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Ib Lub Chaw Tso Pa "A Place to Exhale"

Hmong Women Addressing Violence through *Neej Neeg* Storytelling

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Asian American Studies

by

April Bao Yang

2024

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Ib Lub Chaw Tso Pa "A Place to Exhale"

Hmong Women Addressing Violence through *Neej Neeg* Storytelling

by

April Bao Yang

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Lee Ann Shih-Ching Wang, Chair

This thesis centers on Hmong women and Hmong feminist epistemologies in addressing violence in Hmong communities. Many studies seek to understand violence in the Hmong community in order to address it. Culturally competent state care has been heavily pushed, only to continue falling short of fully meeting the needs of Hmong women. Instead of investigating violence in the Hmong community to create culturally competent care, this thesis studies the Hmong Story YouTube channel, the care work of the channel's host, May Vang, and *neej neeg* storytelling to consider what we can learn from how Hmong women are organizing for care and addressing violence in their communities.

The thesis of April Yang is approved.

Grace Kyungwon Hong

Cindy Cruz Sangalang

Lee Ann Shih-Ching Wang, Committee Chair

University of California

2024

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my Hmong community, especially my Hmong mothers, sisters, and daughters. Hmoob yuav tsum hlub Hmoob mog.

To my mother, Chong, and my sisters, Gatonie, Ciarra, and Kelly, who I do everything for.

To my husband, Kyle Yang, who readily walked with me through this journey.

Most importantly, to my Niam Tias, Yeeb Lis Naim Vam Sawm Thoj, who I miss dearly. You are my inspiration and guide.

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INTRODUCTION

My dear friend and I were working together on a suicide prevention workshop in response to the mental health needs in the Hmong community we saw arise during the COVID-19 pandemic when she expressed to me that Hmong feminism felt like a paradox. I was surprised, not because I was disappointed in her genuine comment, but because she embodied what I considered to be a Hmong feminist. We identified as working-class, American-born Hmong women, first-generation academic scholars, and community organizers. We organized together and with other Hmong women throughout our undergraduate years to address needs we saw in our communities that were not being met. We created peer support that was specific to our fellow Hmong college students' needs to promote the retention and graduation rate of our community on campus. We programmed education conferences to increase access to higher education for Hmong youths. We wrote about the Hmong community to expand research in our respective fields when many of our professors and peers had no idea who the Hmong people were. The work we had done and continue to do together and individually required more than passion and our academic education – it required us to care as, draw from, and practice our knowledge and experiences as Hmong women, our Hmong feminist epistemologies.

I am constantly pushed to reface the question of whether Hmong women can be both Hmong and feminist as I encounter over and over again the notion that Hmong women are at the mercy of innately violent Hmong culture that reinforces gender inequality. To identify as a Hmong woman must mean she accepts violence and submits to the patriarchy. On the other hand, when she rejects Hmong patriarchy and adopts American and Western feminist ideals, she renounces and loses her Hmongness. However, I can attest that neither the imagined opposing ethos is ever entirely true. Hmong women have always been and still are at the forefront of the

efforts to end violence in their communities while also leading the efforts to safeguard their cultural heritage and identity for future generations.

My coming into anti-violence work was unintentional, but now seems so intuitive as a part of addressing needs and gaps in the Hmong American community. I do not claim to speak on behalf of the community as an expert in Hmong culture. Still, my personal experiences as a victim of sexual abuse, as a witness to many instances of domestic violence, and as a keeper to Hmong women experiencing violence allow me to reflect on where Hmong women experiencing violence access care that speaks to their cultural needs. Where are Hmong women experiencing violence turning to for care? Where can victims go to escape violence? Do they seek out, but more importantly, can they access current resources and services? What do current resources and services to support Hmong victims and survivors look like? What *could* they look like? As I dove into trying to answer these questions, my project began to evolve to examine what was lacking but what Hmong women were creating in the absence of and in response to state resources and services. My questions began to focus on what Hmong women are doing about and how Hmong women are addressing violence. Rather than ask what we can learn about Hmong women, this project centers on Hmong women, their voices, their experiences, and their knowledge to think about what we can learn *from* Hmong women.

This thesis, *Ib Lub Chaw Tso Pa*, is a study of the Hmong Story YouTube channel focusing on care work, storytelling, and how Hmong women are addressing violence. The project examines the oral tradition of *dab neeg* (da neng) storytelling. It analyzes May Vang's, the host of the Hmong Story YouTube channel, work telling stories and stories from women sharing their experiences of violence. *Dab neeg* is the general term and the broader, all-encompassing category for stories. *Neej neeg* (neng neng), loosely translated as life stories, can

be understood as a genre of *dab neeg*. *Neej neeg* storytelling is a popular pastime that I think of as a continuation of the folk art of storytelling. Although the terms are mostly used interchangeably and the different genres of stories are regarded similarly, *neej neeg* differentiates itself from other types of *dab neeg* as a “real” story of a real person’s life. *Neej neeg* is understood to belong to real people, not characters. Hmong Story is a YouTube channel well known throughout the Hmong community for sharing *neej neeg* by its host and storyteller, May Vang Niam Ntsuab Teev Yaj, who narrates *neej neeg* submitted to her from her community of listeners. Matters that are considered private, taboo, unworthy, inappropriate, or unsuitable to discuss among one another in public are shared through this medium. May is only one of many other storytellers retelling *neej neeg* on YouTube, but she has grown a loyal following throughout the years for her storytelling skills and style, especially among women. Even though May tells *neej neeg* regarding all sorts of matters on her channel, Hmong Story has unintentionally become a space for many community members to share experiences of violence. Hmong Story is particularly utilized by women, with May noting that she and her channel have become “*ib lub chaws tso pa*,” literally translated as a place to exhale but figuratively symbolizes an outlet to release for women who have nowhere to express their frustrations.

When women’s outward expressions of frustrations are undervalued and deemed unproductive and violence is considered a taboo topic, focus is placed on reasoning women's reluctance to discuss their experiences of violence. However, to whom it is taboo to hear about violence experienced by women is a more intriguing matter to contemplate. Hmong women have always understood, discussed, critiqued, challenged, and resisted Hmong patriarchal practices and the many other systems of power that are violent toward them. It is the backlash and disregard they receive when speaking out about violence that renders them silent. May’s idea of

ib lub chaws tso pa is simply a space where Hmong women can express to someone, to anyone, what they are otherwise unable to express to their usual support systems. Hmong Story has become, in a literal sense, a channel where Hmong women can talk about their experiences of violence and have their stories heard on a public platform.

In this thesis, I argue that Hmong Story arises as an alternative form of care for Hmong women experiencing violence facilitated through Hmong *neej neeg* storytelling and May's feminist practices that meet the particular needs of the Hmong women experiencing violence sharing their *neej neeg* through this medium that may be unavailable to them through other types of care. In acknowledging Hmong Story's potential to care, I do not dismiss the limitations or the critiques of the medium, nor do I disregard the advantages of state forms of care. Instead, I seek to consider how Hmong women have created other options for care outside of and without state institutions. While May herself does not call her storytelling work "care work" per se, May does recognize what Hmong Story offers to Hmong women experiencing violence. May's *neej neeg* storytelling is Hmong feminist practice that requires both skills in the craft of storytelling and caring. Therefore, May does more than retell *neej neeg* – she provides care informed by her own epistemologies when she listens to and tells *neej neeg* on behalf of the story owners. I assert that May's storytelling practices do not replace forms of state care but emerge as an alternate form of care that authentically serves the needs of her audience, specifically Hmong women, and does not subject them to the eligibility criteria that create barriers to and have excluded them from accessing state care.

Additionally, I argue that Hmong women's *neej neeg* allows for narratives of women and experiences of violence that expose the complexities and challenge strict notions of how both women and violence are talked about in state anti-violence work. The story owners of the *neej*

neeg in this study who are recounting their encounters with violence demonstrate the nuanced ways in which they recognize, discuss, and thus choose to address their experiences of violence. Through sharing their *neej neeg*, Hmong women disclose experiences of violence and express what they might need when experiencing violence without erasing their agency. Therefore, I posit that Hmong women's *neej neeg* discussing their experiences of violence make room for anti-violence futures outside the scope of victimhood and survivorhood that has rendered so many marginalized communities' needs and agency invisible and illegible for state care.

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO HMONG HISTORY AND ORAL TRADITIONS

Hmong are an Asian ethnic minority sub-group of the Miao people in China. Most Hmong and scholars believe Hmong originated from what is now China and continuously migrated south into Southeast Asia due to several factors, including conflict with imperial China and the dominant ethnic group, as well as the need for land to cultivate opium. Hmong refugees arrived in the U.S. in the aftermath of the Vietnam War through the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1976 and the Refugee Act of 1980 after being displaced for aiding with the U.S.'s covert military operations. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency recruited Hmong and other ethnic minorities in Laos to conduct secret military operations in the neutral country during the Vietnam War, which has since come to be known as the Secret War. The majority of Hmong Americans are refugees and descendants of refugees who are linked explicitly to the Hmong populations in Laos directly impacted by the Secret War. The United States has become home to the largest Hmong population outside of Asia (Vang, C.Y., 2010). Stories and storytelling are essential aspects of Hmong memory, loss, and lived experience in refugeehood and diaspora.

The legacy of the Secret War in Laos and the subsequent diaspora marks a pivotal, albeit more recent, chapter in Hmong history. Yet, it is important to recognize that the Hmong possess an even more enduring historical presence throughout Asia. While extraordinary efforts have been made to recover Hmong history prior to encounters with French colonists in Southeast Asia, much of it remains uncertain, mainly due to the scarcity of written records about the Hmong, both by dominant ethnic groups and within Hmong communities themselves (Vang, C.Y., 2010, p. 17-20). What is certain is that the absence of textual history does not mean there are no historical records. Hmong ways of remembering have been vital to recollecting and recuperating not just long, forgotten ancient histories but also the more recent Secret War. Oral histories and cultural productions of Hmong's Secret War experiences and accounts played a vital part in pressing the U.S. to acknowledge its secret war in Laos. Hmong memory exposed how Hmong were not merely the excess of war needing the humanitarian aid of the U.S., but people who made incredible sacrifices for and on behalf of the U.S.

Ma Vang's (2020) concept of "history on the run," histories that are mobile and living, fugitive and secret, and embodied and practiced, and "fugitive history," histories that "are made and move because they are carried by people who move..." (p. 7) challenges us to value Hmong's different practices of remembering amid persecution and displacement that may take unrecognizable forms. Hmong history is inextricably tied to oral traditions. The passing of knowledge is done through stories, songs, sacred chanting songs, funeral and wedding songs, soul calling songs, and ritualistic secret language chanting songs. Remembering and recalling clan lineages, essential sites, and historical events in oral forms is transmitted and inherited from generation to generation (Thao, 2015, p. 52 -72). Hmong oral traditions are indispensable to remembering, allowing Hmong to adapt, create, and build in diaspora. While Hmong history

remains absent from dominant histories, Hmong history is not forgotten to the Hmong community through the stories that we remember and tell.

Expanding on the genealogy of Hmong oral traditions, this project engages with *mloog lus*, to listen, as the second element and an imperative form of care distinctly linked to Hmong oral traditions and memory epistemologies that recognize that the listening aspect is just as crucial as the speaking aspect of storytelling. *Mloog lus* is an expansive concept signifying different meanings in how it is expressed, although my relationship with *mloog lus*, as a Hmong woman, has significantly been within the context of obedience that spills out over the bounds of the Hmong community. To *mloog lus* has been to not go against, to not cause disturbances, is to accept. While the concept of *mloog lus* has been used in ways to reinforce the marginalization of individuals and groups, including the regulation of women experiencing violence, I prompt the consideration of unlearning and reimagining what *mloog lus* can mean for our communities. I employ *mloog lus* as a practice that listens and gives voice to Hmong women to counter the silencing and marginalization of Hmong women as Hmong feminist epistemology to inform my methods as a writer, researcher, social work practitioner, care practitioner, as someone who has received care, and most importantly, my role as a Hmong storyteller.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

In this thesis, I identify care work in stories, collecting stories, and telling stories. This thesis will function in two parts, examining both care work and talking about and addressing violence. The first part of this thesis analyzes the Hmong Story YouTube channel and May's storytelling work. The second part of this thesis focuses on analyzing stories of experiences of violence from Hmong women that have been shared on Hmong Story. In my approach to the study of Hmong Story, I addressed these sets of questions that focus on the legibility of

unrecognized care work when certain groups of people have been deemed and marked as inherently violent and limited in agency along racial lines. 1. How does May's *neej neeg* storytelling work through her Hmong Story YouTube channel contribute to the Hmong community? 2. How are Hmong women talking about and addressing violence? 3. What can we learn from women's *neej neeg* about experiences of violence?

For this project, I listened to and reviewed stories uploaded between January 1, 2021 and April 6, 2024. I focused on May's story collecting and telling practices and her interaction with story owners and her audience, as well as the stories that were being told. To locate care work, I examine May's responses to the story owners and comments made to explain her story collecting and telling practices to her audience that she makes before and after stories. I noted the comments that demonstrated May's care practices in caring for stories in her collection of stories and engagement with story owners. I focus on the language that May uses, how she speaks to her audience, and how she speaks about storytelling. I also interviewed May about her work creating Hmong Story as a YouTube channel¹.

To analyze how women are addressing violence, I listened for *neej neeg* from Hmong women that discussed experiences of violence. May announces at the beginning of each *neej neeg* the gender of the story owner, which provided categories of self-identified women's stories. However, since Hmong Story is not a podcast that is only about women or violence, I paid attention to titles that indicated the *neej neeg* belonged to a woman and would possibly discuss violence with keywords such as "*txiv*," husband, "*phem*," mean/bad, "*mob*," hurt. While I am not analyzing the public comments left on the uploads, I did review them to help me indicate if the

¹ This interview was conducted in 2021. Published to Distorted Footprints.

neej neeg included discussions about violence. When reviewing each *neej neeg*, I looked for indications from the story owner that demonstrated how they identify for themselves that they are experiencing or have experienced violence. Since there is not necessarily a lone word in Hmong that means victim or survivor, nor do all the story owners identify as a victim or survivor, I listened for words such as, “*kuv yog ib tug neeg ua tau*,” I am a person that has, and “*kuv raug*,” I was/experienced.

The second half of this thesis examines the *neej neeg* themselves. I examine five *neej neeg* recounting instances of violence experienced by women. I began with thirteen selected stories that were diverse in experiences of violence, and I examined the different themes that emerged in each story, paying close attention to how story owners talked about and addressed experiences of violence. I then narrowed the stories down to five stories to study common themes that emerged to examine more closely. I took notes of themes that emerged in each story I listened to and reviewed. These five stories demonstrate how each woman discusses their experiences of violence and how they addressed or is addressing violence.

The first is about Mai and her journey of recovery after being sexually exploited at the hands of her husband. The second is about See and her journey leaving an abusive relationship. The third is about Pa and her experiences as a person with a disability and calling out the person who raped her. The fourth is about Yer and her journey to end the violence she was experiencing. The fifth is about Lor and where she has found support for her experiences of violence. In this section, I briefly summarize each *neej neeg* with the intention of keeping certain things unknown to certain groups of people as part of my own care practice to safeguard women and the Hmong community.

In my analysis, I intentionally use specific words to try to make my analysis as clear as possible while avoiding reproducing the same discourse and practices I critique. I refer to May as the *storyteller* since she is the one whose literal voice we hear when listening to the channel. I refer to the people listening to the *neej neeg* through the Hmong Story YouTube channel as listeners. I refer to the person the story belongs to as the *story owner*, which I also use as a neutral term to refer to the women experiencing violence in the *neej neeg* I analyze in place of victim or survivor. In many senses, they are victims and survivors. However, I refrain from using those labels unless the story owner specifically identifies themselves as such. In the second section, “Addressing Violence,” I created pseudonyms for each story owner. May’s practice of telling *neej neeg* in first person and not including names or certain specific details anonymizes each story owner. My use of pseudonyms is strictly to help make the analysis easier to follow. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or deceased, or real-life events is purely coincidental.

LITERATURE REVIEW

VIOLENCE AND CULTURE

The discussion of violence must encompass how we talk about the people involved. In “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities,” Eve Tuck (2009) maintains that research on Indigenous, marginalized, and disenfranchised communities has been historically “damage centered,” where they are portrayed as “defeated and broken” in what she calls damage centered research (p. 412). Tuck specifically critiques research utilizing the theory of change that aims to build more resources for marginalized communities, which often comes at the expense of the marginalized communities being depicted as perpetually damaged. Damaged-centered research prioritizing the establishing of harm or injury to and documenting pain and loss of the

marginalized individual or community has been the dominant strategy for acquiring specific political and material benefits. However, as Tuck maintains, damage-centered research ends up being detrimental to the communities it intends to serve by pathologizing communities, defining them solely through their experiences of oppression (p. 413).

Specifically for Hmong women, damage-centered research has centered around framing a group of people and their histories as dictated by purported violent, patriarchal culture and grappling with adapting to new ideas of gender equality encountered upon their resettlement in the West. This theme has been so prominent among the increasing literature on violence in the Hmong community that French anthropologist, Jacques Lemoine (2012), boldly opens in his commentary essay, “Gender-based Violence Among the (H)mong,” that after over fifty years of fieldwork in Laos, “(H)mong society...epitomizes a patrilineal, patriarchal tribal organization in a clear cut treatment of gender problems” (p. 1). Leena N. Her (2016) writes that the essentializing of the Hmong women subject in ethnographic narratives to “the authentic Hmong woman, the refugee woman relocated in the West, and the acculturated and educated Hmong woman caught between two opposing worlds” (p. 6) is a “Western fascination and phenomenon” of emphasizing the Hmong woman subject as shaped and restrained by patriarchal Hmong culture. That is not to say that patriarchal Hmong culture does not hold any weight in the lives of the Hmong woman subject nor that scholars deny the Hmong woman subject agency. Rather, Her critiques that there is a fixation on treating patriarchal Hmong culture as a “cultural fact that structures the lives of Hmong women” (p. 17) and confining the analysis of Hmong women only within a male-centric framework of patriarchal Hmong culture. This fascination with viewing Hmong women through the lens of a patriarchal Hmong culture has produced substandard and problematic analysis and data with great weight on anti-violence work in the Hmong community.

Studies and literature examining violence, especially domestic violence, in the Hmong American community's obsession with culture can be seen in its reinforcement of a Hmong culture versus white American gender equality dichotomy. Hmong culture is identified as a primary site for violence, associating violent behaviors strictly as cultural norms, whereas Western culture liberates Hmong women (Volpp, 2000). According to Leti Volpp (2000), the idea that non-Western people are governed by culture implies that violence is culturally determined, whereas, for Western people, violence is unrelated to Western culture. Therefore, non-Western people are limited in capacity for agency, will, or rational thought and have only begun to challenge culture after having been exposed to Western ideas of gender equality (Volpp, 2000).

This is exemplified in Lemoine's (2012) insistence that Hmong women can now openly express and make choices for themselves after having "gender asymmetry...shaken by education within the Western system" (p. 18) only to contradict his statement when he co-opts testimonials from "Western-educated," Hmong American women to serve his arguments. These instances are abundant, such as when Lemoine used Mai Na Lee's online forum post calling out the normalization of beating and killing of Hmong women in Hmong society but left out what he calls her "humorous formulation," where she points out white supremacy's impact on Hmong men that contributes to violence against Hmong women. Or when Lemoine instinctively demonstrates the projection of his subjectivity by labeling Mai Bao's blog post explaining what she has gained with both Hmong and American values as "confusion" and using it to further reinforce a clash of cultures, where individualism is suppressed by the male leader of the household. Or when Lemoine cites Hmong anthropologist Kao Ly Yang's illustration of how children are viewed as individuals with their own agency at any stage of life, which he asserts as

children being perceived as adults, to demonstrate how some “spoiled” children can develop into “rather outspoken and very heady strong [Hmong women] (p. 7-8)” who challenge their husbands that results in their abuse. In “Missing in Action: Violence, Power, and Discerning Agency,” Alisa Bierria’s (2014) examination of the social authoring² of Black action points out how Black women can never be seen as whole subjects as their agency is undermined by racist narratives explaining Black action, regardless of the actual intention of the Black actor. Similarly here, Lemoine (2012) socially authors the words of Hmong women with racist narratives that not only miss the point but end up creating something new. In this case, Lemoine’s essay is an example of how the foundations of the Hmong woman figure as failure, irrecoverable victims of a violent culture, begin to be laid.

Since violence is culturally bound, discussions on addressing violence are focused on removing Hmong culture from the individual. To provide a viable solution, studies follow a similar approach that adopts the acculturation model, suggesting that assimilating into white American culture and adopting their gender equality ideals lessens experiences of violence. Acculturation refers to the exchange of cultural features between different cultural groups, resulting in changes in either or both groups, although in practice, this exchange is not always equal (Berry, 1997, p. 7). However, oftentimes, the acculturation model is utilized in a linear fashion that upholds racist hierarchies, suggesting that Western culture has greater gender equality that non-Western cultures should strive towards.

For example, Ace Chang’s (2015) thesis, “Social Factors Related to Domestic Violence among Hmong Adults,” which has had its data cited by the Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-

² Bierria (2014) defines "social authoring" as the process by which the intentions behind an action are not solely determined by the individual performing the action, but are also authored by the perceptions, interpretations, and judgments of others (p. 130). The meaning and intention behind an act are co-created through a social process involving both the actor and the audience.

based Violence, enlists the acculturation theory to identify social factors that contributed to domestic violence among Hmong adults. Chang maintains that Hmong are experiencing opposing cultural worldviews and suggests acculturation as a barrier where the less one is acculturated, the higher the risk of experiencing or perpetuating domestic violence. Chang's use of the acculturation theory as a measurement to determine the likelihood of domestic violence ends up inadvertently vilifying culture and insinuating that victims are partly responsible for domestic violence when they are less acculturated.

Yet, interestingly, scholarship in favor of acculturation tends to also argue for the cultural competency model, insisting that interventions need to be more competent in addressing the culturally Hmong components of violence. Cultural competency models historically arose amongst an array of social service practitioners to address the limitations of state care systems and to promote "one size fits all" models. In "An Analysis of Domestic Violence in Asian American Communities," Christine K. Ho (1990) critiques that the domestic violence models were inadequate in addressing domestic violence in Asian American communities. He explains that the model was developed with a "monocultural analysis of domestic violence" (p. 131) and did not consider Asian American experiences nor the diversity, complexities, and nuances of those experiences under the Asian American umbrella. Thus, cultural competency models were intended to train practitioners in different care systems to consider cultural differences to provide better care to patients.

The acculturation model can seem like an instinctive explanation that a natural process of adopting different worldviews will progressively change perspectives and behaviors. However, studies like "Effects of Acculturation and Social Network Support on Depression among Elderly Korean Immigrants" (Kim et al., 2012) demonstrate the nuances of applying an acculturation

model. Kim et al. (2012) found that acculturation without social network support was not sufficient enough for mental health in comparison to individuals who were seemingly highly acculturated and had a strong social network (p. 791). The study suggests that acculturation was a secondary outcome of having a strong social network, not vice versa. Therefore, acculturation alone is also not sufficient to explain or address violence.

Pa Thor's (2020) examination of how cultural-related risk factors increase instances of intimate partner homicide-suicide (IPHS) among Hmong heterosexual couples calls for an analysis within the context of their social and cultural structure to understand risk factors unique to the Hmong community. Thor's essay echoes the same narrative of "traditional" Hmong cultural values, beliefs, and practices around gender roles before encountering "progressive" Western ideas of gender equality upon resettling in the United States that perpetuates violence towards Hmong women. Thor argues that less heightened forms of interpersonal violence escalate to IPHS because traditional Hmong cultural values, beliefs, and practices that reinforce men's control over women continue to be practiced in modern society. Thor lays the responsibility of IPHS on Hmong men's sense of loss of control due to their inability to enforce control through cultural practices because of changing attitudes towards gender roles and equality among Hmong women upon resettling in the United States as well as the United States legal system's approach to divorce. Therefore, IPHS perpetrators, Hmong men who still hold traditional cultural values, carry out the act of killing their partners and then themselves to maintain and assert control. Ultimately, Thor concludes Hmong culture must change and adopt the more progressive gender equality ideals in the United States to stop Hmong men from murdering their spouses.

Thor's (2020) attention to how forms of Hmong culture can entrap Hmong women in violent environments is reasonable. However, while Thor is specifically investigating how Hmong men utilize violence to control Hmong women and how Hmong men justify the killing of Hmong women, Thor's intense focus on linking IPHS to Hmong men's behavior becomes ensnared by an analytical limitation that overshadows forms of power and control outside of culture that also contributes to IPHS. Thor's treatment of Hmong culture as an indisputable fact ignores data such as the strong correlation between firearm ownership and the increased risk of domestic violence-related homicides that has been continually found in many studies (Mervosh, 2019). Thor's (2020) overall proposal for the "progression" of Hmong men and culture, instead, ends up contradicting her efforts to bring attention to the increasing rates of IPHS in the Hmong community. While the need for "effective and culturally appropriate ways of addressing gender-based violence (p. 16)" is raised in the study, the arguments put forward about Hmong people hinder any possible analysis towards this goal. Thor's framing of IPHS as a cultural matter is simultaneously reinforcing both the regulation of domestic violence as a private matter and the delegitimization of the Hmong community and culture's ability to address gender-based violence.

Overly emphasizing the role of culture in facilitating violence in Hmong women is a harmful practice that contributes little to addressing the needs of Hmong women experiencing violence. Essentialist analyses employing the acculturation model portray Hmong men as unwilling to cease violent behavior and women as incapable of addressing violence. Culture is then sensationalized to legitimize the urgency to save immigrant and non-white normative women subjects from being victimized only when that saving comes via the assimilation of Hmong people into American society and eradicating their cultural meaning-making (Volpp,

2000). In turn, the state then becomes the only officially recognized form of care and protection through the medical, legal, and criminal justice system for women experiencing gender-based violence.

There are certainly benefits to having state care and interventions that women experiencing violence can utilize. Black, Indigenous, and feminists of color have long critiqued, argued, and documented that state interventions and protection do not equate to care, nor are they not violent or free of stipulations. Rather, the legal and criminal justice system subjects the victims they were intended to protect and victims' communities to compliance, punishment, surveillance, incarceration, and institutionalized violence. This is especially true and exponentially compounded for Black, Indigenous, and women and communities of color, including for Hmong women. When state interventions fall short of producing favorable results and Hmong women continue to experience violence, cultural competency is invoked to attempt to address the specific needs of different populations better and remedy any violence produced by state care systems.

In "The Hmong Community: Acculturation and Utilization of Domestic Violence Services," Hlee Moua (2013) links the underreporting of domestic violence and utilization of domestic violence services to the ultimate inadequacy of culturally competent services which then makes it difficult to report or stop domestic violence. Moua's study found that there was not a significant correlation between acculturation and better help-seeking behaviors. The research findings show that out of sixty-two participants, sixty-five percent believed that Hmong culture contributes to domestic violence. Fifty-two percent of participants did not believe in seeking help from family or cultural community leaders, and seventy-seven percent of participants believed that seeking outside domestic violence services is acceptable. Yet forty-nine percent of

participants did not believe there were many resources available to Hmong domestic violence victims (p. 21-23). These statistics interestingly demonstrate that, while many Hmong domestic violence victims believed that in seeking outside support, many also did not believe they had support from their cultural community or outside domestic violence services.

What Chang (2015), Thor (2020), and Moua's (2013) well-intentioned research, along with other studies, reveal is that these attempts to identify the source of violence or avenues to address violence via the identification of what Hmong culture is *supposed* to be accomplishes very little and often contradicts what such research sets out to do. However, that does not mean that their research was not worthwhile. In fact, I would argue that their studies reveal the ongoing struggles that arise with cultures that tend to be essentialized, coupled with the limitations of state care systems that reinforce the notion that Hmong women themselves fail because of culture. Instead of investigating why identifying why Hmong women experiencing violence do not access state care, it may be more fruitful to consider why Hmong women experiencing violence may be hesitant to access state care.

INSTITUTIONALIZED VIOLENCE

Advocating for better and more comprehensive state services and protection often overlooks a critical examination of how the state itself produces and perpetuates violence. This violence affects both the individuals enacting harm and those experiencing it. Women of color feminist theorists have long argued that the state's failure to adequately care for migrants and communities of color is evident through their experiences of institutionalized violence. These experiences occur when these communities attempt to access, utilize, or are outright denied state care and protection. This institutionalized violence manifests in various forms, such as discriminatory practices, neglect, and systemic bias within state institutions, which further

marginalize and harm these communities. Moreover, these theorists highlight that the very structures meant to provide safety and support often contribute to the cycle of violence, undermining the effectiveness of state interventions.

Women of color experiencing violence often find themselves in precarious positions when seeking and accessing state care. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), in her seminal work “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” highlights how state care and protection systems, which are intended to support women experiencing violence, are often rife with exclusionary policies and practices. These systems frequently operate under frameworks that do not account for the intersecting identities of women of color, thereby rendering them invisible and ineligible for essential services. This marginalization occurs because these systems are typically designed with a one-size-fits-all approach that fails to recognize the unique vulnerabilities and needs of women of color, leaving them without the necessary support in critical times.

Moreover, in "Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice" (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2023), the discussion around inclusion is further expanded to emphasize the importance of accessibility within these systems of care. Piepzna-Samarasinha argues that true inclusion must consider the diverse needs of individuals, particularly those who are disabled, and how systemic oppression often denies them access to care. The author highlights that accessibility is not just a physical or logistical concern but a fundamental aspect of social justice. This perspective prompts a critical examination of how accessibility is intertwined with systems of oppression, highlighting that the failure to accommodate diverse needs perpetuates a cycle of neglect and exclusion. By ignoring the specific challenges faced by disabled individuals, these systems continue to perpetuate inequality and hinder the effectiveness of their care and support mechanisms.

Further complicating inclusion and accessibility challenges, Lee Ann S. Wang's (2016) analysis in "Unsettling Innocence: Rewriting the Law's Invention of Immigrant Woman as Cooperator and Criminal Enforcer" reveals that the U Visa, which promises protection to immigrant women, forces them into a paradoxical position. These women are seen as innocent victims of violent crimes yet are simultaneously culpable for their undocumented status. Consequently, immigrant women must cooperate with law enforcement to receive temporary legal protection, effectively becoming enactors of institutionalized violence. Wang explains that this cooperation is often fraught with coercion, as their protection is conditional upon aiding criminal prosecution, thus perpetuating their vulnerability. This dynamic underscores the problematic nature of conditional state protection, which not only fails to provide genuine safety but also exploits immigrant women, compelling them to participate in a system that marginalizes them further.

In "Disloyal to Feminism: Abuse of Survivors within the Domestic Violence Shelter System," Emi Koyama (2016) calls attention to "abuse of power and control within the feminist movement against domestic violence" (p. 209) as she details her experience working at a domestic violence shelter where women experiencing violence were screened for edibility based on their potential success rate in the program rather than their needs. Rather than focusing on providing comprehensive and compassionate care to all survivors, the system selectively prioritizes those deemed more likely to succeed, thus abandoning the most vulnerable. Koyama's essay not only demonstrates how state care systems deem certain women worthy or unworthy of care but also exposes how domestic violence systems prioritize maintaining political and economic relationships with the state over victims' needs. The mission to support women

experiencing violence is overshadowed by the need to secure funding and legitimacy that then perpetuates a hierarchy of deservingness.

In “Killing Me Softly: Remembering and Reproducing Violence in Southeast Asian Refugees (Two Times),” Mary Keovisai (2012) highlights how the criteria of domestic violence shelter work in a way that defines who is deserving of assistance. Keovisai critiques that domestic violence shelters’ focus on “remembering” abuse excludes victims who cannot or choose not to remember violence from accessing care in domestic violence shelters. Therefore, Keovisai argues that the refugee, domestic violence shelters, and domestic violence survivors narratives are linked to one another through memory politics that aim to propel the U.S. as a savior and protector that eradicates violence, homelessness, and statelessness. Keovisai’s thesis allows us to consider how the refugee and the domestic violence survivor must be conducive to the U.S. in order to be visible.

For Hmong women experiencing violence to be wary of the state and choosing not to enter state care systems should be understood as a rational response given the history of institutionalized violence targeted towards managing immigrant communities of color. State care and protection are not necessarily designed for women experiencing violence and their needs, but rather, the needs of the state. However, just because state care systems fail Hmong women does not mean Hmong women nor the Hmong community is doomed. At the end of her article, “Hmong Means ‘Free,’ or Does It? Memories of the Hmong Dead, 1997,” reflecting on the violence in the Hmong community that ensued the Welfare Reform Act of 1996, Pa Xiong (2002) expresses hope, writing, “We can no longer endure the sounds of traditional Hmong drums beating at funerals, beating so loudly so the souls of our mothers and our fathers can find peace in a less painful world” (p. 180). In the absence of state care and in the presence of

institutionalized violence, Hmong women are actively creating and organizing for their own, one another, and their communities' survival.

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO DAMAGE AND VICTIMHOOD

To return to Tuck (2009), a shift must occur away from deficit- and damage-centered research approaches that view Indigenous, marginalized, and disenfranchised communities as lacking or broken. Scholarship must move towards desire-centered research “concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives” (p. 416). Tuck’s concept of desired-based research still acknowledges “painful elements of social realities” (p. 416) but also recognizes people and communities beyond being broken and conquered by acknowledging their hopes, visions, and wisdom. Tuck writes, “Desire is involved with the not yet and, at times, the not anymore” (p. 417). Through desire-centered research frameworks, we may begin to recognize what may have been unrecognizable by only viewing marginalized individuals and communities as damaged.

In *The Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Intimate Violence within Activist Communities*, Andrea Smith prefaces the book by explaining that the goal of creating and providing alternatives to the criminal legal justice system is not to say that survivors can never engage the system but to ponder why there are little to no options other than to call the police (Chen, C.-I., 2011). Organizing care and care work outside of state care moves towards work that aligns with desire-centered research. Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto (1990) define care as “a species activity [composing of caring about, taking care of, caregiving, and care-receiving] that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible” (p. 40). However, as Crenshaw (1991) argued for intersectionality as a framework for understanding how various forms of social stratification must be examined

together to fully grasp the challenges faced by these victims, care work must also engage in an intersectionality approach.

In "Race and Feminist Care Ethics: Intersectionality as Method," Parvati Raghuram (YEAR) delves into the historical racialization of care ethics and its profound implications on the recognition and acknowledgment of care. Raghuram posits that care has been systematically racialized throughout history, leading to disparities in how care is perceived and valued based on racial identities. As a remedy, Raghuram suggests that care must not only be located within specific contexts but also dislocated and examined through the lens of the racialized body. This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of care practices, highlighting the intersectional dynamics at play.

Building upon this framework of intersectionality, Grace Hong's (2018) work, "Intersectionality and Incommensurability: Third World Feminism and Asian Decolonization," further explores the complexities of solidarity formation within diverse communities. Hong challenges traditional notions of solidarity by emphasizing the importance of recognizing and embracing differences. She highlights how solidarity has not only been built solely on shared experiences but must also encompass an understanding and respect for the unique struggles and perspectives of marginalized groups. This call for solidarity that acknowledges and embraces differences offers a transformative approach to collective action, fostering inclusivity and empowerment within feminist and decolonial movements.

Grace M. Cho's (2008) book *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War's* examination of the delicate spaces in which the yanggongju exists explores the violence of both silence and visibility to complicate the inheritance of trauma. Cho argues for a methodology that, rather than filling the gaps to make sense of uncertainties, allows us to learn

from listening to silence and acknowledging the unknowable. Cho writes, "...secrets have a way of revealing themselves even when the subject who carries the secrets never speaks of them (p.17)." Thus, Cho looks beyond silence as failure to the possibility that silences can also yield knowledge and produce futures. Building upon Cho's productive intervention, my exploration of Ly Thuy Nguyen's (2020) concept of dis/inheritance extends the possibilities of silence, delving deeper into the dynamics of trauma and agency within the context of Vietnamese refugees' experiences.

In "Queer Dis/inheritance and Refugee Futures" Nguyen's (2020) exploration of dis/inheritance of traumas among Vietnamese refugees proposes disinheritance, the deliberate rejection of allowing trauma to define or control one's life, instead opting to repurpose trauma as a catalyst for resilience and empowerment. Through a nuanced analysis, the author reimagines the concept of inheritance, restoring agency to Vietnamese refugees by illustrating how they can actively disinherit traumas to shape their own narratives and envision alternative futures. Drawing on queer theory and refusal politics, Nguyen presents dis/inheritance as a transformative framework for refugee communities, offering a path toward collective agency and liberation beyond traditional notions of recovery and recuperation.

These critical approaches to damage and victimhood serve as the foundation for my analysis of care work within this project. I adopt desire-centered research principles and embrace intersectional perspectives to comprehensively grasp the multifaceted challenges encountered by women experiencing violence. Through this lens, I aim to highlight and bring forth the care work done by Hmong women to address violence that has been overshadowed, made invisible, and illegible through damage narratives.

CARE WORK AND HMONG FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGIES

In “Hmong Women, Family Assets, and Community Cultural Wealth,” Julie Keown-Bomar and Ka Vang (2016) challenge the privileging of U.S. institutions as the “emancipator of Hmong women” (p. 118) in their examination of the agency, determination, and support systems of Hmong women. Keown-Bomar and K. Vang observed that Hmong women often cite familial and community capital as crucial sources of support, rejecting the notion that family, frequently depicted as emblematic of patriarchal structures, limits or denies Hmong women’s agency. Keown-Bomar and K. Vang write, “Hmong cultural practices are alive and adaptive and [that] Hmong women have been able to transform themselves without compromising their cultural identity (p. 118).” Keown-Bomar and K. Vang help us understand that Hmong women can draw from their culture to benefit not only themselves but also their communities.

Ma Vang (2018) has argued that “Palee Moua’s Partners in Healing shaman training workshops in Merced, CA reveals refugee and feminist care as epistemologies that disrupt forms of state management of refugee women and Women of Color’s bodies. Ma Vang explains that immigrant women’s and Women of Color labor and bodies are managed by state and private systems of care that claim to serve them. Ma Vang’s analysis of Palee’s interpretation work between the Hmong community, particularly with Hmong shamans and the Mercy Medical Center Merced, reestablishes language as a form of care and rather than just a barrier to health. Palee’s interpretation work translates not only just language but also worldviews that build lateral relationships centering refugee epistemologies and practices of well-being in place of Western ideas of care (p.182). However, Ma Vang writes, “The language of care is a feminist refugee epistemology that focuses on refugee well-being as a politics of hope and survival rather than on the refugee as a social and political problem” (p. 189). Ma Vang, therefore, argues that

Palee's care work prevents death that would otherwise occur in the absence of interpretation services incorporating Hmong/refugee worldviews (p. 182).

Mai See Thao and Audrey Bochaton, in their work titled "Healing in the Diaspora" (2021), examine health and healing beyond the biomedical treatment of the body through care practices between Hmong Americans and Hmong Laos. Thao and Bochaton employ "soothing" as a concept that challenges Western concepts of curing illness biomedical ailments by addressing the physical and psychological well-being of Hmong Americans with type 2 diabetes. Thao and Bochaton maintain that there exists a transnational circulation of care with the movement of bodies and herbs is part of that not only addresses health and healing for the Hmong body and soul but also the social, historical, and political rupture between Hmong Americans and Hmong Lao in the diaspora. In this transnational circulation of care queers care work through the creation of an "economy of reciprocity" that sutures and maintains the disrupted familial relationships (p. 14).

Lori Kido Lopez's (2021) book, *Micro Media Industries: Hmong American Media Innovation in the Diaspora*, illustrates how Hmong women are utilizing micro media³ technologies, specifically teleconference radio programs, to discuss both personal and broader women's issues, including those considered controversial and taboo. Lopez explains that the anonymity format and the geographic reach of teleconference radio programs ensure a sense of safety from having their identities revealed. At the same time, the shared cultural specificity of the audience provides a sense of intimacy. Expanding on discussions among one another, in "Hmong Women on the Web: Transforming Power through Social Networking," Faith Nibbs's

³ Lopez (2021) defines micro media industries as minimally staffed, small-scale media that are culturally specific and adaptable to the constantly changing needs of a community that is not necessarily concerned with commodification, capitalization, and growth (p. 2).

(2016) examination of Hmong women's use of online social networks demonstrates that Hmong women's intend for their conversations to actualize change.

Through diverse methodologies and perspectives, these scholars collectively challenge dominant narratives and offer alternative frameworks for understanding and supporting marginalized communities. This project builds off of these existing works that center the voices and agency of Hmong women in their endeavors toward community organizing and care. By building upon this foundation, the project aims to contribute to a more inclusive and equitable understanding of violence in the Hmong community and Hmong women's experiences of violence.

NEEJ NEEG AND HMONG STORY

May began telling stories in 2014, which led to the creation of the Hmong Story YouTube channel in 2018. Hmong Story is operated entirely by May and her husband and exclusively publishes *neej neeg*. The channel's "About" section writes, "Hmong Story Channel is Hmong real life stories!⁴ *Neej neeg* are uploaded daily. The channel utilizes a simple podcast-like formula where a voice recording set to a single photo slideshow is uploaded in video format. Each video's title is accompanied by the date that it was uploaded. Each *neej neeg* is told entirely in Hmong, with the exceptions of English, Lao, or Thai loan words.

Neej neeg is a relatively new term that has emerged specifically to encapsulate the stories of personal experiences being shared through mediums such as Hmong Story. I speculate that the term *neej neeg*, meaning "life" and "person," was constructed to distinguish personal from *dab neeg*, meaning "spirit" and "person," whose stories are often regarded more as folklore or tales.

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/@HmongStory>

Neej neeg is unique in that the story is a personal narrative, widely acknowledged as a genuine retelling of an individual's life, even though it is also scrutinized about to what extent the story is factual, with an acute awareness of the inevitable possibilities of inherent biases and exaggerations. *Neej neeg* content is often thought of as entertainment, especially because listening to *dab neeg* in general on YouTube has become a popular pastime in the Hmong community. However, because *neej neeg* are accounts of real people, they carry an oral history-like essence in that they are intertwined and fraught with historical events that are entangled with everyday lived realities. Hmong Story and other *neej neeg* YouTube channels have become an anthology archive of Hmong oral histories, granting significant potential to offer diverse insight into the Hmong community.

May uploads at least one story almost every day, though she strives to upload two daily to manage her ever-growing backlog of stories (Yang, 2021, 10:28). The consistent daily presence of *neej neeg* has become a staple in the lives of many Hmong Story listeners, to the extent that they become concerned about May's well-being if a new story is not posted. The regularity of these uploads has woven these narratives deeply into the fabric of the community, making them an integral part of the listeners' daily routines and emotional lives. Therefore, while *neej neeg* storytelling is fundamentally a telling genre, it is also inherently a listening genre. Hmong Story involves not only May's retelling of these important cultural narratives but also the audience's active engagement through listening and holding onto these stories. This interaction transforms *neej neeg* storytelling into a vibrant community cultural production characterized by a daily communal practice of both telling and listening. The stories are not just shared; they are experienced collectively among the Hmong community. It is as May often reminds her audience that there would be no Hmong Story without the community of listeners.

While I do not delve further into the intricacies of *neej neeg* in this thesis, it is essential to grasp its properties and potential to shed light on the nuances of care work explored through *neej neeg* storytelling. *Neej neeg* of women who have experienced violence offer profound insights into the ways Hmong women navigate and respond to such challenges in their communities. These narratives not only shed light on individual and collective strategies for coping with violence but also reveal the resilience and resourcefulness that underpin their efforts. Thus, exploring the role of *neej neeg* in these contexts highlights the importance of culturally specific storytelling as a means of addressing and understanding the complexities of care work and community response within the Hmong cultural setting.

Part 1: CARE - *IB LUB CHAW TSO PA*

“Hais los txog ntawm cov dab neeg, neej neeg uas nej xa tuaj es lub neej plam los yog kev tub siab, kev chim siab ntawm kev txij nkawm...kuv twb ib txwm hais rau nej, kuv muaj ib co niam tsev lawv muaj txoj kev nyuaj siab ntxog ntua lawv twb muaj txoj kev xav tag txoj kev zoo rau hauv lub ntiaj teb no lawm. Tab si thaum lawv hu tuaj rau kuv lawv quaj, lawv lub kua muag poob, ua rau lawv txoj kev chim siab, ntxhov plawv kuj tau yaj xam. Ces lawv muab kaw tag rau kuv li hnuv no, ces tag kis lawv xav xav, mus pwb ib hmo xav xav. Twb hais rov qab tuaj rau kuv tias, ‘Txhob tham lawm. Kuv lub siab nqig lawm. Kuv chim chim rau kuv tus txiv, kuv tu tu siab rau kuv lub neej. Tab sis cas thaum kuv muab tham tag rau koj, ces kuv lub siab nqig. Kuv sawv kev ntau zaus tham qhia rau kuv cov neej tsa, taug xaiv qhia, los yog xam chim qhia rau kuv ib tug viv ncaus. Tab sis kuv niam laus yog kuv niam laus, tab sis kuv tus txiv laus tsis yog kuv tus nus. Nws yuav tsis nkag siab kuv...Ces zoo nkaus tab tom nqa kuv lub neej, los nqa kuv lub qe mus rau lawv paub xwb. Ces kub tiaj li tsis tham. Es Niam Ntsuab Teev, cia nws tuag rau ntawm koj, faus rau ntawm koj.’ Ces kuv tiaj muab faus cia rau ntawm kuv no. Hos tej zaj ces nws hais tias tsis hnov xa dab tsi tuaj ces kuv muab hais tawm...Peb ua neej nyob, ib leeg muaj ib leeg txoj kev nyuaj siab...Es kuv ua tsaug ntau ntau rau nej cov neeg ua nej tseem ntseeg tau kuv, nej tseem xa tau neej cov *neej neeg* tuaj, es nej tseem muab txoj kev nyuaj siab, ntxhov plawv tso tseg rau ntawm kuv no. Vam thiab cia siab tias nej sawv daws txoj kev tseem yuav nrog kuv. Es kuv los kuv yuav nyob ntawm no. Nej cov lus nej xa tuaj rau kuv, kuv yeej tsis tham tawm tias koj yog leej twg, kuv yog leej twg...Vim cov lus no yog nej cov lus kev nyuaj siab ntxhov plawv nej nqa tuaj tso tseg ntawm kuv kom kuv muab tham tawm” (Vang, May, 2024, 3:28).

“In regards to the stories about divorce or being upset at your partner...I have always told you all that I have female listeners who are dealing with difficult matters to the point where they no longer want to live. But when they call me and cry, their sadness and worries melt. They record their stories to me today only to call me back after spending the next day thinking about it to say, ‘Don’t tell my story anymore. I feel better now. I was upset at my husband and at life. However, after telling you, I feel better. I have attempted many times to tell my family. While my sister is my sister, my brother-in-law is not my brother. He does not understand me. It feels like I am exposing myself and my problems so that is why I don’t voice it. So May, let it die with you, let it be buried with you.’ Therefore, I bury the story with me. However, for those that I do not hear from, I tell those. Everyone has their own struggles. I want to thank everyone who trusts me to send me your stories and leave your difficulties and worries with me. I hope that you continue to trust me and I will continue to be here. When you send me your stories, I don’t reveal who anyone is...because these are your stories of about your struggles and pain that you entrust in me to tell.”

The reasons that May cites to explain to her listeners why there are so many stories about interpersonal relationship conflict illustrate the essence of what May’s work has been for the Hmong community. May has always seen her work as a storyteller as serving the needs of her audience. May shared on the “Hmong Lifestories” (Yang, 2021) episode of the Distorted Footprints Podcast that her storytelling work began because the original storyteller of their predecessor YouTube Channel, *Saib Lom Zem*, had accrued a backlog of *neej neeg* that were left untold. Despite her hesitations, May eventually stepped up to tell the collection of untold *neej neeg* because story owners were waiting for their turn to have their *neej neeg* told. May has continued her storytelling work in the same manner as when she began, which is to prioritize the needs of her audience.

May’s storytelling is simple yet skillful and always done with care in how she presents each *neej neeg* through the balancing of language, cadence, and emotions. May often sets a disclaimer that these stories do not belong to her and that she is just the messenger presenting the words of the story owner because her practice is very much engaged with negotiating how to

present and deliver her audience's stories. She retells the *neej neeg* that she receives and presents them as close as possible to how the story owner wishes to be perceived, regardless of her own personal alignment with the *neej neeg*. She prefaces each story with an invitation to her audience to join her in listening to the *neej neeg* that has been asked to be shared by the storyteller. She tells the *neej neeg* in Hmong, speaking in a first-person narrative, from beginning to end, with little interruptions except for the occasional snuffle, laughter, or to correct herself when she has made a mistake. As the *neej neeg* comes to a close, May might send story owners a short personal message or remind her listeners to be kind to the story owners. However, before doing so, she clearly ends the *neej neeg* to mark the separation between the story and her own messages. She heeds great caution not to make inferences, only concluding each *neej neeg* as she received them. Then, she thanks her listeners for joining her and hoping they will tune in again for the next *neej neeg*. May's storytelling practice demonstrates how she navigates the complexities of recounting stories involving violence with much consideration to both ensuring a thoughtful and respectful presentation of the story owner and the varied responses they may elicit from her audience. May's care in storytelling becomes a community practice and revolutionizes how the community talks about violence.

May's carefully crafted storytelling practices have established her as a respectable public figure in the Hmong community, someone whom people can trust with some of the most vulnerable parts of their lives. When prompted about why she thinks she has grown such a large following, she alludes her success to her decision to publicly identify herself rather than to go by a pseudonym, as had been common with other storytellers at the time. Her decision to forgo anonymity and go by her real name is demonstrative of her knowledge of building relationships and rapport that fosters trust among Hmong community members (Yang, 2021, 6:16). Her

unique relationship with her audience has played a large role in the story collecting process itself, being just as significant as a form of care work.

Storytelling holds such a central place in Hmong culture that, despite not actively soliciting *neej neeg* submissions, May continues to receive up to eight submissions a day. Instead, her audience voluntarily seeks out May in order to request for their *neej neeg* to be told, which further solidifies May's role and positionality as a messenger. *Neej neeg* are submitted to May anonymously through direct phone calls with herself or through recordings sent via email or FaceBook Messenger (Yang, 2021, 10:28). May's story collecting process involves not just gathering narratives but also engaging in a practice of attentive listening, especially when she is speaking directly with the story owner. May's positioning of herself as the messenger presenting the words of the story owner is a positioning of herself as a listener as well, engaging in the practice of *mloog lus*. Thus, not only does May care for stories but also the story owners.

May's storytelling and collecting practices, including not telling stories that have been redacted, disrupt what I critique as the co-opting of Hmong narratives only when they are needed and able to advance agendas, all at the expense of the Hmong community. Not co-opting and interpreting *neej neeg* has never been explicitly requested by her audience. Instead, May refers to this boundary as her rule to maintain anonymity and thus safety and peace among her audience (Vang, May, 2024, 5:59). I argue that May's storytelling practice illustrates a purposeful intent to carefully tell *neej neeg* values Hmong stories and memory in a manner that does not require them to be productive nor does she make them productive. In other words, *neej neeg* do not need to have a message or have a certain type of ending for them to be told, nor are they told to send any message or make any statement outside of what the story owners may have intended. Furthermore, while story owners may feel a sense of relief after sharing their stories and make

meaning of sharing their stories, they are not required to “get better” and rectify their situations. I do not mean to infer that May’s storytelling is free of her influence as it is a second retelling of a story, nor that her stance is completely neutral. Instead, I assert that May views *neej neeg* as stories to be heard, and she makes nothing more of them as the storyteller, regardless of how her audience will listen to and interpret them.

Not requiring *neej neeg* to be productive makes room for all kinds of stories, including those considered unproductive, counterproductive, or even failures. This lack of requirement is incredibly alluring for those with stories about interpersonal conflict that have yet to or were not resolved or resolved in a manner deemed incorrect, especially women. As May notes, for women specifically, opportunities to discuss matters dealing with interpersonal conflict are limited. While the issue of having few spaces to discuss conflict is not unique to just Hmong women, it is a particular issue that Hmong women must contend with. In addition to gender inequalities that devalue women’s experiences, women may be discouraged for several reasons from discussing such matters as it is already generally frowned upon, even punishable, to be unproductive, counterproductive, or a failure. In valuing each *neej neeg* as just a story, May allows *neej neeg* that are unproductive, counterproductive, and failures that have been marginalized to emerge and be expository.

Hmong women began using the structure and format of Hmong Story to voice their frustrations. Hmong Story and May organically became *ib lub chaws tso pa*, a place to exhale, for Hmong women dealing with interpersonal conflict. I do not doubt that other *neej neeg* YouTube channels receive and tell their fair share of *neej neeg* that discusses interpersonal conflicts. However, as Hmong Story began to reflect a pattern of *neej neeg* from Hmong women that discussed interpersonal conflicts, May did not shy away from them, even as many of her

listeners questioned why she would share such *neej neeg*. She did not waver in her decision to cater to the needs of the story owners. Instead, May defended women and their *neej neeg* of interpersonal conflict by explaining to her listeners, as she did in the excerpt above, why she believes women are asking for their *neej neeg* to be shared. Therefore, I argue that May's commitment to listening to and telling women's stories of interpersonal conflict was not merely intuitive but critically informed by her Hmong feminist epistemologies. Not only did May recognize what and why women were seeking when they shared their *neej neeg*, but she was also open to the potential of what *neej neeg* and telling *neej neeg* can provide for women.

May's *neej neeg* storytelling and practice challenges what culturally competent care has been imagined to look like for Hmong women. May's care work is not perfect and does not replace other forms of necessary care. Still, I imagine it has been effective to enough extent, especially if it is the only form of current care available to some women. Her care work disrupts the hierarchy and bureaucracy of care that make many forms of care inaccessible for many Hmong women. Hmong women utilizing Hmong Story and turning to May and her audience for care also disrupt the hierarchy and bureaucracy of care that is purposefully exclusionary and violent towards Hmong women. In conclusion, May's storytelling practice that allows for *neej neeg* discussing interpersonal conflict is care work that ensures the survival of the Hmong community by caring for Hmong women and Hmong stories and memory.

Part 2: ADDRESSING VIOLENCE

In this section, I provide short summaries of and analyze five different *neej neeg* that discussed experiences of violence. The stories are "Lub Neej Txawv Tsaj Nej Lub" from Mai, "Tus Zoo Tsem Muaj Ntau" from See, "Yug Los Xiam Tiam" from Pa, "Lub Neej Nyob Foster Care" from Yer, and "Txob Cia Siab 100 Rau Tus Txiv" from Lor. I am aware that these stories

are being retold by May, which may have altered language and meaning from their original submission. However, May stated in the excerpt in “Part 1: Care – Ib Lub Chaw Tso Pa,” the *neej neeg*’s words truly belong to the story owners. Therefore, I choose to represent them in the same manner as the story owner’s own telling of their *neej neeg*. I am also aware of the limits of translation. I would like to preface this section by reminding readers that the summaries are not all direct translations and include approximate translations and interpretations for better clarity. Furthermore, written summaries are void of much of the different aspects and qualities of storytelling that compels each story. This is a reminder that the stories provided are summaries that do not fully encapsulate the *neej neeg* listening experience.

I also remind readers at this time that there are many things I intentionally exclude and do not speak about. While May has anonymized these stories by not using any names, I have created pseudonyms for each story owner to enhance clarity and readability in this section. Additionally, information that may seem essential but happens to be missing, such as dates or locations, are intentionally not included if they are not included in the *neej neeg*. I take these measures as part of my own practice of caring for Hmong women, the Hmong community, and people who have or are experiencing violence.

LUB NEEJ TXAWV TSHAJ NEJ LUB - A LIFE STRANGER THAN MOST - MAI

Mai met and married her first husband, a Hmong American man, while employed as his tour guide in Vietnam. When she reunited with him in the U.S., she was handed off to men, described as all of other ethnicities, by her then-husband and sexually exploited. While at an appointment to file official documents regarding her marriage to her then-husband, she told the employee assisting the couple that she needed help. She received immediate help and was connected to an agency that she describes as an agency that helps women.

Mai initially wanted to return home to Vietnam but ultimately decided to stay and apply to remain in the United States. While she knew of no close family in the U.S., she eventually made community and family connections through a Hmong male coworker. She became close to a couple she refers to as Aunt and Uncle. Through her new community and family connections, she met a man who would become her second husband.

Mai became a stepmother to her husband's previous children and a mother to her own children. She and her husband have since returned to make a monetary donation to the agency that helped her to thank them for what they did for her.

Mai concludes her *neej neeg* with a message for other young Hmong women to be aware of sexual exploitation. She cautions other women to be wary of some men but to also not generalize all men as ill-intentioned. She hopes that what happens to her will end with her so others will not experience what she has gone through.

TUS ZOO TSEEM MUAJ NTAU - THERE A STILL PLENTY OF GOOD MEN - SEE

See married her first husband, as she describes, very early. Upon marrying into the family, she observed that her mother and father-in-law constantly fought. After some time, her then-husband picked up a habit of drinking with his friends and eventually began having extra-marital affairs. He started displaying controlling behaviors, such as not letting her drive herself, accusing her of talking to other men, and threatening to kill her and her family if she complained to them, which eventually heightened to full-on physical and verbal abuse. She was urged many times by her family to leave her husband, but she chose to stay and tolerate him because she still loved him and had hope that he would change.

One day, See's then-husband did not return home after promising he would only be gone briefly. To demonstrate her disappointment, See left home to stay with her parents to wait for his

return. When See's then-husband came to pick her up upon his return, See attempted to refuse. Her then-husband began to become violent. See's father tried to intervene and stand up for See, but her then-husband threatened to kill the family. See decided to return home with her then-husband to protect her father. Upon returning home, her father and brother reported the incident to the police. However, when the police arrived, See reassured them everything was okay at the order of her then-husband. See was no longer allowed to work and talk to her family after this incident.

See eventually began working again as she was the only source of income. One day, she saw her opportunity to leave her then-husband after he returned home hungover and exhausted. She knew that he would be sleeping once he dropped her off at work and would probably not make it there to pick her up at the end of her shift. She confided in her boss and asked him to help her pick up her children from school and take them to the airport. See, her boss, school officials, and her family worked together to quickly file a report against her then-husband before she and her children boarded a plane to a safe location. When her then-husband began looking for See and their children, they were already gone. Her then-husband threatened her family to disclose her location, but he was unsuccessful in gaining information about where they were.

Years later, See is dating and learning to trust men again. See reassures women with violent partners that there is a future after leaving their abusive partners. While See is sad about what she endured, she is happy that she has found a life. See sends encouragement to other women to look for a better life.

YUG LOS XIAM TIAM - BORN DISABLED - PA

Pa was born with a visible physical disability where one of her legs is small, short, and not straight. Pa was born in Laos and fled with her family when she was young. During the

family's journey, Pa's father considered leaving her behind because she could not walk by herself. However, Pa's mother could not bear to abandon Pa, and she carried Pa the entire way despite what her husband had proposed. Pa recalls that while she was very young, she was still very much afraid of dying.

Pa's family immigrated to the United States. Pa married her husband when she was 40. Her husband was Hmong. He had epilepsy as well what Pa alluded to were mental health conditions. Pa lost her first child in an accident where her child's head was injured while being held by her husband as he was experiencing a seizure. During her marriage, she experienced interpersonal violence, including physical violence, verbal abuse, and financial control at the hands of her husband. Pa and her husband separated several times and made attempts to divorce permanently. However, Pa's husband comes in and out of her life when he needs her and her resources. One encounter where Pa's husband turned physically violent landed him in a mental health institution after Pa called the police. Since that incident, Pa has been experiencing intimidation and violence directed towards her by her husband's family.

One day, a male relative of Pa's husband asked Pa to drop by her home, claiming he needed to pick up some clothes for her husband. Pa was raped by her husband's relative. He was arrested with evidence from a rape kit. Pa and her children have been facing even more violence in attempts to intimidate her into withdrawing her accusation. However, Pa decided to share her *neej neeg* and what happened to her to send her husband's family a message that she will not be disrespected.

Pa ends her *neej neeg* with a message about different-abled body people. She acknowledges her bad luck being born with a disability and hopes in her next life, she will be

born abled-bodied. She asks people with able-bodies not to judge those with different-abled bodies. She shares that being made fun of hurts, and she cries, but now she no longer cries.

LUB NEEJ NYOB FOSTER HOME - THE LIFE OF LIVING IN FOSTER HOME - YER

Yer grew up in a home where her parents fought over her father's constant disappearances to attend to his extramarital affairs. Yer, her younger brother, and her younger sister entered the foster care system after they were spotted crossing a bridge by a passerby. They were beginning to get hungry and decided to look for their mother at her mother's friend's home after having spent two days and one night with both parents gone. Neither their parents nor any relatives came to take them home, so they were placed into foster homes.

When Yer turned 18, she married the first man who would marry her. Yer figured being married would give her access to resources that would allow her siblings to come live with her. However, Yer's marriage was never formally recognized. Yer had been estranged from her family for so long that she refused to allow her family to perform her wedding in their absence in her life. Yer lived with her husband, had children, and provided a place for her brother and sister to live when the time came for them to leave foster care.

When Yer's husband started seeing other women and began to become increasingly absent in the family home, Yer's brother and sister urged her to consider thinking about herself. However, Yer decides that staying and keeping her status as his wife is more beneficial to her cause than leaving. Yer's husband eventually marries another woman with whom he also has children. Yer primarily lived separately from her husband for most of her marriage.

When Yer's brother married, Yer learned that her father was remarried and her mother lived with a partner. However, shortly after, Yer's brother received a cancer diagnosis and eventually succumbs to the disease but is survived by his wife and two children. Yer becomes

the primary caretaker of her brother's children with the help of her sister when her sister-in-law remarries.

Later, when her husband becomes ill, Yer receives an apology from him for not loving her and being violent towards her and realizes that despite what he has done to her, she has never hurt him. Yer forgives him and admits that she probably was never in love with him either and mostly married him so she could provide a place for her siblings to stay. She explains to her husband that she has no reason to hurt him because she has achieved the life that she wants.

TXHOB CIA SIAB 100 RAU TUS TXIV - DO NOT RELY 100 ON YOUR HUSBAND - LOR

Lor was a young girl in Laos when her father, a soldier, had to leave home to join the war effort. Lor's mother asked her not to get married yet so that Lor could help her mother while their father was away. Unfortunately, Lor's mother stepped on a mine and died while trying to retrieve a humanitarian aid package. After her mother's death, her first husband came to ask for her hand in marriage. Lor saw that her husband had a physical disability that affected his mobility and required him to walk with a cane. Lor's attempts to refuse were unsuccessful, and she was married off to him. Lor experienced physical violence in her first marriage and had no children.

Upon seeing who his daughter had been married off to, Lor's father eventually returned home and told her to divorce her then-husband. Lor's father provided Lor with the necessary financial resources and knowledge of what to say to initiate divorce. That night, Lor refused to go home with her then-husband, which caused him to begin hitting her with his walking stick. Lor's father intervened to stop the violence and called a council to discuss the matter. During the meeting between the two families, Lor threatened to die by suicide if she had to remain married to her then-husband. Lor successfully received the divorce she initiated.

Lor remarried shortly after her divorce and moved away from her village. When Lor returned to visit her father, she had one child. This time, Lor's father suggested she return home promptly so her child would not get sick.

Lor did not see her father again until 1978 when he came to her village to try to convince her and her husband to flee Laos with him. Lor and her husband did not go with her father this time. However, Lor's father returned a second time, and this time, Lor and her husband followed her father. While crossing a river, Lor and her family were shot at by patrols but eventually made it across and to the refugee camps in Thailand.

Because Lor and her husband fled Laos with her father, most of Lor's husband's family remained in Laos. The couple sends money to support Lor's husband's side of the family. In 2009, Lor's husband returned to Laos to visit family and secretly married a second wife. Lor was unaware of this marriage until 2016. Lor's husband made a second visit to Laos, which turned out to be troublesome and required Lor and her children to help extract him from Laos. Lor expressed that, during the period when Lor's husband began having extramarital affairs, Lor's husband started calling her names, shaming her for being a divorced woman, and putting her down.

Lor received an apology from her husband after returning from his trip but remains ambivalent about it. Lor reminds listeners that when your spouse no longer loves you, your parents and children will. Lor does not believe in stressing over a partner who does not love you.

MEANING-MAKING

The act of talking about violence when it is not welcomed, as well as how we talk about violence and the people experiencing it, is addressing violence. A lack of language to define violence is often attributed to why Hmong women may not be talking about violence. While

there may not be a word that encompasses “gender-based violence,” Hmong women know that violence is enacted against them based on their gender. Chapter 11 on domestic violence in *Healing by Heart: Clinical and Ethical Case Stories of Hmong Families and Western Providers*, titled “Traditional Hmong Concepts of Wife Beating,” writes that there is no word that encompasses “domestic violence.” However, there is language that signifies violence, such as the term often used for domestic violence. “*ntau poj niam*,” hit a woman/wife (Culhane-Pera, K. et al., 2002). Violence is easily identifiable when the *neej neeg* uses words like “*ntau*,” hit, or “*ua phem*,” be mean, to talk about the physical aspect of violence. Words such as the one Pa uses, “*mos*,” rape, “*quab yuam*,” force, and the one See uses, “*tsim txom*,” a word usually meaning torment but a general term for abuse, are very forward language that directly names acts of violence.

However, one’s use of language allows for a more nuanced understanding of how people who have experienced or are experiencing violence perceive and identify violence. In Mai’s *neej neeg*, language is used more carefully. When talking about sexual violence, Mai acknowledges that she was aware of sex trafficking because she had learned about it while working as a tour guide. The phrase used in the *neej neeg* to describe sex trafficked victims was “*cov ntxhais lawv yuav mus muag cev*,” girls they take to sell their bodies. However, sex trafficking was not the term used to describe her situation. Instead, the phrase “*tau nrog kuv pw*,” they got to sleep with me, was used. She also differentiated her violence from the consensual sex with her “*qub txib*,” ex-husband, vs. “*mauj kev sib hlub, kev sib cuag*,” have love and connection. More subjective concepts, such as Pa’s use of “*hlub*,” love, is used along with literal language to expand on violence beyond the physical aspect. When describing what she considers to be violent, Pa utilizes love as both a factor and a measurement of violence. For example, when talking about

her parents' dismissal of her because of her disability and inability to contribute to the family, she says her parents "*hlub kuv tsawg dua,*" love me less. When she talks about the violence she experiences in her relationship with her husband, she says her husband "*phem rau kuv, tsis hlub kuv, ntau kuv,*" is mean to me, does not love me, hits me. In Yer's *neej neeg*, she never outright identifies as being left by both of her parents as violence. However, later when she describes how her husband is violent to her, she associates her husband leaving her with how her father left her mother. Despite her husband's behavior, she vows never to leave her children the way her parents left her. These complexities of how violence is perceived challenge notions of victimhood and survivorhood that have dominated how women who have experienced and are experiencing violence have been talked about.

Identifying and highlighting agency through desire-centered analyses of each woman through their telling of their experiences of violence in their *neej neeg* sheds light on how each woman constructs meaning beyond being a victim or survivor and expands how success, failure, and futures are understood beyond traditional notions associated with victimhood and survivorship. Women experiencing violence, particularly domestic violence, have increased emphasis placed on being or having the potential to be "successful" and leaving a violent situation. Whereas women who remain in violent situations, regardless of their decision to or not or their ability to leave, are often regarded as unsuccessful. Futures are easily associated with successes, but looking for futures in failures is a more challenging practice when examining women who are not able or choose not to leave their violent situations. Our narratives of victim and survivor are based on perceptions of success and failure and are further influenced by legal definitions that are supposed to make people experiencing violence legible to the law. Presumptions that violence is stopped when the act of violence ends obscure any violence that

continues to impact an individual or community. However, as these *neej neeg* demonstrates, ideas of success and failure and victim and survivor overlook many people and experiences of violence.

The exploration of these five *neej neeg* narratives offers a compelling invitation to reassess our preconceived notions of victimhood and survivorhood. Through these narratives, we gain insight into the diverse approaches adopted by each woman and her community in responding to instances of violence, showcasing a range of strategies that may diverge from conventional norms. While immediate crisis intervention often relies on state resources and external interventions, these narratives shed light on the equally vital long-term interventions being cultivated within their communities. Each woman's unique practices of care, informed by their lived experiences and cultural context, serve as powerful examples of multifaceted initiatives aimed at addressing and preventing violence. These grassroots efforts contribute to the broader societal dialogue on the complex and multifaceted nature of addressing violence.

Mai received help from government officials at her appointment, who immediately intervened to put a stop to her being sexually exploited. She was then referred to an ethnic-specific domestic violence shelter for Vietnamese women that helped her upon being removed from her abuser with no family and a fear of men. When the time came, she testified in court against her ex-husband and the group of involved men, leading to their indictment and imprisonment. After the trial, she wanted to return to Vietnam, but her advocate from the domestic violence shelter encouraged her to reconsider staying. Therefore, Mai decided that since she had experienced so much violence in the U.S., she would remain in the U.S. to access the help she was offered and recuperate her losses. However, Mai's *neej neeg* demonstrates that recovery was crucial to addressing violence.

Forming familial relationships was a crucial part of addressing violence. Although Mai and her parents knew of no close relatives living in the U.S., Mai was eventually connected to the Hmong community through a Hmong male co-worker. She was then able to “*zeem kwv tij, neej tsa,*” the process of creating kinship through rekindling historic familial relationships using the clan system, where she gained an aunt and uncle. Her aunt and uncle provided support similar to that of parental figures, where they tried to help her find a new partner so she may begin her life. Even though Mai was still wary of men and struggled to be around men, her aunt and uncle were always present in the presence of suitors. They vetted potential partners and challenged and encouraged her to see the potential in different people, allowing her to meet her current husband. When she married her husband, her aunt and uncle performed the wedding on behalf of her parents, who could not be there.

While Mai was the only one who directly experienced the violence, Mai’s *neej neeg* reveals how her husband played a significant role in addressing the violence Mai experienced. In Mai’s *neej neeg*, her current husband puts much effort into addressing the violence that Mai has experienced through caring for her in a way that demonstrates an awareness of trauma and continued violence. When marrying Mai, he chose to take her home like “*ib tug hluas nkauj,*” a term meaning a woman who has never been married, rather than a divorced woman whose weddings are short in comparison. The intentional act of choosing to marry Mai as *ib tug hluas nkauj* counters the practice of devaluing divorced women. Instead, as in Mai’s retelling, her husband explains that he chooses not to allow her experience of violence to define her and, in doing so, rectifies the violence Mai experienced with her first husband. Mai’s wedding also challenges the critique that Hmong marriage customs are infamous for producing gender inequalities.

When See was unable to leave her abusive ex-husband with the help of her family because of her ex-husband's threats towards them, See sought help from her boss, who did not previously know about her situation. With the help of her community of support, including her boss, her family, her children's school, and law enforcement, she safely left and relocated to a confidential location in a matter of hours. However, See's *neej neeg* demonstrates that addressing violence was not just about leaving an abusive situation but also maintaining safety. See specifically chose to relocate to a town that would not have a Hmong community where she may be identified or have her location compromised. See found comfort in maintaining an active restraining order even when her ex-husband was incarcerated.

Furthermore, See's *neej neeg* demonstrates how See sought to prevent violence. See was very concerned about her family's safety. When See's husband became violent in front of her father and threatened her father for intervening, See de-escalated the situation and protected her father by returning home with her ex-husband. See challenges how the concept of victim obscures women's agency while they are experiencing violence. When See decided to return home with her ex-husband, she did so to protect her father from violence. While See fits the criteria of what we would consider a victim, she also existed as a protector at that moment.

For Mai and See, whose experiences would be easily identifiable as examples of conventional ideas of success when they were no longer in their violent situations, futures are easily recognizable. Mai's experiences of being made to sleep with other men by her ex-husband and then boldly seeking help at her appointment easily demonstrate the linear progression from victim to survivor. For See, we see this happen when she is able to strategically leave her husband without him being able to locate her and her children ever again. However, they both

highlight the violence that comes after the primary act of violence, asking us to consider what the idea of success encompasses when remembering violence itself is violent.

For Pa, violence did not abruptly end with legal or criminal intervention. In Pa's *neej neeg*, Pa engages with law enforcement when her husband physically assaults her and when her husband's relative sexually assaults her. When Pa divorces her husband, he continuously returned to harass her. When Pa was sexually assaulted, Pa reported the person who raped her to the police immediately after the incident and underwent a rape kit examination. However, the arrest of the person who raped Pa did not cease all violence. Pa's divorce did not end violence and harassment from her ex-husband, nor did the police report against the person who raped her end harassment from the person who raped her. Instead, it increased violence for Pa. While Pa has legal protections in place, Pa was blamed for the arrest of her husband's relative who raped her, pressured to redact her accusation, and continued to face harassment from her husband's side of the family. Pa, therefore, tells her *neej neeg* on Hmong Story to testify to the violence she has experienced and to speak directly to the person who raped her and tells him not to disrespect her. Additionally, while justice was served when the person who raped her was arrested, she also points out to the person who raped her the karmic justice she believes she has received. Pa attributes the health development that caused the son of the person who raped her to walk with a limp, similar to how she walked, as the universe giving her the justice that she deserves.

Pa's experience challenges the privileging of Western state forms of interventions as indefinite solutions to stop violence. While arrests have been made, the criminal justice process only addresses violence enacted by an individual, doing little to address violence enacted by the community supporting the individual causing harm. Interestingly, she uses Hmong Story as another measure to publicly call out the person who raped her and the people who are harassing

her. While the effectiveness of calling out the person who raped her on Hmong Story cannot be assessed, Pa's utilization of Hmong Story highlights the channel as a medium that allows Hmong women an avenue to speak and be heard. Furthermore, Pa identified at the beginning of her *neej neeg* violence that preceded violence from her ex-husband and the person who raped her. She alludes to the possibility that discrimination against her for being born with a physical deformity and being rendered disabled makes her more vulnerable to violence in the first place. Pa's experience obscures the binary that separates victimhood and survivorhood and highlights the structural nature that violence can take on.

When Yer and her siblings found themselves abandoned by their parents and not taken in by relatives, they were placed into the foster care system. While the foster care system sheltered them, Yer constantly sought to live independently with her brother and sister. She sought marriage as a way to access resources that would allow her to provide a place for her siblings. Interestingly, when Yer does get married and requires her family to complete a traditional wedding, she refuses to let her wedding take place with her family, citing their willful absence in her life that contributed to her experience of abandonment as a child. When Yer began to experience conflict in her marriage with her husband, she saw the parallels in her relationship with her parents. However, Yer chooses to remain with her husband, despite his constant absence in her and her children's lives, so that her children will not have to experience losing both parents. Later, when Yer's husband apologizes to her for mistreating her, Yer forgives him. When her husband touched upon the fact that Yer never acted out against him, Yer said there was no need to act violently towards him because she already had the life that she wanted. Yer maintained her marriage to retain her resources, not necessarily to be with her husband. Her

determination to care for her children and siblings trumps all other desires she may have for her marriage.

Yer justifies her decision as an act of agency, asserting her autonomy and control over her choices. Yer, who chooses not to leave her husband, does not necessarily fit conventional ideas of success. Even so, Yer feels successful in having achieved her goal of a less violent future for her siblings, her children, and her nieces and nephews. Under preconceived, conventional notions of success, Yer's success becomes invisible as her decision to remain with her husband renders her experiences as failure to leave violence. A desired centered reading of Yer's *neej neeg* highlights her act of agency not just in her actions but also in reshaping perspectives on what ending violence can look like. Yer prompts us to consider how disinheriting trauma and violence address violence by helping people experiencing violence to shape their own narratives.

While Lor's *neej neeg* highlighted her interpersonal relationship conflict with her husband, Lor's *neej neeg* also exposed how different forms of violence intersect. Lor recounted experiencing violence due to war on two occasions. The first was when her mother was injured and died from tripping a mine that most likely was an excess of military activities while attempting to retrieve humanitarian aid because of military activities. The second incident facing violence due to war was when she journeyed from her home in Laos to the refugee camps in Thailand. Fortunately, neither she nor her family were harmed by the gunshots directed at them. Lor does not explicitly link her experiences of violence due to war with the violence she experiences in her interpersonal relationships. However, Lor's *neej neeg* challenges the regulating of Hmong women's experiences of violence only to interpersonal violence directed at them from a male figure.

After Lor's mother's passing, Lor found herself in a position of little power where she was unable to refuse her first marriage. Lor speaks highly and fondly of her father, who always supported her, even providing her with the means and knowledge to leave her first husband during a time and place imagined as untouched by Western notions of gender equality. Interestingly, that was not enough to grant Lor a divorce. When she first initiated divorce proceedings, Lor faced immense pressure to return to her ex-husband. It was only when she threatened to take her own life as a final measure to escape the marriage that the council finally granted her the divorce she sought. Lor also began to experience marital conflicts with her husband in her current marriage. However, after receiving an apology from her husband, rather than accepting the apology without question, Lor speaks ambivalently about marriage. Lor's *neej neeg* illustrates that addressing violence can deviate from traditional notions of what is considered productive, positive forms of interventions against violence yet still be successful at intervening violence.

Each woman concludes their *neej neeg* with a final thought or a message for listeners. Mai sends a message of hope that, in sharing her story, other vulnerable Hmong women will be more aware of and not have to experience sexual exploitation. See encourages women in abusive relationships to seek a better life by reassuring them that there are futures without violence. Pa requests that different-abled people not be judged and treated unjustly because of their disabilities. Yer instates her agency and demonstrates how she has succeeded in her goals through her own means of not replicating and producing violence. Lor prompts listeners not to stress over recuperating loss love from a spouse but to locate it in other family members. The women's concluding messages are demonstrative of recognizing individuals and communities not merely as broken or conquered but rather by acknowledging their aspirations, perspectives,

and insights. Their *neej neeg* and messages are Hmong women's efforts to build less violent futures.

Each *neej neeg* stands as a testament not only to the violence endured but to the practices Hmong women and their communities engage in to end violence. *Neej neeg* serves as counternarratives challenging the prevailing, often simplistic narratives within Hmong culture regarding violence and the experiences of women. Through the lens of these narratives, the five Hmong women examined, along with their communities, actively engage in a process of meaning-making that reshapes and redefines their experiences of violence. Their stories transcend the labels of victimhood or survivorship, serving as powerful tools to educate their communities on the complexities of violence and to challenge entrenched cultural norms. By sharing their experiences, they are not only breaking cultural traditions but also paving the way for a more nuanced understanding and response to violence within their communities.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I delved into the [Hmong Story](#) YouTube channel to unveil how Hmong women actively confront violence within their communities through the power of storytelling. Employing a care work framework, I showcased the feminist epistemologies of Hmong women, which challenged prevailing narratives depicting them solely as victims of their culture or as recipients of inadequate state care. Moreover, these narratives serve to disrupt entrenched hierarchies and binaries that have long rendered Hmong women invisible. While Hmong Story may not provide a perfect solution and does not replace certain forms of necessary care, it offers a vital form of support for those who are unable or choose not to engage with state care but are still seeking care. Through the traditions of storytelling and *neej neeg*, Hmong women have

forged a distinctive form of care that addresses their unique needs while ensuring the survival and resilience of the community at large.

May emerges as a central figure in this narrative landscape, serving not only as a storyteller but also as a cultural creator. This inherent cultural practice not only underscores why May approaches storytelling and Hmong women's *neej neeg* detailing conflict and violence in the manner she does but also sheds light on why individuals choose to share their stories and why audiences are drawn to listen. Through her care work via *neej neeg* storytelling and Hmong Story, May engages with and engages the community in a consistent practice of Hmong oral traditions that listens to Hmong women in order to work towards creating less violent futures. At the core of this narrative practice lies in meaning-making, which has contributed to the enduring history of resilience and survival within the Hmong community.

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