focus on the characters' roles and responsibilities to their families and communities, although the Menyuum Laib do describe themselves as queer and trans HMoob youth and as part of the queer and trans HMoob community. HMoob scholar Kong Pheng Pha also writes how the "absence of nomenclature is itself an act of queerness" by living without labels (Pha, 2017, p. 280). By partnering with queer and trans HMoob and Indigiqueer youth who live without labels or create their own, we can understand how they are understanding their identity and relation to their communities. I hope these interrelated disciplines, particularly queer studies, can listen to their stories to begin centering queer and trans PGM youth within the fields. By creating spaces to have discussions about these interlapping identities, we can continue to understand how queer and trans HMoob youth remake culture and belonging within the HMoob diaspora as they contend with the legacy of the Secret War.

### **(Still) On the Run with Menyuum Laib**

In early 2023, right after I began my gatherings and listening sessions with the Menyuum Laib, I became pregnant with my first child and gave birth that October. The idea of bringing someone into this world and being responsible for them for the next few years of their lives was incredibly overwhelming. I think about how in 2022, Florida passed a law that banned instruction or classroom discussions about LGBTQ+ topics and issues for kindergarten through third grade, and how curriculum and materials would need to be "age-appropriate" for older students (Phillips, 2022). This law and the constant war on critical race theory (Lopez et al., 2021; Harrison et al., 2021) exist to remind us of the violent ways the United States' empire and education system, rooted in white-cisgender-heteronormative-patriarchal violence and settler

colonialism, continue to harm Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian American, Pacific Islander and multiracial students, queer and trans students, dis/abled students, migrant and bilingual students, and others who do not ascribe to white, middle-class, Christian values. We are treated like fugitives, and our learning unintentionally evolves in response to these traumas as defense mechanisms. To simply exist is a form of resistance. When I think about these, I often wonder why I would want to bring an innocent child into a world that will threaten to dehumanize him, his community, his language, and his culture.

However, these state-sanctioned violences are just some of the reasons why I believe that having a space for storying, reflecting, and reimagining is crucial for queer and trans HMoob youth to explore and interrogate their racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities while learning from and with one another—regardless if these spaces are online or onground. The dab neeg from the five Menyuum Laib demonstrate the power of coming together and utilizing dab neeg to rework and transform culture for themselves and their community. These dab neeg not only expand and shift HMoob culture and lifeways, but they also provide social commentary on our world while offering guidance to those who may need it. While I try to refrain from downright labeling a place as “safe” without knowing for certain that it is safe for queer and trans people specifically, a status which is subject to change at any time, I do want to emphasize that being around other queer and trans individuals can create a safer space for young people to feel empowered to share their stories with one another. Being intentional about who the space serves and who the guests are is crucial in protecting practices and spaces that refuse to be colonized. So, when I think about *these*, I am reminded that there is still beauty in this world worth fighting for. When I remember my learnings with queer and trans HMoob youth, I am reminded that one

day, my son will get to experience a different world, one that was built and molded by queer and trans HMoob youth who thought of him and loved him even before he was knitted in my womb.

It's been over 40 years since the first HMoob refugee set foot in this country. Our language, culture, and traditions have always evolved and adapted themselves to the many places we've come to occupy across space and time and will continue to do this as we cross borders, nations, and communities. As young people continue to reimagine what this will look like for themselves now and for future generations, let's open our hearts and minds to the many possibilities they have opened up. During our last listening session, Sai shared a powerful quote with me about the importance of having spaces to story together that I wish to conclude this dissertation with:

“You know there are so many people who are in search of this search like me and are looking to connect and find a community where they feel that they belong, essentially where they belong—as we all are. And I think it's so layered in the fact that as HMoob people—as displaced people, as a diaspora—I think a lot of us, when having our experience and story intertwined with also being queer, being connected to each other is holistically—like spiritually, emotionally—everything. It's everything because we get to then, as I was speaking to my experience, just like unpack real shit we're going through in real time. We get to take a peek into our history and find where we were in that. And then we get to dream of a future where hopefully there's a lot of healing for us, there's a lot of joy for us. And there's a lot more access to safety, to ceremonies, to cultural relevance, where we make and build that stuff so that those to come, they know the legacy that there have been other people who love them enough to think about them enough. That there's a world for them too. There's a community for them, too.”

After all, if anyone's going to

transform and maintain our culture with love and care

Menyuam Laib yog cov ua laib

*[It's the gangster youth who can do it].*

## POSTLUDE

### PEB YOG (WE ARE) (BY KEVIN YANG)

So ask me,  
who we are,  
as if a single sentence could define our existence,  
as if one page in the history book could speak about our millenniums on this Earth,  
as if a statistic could do justice to our numbers  
So ask me,  
who we are  
Peb yog  
We are soy milk and frosted flakes for breakfast  
We are carnivores  
feasting on laj nyoos and qaub,  
unafraid of e-coli  
We are grateful that rice is gluten free.  
We are vegans feasting only on zaub ntsaub,  
We are everything in the garden is zaub ntsuab.  
We are full stomachs  
and  
full hearts.  
Peb yog,  
We are lovers.  
We are love  
in all of it forms.  
We are Gay.  
We are straight.  
We are queer.  
We are ace.  
We are hands holding hands.  
We never kiss in front of our children, but  
We always kissed in front of our parents.  
We are black umbrellas and bride prices.  
We are patriarchy.  
We are feminists who know better.  
Peb yog.  
We are family.  
We are married since sixteen.  
We are divorced twice.  
We are orphans.  
We are eternal bachelors.  
We are single mothers holding down the fort,  
fathers who cradle children on their backs.  
We are grandmothers

who can still tell stories about Laos  
before the war.  
We are brothers  
We are sisters  
We are siblings  
We are cis  
We are trans  
We are transformers  
We are giants  
We are five foot five  
even though we write five foot six on our  
driver's license registrations  
We are bigger than our bodies.  
We are bigger than our fears.  
Peb yog.  
We are superstitions  
We are uneaten oranges  
at the dinner table.  
We hide our ears from dogs breath.  
We only point at the moon  
with our elbows  
We graduate with our doctorates in medicine,  
but we still rub tiger balm on everything.  
Peb yog.  
We are joss sticks  
and bowls of rice for our ancestors  
We read Exodus  
and become jealous of Moses  
how he split the Red Sea  
wishing we could've done the same  
to the Mekong River.  
We are prayers. We are chants.  
We are bruised knees on marble floors.  
We carry the fallen on our backs and in our hearts.  
We are alive.  
We are beating.  
We are beaten.  
Peb yog.  
We are bruised ribs in Wisconsin forests.  
We are police brutality in North Minneapolis.  
We are eight shots in the back.  
We are not always welcome here.  
We are always here.  
We are always hearing go back to where you came from.  
We are trying to remember where we came from.  
Peb yog.

We are Frogtown, East Side, Northside Minneapolis.  
 We are Eau Claire, LaCrosse, Detroit, Charlotte, Fresno.  
 We are Xieng Khoung, Nan, Guizhou, Paris, Berlin, Australia, French Guiana.  
 We are Mekong to the Mississippi.  
 We are home  
 everywhere we stand.  
 Peb yog.  
 We are ELL in the second grade  
 and the third grade.  
 We are bootlegged copies of Rush Hour 2  
 dubbed in all Hmong.  
 We are McDonalds signs on University and Lexington.  
 We are Northside Slang.  
 We are Masters Degrees in English Literature.  
 We are Nyob Zoo Kwv Tij Neej Tsa  
 contestant winners.  
 We are fluent in tragedy,  
 speak about struggle  
 like it's our mother tongue,  
 swallow hope  
 like it's mov nplaum.  
 Peb yog.  
 We are the children of the future  
 playing kaw taub  
 with our elders  
 a winding game of back and forth  
 traveling in spirals.  
 We are dab neeg told at campfires  
 We are Hmong immersion schools on the Eastside.  
 We are poems  
 We are kwv txhiaj.  
 We are hip hop.  
 We are Paj huam.  
 We are contradictions.  
 We are harmony.  
 We are Generation 1  
 We are millennials  
 We are Generation 1 million.  
 Peb yog.  
 We are growing  
 We are complicated.  
 We are human,  
 the same way  
 We are invincible  
 in our flaws and  
 in our perfections.

So ask me,  
who we are  
as if you weren't expecting an entire story  
understanding that by the time I finish speaking,  
I'd have to start all over just to capture every new  
stone that we've turned over since,  
So ask me,  
who we are  
understanding that we have so much more to go,  
but we've we come so far already  
So ask me,  
who we are  
and we will tell you  
Peb yog  
Peb yog  
Peb yog Hmoob.

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