“Knowing Who You Are”: The role of ethnic spaces in the construction of Hmong identities in the Twin Cities

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This thesis titled

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ABSTRACT

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Identity in New Spaces: Hmong Ethnic Spaces in the Twin Cities

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The geographic literature has shown that there is a connection between ethnic spaces and ethnic identity formation and persistence. However, by focusing on the Hmong population of Minneapolis, and St. Paul, Minnesota, this qualitative research will demonstrate that different types of ethnic spaces play different roles when it comes to these complicated formulations. Ethnic identities are complex, socially constructed phenomena that shift with changing contexts, and are in fact not mutually exclusive; any individual person could identify as a member of multiple ethnic groups. These intricate identities are displayed in ethnic spaces where Hmong individuals showcase, in a variety of ways, embodiments of these identities that are symbolic, commemorative, artistic, bodily, and performative. Ethnic spaces become not only producers and re-producers of identity, but outlets for the expression of identity in all its complicated forms.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Scholars have put much thought and discussion into issues of identity, ethnic spaces, and material symbols of culture. Ethnic identity is a critical issue when it comes to understanding acculturation, immigration, and the everyday lives of members of immigrant groups. However, ethnicity and identity are complicated issues, rarely existing in the binary forms we often ascribe to them, and the ways in which we view these topics must take into account this complexity. Ethnic identity exists in space, not a vacuum, and the display of ethnic identity relates closely to ethnic spaces and the behaviors, norms, and identities deemed appropriate for embodiment. The linkage between these issues is under examined, especially in the cases of recent immigrant groups to new destinations, like the Hmong in Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota.

When we think of cities typically associated with immigration, we usually think of massive urban centers like New York, Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco (Jones 2008) and only rarely do other large cities like Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, cross our mind. Historically, the east and west coasts have attracted the largest number of migrants, while substantial portions of the Midwest have remained primarily, but not exclusively of European descent. Recent patterns of immigrant settlement are altering this norm, along with the communities they settle in, and this demands scholarly attention to a number of issues. Some of the largest immigrant groups to arrive in Minnesota are from east Africa and Latin America, but the group that has arguably had
the most impact in Minnesota is the Hmong refugee population arriving from Southeast Asia after the end of the Vietnam War.

While the migration experience can be stressful even when migrants have control over the process, the experience of refugees is substantially more difficult (Pipher 2008, Vang 2010). The United States has become home to a number of refugee populations, but in this research I will focus on the Hmong population of the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area (referred to here as the Twin Cities). While public discourses often demand substantial acculturation from immigrant groups, this is often at odds with the desires of the members of these groups. While few actively resist adopting some American norms, ethnic identities are still valued and maintained among immigrant groups. This research will focus on the maintenance and reification of these identities through the use of ethnic spaces.

The geographic literature has shown that there is a connection between ethnic spaces and ethnic identity formation and persistence. However, this research will demonstrate that different types of ethnic spaces play different roles when it comes to these complex formulations. That is to say, most Hmong individuals in the Twin Cities do not identify solely as Hmong. Identities are complex, socially constructed phenomena that shift with changing contexts, and are in fact not mutually exclusive; a person could identify as both Hmong and American. These complex identities are performed in ethnic spaces where Hmong individuals showcase, in a variety of ways, embodiments of these identities that are symbolic, commemorative, artistic, bodily, and performative. Ethnic
spaces become not only producers and reproducers of identity, but outlets for the expression of identity in all its complicated forms.

To satisfy this argument, this research will focus on a few major questions: (1) What types of ethnic spaces do Hmong individuals in the Twin Cities find particularly important with respect to identity; (2) In what ways do Hmong ethnic spaces in the Twin Cities contribute to ethnic identity formation and persistence; and (3) In what ways can the performance of ethnicity be seen in these types of places. Over the course of six major chapters, these questions will be answered as I demonstrate the key linkages between ethnic spaces and ethnic identity.

Chapter two focuses on the recent history of the study population. The Hmong are an ethnic group from Southeast Asia that has experienced minority status in essentially every location they have called home throughout their history. This history has not been entirely well documented due to a lack of a written language until the 1950’s, but the Hmong have experienced multiple migrations from southern China, through Southeast Asia, to highland regions of Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, and finally to the United States. Perhaps due to their reputation as violent (perpetuated by more empowered groups, such as the ruling Chinese society (Lee 1998)), the Hmong were targeted as allies of the United States during the Vietnam War and its spillover into Laos that came to be known as the Secret War or the Clandestine War in Laos (approximately 1964-1973). After brutal persecution following US withdrawal, the Hmong were
relocated in waves to the United States and other western countries, with substantial populations migrating to Minnesota after resettlement.

Chapter three provides a literature review and places the study in relevant academic contexts. Immigrant settlement patterns and theories of acculturation were important to consider for this study. Because settlement patterns have been changing throughout US history, it is important to understand recent immigrant behaviors to give this study geographical context. While “traditional” immigrant groups from Europe once settled primarily in the rural Midwest or in the central business districts of large cities, more recent immigrants are increasingly settling in spatially dispersed locations in smaller suburban locales or rural towns. For the same reason, it is important to understand various theories of acculturation that scholars have employed to understand the immigrant experience in the United States. Discourses regarding immigrants have shifted over time, from the demand for Anglo-conformity to the gradual acceptance of multiple ethnic identities, and because this study will focus on the creation of these identities, it is important to understand its place in the scholarly literature. Finally, this chapter will examine frameworks of ethnic spaces, providing context for specific Hmong spaces discussed in later chapters.

Chapter four details the research methodology used in the study. Because it is concerned with understanding individual conceptions of ethnicity in relation to space, the study employs a qualitative framework for collecting and analyzing data. Semi-structured interviews and participant observation were the primary methods of data
collection. Interview respondents were contacted throughout the research timeframe and were chosen on the basis that they identified as Hmong and lived in the Twin Cities area. Interviews often moved beyond the initial scope of my interview protocol, allowing for respondents to convey the information they believed was important. Coding of interviews focused on common themes that arose during conversations, and these codes became the framework for the following three chapters.

Chapters five, six and seven present the results of the research and analysis, relying heavily on interviews and participant observation. Chapter five focuses on Hmong ethnic spaces in the Twin Cities and how they are conceived and perceived in terms of value and importance. Ethnic places frequently discussed in interviews include gathering events such as Hmong New Year and the Hmong Freedom Celebration and an annual sports festival; outlets for goods and services, such as Hmong Village; and institutions designed to teach both aspects of Hmong culture as well as classes to help Hmong immigrants adjust to life in the United States. These spaces are valued for their (re)creation of Hmong identity and for the role they play in maintaining traditions held by the Hmong in Laos. The following two chapters will draw upon these spaces when considering matters of identity and ethnicity.

Chapter six discusses the ethnic identification of the interview respondents. Their commentary seems to suggest that it is inappropriate to attempt to separate Hmong and American identities. The respondents to this study all clearly identify as Hmong, despite varying levels of acculturation and interaction with “traditional” Hmong
lifeways. However, none of them would hesitate to identify as American either, frequently citing the same aspects of identification they use to call themselves Hmong. Put another way, the study respondents conceive of themselves – consciously or otherwise – as multi-ethnic, valuing both the Hmong and American aspects of their lives.

Finally, chapter seven examines the concept of symbolic ethnicity and whether or not it is possible to maintain substantial aspects of pre-US Hmong life. It seems as though it is not, and in place of “traditional” ethnicity, Hmong individuals, like many immigrant groups before them, engage in the display of ethnic symbols in order to help maintain their Hmong identities. Symbolic ethnicity takes many forms in these cases, such as physical embodiments of ethnicity in the form of traditional Hmong clothing, ethnic performances and the display of images deemed applicable to the lives of almost every Hmong individual in the United States. The targets of these symbolic displays are often other Hmong individuals, with the performer/displayer attempting to show to other Hmong that they are still Hmong as well.
CHAPTER 2: Hmong History and Values

The Hmong in the United States represent a large fraction of a diasporic population that can trace their roots to mountainous regions of Southeast Asia. Scholarly research, combined with the Hmong’s own oral history, places the origin of this ethnic group somewhere in China. Aspects of this same oral history suggest that the Hmong originated in much more distant regions, such as Siberia or Europe. For example, F.M. Savina (1924) described that prior to arriving in the mountains of Laos, the Hmong hailed from a land constantly covered by ice and subject to six-month-long days and nights. Savina’s writings have been called into question and criticized for presenting a Eurocentric view of the Hmong, as well as for the likelihood that he misinterpreted his own first-hand sources (Fadiman, 1997). Whether or not the writings of Savina actually present any historical reality, the Hmong in the United States often do not look beyond China in seeking the genesis of their culture.

The Hmong faced in China, as they would elsewhere in the future, minority status and constant discrimination. As Lee (1998) explains, the Chinese often viewed the Hmong as inferior and barbaric, deliberately standing in the way of Chinese advancement in the southern plains. Consequently, the Hmong have been yoked indelibly to a stereotype of violence, belligerence, and a warlike demeanor that effectively prevents any kind of cultural adaption. In fact, this stereotype may have contributed to the CIA’s decision to target the Hmong as allies during the Secret War in Laos (1964-1973). However, Lee vehemently contests the accuracy of this stereotype.
While the participation of the Hmong in Chinese conflicts is not denied, she identifies
the “Miao Rebellions” during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as particularly
influential with regard to this stereotype. The word “Miao” can refer to a number of
ethnic groups in southern China at the time, and was actually used to direct attention
away from the Han Chinese, who were in fact the major players in the rebellion. This
detail has been largely ignored, with the bulk of the blame for the violence placed
squarely at the feet of the Hmong. The stereotype of the violent, aggressive Hmong still
exists today, and repeated media attention to violent acts committed by Hmong
individuals or groups does nothing to contradict it. In fact, despite an otherwise
compelling and compassionate piece of literature, Fadiman cannot seem to shake this
idea in her gripping _The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down_, repeatedly discussing the
combative stubbornness of the Hmong in both a critical and nostalgic tone.

Whether or not the Hmong in China were more or less violent than any other
ethnic group, we know the remainder of Hmong history up to the present. China is still
home to the largest population of Hmong in the world, numbering, by some estimates,
to exceed 9,000,000 people (Yang 2003), and discrimination against the Hmong still
exists. Neal, a university professor (see Appendix C for a list of interview respondents)
offers a simple but telling statement:

Neal: In China, if you are Hmong, you are a small community group, you wanna
go to (), go to Beijing, you need to change your name to be Chinese so nobody
know you!
Here, Neal clearly identifies discrimination against Hmong in China, to the point where association by name leads to disadvantage. Though he does not go into detail about the behaviors of Chinese toward the Hmong, the presence of ethnocentrism is unmistakable. Over time, fighting and discrimination pushed large populations of Hmong out of China and into other reaches of Southeast Asia. The Hmong came to make homes for themselves in mountainous stretches of Vietnam, Thailand, and, primarily, Laos.

In Laos, the Hmong continued lifeways that had likely been a part of their culture for hundreds, if not thousands of years. Agrarian lifestyles dominated, and the Hmong grew a variety of crops on a largely subsistence basis. An array of fruits, vegetables, and livestock made up the farming practices of the Hmong, who possessed a well-developed slash-and-burn agriculture system. Consequently, the Hmong were also largely nomadic. Collections of families lived together in villages that were capable of being moved at multi-year intervals. The high altitudes of the Laotian mountains prevented the Hmong from attaining high yields from any of their crops, though there was one plant that thrived in the high elevations: the poppy. The poppy plant, from which the drug Opium is attained, served as the Hmong’s sole cash crop and provided their only true source of income.

Socially, the Hmong were (and still are) organized according to a clan-based structure. Eighteen Hmong clans exist, and members of the clan traditionally see each other as family, regardless of their actual blood connection. As such, members of the
same clan are expected to assist each other to the best of their ability. Clans are patrilineal, with children inheriting their father’s clan name. In order to be acknowledged as a clan member, then, a person needs to be able to trace their ancestry to a common male figure. There are strict taboos against marrying another member of one’s own clan, so inter-clan marriages are most common. After marriage, the Hmong woman traditionally leaves her own family to live with her husband, though she keeps her own father’s clan name. The practice of paying a dowry has historically been an important aspect of Hmong marriage, and the practice continues to this day in the United States, though it is challenged by a number of young Hmong men and women. Furthermore, the Hmong organized themselves into larger tribal structures that were given names based on the types of clothing they wore, such as Green Hmong, White Hmong, Flower Hmong, etc. This distinction has become largely irrelevant in the Western world. The use of these visible markers has died out, though dialects that make these groups distinct persist, and Hmong can often identify each other as “White” or “Green”. Clan structures still exist and carry heavy sway in the United States, though the power of organizations like the Eighteen Council, a body of esteemed members from each of the eighteen Hmong clans that holds substantial social – but not legal – sway, is often quietly and privately contested.

Traditionally, the Hmong have practiced a form of animism in which the well-being of ancestors in paramount. Ancestors are prayed to and are the beneficiaries of sacrificed animals. Furthermore, a major tenet of animism is the concept of what
Graham Harvey (2005) calls non-human persons. To the Hmong, spirits exist in everything natural. Ancestors have spirits, rivers have spirits, animals have spirits, and people have spirits. Humans are also not believed to necessarily have only one spirit, and multiple spirits are often working either in tandem or in opposition. The relationship between Hmong animist religion and daily life is critical and profound. According to the Hmong belief system, sickness is caused by the loss of a person’s soul. This could happen for any number of reasons, but no matter the cause, the retrieval of the soul is the most effective (and often the only) way to cure the sickness. However, this is not believed to be an easy task, and a shaman, or txiv neeb (Tsi neng) must be enlisted to help with the soul’s retrieval. The txiv neeb ritual is complex, and it is not believed that an individual can actively choose the path of a shaman. Rather, a person must be chosen by spirits and called to become a txiv neeb. This calling manifests in the form of a life-threatening disease that must itself be cured by a txiv neeb. After a txiv neeb’s training is complete, they are believed to have the power of astral projection, a necessary skill in the retrieval of a lost soul. While astral projecting, the txiv neeb communicates with spirits that either help or hinder the search for the lost soul. This idea demonstrates the interconnectedness of traditional Hmong belief systems, and provides some context for the difficulty faced by Hmong immigrants in the United States when it comes to health care and law (Fadiman 1997).

In Laos, as in China, the Hmong were again a minority group. Living in isolation in the hills of Laos, most Hmong had little to no contact with the lowland Lao, or any of the
other dozens of ethnic groups in Laos. In fact, the Hmong often believed that it was
dangerous to go down to the lowlands because they were sure to contract some sort of
disease (Fadiman 1997). The Hmong lived in such isolation from the Lao that many were
not even aware that they were governed by another group of people (Eberle 2008). This
did not mean that the Lao were unaware of the Hmong, and this awareness, coupled
with geographic isolation often led to discrimination and stereotyping of the Hmong by
lowland Lao. As Moua (2007, 14) reports, “The Lao government often accused the
Hmong of being the cause of the country’s problems, such as the high levels of
deforestation and cultivation of opium.” The issue of social distinction and the Hmong’s
minority status was raised in my interviews as well. Foung, a state senator, described his
experience as a Hmong child enrolled in an almost exclusively Lao school.

Foung: And then there’s memory of me going to school in the city. Which was a
little isolated from war. And memory from that would be...I would say safe from
war, but memory of adjustment to the mainstream of Laos. Because that was a
city environment, and me and my brother are the only two Hmong kids going to
the whole school for Lao kids. And um...let’s see, there’s social distinction in Laos
too. So I would say we were a little bullied throughout all the years we’ve been
there. It was...it was quite interesting.

Foung’s experiences, Neal’s statements, and historical records of discrimination towards
Hmong in China and Laos serve to illustrate a major concept in Hmong history: that the
Hmong have been a minority in essentially every country they’ve lived in. Hmong oral
tradition suggests they may have once possessed a nation state under a king named Chi
You, but in the past few thousand years the Hmong have had no country they could call
their own, instead living under the rule of other ethnic groups in Asia, as well as in
countries of resettlement, especially the United States, France, Australia, Canada, and French Guiana.

The Vietnam War (1956-1975) permanently altered the course of Hmong history. On paper, Laos was a neutral country in the struggle between Cold War powers. In reality, it was anything but. Both rival blocs exerted their influence in Laos despite the Geneva Accord’s declaration of its neutrality. After the rise of an independent Lao state following the removal of French colonial influence, the country was ruled by a collection of three political parties: Conservatives, Moderates, and the communist Pathet Lao (Eberle 2008). The US targeted support from the Conservative and Moderate parties, while the Pathet Lao sided with the North Vietnamese. Initially, the United States had trouble with the soldiers provided by the Lao government in exchange for massive amounts of humanitarian aid. In response, the US military began targeting mountainous ethnic minorities for recruitment. The Hmong were the most prominent such group due to their geographic location along the North Vietnamese supply line known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. In clear violation of an international peace accord, the US began military operations in Xiengkhouang Province, and so began what has come to be known as the Clandestine War in Laos, or the “Secret War.”

Enter General Vang Pao (called affectionately by the Hmong “The General” or “VP”). A former ally of the French, Vang Pao’s military career was fueled by a combination of charisma and cooperation with foreign powers (Vang 2010). He quickly became a figurehead for the US-aligned Hmong and was the primary decision maker
when the US military offered to start bringing weapons and financial and material aid to the Hmong. As Vang (2010) notes, the meeting that led to the transfer of these supplies has been retold and reshaped to the extent that it has become pseudo-mythological. A common refrain in regard to this meeting suggests that Vang Pao and other Hmong leaders believed that they were promised an independent state or homeland if the US were to win the war against communism in Southeast Asia, and a safe place to live if they did not. The American CIA agent who organized the meeting, Bill Lair, claims that the meeting was strictly about Vang Pao’s anti-communist agenda and the arming of his soldiers. In any case, no documentation exists from the meeting, and any deal struck was likely based on trust alone. However, the mythology surrounding this meeting is a critical aspect of Hmong collective memory. Upon arrival in the United States, many Hmong were shocked to find that United States citizens knew nothing about them, and the CIA officials who worked with Hmong leadership were nowhere to be found.

A remote and barely populated valley was chosen for the base of operations in Laos. Long Tieng (or Long Cheng) was transformed rapidly from the home of only a few families to the most heavily trafficked airport in the world (Eberle 2008). Not only was Long Tieng the busiest airport in the world, it was without a doubt the most secret. Due to the lack of US soldiers in Laos, it was easier for Congress and multiple presidents to deny that the United States was involved in Laos at all. The Secret War was cheap and effective, as only Lao, Hmong, and other ethnic minorities lost their lives, sparing the United States soldiers, expenses, and perhaps most importantly, publicity. The CIA
airline, Air America, was used to feign humanitarian aid, instead supplying weaponry to the Hmong. Throughout the course of the war, disruption to everyday lives of the Hmong forced them to relocate, often to Long Tieng and the surrounding area. The airbase was kept secret between the years of 1962 and 1970, when a pair of journalists managed to infiltrate and expose US operations.

The suffering of the Hmong during the Secret War is difficult to overstate. Over the course of the War in Vietnam, Laos become the most bombed country in history; more tons of explosives were dropped on Laos during this period than Germany and Japan combined during World War II (Eberle 2008). What had previously been an isolated, agrarian existence was swiftly destroyed, replaced by the terror and confusion that accompanies life as a refugee. Entire villages were destroyed by US bombs, some of which were intended for use in Vietnam, but dropped on Laos instead when the pilots failed to reach their targets. In some cases, all the men of fighting age in a particular village were killed in combat. Undeterred, Vang Pao reportedly recruited child soldiers in their stead, strong-arming villages by threatening to withhold food supplies should they not send their twelve to fourteen year old boys. Estimates vary, but during the war alone, between 17,000 and 30,000 Hmong soldiers were killed and over 50,000 civilians were killed or wounded (Vang 2008). Regardless of the true number, the Hmong suffered astronomical and disproportionate death tolls during the Secret War.

While the war itself was devastating, its aftermath was terrifying and brutal. The fall of Saigon in 1975 prompted the United States to withdraw from much of Southeast
Asia, including from Long Tieng. The town and airbase were thrown into a state of panic when the US began removing Hmong military leaders and their families. Only about 300 families were removed, and the rest of the Hmong were left to an uncertain fate. The Pathet Lao took swift retribution on the Hmong in what amounted to ethnic cleansing. The result was a diaspora of Hmong and other highland groups. During the next five years, 102,000 highland minorities fled Laos to neighboring Thailand. Horror stories of crossing the Mekong River permeate the memories of nearly every Hmong person forced to face this terrifying obstacle. Seexeng, an art teacher, was a small boy when his family was faced with crossing the river.

Seexeng: So I remember a dark evening and we get on these Thai longboats, and there were so many of us in the rain, and I remember, my mom and them just tell their kids to be quiet and get in the boat. And the men and the elders keep...whatever tools they have to get the water out, because there was so much rain and there were so many of us so it was quite heavy [he pantomimes bailing water with his hands]. And so each boat made it and we got over there, and I remember this tarp covering us on wet grass. The next day woke up and they get us to walk a little bit further. Blacked out and then made it to Ban Vinai [a temporary camp in Thailand that housed a substantial portion of Hmong refugees]. And I think the Thai government was...that was illegal movement, and they brought the boat back that took us and I think they find the people who did that...but they led us to Ban Vinai.

Though Seexeng’s family was fortunate to cross the river without losing any family members, he was in the minority. Yang’s (2008, 39-40) family was one of the lucky few to make it across the river unscathed, but she writes about just how lucky they were. “If my family had crossed the river two months later, they would have been massacred...The group was on a sandbar gathering vines to weave a bridge to Thailand...Many of them were little more than skeletons...On August 2nd, 1979,
Hamilton-Merritt [a journalist] learned that a group of thirty to forty Pathet Lao soldiers had landed on the river island and the Hmong were massacred.” These stories are only two examples of the horrors perpetrated in Laos. It is uncommon for a first generation Hmong immigrant in the United States to not know someone who died during the war.

After crossing the Mekong, the majority of Hmong refugees were placed in Ban Vinai refugee camp. Here, conditions were deplorable. It was overcrowded, food was scare and rationed, camp guards often treated the Hmong brutally, and for the majority of its existence there was no sewage system. There was a school that provided basic education for those who were lucky enough to attend, but the manner in which the school was run was not exactly conducive to good education. Xai, a librarian and adult basic education instructor, who spent the first eight years of his life in Ban Vinai, describes his experiences in the schools:

Xai: The school systems, they are different from here. So corporal punishment is allowed. The way they teach kids is different: there’s a lot of memorization, recital. So if you’re unable to recite a sentence or paragraph, long paragraph, they will hit you. If you don’t cut your finger nails, they’re not clean, they hit you on your fingers. They put bottle caps on your knee, and basically you kneel down to put the bottle caps under your knee, they make you hold box of wood [turns both hands up, mimicking holding something heavy above his head.]

In this passage, Xai describes the challenging and dehumanizing conditions in Ban Vinai. While the camp represents a place where the Hmong did not need to fear for their lives, it was another place that prolonged their suffering.

Hmong resettlement in the United States began in 1975 after the US retreat from Southeast Asia (see Figure 1). Though the 1975 Indochina Migration and Refugee
Assistance Act marked the first refugee migrations from the area, it only provided for Vietnamese and Cambodians. It was not until a year later that the Hmong were included.

(Vang 2008). Over the next decade more than 50,000 Laotian highland refugees comprised mostly, but not exclusively, of Hmong were admitted to the United States (Gordon 1987). Most arrived in time to be subject to new immigration laws stemming
from the Refugee Act of 1980, which radically altered refugee resettlement policy in the United States (Byrand 2008, Gordon 1987, Dinnerstein and Reimers 1993). The original resettlement plan of the United States government was to disperse the Hmong widely so that no single community bore the weight of their arrival, but it was not long before secondary migration led resettled Hmong to relocate to areas of greater Hmong settlement. The “family reunification” policy in US immigration law bolstered the number of Hmong concentrated in these areas (Byrand 2008). Though at least some Hmong call all fifty states home, today most Hmong communities are concentrated in just a few states, most notably in California, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and North Carolina (Pfiefer et al. 2013).

The first Hmong to arrive in Minnesota landed in 1976. Minnesota was a common destination for new Hmong arrivals due to the efforts of a number of local Christian churches who sponsored refugees. Because the refugee resettlement process relies on non-governmental organizations, these groups were necessary and critical to the Hmong arrivals in the United States. Though California hosted the highest number of initial Hmong refugees, Minnesota’s Hmong population grew quickly as word spread among Hmong family networks (see Figure 2). This secondary migration was bolstered in the 1990’s by newly enacted laws in California that made it difficult for immigrants to receive welfare. No such laws existed in Midwestern states like Minnesota and Wisconsin, and the Hmong population continued to grow. While California still has the largest Hmong population of any state, the Twin Cities of St Paul and Minneapolis are
now home to the largest concentration of Hmong anywhere in the country (Pfiefer et al. 2013).

Figure 2: Hmong and Lao Refugee Arrivals to Minnesota by Year.

Despite support from their sponsors and resettlement organizations, adjustment to life in the United States was seldom easy for the Hmong. Essentially everywhere they have settled the Hmong have faced discrimination and racism (Fadiman 1997, Hein 2006). Hein touches on a few examples from the cities of Rochester, Minnesota and Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Though he makes sure to note that there were plenty of positive responses to refugee resettlement, he demonstrates that Hmong and Cambodian refugees
experienced discrimination in the form of unfair apartment leasing and hiring practices, harassment in school, and the actions of civic leaders who suggested that refugees represented “big-city” problems that could damage small town communities. Many of the Hmong I spoke to for this study described similar discrimination that they or those around them experienced. For example, when I asked Tswjfwm (Tsu-fu), a university student, if he had ever experienced misconceptions due to stereotypes from non-Hmong people, he responded:

Tswjfwm: Yeah. [chuckles] I have a friend whose dad is actually a racist [laughs]. He was like, “I’m not gonna sell a house to a Hmong person cause I don’t want to see it go to trash.” And I was like, “Whoa. [laughs] OK.”

Here, Tswjfwm provides his own story of a negative encounter with a non-Hmong person. Though the opinion of Tswjfwm’s friend’s father is certainly not representative of all non-Hmong people in the Twin Cities, he is certainly not the only one to offer up this type of response.

As a whole, the Hmong today still face a number of issues, despite having experienced improvements in a number of socioeconomic and educational categories since their arrival in 1975. Compared to other Asian groups, and especially Americans as a whole, the Hmong lag far behind in terms of income. Deceptive statistics may suggest the reverse. For example, according to the 2010 Census (Vang 2013), 91% of Hmong households have incomes which exceed the national median by 12%. However, the income of these households falls short of the national median, $47,200 and $52,200, respectively. It is also critical to know when making this assessment that Hmong
households tend to include extended family members and are on average larger than the “typical” American household. When looking at the state of Minnesota in particular, the disparity grows. The median household income in Minnesota as a whole is $56,500 compared to $49,400 for the Hmong. Therefore we can see that while the income disparity does not seem large when analyzing these statistics, Hmong individuals and households do not approach the level of income acquired by Americans in general.

Family income statistics flesh out this problem more completely. In this category, the Hmong families fall behind American families as a whole by $15,000 (median US family income of $62,100, median Hmong family income of $47,400). In Minnesota this disparity balloons to $22,000, with Hmong families making $48,200 compared to the Minnesota median income of $70,200. The median per capita income for a Hmong person then, is $11,200 in Minnesota, less than I make as a teaching assistant in comparatively cheaper Athens, Ohio.

It is not surprise that Hmong families and individuals tend to experience higher poverty rates than the US as a whole. In fact, Hmong families experience poverty at more than double the rate of other American families (25% to 11% respectively). In Minnesota, once again, the figure inflates. Minnesotan families experience poverty at a rate of 7% compared to 26% of Hmong families. It is worth noting that the national poverty levels experienced by Hmong families have decreased sharply. In the past ten years, poverty rates have dropped from 40% to the previously stated 25%. While this is
an encouraging sign, these high poverty levels are still troubling for many members of the Hmong community.

It is likely that one factor contributing to these high poverty rates is the clustering of Hmong in low-wage jobs. The US Census (Vang 2013) divides types of employment into five categories: production, transportation and material moving; natural resources, construction and maintenance; sales and office; service; and management, business, science and arts. The biggest differences occur in the first and last categories. In low-wage production jobs, the Hmong are overrepresented compared to the US as a whole, as 31% of Hmong and 12% of the US population works in this sector. Alternatively, in higher paying professional jobs like science and business, the US population outpaces the Hmong by 36% to 20%.

While there has been some improvement to the socioeconomic position of Hmong- Americans as a whole, educational attainment has been improving more substantially. Between the 2000 and 2010 Censuses, the percentage of Hmong attending college slightly more than doubled, from 13.2% to 26.7%, though, similarly to the US population as a whole, female college attendance (29.9%) outpaces the 23.4% college attendance achieved by males (Xiong 2013). Looking back to 1990, the improvement can be seen even more clearly. At that time, 4.9% of Hmong Americans held bachelor’s degrees. This figure increased to 7.4% in 2000, and again to 13.4% by 2010. Still, compared to non-Hispanic whites, who attain bachelor’s degrees at a rate of 30.9%, the Hmong still lag far behind, also trailing non-Hispanic blacks (18%) and non-
Hispanic Asians (50.2%). Despite these increases in academic attainment, the organization Hmong National Development (HND) identifies another area of concern. 70,800 Hmong students throughout the country are classified as English Learners (ELs), though the majority of these children are US-born. Despite growing up in America, a significantly higher number of Hmong children are represented in this category, often compromising a particular state’s second or third largest EL group.

Language concerns have also become a problem for Hmong-Americans since their arrival in the United States. As part of her study of the Hmong in Rochester, Minnesota, Faruque (2002) gauged the complications resulting from language barriers between not only the Hmong and non-Hmong, but also between Hmong of different generations. It is not difficult to understand how lacking English skills would make life challenging for recent immigrants, and indeed a substantial proportion of my respondents identified knowing little English as one of the most challenging aspects of their migration. Children are typically more adaptable and faster learners than adults, picking up English at a faster rate. This is a serious concern for not only the Hmong but many other immigrant groups. A child knowing more of the host country’s language creates a power reversal that is especially anathema to traditional Hmong social structures. Elders should be revered and respected; the decisions of the father or grandfather are law. Consequently, when children must be used as interpreters Hmong culture is turned on its head. Faruque also makes clear that the reverse situation is equally an issue. When Hmong children speak more English than the Hmong language,
they often need older siblings to serve as translators within their own family. This limited communication can lead to resentment of their parent’s language and can interfere with the transfer of memories and cultural identifiers. Indeed, Faruque found that a number of pre-adult Hmong believed it was important to cast off traditional Hmong values and beliefs. At the same time, it is important to realize that 92% of Hmong speak a non-English language at home (Xiong 2013). In spite of this, 49% report speaking English very well despite speaking a non-English language at home. This figure represents a drastic increase from 21% in 1990. The language gap is still an issue, but as 1.5- and second-generation Hmong grow older, it is shrinking.
CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Collision: From the “Melting Pot” to Cultural Pluralism

Throughout American history, public discourses over the roles played by immigrants and ethnic groups have engendered significant public debate. Conflict arises when comparing the discourses surrounding migrant behavior. The concept of America as a country constructed by immigrants is in direct opposition with the often vehement anti-immigration sentiments possessed by a number of its citizens. Still, somewhere between these two extreme stances reside issues and terms commonly used by both academics and the public alike. Concepts such as assimilation, Anglo-conformity, and acculturation are often ill-defined, and in the section that follows I will examine the genesis of some of these critical concepts and trace the evolution of migrant behavior theories over time. These ideas are critical for understanding how mainstream Americans conceptualize immigrants, as well as how immigrant groups, like the Hmong, interpret American society.

One of the earliest and most pervasive conceptualizations of American society is that of the melting pot. Often used in a positive and idealistic manner, the term in popular discourse evokes the national motto *E Pluribus Unum*. In other words, despite disparate heritages, background, religions, and any number of social factors, this ideal argues that the United States is a unified society. In a literal sense, the melting pot also
evokes images of societal members becoming like each other, accepting new ways of life as more and more “ingredients” are added. This grand idea is problematic on a number of levels. First, the biological aspect of the melting pot has not come to pass. If over time immigrant groups are expected to integrate seamlessly into American society, as I will discuss below, it can be expected that the country will “melt” together biologically. Due to the persistence of ethnic endogamous marriage (Census 2010) this has not occurred. Furthermore, though some degree of national identity and unity has been achieved, the idea of a cultural melting pot has been complicated by continuing immigration to the United States throughout its history. In fact, the imagery evoked by the melting pot is almost in direct contrast to the ways in which it is actually interpreted and manifested. Instead of societal members becoming like each other, it expected that newcomers to America become like its Anglo-American founders. This process is referred to as Anglo-conformity (Dicker 2008).

Abramson (1980) writes that Anglo-conformity has largely social connotations. The dominant English Protestant society of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, rather than actually changing along with new ethnic groups added to American society, would instead make itself large enough to accommodate them as they adjust their culture and identity to match Anglo-America. This concept has not entirely disappeared. Anglo-conformity in a more contemporary context takes on socioeconomic complications (Valdez 2006). Class status of ethnic groups is often the driver of any type of Anglo-conformity. Valdez finds that Mexican-Americans with high levels of education
and wage earning gradually become more like the American middle class while the opposite is true of Mexican-Americans with low education and earning potential. Though the concept of cultural Anglo-conformity is seen as unfavorable by most academics, it remains alive in discourse, as the importance of such cultural traits as language has been imposed upon ethnic groups. Further, though the doctrine of Anglo-conformity replaced that of the melting pot after the American Revolution (Dicker 2008), both ideologies have survived and evolved in tandem throughout American history.

The ability of immigrants to succeed in the United States is often largely ascribed to their potential for assimilation. This theory was forwarded most influentially by the Chicago School of sociologists who studied early immigration to the United States. European immigrants frequently settled in the central city and formed dense ethnic quarters that included a safety net of family members and co-nationals, as well as literal neighborhoods that contained economic outlets that catered to the immigrant group (Burgess 1925). These immigrants were then expected to gradually assimilate to the American cultural milieu (Gordon 1961, Chacko 2003a). Assimilation was fueled by improved socioeconomic standing and English skills, among other attributes. Over time, this line of thought came to imply that immigrants would cast off their existing ethnic traits across a period of decades or generations and eventually become part of the American mainstream (Chacko 2003a).
This process involved a linear transformation, whereby immigrants would first adapt to American culture by adopting cultural norms, and then proceed through a series of steps to full assimilation. Gordon (1961) assembled the process into the following “steps:” (1) cultural assimilation or acculturation, (2) structural assimilation, referring to entrance into the social groups and institutions of the “host society”, (3) marital assimilation, (4) identification with host society, (5) absence of prejudice about host society members, (6) absence of discrimination towards host society members, and (7) absence of conflicting goals with host society members. Gordon does, however, take care to suggest that while the final stage in this process, Anglo-conformity (or the more blanket term, assimilation), is the ultimate outcome, particular groups may skip certain steps and levels of assimilation. The term assimilation is rather ill-defined, and Gordon deconstructs it briefly when making his final argument. He draws a distinction between behavioral assimilation and structural assimilation. *Structural assimilation*, to Gordon, is as I described briefly above. Namely, particular immigrant groups and their descendants enter “into the social cliques, organization, institutional activities, and general civic life of the receiving society” (Gordon 1961, 279). However, Gordon acknowledges that to a large extent, structural assimilation has not occurred (keeping in mind of course that Gordon was writing in 1961). The few exceptions he details deal explicitly with white immigrants, noting that racial minorities to a large extent maintain a structural separation from Anglo-American society. Instead Gordon suggests that *behavioral assimilation*, or the adoption of behavior patterns of a host society is much more
common. Gordon equates the term behavioral association with the more recognized acculturation, a concept that requires elaboration.

While often used to describe the same phenomena as assimilation, *acculturation* refers to a much different set of behaviors (Dicker 2008). Definitions of acculturation have over time dealt with the exchange of cultural traits, rather than the absorption of particular groups. For example, an early definition reads that acculturation is simply “the study of the cultural transmission process” (Herskovitz 1949, 523). Explanations such as the one provided by Herskovitz are simple and benign, but in all likelihood ignore the nature of acculturation as a process relating to two groups with different levels of influence in a particular society. Indeed, descriptions of acculturation often take this tone, as Linton (1940, 523) states, “other things being equal, a group which recognizes its social inferiority will borrow more extensively from its superiors than its superiors will borrow from it.” As Dicker (2008) points out the terms “inferiority” and “superiority” are no longer accepted in academic discourse, but the general idea of Linton’s statement remains plausible. The most important part of this statement is the idea that the “subordinate” culture is much more vulnerable to the adoption of “dominant” cultural norms than the reverse. Indeed, when examining this idea in the American context it is clear that acculturation does indeed occur. Despite the existence of ethnic enclaves, immigrant social structures, and a desire to maintain certain behavioral practices, the adoption of certain aspects of American culture is unavoidable. The English language is present nearly everywhere, and to function in a contemporary,
post-industrial society a certain amount behavioral adoption is nearly inevitable. Meanwhile, as Dicker points out, the dominant culture may accept superficial behavioral changes, such as foodways or musical styles from the subordinate group, but in fact their way of life remains much less affected by this cultural interaction.

Returning to Gordon, then, we can see how his work provides a type of “happy medium” between assimilation and acculturation. Gordon views some type of assimilation as inevitable (and he’s probably correct in this statement) but he recognizes that it may take different forms for different groups. Furthermore, he equates the terms acculturation and assimilation, with some qualification, in a way that makes them both seem less detrimental to the survival of ethnic lifestyles. Finally, it is important to note that in later writings (Gordon, 1964, 81), he states that “once structural assimilation has occurred, either simultaneously or with subsequent to acculturation, all other types of assimilation will naturally follow” (author’s emphasis). However, this theory leaves much to be desired. Gordon acknowledges and accepts that the disappearance of ethnic groups is the “price” of this assimilation. In reality, it is important to note that while certain immigrants groups are reaching structural assimilation, all forms of assimilation have not followed (Dicker 2008). Moreover, as I mentioned above, he does not offer any insight into what differences racial minorities may face when they come into contact with the “dominant” American culture. As Waters (1990) points out, it is much more challenging for a racial minority to identify in a way that conflicts with the way that their race or ethnicity is interpreted by mainstream America, and so the “simple” process of
behavioral assimilation and identity is in fact much more complicated. These issues will be touched on later.

These concepts were worked out and elaborated upon before the advent of immigration reform and quota relaxation during the 1960’s and consequently does not take into account the behavior of “new” immigrants, who hailed primarily from non-European countries. These immigrants are increasingly diverging from the trends recognized by many of the scholars discussed above. Since then, theories have stressed the ability of migrants to retain the cultural practices of home while still adopting some American norms (Abramson 1980, Portes and Zhou 1995, Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Indeed, Hall (1992) suggests that migrants should be viewed as people belonging to multiple cultures, and that they are obliged to both come to terms with new cultures and to retain their cultural identity. While more attention has been paid to these ideas since the mid 1960’s, the idea of cultural pluralism is in fact much older, originating with Horace Kallen (1924), one of the first scholars to suggest the positive role played by bilingual, “hyphenated” Americans. Kallen’s ideas tie in directly with those of Alejandro Portes, Reuben Rumbaut, and Mihn Zhou. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) suggest selective acculturation, in which first and second generation immigrants acculturate at relatively similar paces, allowing for the maintenance of the language and knowledge structures of the first generation. Portes and Zhou (1995) put forth the idea of segmented assimilation. The primary component of this theory is that assimilation is not a black and white phenomenon. Rather, individuals can choose the degree to which they assimilate
to the dominant culture, and to what extent they keep the norms of their own ethnic society. Segmented assimilation and selective acculturation are crucial theories because they suggest levels of agency and choice that are less present in previous frameworks and more reflective of American reality. Portes, Rumbaut, and Zhou suggest theories of identity that allow individuals some level of choice in how they view themselves and the world around them. These two theories mesh strongly with the social constructionist perspective that I use in my research.

New Faces in New Places: The Transformation of Immigrant Sources and Destinations

For a substantial portion of American history, new immigrant arrivals in the United States were comprised mostly of white Europeans. Escaping famine, religious oppression, and deplorable living conditions, and compelled by dreams of fortune, abundant work, and family ties, these Europeans made the journey to the United States in significant numbers. One of the most massive waves of migration in history arrived on the shores of America between 1820 and 1930 (Dinnerstein and Reimers 1999). During the nineteenth century, state legislatures sought innovative ways to attract migrants to the United States, often to work low skill jobs relating to the railroad industry. Northern and Western Europeans represented the bulk of immigrants both forced to leave their homelands and enticed by opportunities in America. Both urban and rural areas received large immigrant populations during this period. However, in
what would become a continuing theme in American Immigration history, the conceptualization of America was at odds with the reality immigrants faced when they arrived. The work was often dangerous, urban immigrants faced the threat of poverty, and nearly every nationality faced some type of discrimination (Dinnerstein and Reimers 1999).

Over time, though, northern and western Europeans became the idealized standard that American society hoped immigrants would fit. This idea can be placed into context when examining immigration during the early twentieth century. This period was characterized by increased migration from southern and eastern Europe. The intensity of American nativism towards these immigrants surpassed that faced by previous groups. “Old-stock Americans called [Italians] ‘wops,’ ‘dagos,’ and ‘guineas’ and referred to them as ‘the Chinese of Europe’ and ‘just as bad as Negros.’ In the South, some Italians were forced to attend all-black schools, and in both the North and the South they were victimized by brutality” (Dinnerstein and Reimers 1999, 55).

Immigrants in the early twentieth century were more likely to settle in urban gateway cities; Boston, New York, and Chicago hosted a large portion of these migrants (Price et al 2005). Low-skilled jobs available in these cities were attractive to immigrants coming from largely rural backgrounds. The advance of industrialization, coupled with America’s reputation as a land of opportunity, continued to bring in sizeable number of migrants from Europe into the early twentieth century.
However, it would not be accurate to characterize this era of immigration solely as European. Beginning in the early 1800’s Chinese laborers began migrating to the western shores of the United States. Merely a trickle in the 1820’s and 30’s, the wave of Chinese migration began in earnest in the 1840’s during the California gold rush (Yang, 1995). First mining, then working on railroads, Chinese immigrants began to draw the ire of white Americans who believed the Chinese were amoral, inferior, and being favored in the job market (Dinnerstein and Reimers 1999). Various taxes on foreign workers in California gradually led to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, barring entry of further Chinese laborers (Yang 1995). Other Asian groups, like Japanese, Koreans and Filipinos also experienced this fear and racism. Following passive attacks like unfair tax laws and more direct exclusion like the 1882 act, the United States further restricted Asian immigration of almost all types. Immigration from Europe fell too, but anti-immigration fervor led to the Immigration Act of 1924, which instituted the now-infamous quota system (Yang 1995, Dinnerstein and Reimers 1999). Between this time and immigration reform in 1965, migration to the United States was decreased significantly.

1965 proved to be a watershed year for future immigration to the United States. Due to heightened acceptance of minorities resulting from the Civil Rights movement and the ineffectiveness of the national quota system, the Immigration and Nationality Act was passed in 1965 (Yang 1995). Two provisions of the new law were of critical importance. It abolished the national quota system (though there were still overall
restrictions in place) and emphasized family unification and occupational skills of the admitted immigrants (Dinnerstein and Reimers 1999). Consequently, those who arrived in America after the immigration reform in 1965 were more often than not non-European, hailing especially from Africa, Latin America, and Asia (Yang 1995, Dinnerstein and Reimers 1999, Bohn 2010, Lien 2010). In fact, though the United States continued to impose limits on the number of migrants from any individual country (20,000 maximum), immigrants from many of these countries, including Mexico and a number of Asian countries, were able to bypass these limits (Hing 1993, Yang 1995). By exploiting family reunification priorities and entering “pools” for unused visas from other countries, these immigrants could create even more sizeable communities of co-ethnics.

What is striking is the incredible diversity of immigrant groups, many of whom were migrating not for economic or social gain, but who arrived as refugees. Escaping war, political disruption, famine and a host of other crises, refugees were first provisioned for in the Refugee Act of 1980, despite the country’s age-old internalized view of itself as a “haven for the persecuted” (Ngai and Gjerde 2013, 524). This act defined a refugee as any person “who is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of [the country last resided in] because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular group, or political opinion” (Refugee Act of 1980). Furthermore, this act provided for the admission of refugees for the first time in American history.
Like most immigrants before them, refugees to the United States were often met with fierce opposition. Unlike a number of other new immigrant groups, refugees often arrived with very limited or even nonexistent English skills and were thrust into a society completely unlike anything they had known before (Vang 2008, McKinnon 2008, Pipher 2002). In fact, many groups, including the Hmong, were illiterate in any language. It is understandable that the language barrier placed a strain on school systems, and these concerns contributed to efforts on the part of the refugee resettlement agencies to distribute these populations widely in a number of different locales. But regardless of where refugees were resettled they experienced nativist sentiments from white majorities, as well as discrimination on the part of previous immigrant groups (Hein 2006). Though Hein notes that this was not always the case, Hmong and Cambodian refugees faced discrimination in the form of housing opportunities and the perception that they represented a threat to the “moral order” of small communities. This has led to hardship on the part of these new immigrants while simultaneously contributing to an incredibly broad spectrum of immigration since 1965.

The experiences of these early immigrants contributed to the development of assimilation theory and were reflective of American melting pot ideal. Park (1950) explains that newly arriving immigrants settled in low income areas of gateway cities. These gateway cities were the destinations that many think of when conceptualizing immigration to America throughout much of its history: New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, and San Francisco. During this period, the mostly European immigrants arriving
through Ellis Island would frequently settle in Central Business Districts and ethnic enclaves in the inner city. Throughout American history (and still to this day) these ethnic enclaves are viewed in both negative and positive manners (Singer 2008). The presence of large numbers of immigrants contributed to discrimination on the part of the American mainstream, and ethnic enclaves came to represent everything that made these new ways of life foreign and detestable (Anderson 1987). According to the discourse of early assimilation theory, these immigrant groups gradually acquired English and occupational skills, education and economic status, allowing movement away from inner cities and into wealthier areas of the city and suburbs. In this way, they assimilated to American culture, gradually losing their unique ethnic traits and dense settlement patterns.

This “clean” conceptualization of American immigration has since been heavily critiqued and deconstructed. For example, it has been shown that since the advent of immigration reform, and especially due to the economic restructuring of the 1980’s and 90’s, immigrants to the United States have increasingly settled in what have broadly been termed non-traditional or new destinations, or emerging gateways (Singer 2008). These new destinations are comprised of smaller but growing cities, some experiencing growth for the first time and others enjoying economic revitalization (Singer 2008), and, increasingly, rural areas in America’s “heartland” (Jones 2008).

The reasons behind this shift are diverse. First, as Singer identifies, the growth of knowledge-based jobs has drawn highly educated immigrants to cities that prominently
feature this sector. Furthermore, an increase in jobs involving agriculture, construction, and meat and poultry packing are pulling sizeable numbers of immigrants to southern cities like Fort Worth, Texas and Atlanta, Georgia. Second, faith based refugee sponsors have drawn a substantial number of these types of immigrants to smaller cities throughout the country (Hein 2006, Byrand 2008). Though this settlement pattern often reflects the desire to see refugees “spread around” (as described above), the arrival of refugees to small towns and emerging gateway cities has created a network for internal migration. For example, a number of the respondents interviewed in this study were either a part of this type of sponsorship or relocated to the Twin Cities because of some familial or friendship tie. In fact, because the Hmong throughout the United States live in these non-traditional destinations, this study will contribute to the small but growing literature of immigrants in emerging gateways.

A shift in destinations is not the only aspect of immigration that has undergone change in recent years. Recent immigrant groups have tended to avoid Central Business Districts altogether, opting instead to settle directly in suburbs that often separate them from other co-ethnics. This pattern of settlement has been termed *heterolocalism*, and Zelinsky and Lee (1998) believe that this model explains the persistence of ethnic community ties across greater distances than those experienced by earlier immigrant groups.

The heterolocal model bridges an important gap in the literature: namely, the connection between the assimilationist/cultural pluralist models of immigrant behavior,
and the new destinations literature. The authors conceive of heterolocalism both as an alternative to these models and as a method of investigating new patterns of settlement. They find flaws in the assimilationist perspective due to its genesis at a particular and unique time in American history and point to its focus on white European immigrants, whose differences from American society could be forgotten relatively quickly. Second, they state that cultural pluralist perspective makes little effort to address the spatial distribution of ethnic groups. Expanding upon the idea, though, it is suggested that American cities would be dotted with ethnic enclaves sustained over long periods of time. However, “… it seems to be offered as a lofty ideal rather than as a reflection of existing realities or practical probabilities” (Zelinsky and Lee 1998, 284).

Zelinsky and Lee identify four major characteristics of heterolocalism that differ from previous perspectives, as well as a fifth that applies to other models: (1) swift or immediate dispersal of immigrant groups upon arrival; (2) lack of immediate spatial overlap between residence and workplace, shopping, and sites of social activity; (3) maintenance of strong ethnic community ties; (4) heterolocalism owes its full development to socioeconomic and technological conditions of the late twentieth century; and (5) heterolocalism can be seen both in and outside of metropolitan areas. Zelinsky and Lee take particular care to note that applying any of these three models (assimilation, cultural pluralism, or heterolocalism) to one particular group is challenging and dangerous, as numerous groups exhibit behaviors from multiple models or, for
those that arrived post-1965, exhibit traits of previous models contrary to the authors’ expectations.

However, because one of the tenets of heterolocalism is that immigrant groups maintain ethnic identity despite disparate settlement patterns, it provides an interesting context for this research. Though they note the array of different conditions under which immigrants arrive, Zelinsky and Lee do not speculate on how these will affect any potential heterolocal behavior. In regards to this research, for example, do the experiences of the Hmong (forced from Laos by war, most illiterate in any language, and little agency in selecting settlement destinations, at least initially) affect the level of heterolocal behavior that might be expected by the authors? Secondly, Zelinsky and Lee acknowledge that specific community sites (i.e. ethnic spaces) still play a critical role in maintaining community ties and ethnic identity though they may not necessarily be located in areas of heavy ethnic concentration. If the Hmong exhibit heterolocal behavior, in what ways do these ethnic spaces identified by Zelinsky and Lee work to maintain these ties? This research will attempt to answer these two sub-questions in addition to the overall research questions.

Ethnicity and Identity: Nebulous Concepts

Ethnicity and identity are two concepts that are notoriously tricky to define. *Ethnicity* is often thought of in popular culture as an immutable aspect of an individual’s
existence. Evidence for this thought process can be seen simply by traveling to the nearest Target or Walmart and finding the aisle labeled “ethnic hair care products”.

Ethnicity is so often equated with race in American society that it is often taken for granted that, for example, white individuals have no ethnicity at all. However, numerous scholars have challenged this interpretation of ethnicity using the social constructionist perspective (Waters 1990, Nagel 1994). When viewed from this perspective, ethnicity is much more fluid and ephemeral, a product of agency and choice. However, it remains challenging to pin down the exact factors that go into making this choice. Nagel (1994, 153) identifies an array, stating that, “Ethnicity is constructed out of the material of language, religion, culture, appearance, ancestry, or regionality.”

Identity is another matter entirely. In fact, as Gleason (1983, 460) points out, “Its very obviousness seems to defy elucidation: identity is what a thing is!” However, as Gleason goes on to explain, identity is a rather new term and owes its origin to early psychologists. The term is ambiguous and “can legitimately be used in a number of ways” (Gleason 1983, 480), from a person’s conceptualization of themselves, to criminal fingerprinting, to the distinguishing characteristics of a particular group. For the purpose of this research though, the definition will be necessarily and critically conflated with that of ethnicity. Put another way, I will not seek a definition of identity, or even ethnicity for that matter, but rather a definition for ethnic identity specifically. For this definition I will once again turn to Nagel (1994). For this study, ethnic identity will be defined as how individuals and groups “define themselves ... in ethnic ways” (culture,
religion, language, ancestry etc.) as a result of a social process between internal and external opinions of ethnicity (Nagel 1994). There are a number of critical aspects to this definition. First, present are a number of the factors that Nagel suggests work in tandem with individual choice to form ethnicity. Second, these ethnic identifiers are interpreted by the individual, the group they deem themselves to belong to, and those who fall outside the group in a social process of categorization. In this way, it is important to recognize that social constraints are often placed on individuals that restrict their ability to identify themselves with a particular group. Both internal and external ethnic categorization was taken into account in this research.

Ethnic identity formation is a complicated issue that multiple theories seek to explain. Conner (1978) argues in favor of primordialism, the idea that ethnicity is tied directly to the group or individual’s place of origin. This theory argues that what we perceive as manifestations of ethnicity - religion, language, etc. - are in fact not what make up ethnicity. Instead it is the intangible tie to a greater nation and a notion of kinship held together by blood ties that are important. That is to say, interaction is not the most significant aspect of ethnicity, but is instead an indefinable connection (Schils 1975). Strip Jews of Judaism, argues Conner (1978), and they will still have a strong ethnic identity connected to the Jewish nation. While this theory has its merits in that ties to a nation may influence identity, it fails to acknowledge the influence of host societies on minority populations. For example, it is unreasonable to assume that minority populations exist in a vacuum and that their ethnic identity will remain
unaffected by the majority population simply because they come from another place. Calhoun (1993) argues against this theory to an extent. He believes that while ethnicity and nationality are not entirely inseparable, ethnic groups do not necessarily seek recognition as a nation.

Although primordialism has been thoroughly rejected by academics, there is a reason I choose to discuss it here. George Scott (1982) claims to find some level of primordial attachment among the Hmong in San Diego, California. Scott cites reprobation by Hmong leaders towards mainstream Americans who mistake them for other Southeast Asian groups, as well as a growing sense of ethnicity when confronted with social circumstances that force increased intra-ethnic interaction as evidence of primordialism. Here, however, Scott strays from the mark of his argument and mistakenly interprets the definition of primordialism. The concept revolves around something inherent and biological, which Scott acknowledges, but he then identifies two social circumstances that supposedly increase primordial sentiments. If ethnicity was a primordial function, should it not be a static and persistent aspect of life? The reason I choose to discuss primordialism here is that it is easy to mistake sentiments expressed by the Hmong as primordial when in fact they are the outcome of a desire for some amount of ethnic preservation or a shared history. For example, when I asked Xai if he believes that it is important for him to interact with other Hmong people he stated:

Xai: Yes it’s very important to interact with other Hmong individuals. Because when you are a Hmong person, somehow from the inside you want to reach out to them.
This statement would be easy to interpret as primordial. Xai gives little suggestion as to why he feels a need to “reach out” to other Hmong people, and he uses vague language such as “somewhere from the inside.” However, it makes much more sense to interpret this statement as a function of desire to interact with other co-ethnics, and suggests that a history of intense ethnic solidarity plays a greater role than something as nebulous as “ineffable significance” (Shils 1973, 122).

A more contemporary theory regarding ethnic identity formation is the social constructionist perspective (Hein 1994, Barth 1969, Chacko 2003a, McKinnon 2008). This theory claims that ethnic identity is not determined simply by belonging to a nation of people, but rather by social factors that influence identity formation, and indeed can lead to shifting between identities based on context (Hein 1994). Contrary to existing in a vacuum, Barth (1998) argues that ethnic groups actively seek to maintain ethnic boundaries, even while interacting with those outside of the ethnic group. Consequently, “defining who is a member and what it is to be a member of a particular social group involves the consolidation of... internal and external processes,” (Nazroo and Karlsen 2003, authors’ emphasis). Hein (2006) finds evidence of this type of boundary construction in his study of Hmong and Cambodian refugees in Minnesota and Wisconsin. He notes that the vast majority of his interview and survey respondents would not feel closer to an Asian person than a white person (assuming they knew neither), suggesting that Hmong ethnic identity is so strong that it precludes any sense of racial or pan-Asian identity, effectively creating a “hermetic” ethnic boundary. This
idea of boundary making and inclusion is clearly reflected in Nagel’s definition of ethnic identity stated above, and will be employed in this study. However, Nazroo and Karlsen note that cultural traditions change over time and place, and as a result ethnic boundaries are constantly shifting, contested, and reformed.

Ethnic identity can also be tied to social positioning, and it is critical to understand that it is not synonymous with another social construction: race. Hein cites the example of Portuguese immigrants in Hawaii, where a common class led to the development of an ethnic identity more closely related to Asians than Europeans, demonstrating the nature of social influences on ethnicity. Another prime example of how society influences ethnicity more than “race” is provided by Chacko (2003a). Her study of Ethiopians in Washington, DC, finds that most prefer not to identify as “black” and would rather have an identity separate from African Americans in the United States. We can see here that identity preferences do not just stem from origins in Ethiopia, but also to their social position relative to others that the greater society would view as similar. In this way, ethnicity can be explained as “a type of social organization, which organizes and maintains cultural differences” (Smith 2008, 393), while ethnic identity is how individuals and groups “define themselves ... in ethnic ways” (Nagel 1994, 153).

Despite the validity of this theory, these studies do not delve into the processes by which ethnic identity is formed. A sense of belonging is the outcome of identity formation, but what leads to this conclusion? Despite mild support of the relatively outdated primordialism theory, Lien (2008) demonstrates that the place in which a
person is socialized contributes significantly to identity formation. In the case of Chinese transnationals in America, the region in China in which they were raised affected their identity preferences. Specific adaptation behaviors may be undertaken in the host country depending on place of socialization (Miyares 1997). Immigrants, and especially refugees, socialized in their home countries may have developed their ethnic identity through attachment and communication with their country-men, not necessarily the region itself (Kinefuchi 2010).

Further, according to Barth (1969) the overt and basic values of a particular ethnicity are a result of boundary-making, not the reverse as is commonly thought. However, I have trouble completely accepting the implications of this line of thought as well. During the course of my research, I encountered a white American at the Hmong Cultural Center who was learning the Hmong language and thereby displaying a “result” of ethnic boundary-making. Though I did not ask anyone who would identify as Hmong to confirm my thought, I sincerely doubt that the white American would be considered an “insider” with respect to the Hmong ethnic boundary. In this way Barth’s theory, though it explains ethnic behaviors much more completely than primordialism, still does not account for every complexity of ethnicity and ethnic identification.

A final theory for explaining ethnic identity that is of interest to this study is symbolic ethnicity, forwarded by Herbert Gans (1973). Symbolic ethnicity is Gans’ attempt to explain the “ethnic revival” among white Americans in the 1960’s and 70’s that is sometimes credited with bringing ethnic studies back into public view. Gans,
however, challenges the notion that such a revival ever existed. Instead, he suggests that white Americans were simply engaging in the display of ethnic symbols pertaining to one or more heritages that the individual claims to be a part of. This theory was formulated based upon the incredible difficulty, or even impossibility, that immigrants could fully “live” their ethnicity in the United States. Subjected to a near overwhelming force of American culture, values, norms, and behaviors, immigrants to the United States, in Gans’ view, simply cannot perpetuate their lifestyles to the fullest extent experienced in their home country. Therefore, the significance of their ethnicity comes from the display of symbols, such as food, clothing, festivals, language, etc.

Gans’ theory focuses on white Americans of European decent, immigrants who identify as Jewish, and most importantly, immigrants of the third or fourth generation. These immigrants frequently have a multitude of heritages owing to a generation or two of intermarriage, and can thus choose which of these ethnicities to display in symbolic fashion. Gans conceived of symbolic ethnicity as the endpoint of the straight-line assimilation model, which was the reigning paradigm at the time of his writing. It is conceivable that this may in fact be the case for white immigrant groups, but Gans does not touch on the effects that indelible physical identifiers like skin color have on the ability to display ethnic symbols, though he does acknowledge this shortcoming in an afterword to his original article.

This concern was raised by Mary Waters (1990). She also writes primarily on white ethnic individuals and the ethnic choices that are available to them, but she
briefly touches on these issues in regard to racial minorities. To Waters, it is essentially impossible to separate physical identifiers of ethnicity because, “In fact, people’s belief that racial or ethnic categories are biological, fixed attributes of individuals does have an influence on their ethnic identities. That popular understanding of ethnicity means that people behave as if it were an objective fact, even when their own ethnicities are highly symbolic” (Waters 1990, 18, author’s emphasis). Applying this supposition to racial minorities, it becomes clear that society has enormous influence over the ability of individuals to identify in the way that they choose. Waters provides a hypothetical example: an individual who has both African and Irish heritage. Because this person appears physically to possess “one drop” (or more) of African blood, other members of society will refuse this person the ability to identify as Irish, even if they feel a stronger connection to their Irish ancestors than their African counterparts.

However, this notion has been challenged to some extent. Khanna (2011) finds that bi-racial (in this case, half African and half of some European ancestry) individuals actively attempt to avoid being forced to identify as black. By using ethnic symbols that highlight their particular European heritages, these individuals endeavor to identify not as white but as bi-racial. Khanna both proves and disproves Water’s initial statement. While these particular bi-racial individuals are able to avoid being forced to identify as black, they are also forced to stop short of identifying as white. Still, there is a common theme throughout the works of Waters and Khanna. Namely, the individuals in their study make an active effort to display their ethnic choices to members outside of their
particular identity groups. In this way ethnic symbols become tools that establish ethnic boundaries by targeting out-group members and dictating to them what it means to be a member of the in-group. This is only one way that symbolic ethnicity can be used to establish boundaries, however, and I will argue that the Hmong individuals who took part in my study focus on using ethnic symbols that target other members of the *in-group* in an effort to display that they are Hmong and “know who they are.”

Finally, I would like to make the argument that “American” can be used as an ethnic identifier by those who choose it. Though Hein (2006) notes that Hmong and Cambodian refugees in his study view the term American as a locational identifier that must be achieved, I believe this is too simplistic a view for such a complex identifier when dealing with issues such as ethnicity. For a moment, I will return to Nagel’s explanation of the material of ethnicity. “Ethnicity is constructed out of the material of language, religion, culture, appearance, ancestry, or regionality.” A number of these “materials” can certainly be applied to the notion of being American. Americans have a shared history and national ideology that is prized above nearly every other aspect of national consciousness. Americans certainly have a common culture, and though it would be simplistic to say every person living in America must engage with it, a number of my interview respondents expressed their inability to avoid it and desire to be viewed as American. Finally, though there are no national religions or languages, practicing Christianity and speaking English are often seen as two indicators of acculturation to the American mainstream. Therefore if, as I have detailed above, ethnicity is largely a social
construction, it seems entirely reasonable to state that “American” is indeed an ethnicity, albeit an ethnicity with incredibly porous boundaries. Furthermore, because these boundaries are so porous, it allows for ethnic groups like the Hmong to maintain multiple shifting and contextual ethnic identities.

Ethnic Spaces: For the People

Many scholars believe interaction with the ethnic community and with spaces created by the community drive ethnic identity formation (Smith 2008, Jenks 2008). Drawing on previous scholars (Barth 1969, Bourdieu 1998), Smith (2008) found that the maintenance of ethnic boundaries and interaction with those possessing similar social positions is critical to ethnic identity. His research on the Japanese-American religious communities of Little Tokyo in Los Angeles found that ethnic identity is bolstered by local Japanese American museums and newspapers, and more importantly by association with local religious communities. Religious communities of other Japanese-Americans, and more importantly other people with similar social position, provide places to congregate and affirm ethnic identity. These places are resources for human interaction that serve to cement the ethnic community.

Sites of memory created in Little Tokyo, such as public art and veteran’s memorials also work to tie the Japanese-American community to place and to each other (Jenks 2008). Jenks’ study demonstrates that drawing on the history of Japanese
Americans builds identity. Shared experiences of internment during World War II and serving in the United States military create bonds that tie the community together. Local theatres presenting Japanese stories in their native language provide further spaces where the community can interact not only with their Japanese-American identity, but with their shared history of the Japanese nation as well. Kinefuchi (2010) also finds that community involvement served the needs of Montagnard refugees to connect to their past. These studies work towards confirming the theory that ethnic identity is socially constructed. However, the geographical areas and populations examined in these studies are small and are only able to show how geographically concentrated communities interact. Due to the changing nature of immigrant settlement detailed above, (Zelinsky and Lee 1998, Chacko 2003b, Harkwick and Meachem 2005, and Price et al. 2005) these studies fall short of providing a comprehensive picture of ethnic identity formation.

Finally, the construction of an ethnic community may also bolster ethnic identity. Ethnic groups frequently create *ethnic enclaves* within cities that serve the needs of the group while interacting specifically with others within the group (Kaplan 1997, Airriess 2008, Jenks 2008, Smith 2008). The Little Tokyo studies described above are prime examples of an ethnic community. Jenks (2008) describes communities gathering around sites of memory and other public spaces that could best be classified as ethnic arenas (Chacko 2003b, see below), and Smith (2008) elaborates on useful but occasionally divisive religious spaces.
Ethnic businesses specifically catering to members of the ethnic group are a common signature of an ethnic community (Kaplan 1997, Chacko 2003b, Hardwick and Meachem 2005, Byrand 2008, Airriess 2008). Often taking the form of ethnic grocery stores, these spaces offer the group goods and services provided by other members of the ethnic community. Additionally, these spaces often provide goods and services that are not offered by the larger community (Trudeau 2006). Thus, they are critical to members of a particular ethnic group that use material products to affirm their identity. These ethnic socioconsumerscapes (Chacko 2003b) serve not only as outlets for goods, but also provide the community with meeting spaces in which to relate to a shared history in their native language.

Temporary places of ethnic community gathering also serve this purpose. These ethnic arenas are spaces for a community to come together briefly but revert back to an unused state afterwards. Significant examples include types of flea markets (Miyares 2008) and in the Hmong community more specifically, sporting events and New Year’s celebrations (Vang 2008, 2010, Miyares 1997). Among Vietnamese and Hmong immigrants, individual or small group landscape signatures are often found in the form of vegetable gardens (Miyares 1997, Airriess 2008). These small garden plots allow ethnic group members to engage their culture by growing plants native to their home country, and to interact with their community by selling their produce at farmer’s markets. All of the spaces discussed in the above paragraphs can be identified as ethnic spaces, which Chacko (2003b, 22) loosely defines as “places or locales with a distinctly
ethnic stamp.” Chacko’s definition of ethnic spaces is much too simplistic though, and after tracing the critical aspects of ethnic spaces and ethnic place-making, I will arrive at a more fully developed definition. These ethnic spaces, which exist within the larger ethnic landscape, may not be applicable to every immigrant group, but they will serve as examples that this research will use and attempt to build upon.

And what of Hmong ethnic spaces? As a group, the Hmong are certainly not ignored in scholarly literature. Much has been written about problems related to mental and physical health (Collier, Munger, and Moua 2012, Thalacker 2011), acculturation stress (Faruque 2002, Byrand 2008), and educational achievement (Xiong and Lee 2011, McCall and Vang 2012) within this ethnic group. Additionally, there has been some work on ethnic businesses owned by the Hmong. Kaplan (1997) writes about Indochinese businesses in St. Paul but his study groups together a number of ethnic groups from Southeast Asia, conflating the presence of Hmong businesses with other ethnic groups. Beyond Kaplan’s research, some scholarly works regarding Hmong ethnic arenas [New Year’s celebration, farmer’s markets, etc. (Miyares 1997, Vang 2008, 2010, Yang 2007)], and Trudeau’s (2006) study of a Hmong-owned slaughterhouse in Hugo, Minnesota, there has been little research done on the variety of Hmong ethnic places within the greater ethnic landscape in the Twin Cities, and virtually nothing about how these spaces may contribute to ethnic identity formation.

A number of geographers and sociologists have studied the interaction between identity, space and place (Tuan 1977, Entrikin 1991, Giddens 1991, Massey 1991, Forest
1995, Nogue and Vincente 2004, Kaya 2005, Trudeau 2006). Many of these studies focus on how the identity of groups influences the identity of a place. Places often represent normative importance for groups and construct normative conventions (Giddens 1991), as “morally valued ways of life are often created, shaped, and reinforced through the construction of real and imagined places,” (Forest 1993, 134). Similarly, Trudeau, one of the few scholars to write explicitly about Hmong landscapes and places, argues that landscapes are created through a process of boundary making and decisions about what does and doesn’t belong (Trudeau 2006). This is a critical aspect of these ethnic spaces due to their (mostly) public nature. The place identity of these particular spaces in a sense suggests, or perhaps dictates, what it means to be a member of that ethnic group. Because the place expresses some set of values that are believed to be important to some members of the group, it establishes normative behaviors and beliefs for those who occupy the space. Compliance by every member of the group is of course a different matter, as different members of a group often have contradictory ideas about what these normative aspects should be.

This leads to the second major interaction between space and identity: namely, that the identity of a particular place and the normative values it “embodies” are contested and subject to the power relations within a group. Indeed, there are often tensions over what it means to be a member of a particular group (Nazroo and Karlsen 2003), and regardless of how strong these tensions are the various skill levels, language proficiencies, and economic statuses of members of the group create different
meanings of belonging (Kaya 2005). Places are “frequently riven with internal tensions and conflicts,” often leading to a lack of a consistent and uncontested identity (Massey 1991). As a result, when members of a group or sub-group have the ability to control the identity of a particular place, it reflects the power structures present within the group (Entrikin 1991). We need not look beyond my study area to see an example of this. Vang (2010) writes extensively on the Hmong New Year celebration in the Twin Cities and notes that competing groups have disparate ideas of how this ethnic arena should represent Hmong culture. While one group seeks a more traditional celebration, a group made up largely of younger Hmong people seeks to express the group’s identity in a more contemporary way. In fact, this dispute has led to a separation of celebrations – the more traditional in St. Paul and the more contemporary in Minneapolis – to the chagrin of some and the celebration of others.

While these studies all focus on the identity of place as decided by people, which is undoubtedly critical for this study, my primary focus will be on how places influence the identity of those who occupy them. For this, it will be important to draw on Kaya (2005), who writes on Turkish immigrants in New York City. He focuses on ethnic spaces, which he defines as spaces where members of a group “make identity claims, draw boundaries, resist the dominant culture, jockey for power and position, and encourage, transform, reproduce, and celebrate certain identities but ignore and discourage others” (Kaya 2005, 426). For Kaya, ethnic spaces serve explicitly as spaces in which identity is constructed, and he emphasizes that the existence and interaction with these
spaces influences how members of the ethnic group establish their ethnic identity. Though his classification of these ethnic spaces is different than the varieties I will use and mentioned above, they are in essence identical. He offers examples such as grocery stores, book stores, mosques, schools, workplaces, and residential spaces, among many others. These spaces not only frame what it means to be Turkish American within the larger group (read: white America), but also are used to draw boundaries around what is valued by different groups within the Turkish American community. As an example, while some mosques constructed by Turkish immigrants are primarily conservative, other more secular members of the community have constructed mosques that fit their needs. Here we see a direct parallel to Vang’s writing on Hmong New Year celebrations, in that members of the group are often at odds over how particular social behaviors should be carried out. What is missing from this particular study by Kaya is the identity-switching identified above. Though he subscribes to the idea that identity is socially constructed, he does not discuss the ways in which Turkish-Americans adjust their identity as necessary within the larger American society, which is an issue I believe will be important to address in this research.
CHAPTER 4: METHODS

Two primary research methods were utilized over the course of this project. The first of these was participant observation. Observation involves entering a social setting, getting to know the people involved, and participating in the daily routines of the observation subjects. The result is observing interactions in an effort to interpret meaning (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). Participant observation views social reality as a phenomenon to be interpreted. This methodology allowed me first-hand experience in a few of the places that my interview respondents discussed. This beneficial research technique allowed me to observe what is actually occurring in Hmong spaces and engendered a sense of what inhabiting these spaces means to the people involved. Attention was paid not only to the interactions between individuals, but also to the characteristics of these spaces. A number of the constructed aspects of ethnic spaces influenced the behavior of those who inhabit them, and this interaction could not be ignored.

Second, semi-structured interviews provided a deeper understanding of the ethnic Hmong landscape of St. Paul. Because the concept of ethnicity is often mercurial, meaning different things to different people, interviewing members of this ethnic group provided me with a variety of opinions from which to draw inferences (Dunn 2010). Furthermore, these interviews identified specific ways in which these features strengthen ethnic identity. Semi-structured interviews allowed the interview to flow
naturally and deviate from pre-identified questions when necessary (Dunn 2010).

Because some variation in the meaning of Hmong ethnic identity based on place of socialization, age, education, and a number of other factors was expected, I sought to interview individuals spanning the breadth of these categories. However, as I will explain, this was perhaps easier said than done.

I conducted this research between June 5\textsuperscript{th} and August 15\textsuperscript{th}, 2013, in the St Paul/Minneapolis/Bloomington Metropolitan Statistical Area in Minnesota. This location was chosen for a number of reasons. First, the region represents the largest concentration of Hmong individuals in the United States. As a whole, Minnesota is home to the second largest Hmong population by state (after California), but no city, or in this case statistical area, hosts more Hmong than the Twin Cities. Because so many Hmong (over 60,000) live in this area I expected to have a relatively easy time finding locations that would meet the qualifications of an ethnic space. I also anticipated that there would be ample opportunity to find individuals willing to provide interviews for the study.

Due to the abundance of Hmong individuals in the region, I also expected to acquire a variety of opinions regarding ethnicity, ethnic boundaries and the value of spaces used and/or created by the Hmong. Had this research been conducted in a location with fewer Hmong individuals a different outcome might have been expected. Perhaps a smaller Hmong population would reflect consistent views across the group. However I wished to set this study within a large city that could be classified as a non-
traditional destination, and to elicit an array of different views based on numerous social factors such as age, educational attainment, occupation, and socialization.

Finally, the Twin Cities was chosen because it represented an accessible location to conduct field work. Growing up in the suburbs of St Paul, I was unintentionally separated from large groups of non-white individuals. My home city of Eagan, Minnesota, was largely white and provided me with fewer opportunities to learn about immigrant groups than I would have had if I had grown up nearer to St Paul or Minneapolis. However, immigrant groups came up in news and conversation frequently. As I grew older I became gradually more interested in learning about immigrant groups who shared the same spaces as myself, and that is what led me to conduct this research. Based on my personal history, as well as the proximity of my home to the study location, the Twin Cities provided an ideal field work site.

Engaging with an immigrant community presents particular challenges. One such challenge is the English language proficiency of the study population. The statistics detailing the English levels of the Hmong as a whole suggest a trying time for researchers like me who have no Hmong language skills whatsoever. I hypothesized before travelling to St Paul that this research would be heavily influenced by younger generations, that is, people of Hmong descent who grew up in the United States, attended grade school here, and who were raised speaking English as a first language or speaking English and Hmong in tandem. Consequently, I was concerned that this research would by default “silence” the voices of older generations or those who had
spent little time in the United States due to their (statistically) lower likelihood of being proficient enough in English to take part in my study. I had one prior Hmong contact who lives in St Paul who has the language skills to serve as a translator, but due to time constraints it was not feasible for her to do so. As a result, all interviews were conducted in English with those who possessed a speaking ability that at least reached a conversational level.

Despite my early concerns, it quickly became apparent that I would have less trouble than anticipated arranging interviews with first-generation Hmong immigrants. For this study I spoke with eighteen Hmong-Americans living, working, or going to school in the Minneapolis/St Paul/Bloomington Metropolitan Statistical Area in Minnesota. Of these eighteen interviewees, nine were of the first generation, four were of the second generation, and six were of the “1.5” generation, which I classified as any person who arrived in the United States under the age of twelve. Note that I listed nineteen interviewees when totaling their generational status. This is because one occasion was an (unexpected) interview with two college-aged students that at times functioned as an interview and others as a pseudo-focus group. The ages of the interviewees ranged from nineteen to fifty-nine to sixty-one. The ambiguity in the oldest interview subject, Houa, resulted from the lack of birth records of the Hmong in Laos.

During the period of their immigration to the United States, many Hmong had very little idea of their precise date of birth. Muaj, a medical doctor, explains:

Muaj:...there used to be that the newborn naming ceremony is very important. But I think we do less and less of that now. Because in this country every year
there’s a birthday. In the old country, you get this one celebration when you’re born and that’s pretty much it [laughs].

It makes sense, then, that a number of Hmong immigrants, who would have had to estimate their age based on something like the number of harvests or number of New Year’s Celebrations passed, would not know their exact age. During a discussion on the complicated interactions between western medicine and Hmong immigrants, Fadiman (1997, 99) emphasizes this point: “The difficulty in establishing a chronology between Lia [the subject of the book]’s medical chart and her family’s experience of her illness was compounded by the fact that the Lees did not tell time in the same way that hospital record keepers did. Years were identified not by number but by salient event. For instance, 1982 was ‘the year the spirit first caught Lia and she fell down.’ 1985 was ‘the year Lia became government property.’” Thus, though no first generation participants in this study (excepting Houa) gave me reason to speculate on their exact age, it is possible that there is room for error.

As I have briefly alluded to, generational status is more important to this study than age. Hanson’s (1938, 206) memorable quote still characterizes how we as a society think about immigration: “what the son wishes to forget, the grandson wishes to remember.” This quote suggests a lack of change by what he terms “first generation” immigrants (those who made the initial migration) due to Hanson’s choice to omit them from his quote, an effort to become “Americanized” by the second generation, and an ethnic resurgence by the third generation. Thus, Hanson explains how values and maintenance of ethnicity either persist or diminish with advancing generations, and
there is very little reason to expect that this is not the case among the Hmong as well. Therefore, it will be important to bear in mind the generational status of interviewees when analyzing their responses to certain questions. Of course, Hanson’s view is rather simplistic. He wrote before the advent of electronic communication that can bind communities and suggests that second generation immigrants must choose to identify with their ethnic group or Americans, ignoring the possibility that they may value both. Still, based on Hanson’s work, I expected at the outset of my research to find these general trends holding true: older Hmong-Americans are more likely to seek to maintain ethnic boundaries; practice “traditional” Hmong lifeways, such as shamanism, wearing traditional Hmong clothes, and speaking the Hmong language; and resist the pressures of the contemporary American context of life. On the other hand, I expected the younger Hmong participants to seek the opposite by exhibiting porous ethnic boundaries, speaking more English and less Hmong, and engaging in symbolic ethnicity rather than a more complete ethnic lifeway.

The other challenge presented by this research was finding a way to actually arrange interviews with complete strangers. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) stress the importance of making connections when doing ethnographic research and offer suggestions and guidelines to such researchers. In order to make contacts I began by spending time in places that I had previously identified as potential Hmong ethnic places in the Twin Cities area. While in these spaces I engaged in ethnographic observation, taking notes on the interactions between the people who used these places.
either apparent confusion or interest, a small number of people initiated conversation
with me which led to interviews, while other conversations I needed to instigate myself.
This turned out to be only somewhat effective. In general, the places I visited were
populated by people going about their daily lives, in many cases too busy to devote
much time to a researcher. However, it was certainly not fruitless, as seven of my
interviews resulted from the use of this tactic.

In addition to physically placing myself among members of the Hmong
community, I also targeted individuals and organizations for assistance with my project.
In many cases the individuals whom I contacted could be considered “leaders” within
the Hmong community, though it is so large that there is almost no way for a single
individual to lead the entire ethnic community. For my research, such leaders included
highly educated university professors with experience in Hmong studies research, a
state senator, and executive directors of various Hmong-focused organizations in the
area. From there, in a “snowball” process, those who agreed to interviews pointed me
in the direction of others whom they believed could help me.

Consequently, most of my interviewees were well educated (i.e. had some level
of education beyond high school or GED), and, coupled with the fact that every
respondent spoke at least conversational English, the sample of individuals I spoke to
represents, for the most part, a specific section of the population. This is of course a
result of the convenience sampling method I used in this research. Because the only
criteria for participation in my study were being of Hmong descent and living, working,
or attending school in the Twin Cities area, my sample population theoretically encompassed the entirety of Hmong individuals living in the Twin Cities. This led to people with publically available email addresses (university professors, organization leaders) being the most easily accessible. Furthermore, I believed that these individuals would be more likely to be interested in discussing these topics with me, and were thus ideal targets for interviews. On the other hand, I was rarely turned down for an interview from people I met in public. I found that most people who knew the purpose behind my research were more than willing to assist, with of course a few exceptions.

Finally, I also reached out to Hmong organizations throughout the Twin Cities that appeared to be potentially beneficial to my research. At the suggestion of one interview respondent I joined a Facebook group called Hmong College Students & Faculty Educational Networking. My intent in joining this group was to reach out to Hmong individuals of college age, or more broadly, Hmong individuals who were of the second generation or later. This proved to be only moderately helpful. Only a few individuals responded to my interview request, though for reasons I never learned, the interviews were never scheduled. I also reached out to Hmong mutual assistance organizations, like Hmong America Partnership (HAP), Lao Family, and the Hmong Cultural Center for interviews and participant observation opportunities. I was able, with the help of the leaders and organizers of these groups, to observe a few classes and conferences.
This research attempts to understand the important aspects of Hmong ethnicity as discussed by Hmong individuals in the Twin Cities. It also seeks to explain the ways in which these ethnic traits are tied to ethnic spaces created or used by Hmong in the area. The interview guide I prepared for this research included a variety of questions that attempt to elicit the answers to these questions. For example, I asked many of the first generation immigrants to describe their journey to the United States, their earliest memories of the country, and what exactly challenged them or helped them to get acquainted with their new home. These questions were crafted to potentially elicit the role that groups, important locations or people, or in fact the Hmong community in general played in the resettlement process of Hmong in the Twin Cities.

I also wanted to learn about spaces that were important to Hmong people in the Twin Cities. This presented particular challenges. First, the phrasing of the question may have stripped some amount of meaning from the interviewee’s response. Because asking the (incredibly vague) question “what places are important to you?” would almost certainly be too open ended and yield a number of answers having nothing to do with Hmong ethnicity, the question could not be asked that way. On the other hand, asking “what places are important to you as a Hmong person?” assumes too much about how the interviewee identifies themselves. Consequently, I phrased this question, “Can you think of any places in the Twin Cities that are important for Hmong people living here?” As the research progressed, I noticed that some interviewees were having trouble with the hazily defined word “places,” and I expanded the question to include
“organizations and events,” which also have the potential to fit the definition of ethnic spaces. This question often started a conversation diverging from the interview schedule that elicited more detailed information about that particular place.

Questions regarding the actual creation or destruction of significant places were also asked. For example, I asked interviewees “can you tell me about a place in the Twin Cities that Hmong people worked to establish?” and “what types of places aren’t present in the Twin Cities that you think would strengthen the Hmong community if they were created here?” These questions were intended to target the perceived level of organization possessed by the Hmong in the Twin Cities. Because I asked about the creation of places, I was searching for not only ethnic spaces that may be important to the community as a whole, but also for the ways in which Hmong individuals or organizations came together to produce space that was intended to be used by the Hmong.

Waters (1990) discusses the lack of control racial minorities have in their choice of ethnic affiliations, and though this idea has been countered to some extent (Khanna 2011) I wanted to examine the ways in which ethnicity is imposed upon people of Hmong descent by other (non-Hmong) individuals. This was a challenging topic to broach, as Sophia points out:

Sophia: I think it’s interesting…the word, the R word…people don’t like to talk about race much. It’s like the f------ elephant that no one is talking about. Me included.
Because perception of race is challenging to scrub away from society as a whole, the Hmong in the Twin Cities are faced with issues exacerbated by their skin color and immigrant status. I asked the question, “can you tell me about a time when you were talking with a non-Hmong person who had a misconception or untrue stereotype about Hmong people?” in an effort to understand the ways in which my interview respondents had been confronted with these issues. When asking this question, I was specifically paying attention to two aspects of the response: did the story told by the interviewee relate to aspects of ethnicity, and where did the story take place. In this way I hoped to understand the ways in which ethnicity is externally imposed upon Hmong individuals. To counter this question, I also asked a slightly more benign question: “Is there anything about being a Hmong person that you think separates you from other non-Hmong Americans?” I asked the question in this way (other...Americans) because I anticipated that a large number of my respondents would identify not only as Hmong, but also as American themselves. Consequently, this question targeted the ways in which Hmong individuals saw their ethnicity compared to others that share a similar identification.

Finally, many of my interviews were dictated by the occupation or affiliation of the person I was speaking to. Many of my interviewees were concerned with Hmong ethnicity as well (though often not in a conscious manner) and provided a good deal of information based on their own experiences. In some cases these topics dominated the interview and led to fewer of my prepared questions being asked, and in fact most interviews featured an intense deviation of some kind from the interview schedule.
based on what that person was interested in discussing. This allowed for a more nuanced understanding of member meanings of ethnic identity, though it did occasionally come at the expense of time discussing ethnic spaces. For an interview schedule detailing the general questions asked to interview respondents, see Appendix A.

Additionally, throughout the course of this research I collected news articles focused on the Hmong that had an important ethnic or spatial component. There was one event which I will elaborate on in further chapters that comprised the bulk of these news articles: the dispute over control of the Hmong Freedom Celebration (or “J4”) Soccer Tournament during the spring of 2012. This story provides fascinating insight into the meaning of Hmong ethnicity from an insider perspective. More importantly, it is tied directly to ethnic spaces used by the Hmong population in the Twin Cities; the significance of these spaces can be gleaned by analyzing the text related to these subjects.

Interviews were coded through multiple iterations. First, each interview was open coded for any theme that emerged from the data. These themes were anything that seemed important to the interview respondent, from what they deemed to be important about certain Hmong spaces in the area to the challenges they faced upon arrival in the United States. From this point, interviews were focus coded and arranged into three primary categories: Hmong ethnic spaces, identity claims and challenges, and symbols of ethnicity. These categories are broad and encompass many opinions and
beliefs including negative cases that conflict with what other interview respondents have said. Each broad category was broken down into a number of subcategories that stem from the initial theme. These themes became the focus of subsequent chapters, and the subthemes became sections within each chapter.

Finally, it is important when conducting qualitative research for the researcher to be aware of their own positionality over the course of the study, and as a white American I would certainly qualify as an ethnic outsider. Race and ethnicity are complicated issues because it is always possible to come across individuals who perceive that they are being “studied for their skin color.” I needed to be conscious of this, and it is likely that this study would have been quite different had it been conducted by a Hmong researcher. However, my position as an ethnic outsider with comparatively little knowledge of the Hmong as a group likely contributed to articulation and description of ideas that may have been unspoken between them and another Hmong individual. Consequently, interviewees spoke directly and explicitly about the connection between space and identity, describing why certain spaces are valued and what occurs in them. Therefore, my status as an ethnic outsider led to the vocalization of the major themes that arose during interviews, and shaped this study in a unique way.
CHAPTER 5: HMONG ETHNIC SPACES

Overview

As detailed in previous sections, the definition of ethnic spaces employed in this study focuses on spaces where members of a group “make identity claims, draw boundaries, resist the dominant culture, jockey for power and position, and encourage, transform, reproduce, and celebrate certain identities but ignore and discourage others” (Kaya 2005, 426). Ethnic spaces are omnipresent throughout the United States, whether they are plainly visible as such or not, and Hmong ethnic spaces in the Twin Cities are excellent examples of such spaces. Hmong ethnic spaces are used in a diverse number of ways and frequently touch on some or all of the aspects of Kaya’s definition and occasionally offer direct opposition to these ideas, at least in the minds of those who occupy them. It is clearly unwise to make any attempt to essentialize what goes on in these ethnic spaces, as members of the same group often have drastically different ideas as to what these spaces represent. At the same time though, discussing ethnic places with members of the group, as well as physically placing myself in them, provided common threads that weave throughout the members’ meanings of these places manifest themselves both in the space’s physical representation and the minds of those who occupy them.
This chapter will focus on specific spaces, but themes and discussions of values and identities occur throughout. This will accomplish two major goals. First, it will demonstrate a connection between Hmong ethnic spaces and ethnic identity. Second, it will show that different types of spaces have different roles to play when it comes to identity formation. Specific spaces are used and occupied differently, and therefore have differing impacts upon ethnic identity.

While this research makes no effort to comprehensively detail each Hmong ethnic place in the area, there are a number of examples that were discussed frequently by interview respondents. The two places that were most frequently brought up when asked questions like “Can you think of any places, organizations or events in the Twin Cities that are important for Hmong people living here,” and “can you think of any Hmong traditions or behaviors that you think are important to continue,” were annual events, above all Hmong New Year and the Hmong Freedom Celebration (“J4”) soccer tournament. For example, Xai, an adult basic education instructor and librarian, was asked to describe what helps him to interact with other Hmong individuals. He responded,

Xai: For instance, especially here in Minnesota, we have these two Hmong celebrations: the Hmong New Year’s celebration here in town as well as the soccer tournament which will be coming up soon. And so as a community member, I have to go to these places. Because it’s good to go and see what the Hmong people are up to, what’s new and what’s not... Go and meet up with friends, talk about things, watch soccer or flag football together. And see how many people are actually there.
Txongpao, an executive director, expands on these ideas when asked what places, events, or organizations are important to Hmong people in the Twin Cities:

Txongpao: I believe Hmong New Year is a key thing. Because in our culture, during the time we live in Laos, the New Year is one of the most important celebrations within the Hmong community. And New Year, I believe in the early 80’s and late 80’s, 90’s, New Year the most important to the Hmong people. Many Hmong come from other state, come and celebrate Hmong New Year here, and I believe the majority of the Hmong people, they want to keep the New Year celebration alive.

Here, Xai and Txongpao offer basic statements that reflect the importance of large gathering events like Hmong New Year and J4. Their comments are representative of many of the interview respondents in this study, and I will shortly take up each of these important ethnic spaces in more detail.

Another Hmong ethnic space that was frequently discussed in interviews was Hmong Village, an unused warehouse that was turned into a flea market by a group of Hmong entrepreneurs. Hmong Village is a labyrinth of shops and restaurants selling primarily (but not exclusively) Hmong goods that also functions as a home for a number of professional services, such as dental care, legal representation, and photographic expertise owned and operated by Hmong individuals. When asked the same question that I asked Txongpao above, Houa, a retired author and health interpreter, offered this statement describing Hmong Village:

Houa: Actually...the Hmong Village is very amazing. That after thirty-five years, I was able to walk into a whole, almost like a mall. A Hmong mall. That use shopping (). I mean session after session. All kind of variety, clothing, food, or whatever you need. It’s very amazing.
Houa briefly discusses the wide array of products in Hmong Village, as well as implicitly describing its social value by relating it to a mall. As with the two large celebratory events, Hmong Village will be discussed in more depth below.

Finally, there are a number of other less prominent Hmong ethnic places identified and discussed by interviewees that are better classified as ethnic organizations. These organizations often explicitly communicate a desire to work with the Hmong community through the inclusion of “Hmong” in their names. Many focus on culture, offering language, dance, and history courses, research materials, and a sense of connectedness based on ethnic identification. Others offer valuable services to members of the Hmong community that assist with critical life steps like finding work, purchasing homes, and passing citizenship exams, as well as a myriad of other social services. Such organizations discussed in interviews include Lao Family Community (referred to throughout simply as Lao Family), the Hmong American Partnership (HAP), the Hmong Cultural Center, and the Association for the Advancement of Hmong Women in Minnesota (AAHWM). While all of these organizations are important for one reason or another, this research will focus on the Hmong Cultural Center, as I had opportunity to conduct participant observation there on many occasions.
Hmong Freedom Celebration/J4

The sun was absolutely oppressive by about noon. The McMurray fields in Como Park offered little to no shade, especially for those watching the various sporting events featured at this year’s Hmong Freedom Celebration (also called J4, reflecting its observance near the 4th of July). During the morning hours it was possible to find shelter beneath the occasional tree, but those respites quickly vanished. The most-prepared groups of spectators/visitors were able to secure space to construct tents around the top of the basin which held the soccer fields and volleyball courts. Nearly everyone else carried umbrellas (Figure 3). Despite the heat and my inability to pass an entire day at the park, it was hard not to come away impressed with the sheer number of people who made the trek to Minnesota for one of the largest annual Hmong-centered celebrations in the world.

It was easy to believe that J4 is in fact one of the largest Hmong gatherings organized since their exodus to the United States. Parking was hellish, and shuttles transported thousands of people from distant lots to the park. The celebration itself was crowded, though not so much as to make it difficult to move. The entrance led through rows of vendors selling everything from traditional Hmong clothing, to music and musical instruments, to books and DVDs. Music from popular Hmong bands blasted from stalls and I wondered how the workers weren’t deafened after a weekend of such auditory assault. Occasionally, soccer matches and scores were announced in Hmong
over a loudspeaker. The fields lay in a deep basin, and the steep hills provided natural bleachers for those watching the games. A long row of stalls along one ridge emanated columns of smoke and the enticing scent of traditional Hmong cooking. Behind a collection of stalls stood a wide stage used for dance and song competitions. The Hmong Freedom Celebration was vibrant and alive with everything that brings people together.

Figure 3: Umbrellas shade attendants of the Hmong Freedom Celebration.

As the number of Hmong immigrants in Minnesota has grown, the annual observance of the Hmong Freedom Celebration has likewise matured, from a mere trickle of participants in the early years to a veritable flood of celebrants in more recent years. 2013 marked the 33rd anniversary of a holiday that began as a tiny summer picnic held on 4th of July weekend for a small subset of the Hmong community. Lao Family
began organizing the picnic as a way to bring members of the community together, but since its inception the gathering has grown to represent an assembly that rivals traditional Hmong New Year celebrations in prestige and attendance. In 2012 over 55,000 people, the largest turnout in its history, experienced the sports, music, food, and community offered by the Hmong Freedom Celebration. The Freedom Celebration was frequently discussed in interviews as a critical feature of the Hmong community in the Twin Cities, both as a representation of Hmong culture and as a means to gather huge numbers of Hmong individuals from around the world.

A crucial aspect of Kaya’s definition of ethnic spaces is the struggle over who defines and controls the accepted behaviors and values that the place embodies. Therefore, before progressing to a discussion the ways in which the Hmong Freedom Celebration is perceived by my interview respondents, some context is necessary in order to understand how this important concept is acted out at J4. The Hmong Freedom Celebration, while superficially representing the values and progress of the Hmong community in Minnesota, (and perhaps the United States in general) is subject to a back-and-forth struggle over the control of these values. The celebration, traditionally held at Como Park in St. Paul, went through a period during 2012 that saw an offshoot rival of Lao Family, confusingly called Lao Family Social Services, attempt to hold its own soccer tournament on the same weekend at the Dakota County Fairgrounds in Farmington, Minnesota. Curiously though, no interview respondent actually spoke to me about this conflict, despite it being barely more than a year old. In fact, were it not
for a brief sentence buried in a newspaper article about the 2012 tournament having “other events to compete with” (Jurewitsch 2013), I would have never known about the issue.

The story begins with the 2011 expulsion of Lao Family’s executive director, Dr. Sai Long Yang. The exact circumstances surrounding Dr. Yang’s removal are murky, but the election of ChuPheng Lee to the Lao Family board chair position seems to have keyed these events. The election was contentious and sparked an outcry over the handling of the votes (there were concerns over lost ballots and voters turned away on election day). Though Lee even admits that the election was unfair, a judge (no other identifying information is given) upheld the election and subsequent removal of Dr. Yang, a position which Lee then undertook citing insubordination. This chain of events caused a rift in Lao Family that resulted in the exodus of a number of influential members of the organization who eventually decided to found Lao Family Social Services.

Accusations of corruption at Lao Family continue even today, though I will touch on these later. For now, I will turn my attention to the annual celebration. The competing Hmong Freedom Celebration, which was not identified by any particular name in the news articles, was held at the Dakota County Fairgrounds in Farmington, Minnesota. The organizers, headed by board chair Tou Xiong, established the event to directly compete with Lao Family, but also attempted to construct the event as a way to honor the influential Hmong leader, General Vang Pao. “It is not just a soccer
tournament, but the main purpose of the event is to honor Vang Pao and the men who fought with him in Laos,’’ Tou Xiong says in an interview on the topic with the local newspaper *Hmong Pages* (Jurewitsch 2012b). He also claims that Lao Family changed the date of their event to compete with Lao Family Social Services and that Lao Family no longer supports the community. *Hmong Pages* also interviewed ChuPheng Lee, who seems to use his position as the head of the influential organization to dismiss the challenges presented by Xiong. “‘The impact of having a second event will probably be that we will have a little less of an audience. That is not because people want to support the other group, but because there is a lot of confusion in the community’” (Jurewitsch 2012a). He goes on to explain that “‘Vang Pao’s widow will open the tournament just like the General has done for many years.’”

The interviews that these two men provide are examples of strategies used to control the meaning of a particular space. In this instance, they appear to be aiming for the same goal in different ways. Xiong’s remarks are more combative and in a way almost challenge Lee and the leaders of Lao Family to justify the existence and value of their organization. The natural extent of these remarks, given the timing and goals of the newspaper piece, is to subvert the control Lao Family has on the event. Invoking a consistent theme throughout this research, Xiong cites the desire to honor Vang Pao with the tournament, reinforcing both his (now posthumous) role as the figurehead leader of the Hmong in the United States and his near omnipresent status in public Hmong spaces.
Lee’s tactics are more subtle. Instead of explicitly stating his desire to honor the late general, he merely informs the readership that Vang Pao’s widow, May Song Vang, will attend the event, perhaps hoping that her presence alone would reinforce concepts similar to those in Xiong’s remarks. Additionally, he associates attending the rival event with confusion instead of a true desire to oppose Lao Family. Here, Lee downplays Lao Family Social Service’s authority over the event, and seems to forgive those who choose not to attend the soccer tournament in 2012.

In the end, these speakers are representative of the contestation that is inevitably paired with control over public spaces. They both wish to “honor Vang Pao,” though Xiong views this goal as a tool to strip authority from Lao Family by “honoring Vang Pao more.” Lee’s method is to pay tribute to Vang Pao by honoring his wife as the opening speaker. If nothing else, the contestation presented here demonstrates not only that Hmong spaces are certainly not immune to debate over valued meanings, but also that one of the major ways in which a Hmong place displays value is its connection to the past. In any case, Lao Family seems to have “won” this round. As previously mentioned, 2012 saw a record turnout at Lao Family’s Hmong Freedom Celebration, while the rival event floundered and was not renewed in 2013.

Deeper insight can be gained from the testimony of my interview respondents. How do they view the Hmong Freedom Celebration? How is it used and lived in? Why is this gathering, possessing such a short history and devoid of centuries of tradition, considered so valuable? Two themes were discussed repeatedly by respondents as
implicit answers to these questions. The first is that the celebration offers a chance for Hmong individuals to gather together from disparate parts of the country, and in fact the world. J4 is viewed as a premier Hmong event and draws people from throughout the United States, as Pa Der, a university professor, explains:

Pa Der: ...I grew up in Missoula, Montana where there are no Hmong. There were about 200 Hmong when I lived there, so just to be in that space where, wow you know there’s Hmong walking around and driving around, and I can stop at – you know there’s Hmong grocery stores and you know Asian restaurants and so forth. So that’s why I moved here because I would come here for events like the July 4th tournament. And then drive around Frogtown [the neighborhood surrounding University Avenue in St. Paul] and it just really felt at peace, like I was at home.

Pa Der’s statement illustrates just how important events like J4 can be to Hmong individuals. When she was younger, her family would make the drive from Missoula to St. Paul, over eighteen hours, to attend the tournament (and Hmong New Year in early winter). Moreover, she juxtaposes the Twin Cities against Missoula, reinforcing the value provided by a “space where, wow you know there’s Hmong walking around...” Her statement provides a powerful example of how a space where Hmong individuals are visible and active feels like home to her. Though offering less about his experiences at the tournament, Foung, a state senator, discussed a similar journey:

Foung: I...I was really appreciate the green surrounding when I first arrived to Minnesota. Before that I always come to the July soccer tournament as a young man.

Foung made the trip to the Twin Cities from numerous and disparate states throughout his life in the United States. These two statements demonstrate the importance of the
Hmong Freedom Celebration. The event draws individuals from hundreds or thousands of miles away to gather with their co-ethnics.

Elaborating on these ideas, Tswjfwm, a college student, explains that the event not only proves to be an enormous draw for Hmong individuals, it also offers a chance for them to connect with co-ethnics by expanding their social networks both domestically and abroad. When asked what aspects of large celebrations made them useful as gathering spaces, he responded:

Tswjfwm: Useful? Um...cause it gets a ton of Hmong people together man [chuckles]. Cause we’re not always like this big...area you know. This one event, J4, training for it the whole winter, spring (getting to know) who your team is, who you are and going there to represent and you get to meet new Hmong people too, make new connections, meet new people. We had, actually people from France, Hmong French to come play soccer.
ZB: Yeah I heard, that’s incredible.
Tswjfwm: Yeah really cool [both chuckle]. What makes these events important? Connecting. It brings us all together, we share different thoughts and it’s just good to see old family that you haven’t seen in a few years. It’s good to see and hear that. It definitely brings us together. Makes our people more connected I’d like to say. Beyond that, I don’t see too many things going on.

Here Tswjfwm demonstrates the value of simply bringing Hmong individuals together as well as why he feels it is important. Large events like J4 provide a place for connection and reinforcing family and friendship ties. Other interview respondents expressed similar ideas. One question that was asked of most interviewees involved was whether or not they believe it is important to engage with other Hmong individuals, and what helps them to do so. In response to the second half of this questions Yuepheng, a book store owner replied:
Yuepheng: What help? Um...I think besides the current media network, I think all the events and institution like social service, Lao family, Hmong Cultural Center, and the events like tournaments, July 4th tournaments. That helps to see and meet and know a lot of people in the community.

Pa Der offers similar insight:

Pa Der: What helps me to interact with other Hmong people? Oh yeah! Things like Hmong Village and Hmong New Year, and the July 4th tournament, and the workspaces that are comprised of mostly Hmong employees. Absolutely.

Yuepheng and Pa Der both contribute to the idea that the Hmong Freedom Celebration is important to them personally as a tool to help with connection and communication. Large gathering events like J4 are spatial constructions that help to hold disparate parts of the Hmong diaspora together through their ability to bring individuals together physically.

The second crucial aspect of the Hmong Freedom Celebration is its role as an embodiment of Hmong identity. Foung, when discussing why gatherings are important to the Hmong community, offered a statement that forms a connection between gathering and ethnic identity:

Foung: Oh it is very important as a reunion for us. Because the gathering thing, bring people from Fresno, people from Oklahoma, all over, to come together. It’s one of the mechanisms that enhance our appreciation of identity. Enhance our valued identity. Otherwise we would...if we don’t meet we don’t come together. There are other conferences too, there are education conferences, professional conference activity that reinforce that, and those may be stronger, but we’re talking about civic engagement. They’re different than civic engagement.

Foung implicitly links civic engagement with Hmong ethnicity, suggesting that the act of coming together and connecting with other Hmong individuals is part of that ethnic identity. Other respondents offered similar statements reflecting this role but did not
present particular details. Instead, a theme that pervaded these interviews, the phrase “knowing who you are,” broadly encompasses conceptions of identity that include shared history, language, and common values. The celebration is a visual and physical representation of these aspects of identity playing out in real time far from the places in which they originated. However, it would be too simplistic to say that traditions carried over from Southeast Asia are the only values embodied by J4. Sports competitions existed in Laos, but have been expanded to include western sports like soccer and football, and perhaps more importantly, to include females and non-Hmong individuals in the games, reflecting values of community that could be considered “more American.” In this sense the Hmong Freedom Celebration becomes an expression not only of Hmong identity but also of American identity, a representation of many Hmong individuals’ dual and shifting identities.

I spoke with Muaj, a medical doctor, about the types of places that are important to Hmong individuals in the Twin Cities, and after providing a brief list of places, I asked him if there was anything missing that would help the Hmong community with their goal of coming together. He responded:

Muaj: I think that all of those events that I mentioned, their purpose is just so people will see each other and say, “This is us, this is what we do, this is who we are.” I don’t think that you could do more. I think we already do too many New Years [laughs].

Muaj’s comment is brief but important. He suggests by saying “this is us, this is what we do, this is who we are,” that large gathering events reproduce Hmong identity for those who attend. They reinforce the notion that individuals can find value by coming
together and “doing things that Hmong people do.” Other interviewees responded similarly. During part of our conversation on J4, Seexeng, a high school art teacher, elaborates on the role of the celebration in relation to Hmong history:

ZB: ...do you think that that like, large open spaces for gathering and community, do you think that sort of helps people remember and feel nostalgic towards Laos, or is it on too small of a scale? Seexeng: [chuckles]. The one thing I don’t want to do is speculate. ZB: No of course, for you personally. Seexeng: I feel like...it’s only big because we want to accommodate people. [...] It’s just a huge get together. And I don’t think it was the idea of nostalgia, “Let’s remember Laos!” No. I think the idea is we are a community. We have always been a clan system, a village system, and maybe this is one way to come back and remember who we are and where we are. If it’s nothing, it’s just that, you know.

Seexeng’s comment is representative of those provided by a number of interview respondents. His use of the phrase “who we are” is one example of a similar phrase used by many interview respondents to cast an umbrella statement around the idea of Hmong culture. As I will demonstrate later, there is certainly not agreement over what Hmong ethnicity encompasses, but “who we are” is used here to group together the identities of everyone who views themselves as Hmong. Furthermore, Seexeng identifies aspects of Hmong history and society, “clan system,” and “village system,” and suggests that the large gathering of individuals at J4 recreates some of these societal systems. Indeed it is not a stretch to link the design and activities of J4 with those of a village: people meet and speak to each other, communicate and network, purchase a myriad of goods, eat at restaurants and, most importantly, gather in a communal space. Though Seexeng believes and explicitly states that the gathering is not intended to
conjure nostalgia for a homeland, he does consider that it offers a chance to recreate some important aspects of Hmong life in Laos.

The Hmong Freedom Celebration provides value for Hmong individuals as a gathering space and place that reinforces Hmong identity, but these values may not come through as strongly as they once did, and are not seen by everyone in the same way. In fact, though Seexeng recognizes J4’s ability to recreate certain aspects of Hmong ethnicity, he does worry that the celebration has moved away from its intended goal:

Seexeng: I don’t want to speculate, but it starts to become more commercialized than what it ought to be. It’s just a huge get together. [...]

At the same time, everything starts to like...disappear. Not as authentic or organic as I wish for it to be. But then one of my biggest (advice) that someone shared with me, “Seexeng, change is constant. For anything to remain viable, change must occur.” And so it’s not like, “Oh, why couldn’t we go back?” No, things are changing so fast, things are evolving so fast. Maybe I just didn’t have time to enjoy it while it’s still here. So nowadays when I do go, my lens is a little different. My objective of why I do go is a little different. To see the girls playing flag football. In the old days, just girls volleyball, nothing else. And then girls soccer, yay! And to see girls’ football, to see a traditional game, top spinning, it’s cool.

Here, Seexeng worries that J4 has become too commercialized. By saying “just a huge get together,” he opined that perhaps its value as a cultural celebration is invalidated by its contemporary and commercial feel. But he later seems to welcome this change despite its diminished authentic quality. Seexeng offers a telling statement about many Hmong individual’s dual identities, both Hmong and American. The change that is occurring is transforming J4 into something more representative of everyone who
attends; something more American, though far from out of touch with its Hmong history. Sophia, a lawyer, shared her view on J4’s diminished quality:

Sophia: So July 4th is a great example. I used to think, oh it’s so great to be with Hmong American people – here I go using that word [people] right? – but I mean Hmong people who look like me. And the reality is the event has gotten so large I never encounter friends or people that I know. And secondly there’s such a diverse array of ideologies among our community that I really kinda have a hard time when it comes to it to really relate or identify with most of those folks.

Sophia speaks on the disconnect she feels with the celebration. Its transformation into an international event has stripped the intimacy it previously had, and because of her educational background and life experiences, simply being around Hmong individuals – ones she doesn’t know – is not valuable enough to encourage her to attend.

The annual Hmong Freedom Celebration is one of the most prized gathering events directed by and for Hmong individuals (though all are welcome to attend), and may be the most attended Hmong event in the world, drawing visitors and competitors from France, Thailand, Australia, China, and throughout the United States. What makes a celebration with a mere thirty-three year history so valued among such a large group of people? As many interviewees have suggested, the act of gathering holds substantial weight among Hmong individuals. Constructed as a way to gather that would not be affected by the harsh Minnesota winter, J4 in a sense abbreviates the year long wait between Hmong New Year celebrations. Hmong New Year has a much more hallowed history, but its value as a gathering event is still of primary importance, as I will describe shortly. In this way, J4 mimics the historical gathering activities that have characterized Hmong society for hundreds if not thousands of years. At a more basic level though, J4
provides an opportunity to network with other Hmong individuals from around the world, and gather once again with family and friends in geographically distant regions of the United States. As Seexeng says, “If it’s nothing, it’s just that, you know?”

The celebration’s value extends beyond gathering. By offering products made by and for Hmong individuals, traditional Hmong and Thai cuisine, sports played in Laos (tuj lub, a top-spinning game, and kato, similar to volleyball though using feet), and by providing space where the Hmong language can be used in almost any situation, J4 reproduces valued Hmong identities. Its construction as a village-like space reproduces important social structures from Laos. Finally, as the celebration evolves it reflects the American identities of a substantial portion of Hmong individuals.

While all of these valued reproductions are true, J4 also clearly represents a space where control is important to powerful groups. Lao Family pushed hard to maintain control of the event over Lao Family Social Services, and uses this space to commemorate Vang Pao (who founded Lao Family), and in doing so communicate one aspect of Hmong identity that they deem important. It is clear that J4 is not simply a sports tournament. Its construction and use transform it into a space for a unique type of identity-making.
Of the many social traditions carried by the Hmong from Southeast Asia to the United States, perhaps none holds the prestige and power of Hmong New Year. This annual celebration, typically held near the end of autumn or in early winter, is seen by many Hmong individuals both as a space of gathering and festivity, as well as a crucial and uniquely Hmong event. Most importantly, Hmong New Year is representative of thousands of years of tradition. Yang (2007) notes that, as is common among ethnic minorities (especially those with no written language), Hmong history is clouded and poorly understood. It is not exactly clear just how long the annual year-end celebration has been a part of Hmong society, but due to the lack of a historical record, it is impossible to pinpoint a time when it was not recognized. In any case, its status as a time-honored tradition has a powerful impact on the Hmong in the United States. For example, when I asked Tong, a produce farmer and reseller, to describe Hmong New Year, she related its importance with its history:

Tong: Hmong New Year is like...our people... we not go to church. So all year round, we have to week after week, we have to invite all people, they pass away from the home and enjoy us to have new food, new rice, something like that. And our culture we usually have it like a thousand years ago, the same, like now. So that’s very important to us.

Though Tong does has less experience with the English language as many of my interviewee’s, she succinctly identifies the value she sees in Hmong New Year. By saying “we usually have it like a thousand years ago, the same, like now,” she characterizes the
current celebration as something uniquely Hmong: a thousand-year tradition that has been a part of Hmong society since their time in Southeast Asia. Txongpao echoed Tong’s statement when I asked him about important places in the Hmong community:

Txongpao: Ah ok. I believe Hmong New Year is a key thing. Because in our culture, during the time we live in Laos, the New Year is one of the most important celebrations within the Hmong community. [...] And I feel like the New Year is more like something to keep that as your - this group of people and you have a certain day that that is your day for your New Year celebration. Because the New Year is not just coming as celebration in US. It’s been in Laos and Thailand. China. We have been celebrating for many hundred years, many thousand years. That’s why we keep celebrating the New Year as one of the most important.

Hmong New Year is certainly pervasive throughout the Hmong population. Nearly every city in the United States with a large Hmong population hosts a weekend-long New Year festival that draws a substantial crowd from neighboring states and throughout the country. Cities will often stagger the dates of their New Year ceremonies so that those who wish to attend multiple gatherings have the opportunity to do so. Public New Year’s festivals in the Twin Cities are no exception; St Paul and Minneapolis both host an independent New Year event. The annual Hmong Minnesota New Year, hosted by Lao Family, takes place every Thanksgiving weekend in St Paul’s River Center. Like the Hmong Freedom Celebration, Hmong Minnesota New Year’s yearly event is coincident with a historically American holiday. None of my interviewees offered any thoughts as to why Hmong celebrations are held near other American holidays. The similarly named Hmong American New Year is organized each year by a collection of board members and recently held in Minneapolis’ Metrodome the first weekend in
November. The proximity of these two celebrations has an interesting effect on the perceptions of Hmong individuals in the area. The abundance of year-end festivities spurs many to take every opportunity they can to attend the New Year, celebrating at both events. Others see the profusion of Hmong New Year’s as another unnecessary example of less-than-valuable festivities lacking in cultural authenticity.

Due to the time constraints of this research, I was not able to attend a Hmong New Year myself. Therefore, all descriptions of Hmong New Year will be drawn from discussions with interview respondents, photographs and videos found on the internet, and characterizations provided in scholarly articles. It is also critical to understand that Hmong New Year in America is sharply divided into private and public ceremonies. The private ceremony usually involves only family or clan members and is characterized by the presenting of offerings to ancestors and welcoming in the new year. Yang (2007, 5) gives a brief description of the traditional private ceremony as it typically occurred in Laos:

The ceremony begins with Lwn Sub, or chasing the bad omen away with the old year and welcoming the new year along with prosperity, good health, harmony, and longevity. Lwn Sub takes place outside the house under a rope hanging from a tree. Extended family members circle the tree four times to symbolize sending the old year away with all the bad omens, then reversing the circle three times to welcome the New Year...Before dinner, the ceremony of offering food to the ancestors is made.

The spirit of these traditions has been continued in the United States, often among both Christian and non-Christian Hmong alike, though it is less common among the former group. Interview respondents discussed the private aspect of Hmong New Year far less
often than the public, though it was noted on occasion. When I asked Txongpao what
Hmong traditions he believes are important to continue practicing in the United States,
he discussed both the public and private aspects of Hmong New Year:

Txongpao: The place in downtown St Paul, the Civic Center and the River Center,
and the Metrodome is a place for people to come and see each other, and for
entertain only. But in our actual Hmong New Year, each individual family we
have ceremony, we do ceremony that night that we not bring to the gathering.
We already have done in the individual house. We consider that that is the last
day and tomorrow is the New Year, we need to closing the last day, and
accepting, and for the new year come in. So that is what, no matter what we
need to, the traditional Hmong we still keep practicing and doing that.

Txongpao makes an effort to draw a distinction between the two aspects of the
tradition. As I will demonstrate, first- and 1.5-generation Hmong individuals, like
Txongpao, are often critical of the “Americanized” character that Hmong New Year has
taken on, which makes his quote particularly interesting. Here, Txongpao conveys that
one of the most valuable aspects of Hmong New Year to him is the private ceremony,
which he implicitly juxtaposes against the public celebration as being “more Hmong,”
through his use of the phrase “in our actual Hmong New Year.” Unfortunately, a more
robust discussion of Hmong New Year which includes this valuable private ceremony will
not be possible; the public celebration was simply discussed much more often, and it is
to that which I will now turn.

The photographs of Hmong New Year in the Twin Cities depict a vibrant
atmosphere similar to those taken at the Hmong Freedom Celebration. Hmong
individuals of all ages gather to dress in traditional Hmong clothing, dine on Hmong
food, compete in dizzying array of contests (ranging from song and dance to sports and
beauty pageants), and to network and communicate with other members of the Hmong community. As Figure 4 helps to illustrate, Hmong New Year is frequently regarded as a crowded affair. Drawing so many from so far away, the River Center and the Metrodome are packed full of attendees conversing, celebrating, and watching the competitive events that have come to characterize Hmong New Year. When I asked Seexeng about his first memories at a New Year’s celebration in the United States, he answered:

Seexeng: Right so in the old days, they find the biggest place we could rent. And it used to be in Minneapolis. Then it shifted to St. Paul, Minneapolis, so on and so forth. The community was smaller. And as it goes I don’t think the River Center will be able to accommodate us. And I think most people are turned off by it because of that too.
ZB: Too small?
Seexeng: Too small and when you go there it’s just congested and can’t last.

Despite the vibrancy of Hmong New Year, Seexeng identifies congestion as a problem. It
is not clear whether or not he believes that the River Center New Year “can’t last,” or the New Year in general, but his comments illustrate just how heavily trafficked Hmong New Year is.

Once again, two major themes emerged from the responses of my interviewees on the subject of Hmong New Year. In fact, these two themes closely mirror the perceived values of the Hmong Freedom Celebration: its value as a gathering space, and its value as a space for reinforcing identity. Let us return to Pa Der, who grew up in Montana and made the journey to the Twin Cities for Hmong New Year and J4. When we discussed what made Hmong New Year important to her, she responded:

Pa Der: My parents like the New Year because you go—gosh if you go, every third person you run across you know them. From a distant relative, or maybe...you were at an event together a few years ago or whatever. But it’s that sense, once again, of being around people who look like you, talk like you, know you, just a sense of being at home. So for example when I was living in Madison, I would come over for the New Year’s once a year, even though I didn’t know anybody. I would just walk around and I just needed to be in a space with my people. So I think it serves multiple purposed but definitely, yeah so, those three things that I mentioned: seeing people that you know, being around your own people, and then also cultural recreation. Yeah.

ZB: So can you tell me about maybe the first time when you came to the New Year’s festival here in Minnesota?
Pa Der: Yeah. Um...so gosh I came to many, but my very first— I was 14 though. We were living in Missoula, Montana, my parents, we actually drove here...

ZB: That’s a hike.
Pa Der: Yeah, to go to the New Year’s that’s like an eighteen hour drive just for the New Year. But just amazed that wow, there’s actually Hmong people, there’s Hmong people in this place.

Pa Der’s statement reflects multiple facets of Hmong New Year as a gathering space. First, she reinforces the idea that the New Year provides a space for connection and networking when she describes how “every third person you run across,” is someone
recognizable for one reason or another. Perhaps she is exaggerating, but her point comes across clearly. New Year acts a tool to keep in touch with family, friends, and co-ethnics in a broad sense. Secondly, while working on her degree at the University of Wisconsin – Madison, she traveled to the Twin Cities because “I just needed to be in a space with my people.” She expresses a desire simply to occupy the same space as other Hmong individuals, a statement that clearly demonstrates Hmong New Year’s power as a space of gathering. Coming from a city with a substantially smaller Hmong population, it is easy to see why Pa Der would want to attend such a large event, and if she wants to be in a space with “her people,” Hmong New Year certainly provides it.

Xai expressed a similar opinion:

ZB: Um...I guess we've sort of covered this too, but you believe it’s important to interact with other Hmong people.
Xai: Yes it’s very important to interact with other Hmong individuals. Because when you are a Hmong person, somehow from the inside you want to reach out to them. For instance here especially here in Minnesota, we have these two Hmong celebrations: the Hmong New Year’s celebration here in town as well as the soccer tournament which will be coming up soon. And so as a community member, I have to go to these places. Because it’s good to go and see what the Hmong people are up to, what’s new and what’s not... Go and meet up with friends, talk about things, watch soccer or flag football together. And see how many people are actually there <both laugh>.

Xai identifies himself as a member of the Hmong community, and because of this identification he feels that he has to attend. It is plain from his tone of voice that he does not mean “has to” in a coercive sense. Instead, he feels compelled to engage with other Hmong individuals, to “meet up with friends, talk about things” and to “reach out to them.” Xai demonstrates that he conceives of Hmong New Year as a space for
connection and gathering for the Hmong community. When asked about places that are important to the Hmong community, Khou, a university student, responded:

Khou: Yeah. Um, I would say around every fall we have what is called the Hmong New Year at the River Centre and it lasts two or three days, and one of the main things that goes on is there’s a beauty pageant. And with that you have very young ladies competing for that title, but like, everything that the competition has evolved. But I think it’s really cool kind of how the New Year overall brings together a lot of the Hmong population just not in Minnesota but like a lot of family members from other states fly out just for that event.

Khou’s statement sounds similar to a number of other respondents. She perceives Hmong New Year as valuable due its draw, its bringing together of disparate Hmong populations. Khou expressed these ideas and more, and her thoughts on Hmong New Year will be elaborated upon later. Finally, I discussed this idea with Ying, an adult basic education instructor who migrated from Laos to the United States only six years ago. Having experienced many Hmong New Year’s celebrations in Laos, we discussed the differences between the two countries’ celebrations.

ZB: Alright. So what were your first impressions of your first American Hmong New Year?
Ying: Well, my first American New Year...very amazing. Because here we have everything very available. For example in terms of technologies, and also we have a special place for New Year ok? At a house, like the one in downtown St Paul. So people can organize...and that’s all I can say. And like over there it’s dusty, and people, just like they have New Year in the field.

Ying identifies the site of Hmong New Year in Minnesota as a “special place.” He seems to suggest that gathering is easier for Hmong individuals in the United States due to this special place, and the cleanliness and availability of this space. In short, Ying was surprised but impressed by Hmong New Year in Minnesota.
The second theme that emerged from discussions on Hmong New Year was reproduction of Hmong culture. As a social institution that existed long before the Hmong arrived in the United States, Hmong New Year is viewed as an important space for the reproduction of “traditional” Hmong ways of life. Acculturation to the American mainstream is in many ways either difficult or impossible to resist, but spaces and events like Hmong New Year allow for the brief recapturing of a culture that is, at least nominally, unlike American culture (the worry that Hmong New Year is becoming Americanized will be treated later). Pa Der explains:

Pa Der: I think it’s a way of recreating what was in Laos. You know? So it’s a way of recreating the traditions and the practices, so for example they have the beauty pageants, they have the talent shows, and in Laos those were events that were held for sort of the noble people. The leaders would come and they would have the beauty pageant and all that. And I think it’s nostalgic, it’s a way of recreating these practices and kind of solidifying their identity here in the US by being able to recreate it.

She articulates my argument for me. Here, Pa Der explicitly identifies Hmong New Year as a space for the recreation of a Hmong identity. She offers an example of a traditional Hmong practice that has been brought to the United States from Laos. The beauty pageants serve here as a measuring stick for identity reproduction, and Pa Der believes that they, along with a number of other practices, work to solidify Hmong identity in the United States. She continues in a passage that I abbreviated earlier:

Pa Der: Yeah, to go to the New Year’s that’s like an eighteen hour drive just for the New Year. But just amazed that wow, there’s actually Hmong people, there’s Hmong people in this place. They talk Hmong, and then you can go to the food stalls and you can actually get Hmong food, and there’s Hmong people on stage and so forth. So it was very – it was amazing. And you just feel a sense of validation, and you feel at home, you’re comfortable, you know?
Expanding upon the reproduction of culture, Pa Der identifies the Hmong language, Hmong food, and, once again, pageants as signifiers of Hmong identity. The presence of these traditional Hmong cultural artifacts is important to Pa Der as she relates her Hmong New Year experience. A few minutes later:

ZB: So is there some place or event or whatever that sticks out in your mind that would really hurt the community if it were lost?
Pa Der: Something that would hurt the community if it was lost...definitely I think the New Year’s event. Cause I think no matter who or where you live you always think of the Hmong New Year as the event. It’s a place for to go once a year to be around your people.

Pa Der identifies Hmong New Year as a crucial space for the Hmong community. Despite claiming that the Hmong Freedom Celebration is also an important space, Hmong New Year is “the event.” It may not be as highly attended as J4, but its status as a traditional cultural festival makes it more important to Pa Der.

She is not the only interview respondent who feels this way. I asked many interviewees what traditional Hmong practices they believed were important to continue in the United States, and Hmong New Year was a frequent response. Tswjfw, Txongpao, Tong, and Chai and Aranvihn, both university students and qeej (Kheng) instructors, all identified Hmong New Year as an important tradition, though for varying reasons. Tong and Txongpao’s thoughts on Hmong New Year have been explained earlier, but Chai and Aranvihn (interviewed together) discusses the celebration in the context of material significance; it is a place where traditional Hmong clothing can be
worn. This type of clothing can be seen as an ethnic symbol and will be discussed in chapter seven.

Finally, the traditional events of Hmong New Year have been designed to help young men and women find partners. A game played by young Hmong men and women that includes tossing a ball back and forth while singing in Hmong has been part of the celebration throughout its existence. The game is designed to get these eligible men and women talking and connecting with the intent that they find a marriage partner. In America the game, and likely Hmong New Year in general, has taken a on the role of a facilitator of endogamous marriage. Intra-ethnic marriage wouldn’t have been hard to guarantee in Laos, but in the United States, continuing this practice likely contributes to the persistence of Hmong identities in future generations. Foung describes his thoughts on the ball tossing game and his memories of this tradition from his days as a young, single man:

Foung: And the courtship kinda died down. I was single then, young man looking for partners. So that was a thrill. That was a thrill. The Hmong media bring people together so you can look for a partner in your own community. Otherwise you’d be out there working, and you’d find someone else, the good people outside your culture. So...yeah, so I guess as you start aging you become more of the organizer for the younger generation, and your heart stop pounding, looking for the... [chuckles] pretty woman.

This is another example of the ways in which Hmong New Year provides for cultural reproduction. By facilitating the coupling of young Hmong men and women, the New Year’s celebration contributes to the likelihood that Hmong traditions be carried down in some fashion to subsequent generations.
My interview respondents have demonstrated the value provided by Hmong New Year to them and the Hmong community in general. Both the Hmong Freedom Celebration and Hmong New Year are examples of what Chacko (2003b) calls ethnic arenas. Both take place in at least partially “neutral spaces”. The McMurray fields at Como Park in St Paul are used simply for recreation on a daily basis. People occupy this space, having picnics, walking dogs, entertaining children, or playing sports. The Metrodome and River Centre are essentially unused on any kind of regular basis. Currently in the process of demolition, the Metrodome only hosted the Minnesota Vikings football team regularly during its final year of life. It serves primarily as a special events arena, much like the River Centre. These annual Hmong celebrations give context to these “empty” spaces. They allow the Hmong community to take temporary power over spaces that would normally be used by the dominant American mainstream. Hmong New Year and J4, though temporary, support Hmong identity claims in visible, public space. They act as both gathering spaces and as reproductions of Hmong culture, both resisting and blending with the pervasive American mainstream. In the case of Hmong New Year, it simply continues a long tradition of year-end celebration.

However, the value and role of Hmong New Year is certainly not without debate. As I mentioned, many question the authenticity of Hmong New Year, arguing that it is becoming Americanized or in some sense less than “authentic.” Furthermore, some have expressed the view that the New Year’s celebration has become stale, less likely to
represent and engage Hmong individuals. For example, Chai and Aranvihn express little enthusiasm when I ask them to describe Hmong New Year for me:

Aranvihn: It’s something that we’ve done before, it something – I don’t know it’s tradition I guess. It’s something you just do because we’ve been doing it for so long. Well I’m not sure about the 4th of July, but the Hmong New Year is usually – it’s supposed to be a way for people to go and I guess find a date basically [chuckles].

Chai: Supposedly it was to celebrate the end of the harvest, but then you go there and people celebrate and find just…like yeah you find dates and you just meet people I guess.

Aranvihn states that “you just do it because we’ve been doing it for so long,” suggesting that the value of the celebration is unclear. Later in the interview, Aranvihn elaborates.

ZB: So how has your experiences changed over time, as you’ve gotten older?

Aranvihn: Um, well for me it’s kind of gotten plain. Because it’s the same thing over and over again. I mean there’s nothing wrong with that, but I would expect it to continue to change and continue to expand and grow even, but I feel like lately it’s been getting smaller.

ZB: So what do you mean expand and grow?

Aranvihn: Well I don’t know, but I mean...more variety of what Hmong people can do these days I guess. Because it’s always...I don’t know about always, but you always see the same people doing the same things, having the same booth open. Basically one side is to have fun in terms of other people, the other side is just to sell you things and make money for the people who are selling. I mean, I feel like they should maybe add more events to the whole thing. Because they also have this second room where they just kind do the whole event thing where you can just kind of come and go and listen to what they do.

Here, he clearly opines that the Hmong New Year has become less representational of the “variety of what Hmong people can do these days.” Aranvihn believes that the New Year has turned dull, and that perhaps some of the value and excitement has been stripped from the celebration.
Additionally, by discussing the merchandise booths Aranvihn calls attention to the concern that the celebration is becoming more commercialized as opposed to more representative of Hmong culture. Foung offers a similar insight. When discussing New Year’s celebrations, his friend, introduced to me as “Teacher Ron,” who sat in on the interview brought up recent controversy surrounding the events:

“Teacher Ron”: Isn’t there a little controversy just this winter, between Minneapolis and St Paul? Two competing New Years.
Foung: Yeah between Minneapolis and St Paul. But to answer your question it’s basically July 4th and the Hmong New Year are the two, you know, events that are closer to us.
ZB: Can you expand on that, the controversy that he just mentioned? I’m sort of unfamiliar –
Foung: [To “Teacher Ron”] Why do I let you sit in here [both laugh]. Um, I...sometimes like money comes into play. So people want to...the idea of having a New Year is different from the traditional way, because you collect tickets at the door. And when you have 30,000 folks, five dollars each, that adds up to a lot of money. Then some people have though, “Let’s do one over here.” Some people want to have it privatized. So that’s been a discussion for some time, whether we should privatize Hmong New Year.

Here, Foung discusses the role that money plays in the New Year festivities. The profits that stand to be made from Hmong New Year have contributed to the controversy surrounding the events, and perhaps marred an otherwise respected reputation.

Finally, there is some concern that Hmong New Year lacks the authenticity it once carried. Sophia and I were discussing the visibility of Hmong individuals in America when I asked her what Hmong-Americans do to prevent blending in with the American mainstream. As part of her answer she responded:

Sophia: You know, and I like to think the Hmong New Year and July 4th are big community events that draw our people – our community together. But is there
anything really cultural? Yes and no. I think it’s kind of like Christmas, it’s so commercialized and it sucks the spirit out.

Here, Sophia questions the authenticity of Hmong New Year (and J4) by asking, “is anything really cultural?” She compared Hmong celebrations to Christmas as examples of celebrations that perhaps once had more meaning than they do today. Like Foung and Aranvihn, she is concerned about the commercialization of the event and how that affects the cultural authenticity; “it sucks the spirit out.” Muaj also took time in our discussion to ponder the relative merits of these large gathering events against their changing organization and content. When discussing the importance of engaging with other Hmong individuals and how that is facilitated by large gathering events, Muaj explained:

Muaj: You know, more than anything, I think...let’s say look at my son for instance. Most likely he’s gonna marry a Hmong person. There’s a chance he’ll marry a non-Hmong person, but you know, I need to be connected to people in my community. If he gets married, and then we’re gonna have a Hmong wedding, I’m all on my own, how am I gonna do that? Part of the wedding and the funeral is to tie the family together. Because I certainly, if my son marries a Hmong girl, I cannot do that wedding on my own [chuckles] It’s just not gonna happen.

Here Muaj explains that the connections formed by attending large gathering events will help him in the future when he needs help with events like his son’s wedding. For this reason, Muaj feels at least a moderate need to attend these events, even though he says that he has not been to a Hmong New Year in a few years. Earlier in the interview, we discussed the differences between New Year in Laos and the American celebration.

Muaj: And so I think there’s still a lot of community activities [in Laos], like you go to the New Year in this town, you still meet people, and they’re still gonna
treat each other like if you’re from a different town, come to our New Year, and receive you like guests and treat you in that fashion. I think they still see that in Laos. I think here you’re missing that. It’s just like, oh it’s the New Year, everybody come! It’s not personal. Because the other thing is that the New Year is also run by an organization, so the community doesn’t really take ownership I think. And it’s like, “Oh Lao Family is putting on a New Year and we just go because it’s an event.” It’s...it’s not a community event where this is your town, you take ownership of that and you welcome people from the outside.

Muaj contrasts the two celebrations by identifying who “owns” the event. In Laos, the village organizes and carries out the event, while in the United States it is organized by a private group. To Muaj, this seems to reflect a level of Americanization that strips some value from Hmong New Year, though it is important to note that Muaj states multiple times in the interview that he is not worried about Hmong individuals becoming more American. However, we had a long discussion which will be elaborated upon later regarding the authenticity of activities undertaken at Hmong New Year. To paraphrase, Muaj believes that activities like singing and dancing competitions no longer reflect solely Hmong culture, and while he says he is not concerned about losing these cultural artifacts, he speaks passionately when he identifies the ways in which Hmong New Year is no longer representative of Hmong culture.

Hmong Village

For someone who has never visited Hmong Village before, merely walking into the building can result in sensory overload. At the right time of day, Hmong Village is as busy as any other shopping complex. They browse the diverse variety of products,
uniquely Hmong or otherwise, and enjoy meals from nearly twenty restaurants serving Hmong and other Southeast Asian fare. They converse in rapid-fire Hmong, though the occasional English conversation can be overheard, usually between younger adults and children. The smells are different and hard for the untrained nose to identify. Walking past stalls selling CDs and DVDs will subject the ear to a blast of sound in the form of chanting songs and dramatic film dialogue. The vibrant colors of “new-traditional” Hmong clothes adorn shop exteriors (figure 5) and are displayed vividly on the multitudes of Hmong movie posters taped to the walls. Of course, all of these sights

Figure 5: Toys, Hmong clothing, and movie posters decorate the walls at Hmong Village.

and sounds are familiar to the hundreds and hundreds of people who pass through the former warehouse on a daily basis.
Hmong Village is one of the more recent permanent fixtures of the Hmong community in the Twin Cities. As recently as early 2009, the unassuming white and maroon one story building sat in wait of transformation. A group of about nine Hmong entrepreneurs purchased the warehouse that year and began reserving stalls like those seen in Figure 5 for interested sellers. I spoke to Yong Yia, one of the owners of Hmong Village, about filling the spaces.

ZB: So do you find that you have trouble filling all of the vending spaces or do you have people waiting to-
Yong Yia: We still have whole bunch of people on waiting list. We didn’t open yet the first day we announce that we gonna open a...a flea market, and the first couple days everything fill up, we didn’t even do any construction, just empty building. But we put tapes along the isles, we put numbers, one, two, three, and people just come and they reserve their spot and put down payments, but still a whole bunch of people on waiting list. We have people move from Portland, Oregon, Californians, Michigans, Wisconsin, Mississippi, North Dakota. They just come over to do business in here. People come from all over the country.

He describes the rapidity with which space in the future flea-market was reserved. Like those who visit today, the value of Hmong Village was perceived instantly by members of the community.

Situated on St Paul’s east side, a center of Hmong population that appears to serve as a kind of ethnic enclave in the minds of many Hmong individuals, Hmong Village (along with a similar structure, Hmongtown Marketplace, often referred to as “the flea market(s)”) functions almost as if it were its own central business district. The building’s name can seem misleading at first. How can an entire village be condensed in a single building? Exploration inside leads to the conclusion that “Hmong Village” is not a misnomer. I already detailed the array of product sold in many of the shops, but
perhaps the central feature of Hmong Village is a produce room that occupies almost a third of the building. Vendors here sell their own produce grown in suburbs of the Twin Cities, as well as fruits, vegetables, herbs, and roots grown in more climatically appropriate states. Huge murals cover three of the room’s walls, depicting scenes from Laos that are deeply telling in regards to Hmong history. All of these spaces feel Hmong to an outsider like me. Examples of Hmong culture are ubiquitous, from the movie posters on the walls, to the clothing hanging in the shops, to suppliers of kitchenware crafted from materials not regularly seen at Sears. Beyond all this, though, is a wing of the building devoted to professional services, including dentistry, photography, and legal counsel, among many others. It is the presence of these services that completes the village (or maybe city is a better word) feel.

Three themes arose from discussions with interview respondents surrounding Hmong Village. The first two we are already familiar with: its value as a gathering space and its value as a space for the reproduction of Hmong identity. The third is perhaps a more practical value. Hmong Village provides the Hmong community with jobs, a place for Hmong businesses to thrive, and goods and services that are challenging or impossible to find elsewhere, especially when it comes to services provided by other Hmong individuals. For example, Tong’s experiences trying to find work illustrate how beneficial Hmong Village can be to first generation immigrants:

Tong: I working. I working at a travel company. I work there for 14 years. So they lay me off on December 2008. And I keep looking for work and work but nobody hire me. So I decide to come here because I’m old, and maybe they don’t like me
to work. So that’s why they don’t hire me. So I come to start here and work for myself.

Figure 6: Hmong ABC was not able to survive on University Avenue.

After being laid off by her previous employer, Hmong Village provided Tong with a space where she could work for herself. By simply renting a space in Hmong Village, Tong was able to continue with work that was familiar to her from Laos, and more importantly allowed her to be a more empowered independent worker. When searching for businesses owned by Hmong individuals to observe for this research, I came across an intriguing option: Hmong Arts, Books, and Crafts (ABC) on University Avenue in St Paul(Figure 6). The store front proudly proclaimed its status as “The first Hmong Bookstore,” but I was quickly saddened to see that it was closed. By chance though, I was able to speak with the owner, who now runs the business in Hmong Village and
Hmongtown Marketplace. Yuepheng discussed how he feels when he is in Hmong Village and how his opinions of this space had changed over time:

ZB: o has your opinion of this place changed over time, or do you still feel very proud when you come here?
Yuepheng: I think we all still feel very proud. Because the economy is affecting us. Business has been much slower, so that concerns all of us, but other than that I think we still feel very proud that we have this location. Without this if we don’t move –if Hmong ABC don’t move [to Hmong Village] - I don’t think we can make it on University Avenue because of the economy in general and the construction.

Yuepheng echoes Tong’s story of finding work. Without Hmong Village, both suggest, they would be out of work. Yuepheng implicitly characterizes Hmong Village as a savior of his business. I talked with Yuepheng frequently throughout the course of this research, stopping by his business when I come to Hmong Village, and I encountered him briefly at his stall set up at the Hmong Freedom Celebration. He frequently spoke about how the state of the economy is hurting business, but because of Hmong Village he is able to stay afloat. This is a profound but simple example of the ways in which Hmong Village provides a beneficial space for many members of the Hmong community.

I asked Yong Yia how he feels about helping to create a space like Hmong Village, and he responded:

Yong Yia: Well I feel really good, feel really good that we can do something to benefit the community. Not only just our peoples but also the whole community. Because as you know the economy is so bad right now and people are really scared of going out and do something. And all the malls, all business, you see a lot of shopping malls out of business, but we take a chance to build this and it has been really successful. And um...Hmong Village is a centerpiece of the east side here. These were empty buildings you know, and we change it to a modern...and we put a shopping mall in here and create a lot of jobs, and build the economy.
Yong Yia focuses on jobs throughout the interview. He takes pride in Hmong Village and the role it plays in the urban landscape, going so far as to call it a “centerpiece of the east side.” He discusses the value that other ethnic groups add from their businesses in Hmong Village, but when he says “the east side,” it is likely that he means “the Hmong community,” as it seems that the east side is conceived of by many Hmong as an ethnic neighborhood.

Beyond providing jobs, Hmong Village serves as an outlet for products that are valued by Hmong individuals. I asked Tong to identify a place that was created by members of the Hmong community in the Twin Cities and she chose to discuss Hmong Village.

ZB: And you would say that this building has helped the Hmong community? Tong: Yeah yeah, a lot. ZB: In what ways? Other than providing a place to buy groceries that you’re familiar with? Tong: Yeah yeah...And many other clothing, merchandise yeah. And also food and office. Yeah many things that people can get here. ZB: So things that they can get nowhere else? Tong: Yeah, some that they can’t.

Here, Tong describes Hmong Village as a place that provides goods and services that are not always found in other locations. Pa Der also characterizes Hmong Village this way, and suggests that spending time in this space can give an outsider some idea of Hmong values. She identifies many aspects of these values, but concludes her thought with a brief explanation of material culture:

Pa Der: And then uh...and the things that they value. So if you look at the market stalls, herbs, medicines, traditional clothing, coins and amulets, tools, music
videos – like their videos are so funny! The folk tales, and artwork, there’s art there. So really spending time there and trying to see what they value and how they interact with you and so forth would really give you kind of a clue. Because it’s different from going to...Mall of America you know?

Pa Der lists some material artifacts as general examples of “what they value,” to demonstrate that Hmong Village provides products that are rarely available in other locations. There are very few outlets for Hmong videos, clothing, and food away from the city’s two flea markets, and she suggests that their presence in these places is a good indicator of what material cultural items are generally valued by the Hmong community.

Hmong Village is an example of what Chacko (2003 b) would call an ethnic socioconsumerscape. It falls under this definition by providing products like Tong and Pa Der suggest above, but also because it plays a role as a site of social interaction. Hmong is the primary language spoken at Hmong Village, and the presence of so many Hmong individuals here adds to its value as a gathering space. As Yong Yia mentioned, the space is not exclusively Hmong. Other ethnic groups, including Latin Americans and Somali-Americans, but primarily groups from Southeast Asia, like the Thai and the Karen, have opened businesses at Hmong Village. However, despite the presence of these groups and the valued diversity they provide, the presence of Hmong individuals and culture is strong and primary. I asked Yuepheng to identify a place that is important to Hmong individuals living in the Twin Cities.

Yuepheng: Right right...I think recently, shopping center like this. Probably the main attraction of daily community gathering places. Some people come here to buy some people come here just to find friends and check with other people, to
meet here. So yeah, I think the two shopping centers are two places in recent years that people come to socialize and to just to learn about the community.

Yuepheng not only identifies Hmong Village (and Hmongtown Marketplace) as important to Hmong individuals, but also provides some explanation. He describes the flea markets as “the main attraction,” and discusses its role as a space for socialization and learning about the community. It is clear that Yuepheng believes strongly in the ability of spaces like Hmong Village to bring the community together. Indeed, that is one objective that Yong Yia and his fellow owners had in mind when opening Hmong Village:

ZB: So can you tell me about how this idea got started, about how you decided to open this place?
Yong Yia: Yeah. (...) you have everything in one place, people just come and enjoy the place, and shop, so that’s why we started here, and we see that we also have a dream that we want to have a place, and people can come and feel comfortable and walk around. It’s inside too, so safe environment, and in the winter come, parents, bring their kids, come and eat, and walk around and meet new people in the weekends. So that’s what we build this place.

As Yong Yia suggests here, the desire to bring people together and create a space of communal gathering for Hmong individuals and families was a major impetus in the construction of Hmong Village. Yong Yia and his colleagues seem to have accomplished their goals. The labyrinthine hallways that lace Hmong Village are narrow and allow for the maximum number of business, but spaces for gathering have been built into the structure. The produce room and food court areas both fulfill Yong Yia’s desire for spaces where people can meet and gather due to their more airy feel. It is also easy to see that Hmong Village could be considered a comfortable place for Hmong individuals of all ages, but especially for first generation immigrants who tend to speak less English
than their younger counterparts. Many business names and the names of products are written in RPA (Romanized Popular Alphabet), a writing system using roman characters designed by missionaries in the 1950’s for the Hmong in Asia who lacked a written language. As I mentioned earlier, conversations are frequently held in Hmong, and as a meeting space, Hmong Village draws friends and family from the surrounding area.

However, Hmong Village is not necessarily seen as a site of daily interaction by many Hmong individuals. For example, I asked Sophia where she would take a non-Hmong person interested in learning about Hmong culture, and she qualified her response.

Sophia: Oh gosh. Like really see the community? Hmm see that’s so interesting too, because…it’s funny because I wouldn’t necessarily go there, but I know that’s where a lot of Hmong folks congregate, I would say Hmong Village.

Earlier in the interview, Sophia stated that her daily interactions do not include other Hmong individuals on a regular basis and that she identifies more strongly with those who have similar political beliefs and education rather than those who share an ethnic identifier (though at other points in our discussion it was clear she does identify as a Hmong-American). Instead, she interacts with other Hmong individuals when she makes a special point to, and offered Hmong Village as a place where she would take her family to eat in St Paul. It is clear then that the role that Hmong Village plays differs from person to person. After this conversation with Sophia, I wondered if there was any way to gather more information about what could drive these differing opinions about
Hmong Village. I hypothesized that age or generational status might be a factor, and I asked Houa about this during our interview.

ZB: So do you think places like Hmong Village, the Hmong America Partnership, the Hmong Women Center, do they meet the needs of older and younger Hmong people the same?
Houa: I would say not all, 100%. I see young people hang out at the Hmong Village. I see elderly hang out over there. Not necessarily do shopping, but they have a lot of social life there. I do not know how much it helps them. Maybe there better than nothing. But I still see...because the young people when they get there, they hang out with themselves, by themselves, and they still do a lot of texting, cell phone, in the English way. They have their own view and their own minds. And the elders, I see they enjoy more like the Hmong folk songs, movies, produce. But the young, they enjoy more like the game room. So I still see a lot of gap in between.

Houa expresses a certain amount of disapproval regarding the way that younger Hmong individuals occupy spaces like Hmong Village. She implies that the behaviors of the young could be acted out anywhere, but the reasons that older Hmong choose to visit Hmong Village are space-specific, at least to some degree. Implicit in Houa’s statement is a lack of connectedness between older and younger Hmong individuals that may affect how they perceive Hmong Village.

Finally, the third theme that emerged from discussions on Hmong Village is its role as a space for the reinforcement and reproduction of identity, history, and culture. Unlike J4 and Hmong New Year, though, Hmong Village is permanent. It can be accessed any time of the year, and for any amount of time. What goes on inside Hmong Village is perhaps more representative of lifestyles that could be identified as “Hmong.” Rather than existing as a temporary gathering where behaviors are modified to fit what is acceptable at the celebration, Hmong Village is a site of daily interaction where
behaviors more closely reflect they ways people might actually behave. Its permanence suggests both the durability of the Hmong community in the Twin Cities, as well as the validity of Hmong identities in general. Xai talked briefly during our interview about why Hmong Village is valuable to the Hmong community:

Xai: Before the Hmong flea markets you know, there are a few places that are important. When we looked at the different parts of the city here, Frogtown here is a very important place for the Hmong people here, there a lot of businesses here. The restaurants, the grocery stores, some of the businesses here, that were open here so many people commute here daily to support these businesses. And then eventually we have the flea markets, and I would say the flea markets are somewhat important too. Because they are there and when people go there, probably...basically what I’m trying to say is these places create the Hmong identity, a sense of belonging. So when you go you probably appreciate that, oh you know, it’s good that my people are here and doing these things, have these places.

Xai cogently supports what much of the literature on ethnic spaces suggest: that these spaces create a sense of belonging by offering daily interaction with co-ethnics. Xai’s last point is most telling. When he says that “it’s good that my people are here and doing these things, have these places,” he demonstrates that when occupying spaces like Hmong Village he feels like a member of the ethnic in-group. Statistics from the Census show that substantial numbers of Hmong individuals live in the Twin Cities, but to be able to see them, to be in the same place, speaking Hmong and participating in the types of behaviors that Hmong individuals value is a different matter entirely.

So what are these behaviors? What about Hmong Village actually leads to this sense of belonging that Xai talked about? Pa Der answered these questions when I
asked her the same question I asked Sophia above: where she would take a non-Hmong person interested in learning about Hmong culture.

Pa Der: Oh God, there’s so many…probably…
ZB: Feel free to answer more than one.
Pa Der: There’s a Hmong Cultural Center, the archives, I’m sure you’ve seen. I would probably take them to Hmong Village, the flea market right there on Johnson Parkway. So they could actually get the feel of how Hmong are and the food, and so forth. (…)
ZB: So when you say you would like them to see how Hmong are, like at Hmong Village for example, like what is it exactly about Hmong Village that would demonstrate that?
Pa Der: Yeah…that’s a good point. Good question. What would demonstrate that? Well you know as a professor, I think I think about these things differently. Um, but Hmong are more like a tribal society, agricultural society…I would characterize them as tribal, because even though they’re not really agricultural because they didn’t advance to the point where they were able to do like irrigation you know? So they were more tribal so many of their values, behaviors, you know, norms are really consistent with a tribal society. If someone really wants to learn about Hmong they have to really see how Hmong interact and see how they talk to each other, and the things that they value. And I think you can really see that at Hmong Village, you know. Like if you go to Hmong Village you see, and if you know people they’ll say, “Oh we’re eating. Come and join us! We have this, come and sit down and talk to us, and here, get an extra plate.” And that’s a really collectivist society, tribal society where’s there’s a lot of exchange you know, reciprocity and so forth.

Even though Hmong Village is frequented by Hmong of all ages and generational statuses, Pa Der suggests that the behaviors of people in Hmong Village are reflective of a tribal societal structure similar to what the Hmong practiced in Laos. She selects an intense sense of collectivism and reciprocity as examples of these behaviors and describes the ways they are played out here (sharing of food, for example). In this sense, she identifies Hmong Village as a place where certain behaviors that characterized Hmong life in Southeast Asia are continued in the United States. She makes a general
statement about “the things that they value,” and how these are visible in Hmong Village that suggests deeply rooted cultural significance. I don’t believe that Pa Der would say that all Hmong share specific values, but general ways of life, like a strong belief in collectivism, come through clearly in Hmong Village.

Yong Yia provides another example of these types of behaviors. To him, Hmong Village provides an easier way to continue certain traditions that have been a part of Hmong society for many years without interfering as much with new American lifestyles as they might have otherwise. Here, he describes the transformation of a Hmong tradition that was facilitated by Hmong Village:

Yong Yia: Usually in Hmong custom, when you...have a family, a close relative come from out of state, you have to cook, you know dinners, lunch everything, when they go home you have to buy a whole chicken you know that? And pack chickens and the rice, for them to go home, and when they get halfway, they’re hungry at a rest area, they eat it. But right now I can see, just come to Hmong Village [laughs], and because we have a lot of food in here, they just come and eat breakfast and they just pack a lunch and eat a lunch in here and give to the family and go home. So that helps a lot!

In Yong Yia’s example, we see the ways in which Hmong Village both reinforces cultural practices and allows them to be adapted to life in America.

Finally, Pa Der discusses identity reproduction in the context of raising children. She identifies Hmong Village as a place where children can learn by observing Hmong culture, which is valuable to many parents because they believe it will help children to want to carry on Hmong traditions. We discussed these themes after she asked me to describe why I wanted to do this project.
Pa Der: Yeah you know all of that stuff, like the ethnicity, you could really see it because when you go there it’s loud, and then people have their kids running around, you’ll see little kids running around without their parents, like little two or three year olds running around.
ZB: Yeah I did see that.
Pa Der: But that’s how the community is. They believe the community raises the children. You know it takes a village to...everybody takes responsibility for kids, and so forth.
ZB: It kind of struck me as surprising, because the first thing that I thought is, “wow, the parents must feel really safe, they must feel like it’s a really safe place to let their kids run around.”
Pa Der: Oh yeah definitely! I think there’s a sense of...and I don’t know what that’s all about, maybe it’s not necessarily feeling safe, but maybe that it’s a good place for kids to experiment right? And to be more independent, learn how to be independent. Maybe it is safety in that way.
ZB: So to become independent in that sort of community bubble, what does that entail? I mean...like becoming independent around members of your same group.
Pa Der: Ok yes, I know what you mean. Well for Hmong parents, the really traditional ones, like my parents, it’s believed that kids have to learn on their own, rather than being told. Or don’t ask too many questions from elders because then you’re seen - you know that means you’re not smart enough to learn it on your own. And so Hmong children will learn how to observe, and to mimic. And so that’s how Hmong children are taught to learn and become independent. So you go, you watch, you mimic, and so forth, and don’t ask too many questions.
ZB: And so you think that it’s...beneficial then for the children to, you know, grow up or become independent in a place where everyone understand that?
Pa Der: Absolutely yeah. And that’s why the parents feel that this is safe because you’re learning behaviors from other Hmong people. So feel free to run around, play around, but the behaviors that you’re mimicking and learning and observing are those of Hmong people rather than... cause I think Hmong parents...they really fear losing their traditions and their culture and language you know. So you’re not seeing Hmong kids running around the neighborhood playing with other white kids as much as they would allow with Hmong kids.

In this long exchange, Pa Der rations through her thoughts as to why Hmong Village is perceived as a safe place for children to learn. She describes an implicit understanding among Hmong individuals that everyone has a certain responsibility to ensure that
children are protected and grow up learning from (specifically) Hmong adults. However, she does qualify her response by saying these views are more likely to be held among “really traditional” parents. In this way, Hmong identities are encouraged among children occupying this space, and to some extent the security and learning environment of Hmong Village offer resistance and discourage the development of solely American identities. I believe that Pa Der’s statements are extremely accurate.

During the hours I spent at Hmong Village during the course of this research, it was almost impossible to visit without seeing children running around unattended. Sitting at a table in the cafeteria, I could always see children by themselves or in groups, playing games or talking with each other while their parents worked their stalls or restaurants. They appeared relatively independent too. Though they would often wait outside their parents’ stalls, they would also get up to walk around, visit other businesses, and talk to other adults and children. Not being a child psychologist, I cannot say for sure whether or not they were learning Hmong behaviors and developing Hmong identities, but if they were going to accomplish this away from the home, Hmong Village would certainly be an ideal place.

Hmong Village was not discussed as often as Hmong New Year and J4. Perhaps it is the building’s nature as a permanent and daily interaction site that made it seem less noteworthy during interviews. Maybe its role as a reproducer of daily “Hmong” activities made it less exciting than the two large gathering events. However, it was certainly not ignored among interviewees, and those who had direct ties to the place
(Yong Yia, Yuepheng, and Tong) were eager to talk about the benefits it provides for themselves and the Hmong community in general. Hmong Village fulfills multiple roles for the Hmong in the Twin Cities and functions differently than Hmong New Year or J4. It is a space for reproduction of tradition, but it also used to raise children on the values that are deemed valuable by many Hmong individuals. On a more basic level, it empowers Hmong individuals from an economic standpoint, providing jobs and goods for those who would ordinarily have a challenging time finding them.

However, there are some in the Twin Cities who see potential pitfalls where others see benefits. To Sophia, Hmong Village is part of an ethnic enclave on the east side of St Paul. Here, Sophia and I discuss ethnic enclaves after she raises the issue of their presence in the Twin Cities. While she acknowledges that ethnic enclaves can help minorities who feel unwelcome in mainstream society, she identifies them as places that can be “escaped” to.

Sophia: Yeah, I was reading somewhere...someone said they could be in Chinatown, in San Francisco, live there and not speak a word of English or read a word of English. And that’s really dangerous I think. I mean my God, we live in the United States of America, we have to learn how to operate and function, speaking the English language

[...]

So ethnic enclaves can be dangerous because I think it creates a safe cocoon for ethnic minorities who feel unwelcome from mainstream society, and then they escape to their ethnic enclaves and never learn how to navigate with the larger society. On the one hand, I also understand how if you don’t feel comfortable with mainstream society, you haven’t felt welcome, then you have a safe place to feel welcome. You can walk into Hmong Village and see people who look like you and share your common interest in food and culture. And for some people they need that sense of comfort and welcome. So it does serve its purpose as well.
Here, Sophia complicates ethnic enclaves, specifically identifying Hmong Village as representative of these areas. Earlier in the interview Sophia took care to communicate that she does not interact with other Hmong individuals on a regular basis. She describes herself as American first and foremost (a topic which will be treated in the next chapter), and she seems to approach the idea of ethnic enclaves from an “outsider” perspective. This is noteworthy because she does not characterize Hmong Village with quite the same glowing positivity that others did. Her response is tepid and qualified, but even though she describes some drawbacks to the presence of Hmong Village, she still identifies it as a place that Hmong individuals use to gather and reproduce (primarily) Hmong identities.

A second example comes from Houa, though she does not make the point herself. During our conversation, she mentioned that the Eighteen Council, an organization made up of a representative from each of the eighteen Hmong clans, recently moved all of their meetings to Hmong Village. Though the Eighteen Council has no legal authority, their resolutions and policies hold sway among the Hmong in the area. By moving their conferences to Hmong Village, they (implicitly or otherwise) identified it as a seat of power in the Twin Cities. However, the Council is seen largely as a “traditional” body, and it has been criticized for continuing practices that no longer serve the Hmong community well in the United States.

During the course of this research, I had the opportunity to observe at a conference designed to identify the causes of violence, both domestic and otherwise, in
the Hmong community at the Hmong American Partnership’s (HAP) building in St Paul. At this event, community members had the opportunity to remember those lost due to violence and suggests the ways in which the Hmong community can move forward in a more healthy manner. After the open session, those who attended broke into small groups to answer questions that got at the heart of why this violence is occurring. There I met Lue, a young man who spoke out against the Eighteen Council and identified their leadership style as backward and unproductive. Furthermore, he believes that because there is a lack of Hmong family counselors and psychologists women who have problems with their husbands are forced to turn to the Council for help, and that their response is often “be a better wife or something.”

Here, Lue gives voice to those who disagree with the status of the Eighteen Council as a primary leadership body, and his concerns have implications for the role of Hmong Village as a space representative of Hmong identity. The use of Hmong Village by the council confers onto it the values of that organization, given its weight in the community. It is not unreasonable to guess (though none of my interview respondents voiced this concern) that the value of Hmong Village could be diminished among those who contest the Eighteen Council’s leadership. If perceived backwardness and unproductive policies continue and emanate from voices inside Hmong Village, the space itself could become representative of lifestyles that many in the community disagree with vehemently, rather than a space of the beneficial aspects of Hmong culture, tradition, and identity that so many find inclusive and comforting. Like any
other public space, Hmong Village becomes a space of contested meaning that may prove more divisive than inclusive.

It is self-evident now that Hmong Village plays a very different role when it comes to issues of identity. Though it is a gathering space, it is less an event than a site of daily interaction. Here, identity is communicated at a steady pace, easy to miss unless you think about it. The young are raised in a partially hermetic ethnic environment. It offers financial support, and a space where the endeavors of Hmong men and women can thrive. Though it is a place of contested meaning, these roles feature prominently in the construction of Hmong identities in the Twin Cities.

The Hmong Cultural Center

There are a number of organizations created by and for (primarily) Hmong individuals in the Twin Cities. Lao Family and other social service organizations often work to assist in the transition of Hmong immigrants to the United States, and more specialized groups like the Association for the Advancement of Hmong Women in Minnesota focus on specific needs of certain groups within the community. But, while it may not be deemed the most important organization for Hmong individuals in the area, the Hmong Cultural Center provides an array of services to any member of the community (Hmong or otherwise) who wishes to use them. The center organizes language classes (both English and Hmong (Figure 7)), lessons on how to conduct
traditional Hmong practices like marriage and funerals, as well as *qeej* instruction for Hmong youth, and possesses a library of Hmong studies containing enormous tomes, research papers, theses and dissertations, videos, and its own scholarly publication, the *Hmong Studies Journal*. By providing these services and more, the Hmong Cultural Center fills a number of niches within the community that make it an important organization for the Hmong in the Twin Cities. Like the Hmong spaces discussed previously, the Hmong Cultural Center acts as a space for the reproduction of Hmong ethnic identity by providing a location for important aspects of Hmong society, like the *qeej* and funeral ceremony practices, to be taught to the next generation.

Entering the Hmong Cultural Center is an underwhelming experience. I expected to find a standalone building devoted to this organization, demonstrating the success and important role it played in the community. Instead, the Cultural Center occupies a few connected offices in a nondescript brick building on University Avenue in St. Paul. One small sign is the only external identification the Center provides, and once inside the building there was a bit of guesswork involved in finding it. The walls of the Cultural Center are plastered with newspaper clippings from around the country that have published stories about the Hmong. They are organized by decade, turning the room into a virtual timeline of the experiences of Hmong in Laos and the United States. In the adjacent room, a few glass cases contain artifacts of Hmong life in Laos, ranging from farm tools, to traditional clothing, to detailed sketches of musical instruments. This chamber leads to the resource library and conference room, where all manner of works
about the Hmong are stored in a neat and organized manner. Books, magazines, dissertations, videos and any other manner of information about the Hmong are available here, cataloguing the experiences and history of a group despite the challenging nature of the task.

Figure 7: A sign on the Cultural Center door asks for those inside to speak Hmoob (Hmong) as much as possible.

One of the primary goals of the Hmong Cultural Center is to work towards cultural education and to teach both Hmong and non-Hmong individuals alike about Hmong culture and history. Qeej lessons provided by the Cultural Center contribute to this effort by providing a way for youth to learn about an instrument that has been
important to Hmong individuals and playing a role in Hmong society for thousands of years. The qeej is a reed pipe instrument that plays an important role in Hmong funerals, serving as a mechanism to guide the soul of the deceased person back to the place where they were born. I will elaborate upon this relationship in a chapter seven. At this time though, I will focus on this instrument as an important cultural artifact and as a way for those learning its intricacies to engage with Hmong culture. For example, during our interview Xai stated that the Cultural Center helps to build a sense of belonging, and I asked him to elaborate on this idea:

Xai: It helps especially for the younger kids, it does help them to build a sense of understanding of the Hmong culture, to help them see from a different perspective, “what am I and, and who I am, and why am I Hmong?” And so here at the Cultural Center we offer a musical instrument class called the qeej. Qeej is a unique musical instrument. I consider it to be an ancient reed pipe instrument that is uniquely Hmong. When you see the instrument you automatically know that it’s Hmong if you’ve seen it before. We teach the kids to play the songs, not just for a funeral purpose but also for entertainment purposes. People tend to associate the qeej with the funeral. But we tell them it’s not just for funeral but also for entertainment to be played at the festival, New Year Celebration, community events. When they come, kids, they learn and so they have the opportunity to see and to be engaged with other Hmong kids, and to build friendship, to build self esteem, to um...build social skills and other things.

Here, Xai explains that the qeej lessons provided by the Hmong Cultural Center accomplish multiple objectives. First, teaching the instrument to Hmong youth helps them to get a better grasp on Hmong history and culture. In a society where nearly everyone is exposed the dominant culture almost ubiquitously, the Cultural Center serves as an outlet for a culture that is pushed to the margins. In the minds of many Hmong youth, it is likely difficult (perhaps even undesirable) to maintain Hmong cultural
identifiers in mainstream spaces, but at the Hmong Cultural Center, these ethnic identifiers can be practiced and reproduced in a space designed for them. Second, these lessons, and the entire Cultural Center more broadly, allow students to interact with other Hmong individuals, further reproducing Hmong ethnicity and societal values.

The qeej class is not the only way that the Cultural Center recreated Hmong identity and history. Marriage and funeral ceremonies are also identified frequently as important aspects of Hmong society and identity. When I asked Muaj which places in the Twin Cities are important to the Hmong community, he discussed gathering events like J4 and Hmong New Year, but also singled out marriage and funeral rituals as ceremonies that should be continued. Khou agreed with this idea during our interview:

Khou: One of the most important things that we should continue and that the younger generation should learn the value of are things that occur at a funeral. Because depending on age funerals can last up to three or four days, and it’s very rough, but I’ve noticed that a lot of the younger generations think like, “Oh is this necessary, why does it have to go on this long?” So would like, or I think that funeral practices should be one of the main things that younger generations should learn that’s very important.

Khou identifies the funeral as an important aspect of Hmong culture and specifically suggests that young Hmong individuals should be taught the values that the funeral communicates. This imperative to keep funeral and marriage traditions alive is shared by the Hmong Cultural Center, as lessons in conducting these ceremonies is provided by the instructors here. Xai continues his discussion of the value of the Center by explaining the value of Hmong funerals and weddings and implicitly suggesting that the Cultural Center works to communicate these values by keeping these traditions alive:
Xai: Many of our creation stories reflect what we do today. So for example wedding, funeral, it goes back to this creation story. There was this creator and his wife and created this first man and woman and because of this and that there was sickness, disease and death, and so that’s why we have to do Hmong funeral ceremony this way, and it’s why we have to Hmong wedding ceremony this way, based on this creation story. So basically these creations are like our genesis, and I usually don’t want to make comparisons but it’s kind of like our holy text. And so it makes sense. In the past I study social science, I took some anthropology classes and some sociology and so, according to some anthropologists they say, mythology to some culture, some culture it may be just, it’s not relevant, but to some cultures mythology or a creation story is what they practice on a regular basis. So it makes sense and the more I deeply think of things I see a value why we do the things we do, the practices that we do, the language that we speak, the way we conduct ceremonies, the way we see things morally and ethically too.

Xai explains that the marriage and funeral ceremonies are important because they perpetuate mythologies present in Hmong society for generations. Here Xai makes a general statement about Hmong individuals as a group, but it shows that he personally conceives of these rituals as important to Hmong society. More importantly, if Xai’s assessment is accurate, it shows that the teaching of these ceremonies communicates a certain sense of ethics and decorum expected of Hmong individuals, though he didn’t elaborate on this point. The Hmong Cultural Center then provides for the Hmong community a space for the communication of these values through the perpetuation of culturally significant practices that characterize, in some sense, what it means to be Hmong.

Perhaps what is most significant about the Hmong Cultural Center is that is serves the Hmong community as a site of memory. Jenks (2008) and Smith (2008) discuss sites of memory as places where ethnic identity is forged and a sense of
belonging created by drawing on a shared history or past experiences. In later chapters I will detail more of these spaces that draw on imagery and artwork to create this sense of belonging, but the Hmong Cultural Center accomplishes this goal in a different way.

The resource library at the Cultural Center contains volumes upon volumes of information about the history of the Hmong, from China to Laos to the United States. For example, Ying describes his first experiences with Hmong Cultural Center’s resource library:

Ying: [...] because back in my home country of Laos, we don’t have a Hmong library like this. So I don’t know anything about this. So for here, it made me really happy, really proud to have a library. So we do research about Hmong people and get to know what we don’t know, the past. Like a lotta people in Laos, we don’t get a chance to learn both sides. So we only learn about Laos people’s side, politic, Lao government side. So we don’t know anything about the world, the outside world. So that’s one thing that’s very important to me, that I learn from.

Ying expresses a sense of empowerment provided by this library. Without it, he claims that he would not have had the opportunities he has had to learn about the history of the Hmong. In this way, the Cultural Center has helped him to become more connected to other Hmong individuals through shared history and experiences. The information contained in the resource library certainly covers an incredible breadth of knowledge, but by encapsulating a substantial portion of Hmong history from multiple perspectives, a larger picture of Hmong society can be created for those who have the time or desire to construct it. Xai elaborates on this point:

Xai: And when I was in my college years, I did root seeking, I was...I kinda had identity crisis to be honest, I didn’t really know much about the history of my people, my parents, my grandparents. And so I wanted to know more about who
To Xai, the Cultural Center was at the heart of a personal identity-seeking venture. By volunteering in this space, learning about Hmong history and culture, and engaging with the information he learned here, he was able to better grasp what his heritage and ethnicity meant to him. He states that he now has a “better sense” of who he is, which, when examined in the context of this quote, suggests that who he is has a great deal to do with his ethnic identity. In this way, it is clear that the identity reproduction that occurs at the Hmong Cultural Center is of immense value to Xai, and likely to many other Hmong individuals facing the same questions he once did.

The Hmong Cultural Center is not large, and Xai estimates that only six percent of the Hmong population in the Twin Cities uses its resources and classes with any frequency. Unlike the previous ethnic spaces discussed, the Hmong Cultural Center could most readily be described as a site of memory, forging a sense of belonging and ethnic identity among those who engage with it. This space communicates one group’s idea of what is to be valued by Hmong individuals, and while surely the Hmong as a group do not necessarily agree with these ideas, it is important to recognize that the organization provides a space for these values to be played out.
Summary

Ethnic places have shifted in style and substance over the course of American history. From inner cities and ethnic neighborhoods to heterolocal organization and dispersed ethnic places, the spatial characteristics of ethnic landscapes have shifted noticeably. What is clear though is that ethnic spaces still play an important role in the ethnic communities that construct and occupy them. Hmong spaces in the Twin Cities are certainly no exception to this “rule” and have constructed over the last forty years an interesting and complex collective of valued spaces. The actual value of these spaces is of course always debated and shifting based on context and the inevitable changes faced by Hmong immigrants in a new country.

These spaces are rarely occupied and used in the same capacity. Though they all are characterized here as Hmong spaces, they are certainly not of uniform importance and role. Gathering events like Hmong New Year and J4 perpetuate traditions of gathering, serve as sites of commemoration and power contestation, and acts as a physical space for networking among co-ethnics. Hmong Village and the Hmong Cultural Center are spaces of daily interaction, though they both play different roles as well. Hmong Village reproduces daily identities passively by simply existing as a space where Hmong individuals gather. The Cultural Center is more direct, offering classes and information for those who choose to learn.
Applying frameworks of ethnic spaces discussed by other scholars, we can see the diversity of ethnic spaces created by the Hmong community. Chacko (2003b) discusses ethnic socioconsumerscapes and ethnic arenas, and both of these types of places are represented among the ethnic landscape in the Twin Cities. Hmong Village and large gathering events (Hmong New Year and the Hmong Freedom Celebration), respectively, are prime examples of these places. Drawing on traditions of gathering, encouraging social interaction and the use of the Hmong language, and reinforcing conceptions of Hmong identity, these types of spaces are frequently discussed as important by the respondents to this study. Other scholars like Jenks (2008) and Smith (2008) discuss sites of memory, represented in the Twin Cities by locations like the Hmong Cultural Center, among others I will discuss later. Clearly though, academic frameworks of ethnic spaces can be applied to the little-studied spaces created and used by Hmong individuals in the Twin Cities.

It must be recognized though that the divisions of these types of spaces are in reality not sharp or well defined. The functionality of the Hmong spaces discussed here demonstrates clearly that specific spaces straddle definitions, acting in the capacity of a variety of categories. For example, it would be challenging to argue that Hmong New Year does not fit every type of ethnic space discussed here. No matter the framework used to categorize these spaces, they have roles to play in identity formation.

However, identity is a challenging subject to concretize. In this chapter I have demonstrated that ethnic spaces are closely and crucially linked with ethnic identity.
Respondents routinely made statements about this relationship, demonstrating lucidity about this connection, even if it is not apparent in an academic sense. In fact, this is one of the most crucial roles ethnic spaces play, as they are able to put forth these identities and values that come to characterize a group, for better or for worse. It is clear that different types of spaces are important for different reasons, ranging from heritage reproduction and networking, to cataloguing of history. While these spaces all contribute to identity formation, it is crucial to remember that identity is complex and shifting, a topic I will elaborate upon in chapter six.
CHAPTER 6: IDENTITIES: CAN “HMONG” AND “AMERICAN BE SEPARATE IN THE UNITED STATES?

Overview

Discussing the identities of interview respondents can be a challenging task. Throughout the last chapter, readers will have noticed that I used the phrase “Hmong individuals” frequently and at the expense of less-clumsy terms like “Hmong people,” “Hmong-Americans” or just simply “the Hmong.” While I have demonstrated that the spaces within the Hmong community in the Twin Cities reproduce and reinforce Hmong identity, it is perhaps inappropriate to suggest that “Hmong” is the only identity that Hmong individuals wish to embody and perpetuate. In fact, while all of my respondents would identify themselves as Hmong in some capacity, it is nearly unthinkable that any would not also identify as American. The degree to which this is the case is obviously quite variable, but it is telling nonetheless that most, if not all, of my interview respondents do not view these identities as mutually exclusive or conflicting by nature.

In this chapter I will demonstrate the complicated nature of identity. It is easy to conceive of ethnicity and identity as binary issues – either these interviews identify as Hmong or they don’t, American or not. Even a cursory glance at contemporary literature surrounding acculturation and identity quells this notion though, as scholars (Portes and Zhou 1995, Portes and Rumbaut 2001) argue that identity is much more complicated.
The respondents to this study would likely balk at being forced to choose between American and Hmong identifiers, opting instead to view themselves as both.

These types of identity statements were expressed strongly in interviews. It became clear quickly though that no one would identify as either non-Hmong or non-American, and it became necessary instead to understand why and how individuals identified themselves in either of these two ways. Because both identities were so valued, it is imprudent to examine statements where the interviewee identifies as Hmong. Instead, what came through more strongly were the ways in which the respondent identified with other Hmong individuals. The same distinction applies to American identities. These two ideas will serve as the backbone of this chapter, and I will demonstrate how my interview respondents relate their identities to other Hmong and American individuals. A third section will combine these two identities by focusing on a much-expressed desire to conditionally maintain Hmong identities in the United States, and how critically many important aspects of Hmong identity are embodied spatially. Finally, I will attempt to answer a question implicitly posed by many of my interviewees: can “Hmong” and “American” identities remain separate in the United States? That is to say, without the ability to return to Laos or the lifestyles lived out in Southeast Asia, is every Hmong individual in the United States also “American?”
Identification with other Hmong

When examining interviews for the ways in which the respondents identified with other Hmong individuals, four prominent themes emerged: a strong belief in collectivist values, a sense of shared history, a bond despite international and (often) historical differences, and importance placed on “knowing who you/we/I are/am.” These themes span the spectrum from the specific to the abstract, and together show that identification with other Hmong is a phenomenon that is complicated and sometimes difficult for these individuals to explain. The conception of what makes a person Hmong is contested and complex, but nearly every interview respondent was able to provide an answer that could be generally grouped into one of these categories.

When discussing Asian cultures in the United States, we often fall back on the collectivist culture generalization. That is, we characterize Asian cultures as being so much more focused on the family, the group, and society as a whole than our own Western culture. Perhaps this is just a generalization, true in some cases but not in others. Perhaps it is a simplistic way to characterize vibrant, diverse, and complex societies Americans are simply less familiar with. Despite these possibilities, themes of collectivism pervaded discussions of ethnicity and identity with my interview subjects. Collectivist values and a strong sense of group cohesion, despite inevitable differences of opinion, were frequently cited as central to a Hmong identity. Indeed, when issues of ethnicity and identity were raised in interviews, nearly everyone discussed collectivism,
a shared history, and ethnic bonds that span continents as reasons why they identified themselves as Hmong.

Pa Der provides an excellent example of collectivist values and culture being used as a tool for identification with other Hmong individuals:

ZB: So is there anything about being a Hmong person that you think separates you or sets you apart from non-Hmong people here?
Pa Der: Oh yeah! I think uh, oh definitely. I think Hmong culture is very different from white culture. We believe in the collectivist value, the sense of community, like when you say, “My community,” it has a deep meaning for Hmong people. Same as like Native Americans you know like when they say, “My community” it’s actually very - there’s a deep meaning to it. And also that sense of responsibility to the people around me. And respect, like respecting people and so forth. And the sense of humility, that we’re all one in the same.

Here, Pa Der explicitly cites collectivist values as something that separates her to some extent from non-Hmong Americans. She suggests that the word “community” carries different weight for Hmong individuals, and that to her, “community” suggests a more powerful bond than it might to “white culture.” Most importantly, she ties together the ideas of collectivism and community, linking the perceived “deep meaning” found in the word to collectivism in a way that suggests that there is a similar depth and importance to that concept as well. More than just identifying cultural differences as a separator, she imbues “collectivism” with a deep meaning that is not accessible to “white” (read: mainstream) Americans, thus giving the term status as Hmong-identifier.

Neal, a university professor, was less specific but still suggested that collectivist values are crucial to his Hmong identity. Near the end of our interview, I asked him what it means to him to be Hmong.
Neal: I’m a human, it’s my job to learn, to be proud of what we have around is. That’s to maximize my happiness, my potential contribution, my appreciate to be human being, go beyond just my family, to appreciate things around me.

Though it is only one aspect of his response, Neal highlights his “potential contribution” as an important aspect of what it means to be Hmong. This goes beyond identifying collectivism as a valued Hmong trait. This shows Neal’s personal feeling on the subject and provides a first-hand statement on the importance of societal contribution. Neal would feel “less Hmong” if he possessed a more individualist attitude. His position in regards to “going beyond just my family” to contribute to society in general demonstrates his deeply held values that to be Hmong is to put the larger group first. During my interview with Foung, he elaborated upon these collectivist values and detailed the ways in which they are manifested among Hmong individuals:

Foung: So back to the other question. ZB: So I was asking what types, or if there are any at all in your opinion, Hmong behaviors or traditions that you think are important to continue to practice here in the United States? Foung: You know one thing that I’m very proud of being Hmong, is that we care about each other. My answer to you might not be as clear because sometimes I jump outside my culture, talking in, and sometimes I’m also talking about myself inside. It’s that, and I see that uniqueness too in our culture, because I’ve been around, and observed, I’ve been around many cultures and I can see the distinctness that we help each other with chores around the house, and we try to be connected to other people. We are a gregarious society, we’re very sociable, we talk a lot (...) so that part is very unique, we take care of our own. That’s just...unique in some way...I may be wrong, I may be inaccurate on this to say that there’s no Hmong person that are homeless. There may be one or two. But not in abundance. Because we put everybody in our house.

Not only does Foung believe that these types of collectivist attitudes should be maintained in the United States, but they are easily seen and remain quite strong. Foung attended Lao school while he was growing up, and he may be thinking of this group
when he says that he has seen many different cultures. It is telling then that he identifies Hmong collectivist values as a distinguishing trait from other Asian groups.

While collectivism is often portrayed in the United States as common to most Asian cultures, in the minds of Hmong individuals these values are so strongly associated with Hmong culture that it serves as a type of ethnic boundary, an outcome of an intense and strong group bond. More importantly though is Foung’s final statement, that there are incredibly small numbers of homeless Hmong. If his supposition is true, it shows just how intensely collectivism is valued as a Hmong identity trait. Foung is clearly speaking about the Hmong group as a whole here, which shows the extent to which he believes this is essentially a pan-Hmong identifier.

The Hmong population in the United States has increased substantially since the end of the Vietnam War, and as the larger Hmong community has grown larger it has grown more diverse. There many reasons for differences of opinion among large groups in America, but a thread that ties nearly every Hmong individual in the United States together is a common collective historical experience. Memories of the War and its aftermath are etched indelibly in the minds of first- and 1.5 generation Hmong immigrants, and as such are often communicated to children and to lesser extent grandchildren. These experiences were so traumatic and so widespread throughout Hmong society that they characterize the history of the Hmong in the United States. For example, when I asked Foung if he feels that there is anything that separates him from non-Hmong Americans, he replied:
Foung: (...) one thing that distinguishes me from my non-Hmong peers are the life experiences that I have. Coming from a developing country and exited because of war. Being persecuted, then cross over to an unknown country, and then you know, flew here and adjust to a new life. That life experience is very, very unique as a Hmong person. I would say that people said, “How do I identify myself as Hmong?” I said, “If you live similar history you’d be...what group of person you declare yourself to be.” If someone would have to go through the same process as any Hmong person, that would be a Hmong person at that time.

Foung’s statement is interesting because to some extent it contradicts what previous scholars have written regarding the construction of Hmong ethnic boundaries. Here, he suggests that merely sharing life experiences or a common history with the Hmong would make a person a part of that group. Hein (2006) demonstrates that Hmong ethnic boundaries tend to be closed off and restricted, but Foung characterizes the Hmong group as open and inclusive by suggesting that other groups (like the Lao) who were displaced along with the Hmong may be considered co-ethnics. More importantly though, Foung touches on a theme that runs throughout these interviews: the displacement, the destruction, the persecution faced by the Hmong in Southeast Asia is part of what ties the group together, and their subsequent migration to the United States helps to solidify that bond. Xai agreed when I asked him a similar question:

Xai: To be a Hmong person I would say that you have to be a person that is aware of probably where you are and where you came from, know your family, the history, probably not very into detail and depth, but have a sense of understanding your root, your clan, who your relatives are. Perhaps maybe speak some Hmong. To be able to participate in some of the ceremonies, or even to observe, you don’t have to be an expert in these things. There’s a lot of opinions to who and what they think, and so I have different opinions on what a Hmong person is or who should be a Hmong person. So for me, I don’t want to exclude, I want to include. And so being a Hmong person you basically have to have a common history, a common experience, and that’s it.
Here, Xai offers his explanation of who is Hmong, a quick, simple, and inclusive definition that identifies shared experiences and histories as the most important driver of Hmong identity. Even though his own identification with other Hmong individuals is more nuanced and complicated, Xai believes that anyone who shares these qualities can identify as Hmong. And, while he acknowledges that others have different opinions on who can identify as Hmong based on performance of certain rituals, speaking the Hmong language, and many other traits, it is noteworthy that Xai’s explanation encompasses one of the only personal aspects that nearly every Hmong individual in the United States has in common.

Xai and Foung both demonstrate the importance of shared history as a primary driver of identification with other Hmong, going so far as to suggest that this is the only qualifier a person must meet to do so. They emphasize their arguments by agreeing on another highly debated issue: whether or not a person needs to be Hmong “by blood” to be considered Hmong. Here, Xai continues from his statement above:

Xai: Some people would say that to be a Hmong person you have to have a Hmong last name, a clan name. But again, maybe I’m looking from a western perspective, but no, you don’t have to have a Hmong last name to be Hmong. How about those bi-racial kids you know? What if their father is Caucasian, or African American or Mexican American but the mother is Hmong? Or what if someone that is a non-Hmong person but is adopted by Hmong people? In the Hmong community we do accept adopting. Hmong parents, you know, they adopt non-Hmong kids, like Lao or Thai kids, and they grew up literally a Hmong person, but you consider them as a Hmong person, because they were adopted, obviously they have the last name of their father. So people have different ideas of what the Hmong identity is.
Xai seems to agree with the contemporary body of literature surrounding ethnic groups and recognizes that being Hmong is largely a social construction. He argues his point using the example of the adoption of non-Hmong children by Hmong families, claiming that he would still view these children as Hmong because they were raised by Hmong parents. Here, he expresses his disagreement with notion that having a Hmong clan name or Hmong blood is essential to be a member of the group, thus reinforcing the importance of shared history. Foung argues a similar point:

Foung: And you know, if we question ourselves, about what is truly Hmong, because a number of Hmong people are adopted to a Hmong family. Going back to I think one of your earlier questions, one thing that is very unique about us, I don’t know, I found it fascinating that we are a sub-culture, but we are a culture that will adopt a society that are more powerful than us to be our children. So you know, at one point we live in...some of us are Chinese kid, Lao kid, Indian kid, Thai kid, that are brought up to become Hmong. (...)That’s one thing I’m kinda proud, we are sub-culture, and a culture that’s been looked down upon, but we are a culture that has the capability to adopt people. (...) So even though some people say, “I’m Hmong,” but they maybe have more Chinese blood than Hmong blood, but they identify themselves as Hmong now because they’ve been through the route of history, coming to the United States.

Here, he demonstrates how porous ethnic boundaries can be when faced with a powerful and encompassing shared history. Foung explicitly raises the issue of the importance of “Hmong blood” and quickly argues against it as a primary ethnic identifier. In order for Foung to identify with other Hmong individuals, they need only to have a shared history or be raised to understand that shared history; by doing so, at least in the opinions of Xai and Foung, they have the right to identify as Hmong.
However, identification with other Hmong individuals can be influenced by blood. Though I do not believe that Seexeng would disagree with what Foung and Xai believe, it is important for him personally to be “pure Hmong:”

Seexeng: One thing that selfishly I’ve very proud of, and you speak about being a Hmong person living in the Twin Cities, do I feel different from others? It’s not about others, I just feel great...and I fear to really check it out. I fear. I mean, to get my DNA test, and what is my real makeup? I’m very proud to say that, I’m pure Hmong. And one of the book that influenced me, “The Last of the Mohicans.” Way back in high school when I read it, what if you are that last of the line? What happens? And I feel like that line, my ancestors carried on to my parents, to me, I’m pure Hmong. That’s the only thing I feel good about, because I’m uniquely different from the mass. Again within the community I’m still somewhat unique. So that is the only thing I could say that I’m really proud of. And I know my kids are Hmong [chuckles], but then I’m gonna leave that decision to them.

ZB: Yeah, I mean as far as I’m concerned, you are sort of what you identify as. So you say you’re afraid of getting a blood test you know, maybe you’re not full blooded Hmong? But that doesn’t matter, because to you, that’s what you are. The blood test doesn’t say anything about you. That’s my view anyway.

Seexeng: I like that view. You know like I said to you, I’m so fearful of making a statement - a not well researched, informed statement. And because of that I fear [chuckles] I fear for that reality check. And that’s why I said in my mind, the last breath I take, I’ll probably take happily saying that I’m proud to be who I am and continue to be to this point. Out of my control. But if I had to get my blood tested and I’m maybe not what I think I am, it might be devastating to a certain point. [laughs] That’s what I mean.

Here, Seexeng demonstrates that the concept of ethnicity being influenced by blood still exists. For him, his ability to support his claim of being Hmong and being like other Hmong individuals by being “uniquely different from the masses” is important to him.

Seexeng’s comments, though made about him personally, could be construed as oppositional to Xai and Foung’s. Instead, by explaining that he will leave decisions like
this up to his children, he implicitly suggests that he acknowledges that social belonging and personal choice are drivers of Hmong ethnic identification.

Perhaps one of the strongest indicators that Hmong identities are being actively maintained is the transnational group identification expressed by many interview respondents. While it is clear that the war in Laos and its resulting diaspora is a significant factor for Hmong ethnic identification, it is not so great as to cause Hmong individuals to feel distant or unattached to co-ethnics across the sea. During my interview with Tswjfwm, we discussed differences between the Hmong in the United States and the Hmong remaining in Southeast Asia:

Tswjfwm: (...) here we are like a modern Hmong person, back in Laos and Thailand and Chine it’s very different. They argue back and forth that perhaps they are the real Hmong people and we’re the fake Hmong people. But you know when we left we kept just that one culture. And but the people who stayed behind, they’ve progressed with the other Asian countries surrounding them. So there’s very, very different traditions now. And it’s very interesting, intertwining, but they still argue, saying, “Who’s the real Hmong person?” Um...I just lost my train of thought...
ZB: So does there have to be a “real” Hmong group? So you mentioned there’s argument over it, but in your opinion does there really have to be one group that’s -
Tswjfwm: No! [laughing, he shouts indicating a strong opinion on the subject] I could care less. You know, if you don’t speak Hmong, whatever. If you’re Hmong and you don’t speak Hmong, whatever. Speak English or whatever language you like. There’s no particular group. I think that’s kinda dumb. That’s what causes a lot of gangs around here too, to kill each other. But I think it’s a lot of the older generation who go after each other. And a lot of those younger people, they’re laid back and they understand that there’s different people in the world.

Here, Tswjfwm expresses multiple identifications. By including himself (using “we”) with the Hmong in America, he sets himself apart from the Hmong in Southeast Asia.

Traditions have evolved and changed, and along with them the Hmong as a whole have
become more American. Tswjfwm identifies with this group, but he also sees no reason to consider the Hmong in Southeast Asia as a different group. Clearly, the exact practices of Hmong traditions do not drive his identification with other Hmong individuals, and it is important to note that while he identifies with the Hmong in the United States, the exodus from Asia was not so divisive an event in his mind to create two unalike groups.

Another example of this transnational identification is provided by Houa. After our interview, she tells me about her community and international outreach efforts for which she was awarded a Thousand Points of Light Award (though this was something I learned about long after our interview). Houa and her husband, along with a collection of other families, pooled their private resources to construct and fill a library for Hmong communities in Laos. She shows me a photograph. The building is one story, painted white, and unassuming. It sits alone in the frame and seems like a monument to the intense ethnic bond shared by many Hmong individuals throughout the world. Houa also tells me that she had recently organized an international symposium for the Moua clan which was held the week before our interview to coincide with J4. She sought out Moua clan members from China and Laos and provided them with housing for their stay in America. Beyond just stating a connection with Hmong from other countries, Houa’s actions clearly reveal a strong Hmong identity that transcends borders and the huge gulf in lifeways between the United States and Southeast Asia. Clearly, Houa does not
believe shifts in Hmong tradition, celebration, and lifestyles strip a person of their ability to identify as Hmong.

Finally, as I alluded to in the previous chapter, a recurring theme from the interviews for this research was the concept that it is important for a Hmong individual to “know who they are.” This came across in many different forms throughout these discussions. Sometimes the notion was quite intangible:

Muaj: I think that all of those events that I mentioned, their purpose is just so people will see each other and say, “This is us, this is what we do, this is who we are.”

Muaj offers little explanation of the phrase “who we are” other than to connect it to large gathering events. Sophia offers a similar statement when discussing her relationship with the Hmong community.

Sophia: Ok, so you don’t have to be...you don’t have to be Hmong American to care about the Hmong American community. So you can be white and main, you could be an African American and care about the Hmong American community. You can be, you know, another Hmong and care deeply about the community even though you are personally not involved with the daily affairs or interactions with the Hmong. So from my standpoint, I just care about the community as a whole, because I still do view them as a part of me, even though I still don’t interact with them on a daily basis because of my work.

Though she does not use the exact phrase “knowing who I am,” Sophia’s comments echo this general concept. A part of who she is remains connected to the Hmong community though she often does not interact with other Hmong individuals. She does not specify the exact reasons that she considers them to be “a part of” her, but this statement is a clear indicator that she identifies with other Hmong individuals to some degree. This is a telling statement, because Sophia went to lengths throughout our
interview to make sure that I understood her identification as American (or Hmong-American) first, and that she likely has less interaction with other Hmong individuals than my other interviewees.

Pa Der goes into more detail when discussing culture loss among second and third generation Hmong immigrants. While she explains that she is not concerned that aspects of Hmong culture may be lost and does not believe that culture is something that needs protection, she suggests that understanding of culture is a natural method for identity formation:

Pa Der: I think they’ll start wanting [to learn Hmong culture] because I think it’s a natural part of identity development where people will look back and think, “I’m not white, then what am I? Why don’t I know who I am?” People all do that, everyone does that. White people do that too, but I always have to go back, and I’ve done that too, I’ve had to go back and do research about Hmong culture and history too. So I think just simply because of their identity, and wanting to understand their identity they’ll want to go back and understand their culture.

Here, Pa Der suggests that “knowing who you are” is tied to understanding Hmong history and culture. By divulging her own past desire to “go back” to understand her heritage, she reveals that, though she expresses a lack of concern for “culture loss,” it is important to her personally to know Hmong culture and history. To Pa Der, understanding “who you are” is a natural part of identity development for non-white (or perhaps “non-mainstream”) Americans, and it is critical for a conception of self that relates to ethnic heritage.

Xai places this concept into the context of the Hmong language and the role it plays in identity development:
ZB: So we talked a little bit about the Hmong language fading out. Is that something you’re concerned with, that younger generations aren’t learning Hmong?
Xai: I am concerned a little bit, but probably not as much...having been born as a Hmong person I think that it’s better if you know your native language and then if you become bilingual that’s even better, and multi lingual that’s even better. And the reason why is because the Hmong language is an identity. When you speak the Hmong language, or when you are a Hmong person you know to speak your native language it’s much better because you have a sense of who you are and where you’re coming from. And there are those who probably don’t speak a word of Hmong. And so it’s not that they don’t know who they are but they...couldn’t, you know, communicate with their grandparents.
ZB: Connect as well?
Xai: Yeah or connect with family members or even with being close to family members and the community. And there are those who are totally eliminated or isolated from family members and the community.

Like Pa Der, Xai selects some aspect of being Hmong, in this case the language, as playing a role in the development of identity and a sense of self as a Hmong person. He suggests that language plays an important role in community connection, an idea that is plainly evident when occupying spaces like Hmong Village or J4. To Xai, this connection is responsible for understanding “who you are,” and language links the two.

Furthermore, Xai goes as far as to link the nebulous phrase “who you are” with Hmong identity itself. When he states that “the Hmong language is an identity. When you speak the Hmong language...it’s better because you have a sense of who you are,” he seems to suggest that in order to identify with other Hmong individuals, a conception of who you are is important, if not crucial. However, speaking the Hmong language is not the only way to accomplish this goal. Near the end of our interview, Xai states:

Xai: So people have different ideas of what the Hmong identity is. Again to me what the Hmong identity is, you have to have a common, probably experience, a common history, and some aspect of Hmong things, you know? Either could be
language or the food that we eat or something like that. So it’s a common thing that we share that makes who we are as a Hmong person and the Hmong identity.

As he mentioned earlier, Xai conceives a shared experience as the only necessary factor for Hmong identification. Beyond that, it is only “a common thing” that is important. These aspects of being Hmong, collectively or separately, make a Hmong person “who they are,” and as I have demonstrated, are of importance for many of this study’s interview respondents when it comes to their identification. Many spoke about values in some way when describing identification with other Hmong individuals.

The themes discussed here demonstrate that most of my interview respondents identified with other Hmong individuals, not necessarily as Hmong, though this may also be true. However, American culture is nearly omnipresent, making it difficult, if not impossible, to maintain a strictly Hmong identity. During our interview Pa Der expressed a feeling of powerlessness in the face of mainstream media and American values when explaining that she did not feel as though she could teach her daughter everything about Hmong culture. The nature of this concern makes identification with other members of an ethnic group challenging and may threaten the conceptualization of a Hmong community. However, spaces which exist in the Twin Cities provide a context where these valued Hmong identities can be expressed and lived out. Here, in spaces like Hmong Village, J4, Hmong New Year, and many others, collectivist values can be expressed, a common history remembered, international objectives undertaken and realized, and a sense of self and identification with other Hmong individuals developed.
Identification with Americans

As Pa Der suggested, mainstream culture is overwhelming and makes it nearly impossible to maintain identities that are not influenced by life in America. This can be seen in interviews where the respondent suggests ways in which Hmong traditions have changed since arriving in the United States. However, beyond simply having Hmong identities that are impacted by American culture, I believe that nearly every interview respondent to this study would identify with other Americans as readily as they would other Hmong. This should not be unexpected based on the sample of interviewees. Almost half belong to the 1.5- or second-generation, meaning they were raised wholly or primarily in the United States. While home life may have been primarily Hmong, these individuals were raised in the United States, attended public school, heard American music, and were exposed to any number of American cultural characteristics. Furthermore, and while I cannot be sure that this is true, most if not all of the respondents are American citizens, demonstrating at least some desire to call themselves American. Respondents in this study express multiple identities that shift due to a number of factors, and in this context it is important to examine the ways in which they associate or identify themselves with other Americans.

Evidence that this is in fact the case comes from the testimony of a number of interview respondents, many of whom made an effort to communicate to me that their sense of self is heavily influenced by growing up in America and/or interacting primarily
or secondarily with other Americans. At the beginning of our interview, Sophia cautions me against using the phrase “Hmong people,” as opposed to “Hmong-Americans,” out of concern for its demeaning nature. I asked her about a similar phrase that groups Hmong individuals together.

**ZB:** So if I use the phrase “Hmong community” would that be something also that you would...

**Sophia:** Well, you can use it, but for someone like me, I mean, it doesn’t make a lot of sense because I operate with mainstream society. Well, I rarely come in contact with another Hmong person unless I go out of my way to visit family, going to the east side to eat at Hmong Village [laughs]. Yeah, so my life doesn’t intersect on a daily basis with another Hmong American other than my family. So I mean for me, I tend to be more mobile as well, more broad, I try to reach a larger audience as well. I feel my community is St Paul where I work, or Hudson where I live, or the state of Minnesota where I pay taxes.

Here, Sophia expresses feeling distant from what I termed the Hmong community, contrasting her association with this group by stating that she operates with “mainstream society.” To Sophia, locational identifiers that connect her to a much larger community that includes people of all ethnic heritages carry more weight. In this way she claims identification with a broader America separate from but including “the Hmong community.” Near the end of our interview she circles back to this thought:

**ZB:** So I guess to wrap our conversation, sum up the things we’ve been talking about, in your opinion, what does it mean to be a Hmong person in the Twin Cities today?

**Sophia:** [She collects her thoughts] For me personally, I feel that I’m...just another part of the American process. Yeah, I’m continuing the American journey.

As she continues her response, she explains this idea in the context of being Hmong-American, but her identification with American history and society still shows through.
By qualifying her statement with “just another part,” she downplays her association with Hmong society in favor of American society as a whole. In doing so, she expresses an identification with American life and culture that is valuable to her. Muaj also expresses a similar identity:

Muaj: So I don’t think I’m very traditional. I don’t think I adhere to Hmong traditions very strictly. I’m very liberal in general so I don’t adhere to a lot of non-sensical traditions [laughs]. But I recognize my heritage and my ancestry. But I think first and foremost I see myself as an American, whatever that means. I go to movies, I like pizza, I go to basketball games. I do all those things that Americans do. I think like Americans do.

Though he acknowledges his Hmong history and therefore his Hmong identity, Muaj, like Sophia and other respondents to this study, states his identification as an American. Muaj expresses personal traits and motivations that characterize socialization in the United States. By saying “I think like Americans do,” Muaj is expressing perhaps the most telling measure of identification with other Americans: he shares the same values, the same mindset. While he still appreciates Hmong culture and occasionally attends Hmong gathering events, he perceives his values and thought processes as more closely mirroring those of mainstream America.

It is not surprising that many who belong to the 1.5 or second generation identify with other Americans due to their socialization in this country. But for some first- and 1.5-generation Hmong, the exact reasons may be less clear. Are there specific reasons why these individuals develop American identities? Here it will be beneficial to return to comments made by Xai regarding language. He described the Hmong language
as an identity and a tool for understanding who one is. Shortly thereafter, he explains his thoughts on Hmong individuals learning English before they learn Hmong:

> Xai: And so here obviously we have to learn the English language, it’s a survival language, you want to succeed, if you want to do well academically, you know, your career, find a job, do things with business, you know you need to masters and learn to be proficient in English.

Here, Xai explains that learning English is a necessary skill, and backs up his statement with reasonable evidence. More importantly though, if we apply his statement about the Hmong language to the English language, we can see that knowing English is also a way to understand “who you are” in an American context. Hmong individuals who speak English well have in a sense created a way for themselves to identify as Americans.

Furthermore, Xai also suggests that this is essentially a necessity. In order to survive in America, understanding of English is crucial, and linking these points together - that having some conception of self as American or part of “the American journey,” as Sophia opined - is nearly inevitable. Txongpao makes a similar identity statement when he discusses “American” holidays in the context of his Hmong identity:

> Txongpao: So my opinion for myself, I’m very open, even Christmas, yeah I’m not a Christian, but I buy gift and give it to my kid, and New Year, yeah, I don’t have anything yet we can buy some new clothes and give it to the children. And thanksgiving you don’t even have in the old country, but yeah thanksgiving is a good holiday, a gift. So we can buy turkey and bake, and invite the family come in and have dinner or have lunch together.

Here, Txongpao demonstrates multiple and shifting identities. He explains that he partakes in holidays that did not exist in Laos but which he finds valuable and worthy of celebration in America. In this way, he contradicts Xai’s notion of American identity as
essential or one of survival; he actively chooses to celebrate these American holidays and, consciously or not, exhibits behavior that many would characterize as American.

However, many interview respondents expressed feelings of helplessness in this regard. As Nagel (1994) explained in her definition of ethnic identity, outside conceptions of ethnicity play a role in identity construction. Waters (1990) also suggested that the ability to identify as anything “white” was restricted to people of color by white majorities, and these concepts were expressed by interview respondents.

Sophia:

Sophia: You know, so that’s why I think it’s offensive when white folks say to me, “Oh Sophia, you speak such good English.” I’m like, “I should, I grew up here. Perhaps you could polish on yours a little bit.” It’s offensive to me because there’s a lot of white folks who don’t speak properly, and yet they look at me like I’m a foreigner, just because physically I look like a foreigner and I appear to have mastered the English language. We just gotta shed ourselves of the assumptions of people because of the physical appearances.

Here, Sophia offers her experiences with those who seek to impose identities based on her physical appearance. Sophia identifies as American, but Americans that she has come into contact with are less likely to agree with her identification due to her skin color. For individuals of Hmong descent, it is challenging to communicate their more natural development of English language skills. Instead, speaking English is seen as an accomplishment by other Americans, and leads to a feeling of patronization on the part of people like Sophia. Pa Der expresses a similar concern:

Pa Der: [...] you know what, the truth is in the US people of color are always marginalized you know. If we’re not marginalized and somehow we’re accepted into them group then we become tokenized as, “Oh, that’s my Asian friend.” And so forth right? And the only way that we don’t become tokenized is if we
completely acculturate into American society. And we wash ourselves of our cultural identity. And I don’t think that’s any good either. So that’s why I think it’s important to be around Hmong people for sure.

Pa Der expresses another challenge posed to Hmong individuals who identify as American. She explains that she feels as though she has two choices, to be tokenized, or to “wash” herself of ethnic identity. In this way, she is trapped between incomplete identification and foregoing anything that would tie her to her Hmong identity. She believes that mainstream society will not accept her identification as American as long as she has “one drop” of ethnicity that separates her from them.

If mainstream society restricts Hmong individuals from identifying as American, and yet many still do, then this identification must be motivated either internally or through strong support from other Hmong. What are the factors that contribute to a sense of American identity among Hmong individuals? Many interview respondents expressed cultural traits that may be part of American ethnic identity making, as I discussed in the literature review for this research. For example, if large gathering events contribute to a sense of Hmong identity, then gathering events perceived as American could contribute to the formation of American identity. Neal provides an example of this identification:

Neal: I forced myself to stay in the dorm to encounter young American life, so I can enjoy the Badger football game, the hockey game, I remember like my dorm was very close to Camp Randall. I don’t know if you’ve ever been to Madison. Camp Randall is the Badger stadium. Badger stadium that side and my building on this side. The other thing is that 1981 was the year the Badgers won the national championship of hockey game against University of Minnesota Duluth, and they play in Duluth – no, Superior. I remember I was the only Hmong celebrating with white kids. We all celebrated, cheer on University Avenue until
3 AM! I tell my wife, “that is what I want to experience honey!” So, she live in Oshkosh with my in-law and my little boy. Then one year of university I don’t want to be too selfish but I want to immerse into European American culture, I got to enjoy all kinds of stuff.

Here, Neal expresses his desire to associate himself with American life in the form of sporting events that brought him closer to his (mostly white) peers. Throughout the interview, Neal discussed his education and upbringing as aspects of his life that led to his open mind and desire to work with both Hmong and mainstream American groups. It is not unreasonable to think that the development of this mindset was influenced by the schooling and experiences with American culture he received shortly after arriving in the United States. This is a demonstration that Neal conceived of a way of life that Americans are expected to live, values they are expected to share. As he learned these values, he developed, in a sense, an American ethnicity similar in process and style, though not exactly content, to his Hmong identity. Consequently, through his social life and work responsibilities, Neal began to identify with Americans just as he had always identified with other Hmong.

Muaj provides similar statements that generalize to the larger Hmong community, as well as convey his own personal opinions on American identity.

Muaj: But it’s hard to tell them and make them appreciate it when I can’t sing the song. Who am I to tell them to appreciate it when I can’t even sing the song? I can teach them to read and write Hmong, but I expect the change will happen. And you know the longer we live in America, I think we’re gonna be Americans and we gotta like pizza and everything else American.

Here, Muaj explains that he feels uncomfortable trying to teach his children the Hmong language and asking them to participate in Hmong activities when he himself cannot
recreate them appropriately. He expands upon this idea by saying that living in the United States will force Hmong individuals to take on American identities, and “like...everything else American.” He is speaking about the Hmong as a group here, but he goes on to say later in the interview:

Muaj: So I don’t think I’m very traditional. I don’t think I adhere to Hmong traditions very strictly. I’m very liberal in general so I don’t adhere to a lot of non-sensical traditions [laughs]. But I recognize my heritage and my ancestry. But I think first and foremost I see myself as an American, whatever that means. I go to movies, I like pizza, I go to basketball games. I do all those things that Americans do. I think like Americans do.

Speaking personally, Muaj associates material cultural artifacts and activities that he perceives to be “American,” (pizza, going to basketball games) as a type of evidence for his own personal identity. He explains his identity in the form of cultural values that Barth (1969) would identify as the result of ethnic boundary making. In a sense, Muaj has accepted an American identity that coincides with his Hmong ethnicity, though he does not say so explicitly.

Finally, Foung expresses this concept by identifying some ways that leadership roles have changed since the Hmong arrived in the United States:

Foung: I’m just an elected official, so I don’t know if [the Hmong community sees] me as a leader. If they see me as the ultimate leader that would be major stress.
ZB: I don’t know about ultimate leader, but people look up to you, people are proud to have a Hmong senator.
Foung: Yeah, yeah, they are proud. And they are proud to – because they are proud of themselves to make that happen. They’re proud of themselves to make that happen and I am a servant to them. So yeah, you could say they look up to me in some aspect too, but I would say slightly different from the traditional leader or leader of the old country who lived more rigid. So to them I’m an American leader.
ZB: So can you elaborate on that a little bit more? What makes you different from a traditional leader?
Foung: Let’s see, traditional leader is someone very, very close to them. Someone like their aunts and uncles, extended family. Someone who they're buddy-buddy with, and if they have immediate problems they can complain to immediately. And those are traditional leaders. Aunts...and there’s no rule, there’s no written structures that you have to do. This is someone who just says, “We have to stay together as a family.” And in that mechanism is a power play within that mechanism itself. There’s no bylaw that controls that. It’s just whoever sacrifices the most gets to be the tribal leader. That’s the traditional leader. And myself, as an elected official, senator of District 67, I pay attention to that leadership structure, as much as I pay attention to the structure of District 2 council, in my district[...]So I don’t have that direct connection.

Foung explains the role of leadership in the Hmong community and how this role has shifted over time. The “traditional leader” is often a close family member who sacrifices for the good of others, reflecting centuries of tight collectivism and a clan-centered society. While these types of social structures have been important to the Hmong for quite some time, they have changed in the United States to fit the type of leadership roles and structures demanded by the dominant American society. This may seem like a profound value shift, but it is likely not accurate to say that traditional leaders have been pushed to the side in favor of “American leaders” like Foung. Instead, I believe that valuing American leaders like Foung is more representative of taking on American ethnic identities and identifying with American society and processes than a dismissal of Hmong values.

The testimony of these interview respondents supports the literature surrounding identity and ethnicity. It is not essential that a person possess one sole ethnicity or identity, and these identities shift based on context. From Sophia explaining
her lack of interaction with Hmong individuals on a daily basis to Foung’s shifting
leadership roles based on his position, the respondents to this study show that Hmong
and American identities are not mutually exclusive. Furthermore, they have
demonstrated that there is an intense sense of identification with other Americans
based on a number of factors, such as upbringing, education, and the power and
ubiquity of American cultural values. While nearly every respondent suggested that they
value their Hmong ethnicity, none would be hesitant to say the same about their
American identities. This is telling because it demonstrates the swiftness with which
Hmong individuals have acculturated to American society, at least when it comes to
values and identification, without losing the values that make them Hmong.

Conditional Maintenance of Hmong Culture

A crucial aspect of contemporary theories surrounding the acculturation of
immigrants to the United States is the ability these groups have to maintain multiple
cultures and identities. The gulf between pre-colonial Hmong life in Southeast Asia and
the lives many now lead in the United States could scarcely be wider. A preliterate
society with no access to modern technology was rapidly removed from these
circumstances through a period of intense war and persecution, and then subsequently
transplanted to the United States. If there is one group that faces particular challenges
when it comes to maintaining traditional culture, it is the Hmong. However, the degree
to which this is actually desired by many Hmong is highly contested. While many of the respondents to this study have a strong conception of what being Hmong means to them, there is less consensus as to the actual importance that maintaining these identities and cultural values represents, and many of the respondents stated that in order for a piece of Hmong culture to be maintained, it needs to “work” in America. Throughout the interviews for this research there were many opinions expressed about Hmong culture and whether or not Hmong individuals should strive to maintain it, and three major themes arose from these discussions. First, there were many who expressed a lack of concern for Hmong culture, explaining that culture loss is natural or that Hmong culture has always changed to fit the larger society. Second, despite that lack of concern, there were a few aspects of the culture that were identified as being important or worth preserving, and many of these are associated with an explicit spatial representation. Finally, there was some consensus that Hmong and American identities are tied or inseparable, and that the Hmong in the United States have reached a point where they could not identify as one without identifying as the other.

One common theme that emerges in the academic literature surrounding immigration and ethnic identity is the supposed value that comes with maintaining traditional culture. Scholars such as Potres and Zhou (1995) and Portes and Rumbaut (2001) make this the central theme of their acculturation theories, while discourses surrounding ethnicity and identity have reached a point where it is unacceptable to craft a definition that does not include the ability of an individual to engage with whichever
culture they choose. It is interesting, then, to note the apparent lack of concern expressed by a number of interview respondents when the subject of sustaining Hmong practices, beliefs, and behaviors was raised. It is important to note here that these respondents fall in line with academic theories of acculturation, but do not concur with the implicit value placed on cultural retention.

Even more interestingly, those who expressed this lack of concern were some of the most highly educated respondents. Perhaps this is to be expected; those who have achieved high degrees of education may see themselves as less concerned with tradition and with conservative practices. Indeed, most of these individuals explicitly identified themselves as “liberal” during our discussions. Alternatively, these are the individuals who are most likely to engage with scholarly literature on this subject, so it is telling that they disagree with the embedded academic theories surrounding culture. For example, Pa Der offers her opinions on cultural essentialism when discussing culture loss:

Pa Der: [...]in terms of the cultural loss, I’m really ok with that, I know there’s this essentialist - or people who feel like, this sense of nationalism, or it’s not nationalism... but it’s called cultural essentialism, where they think that Hmong culture is something that needs to be protected and preserved. Whereas I’m not a person who thinks that, you know? Cultural is always changing, and as a result of us living in the US our culture will change, and they’re finding, I think we just we have to kind of go along with is [laughs]. And even if we don’t want to and we’re fighting to preserve it like I was saying, it might be a little futile, against the forces of acculturation. It’s natural.

Here, Pa Der expresses her opinion that protecting and preserving Hmong culture is a complicated issue. Throughout the interview, she discussed important aspects of Hmong culture and clearly demonstrated that being Hmong, conversing with other
Hmong individuals, and attending large gathering events was important to her, but what she expresses here is a *laissez-faire* approach to cultural sustainability. That is to say, if it doesn’t happen, it doesn’t happen. She notes that “culture is always changing,” an idea that seems counterintuitive at first, but falls in line with current academic notions of what “culture” and “tradition” are and are not (Schnell 2003). These statements demonstrate a deep understanding of her thoughts on culture: it is important to her, but only conditionally, and should not be protected simply for the sake of being protected.

Muaj expresses a very similar opinion:

ZB: So are you concerned that a lot of these Hmong cultural things are getting lost?
Muaj: I for one am not concerned because I think part of it is just, you know, we live in an ever changing world. And you know, the Hmong people who live in China have lived there for...years, hundreds of years. And their Hmong culture has a lot of Chinese culture melded in. The Hmong people in Laos, there’s a lot of Laotian culture mixed with it. I think people change and people adapt to other culture wherever you go. So in that sense, I think it’s fine that my kids are becoming Americanized. They should be. They’re American. There’s no reason to, “Oh you gotta learn this and that.” I don’t think it makes sense to do that to them. I think they can learn an appreciation to that.

Here, Muaj suggests that there is no such thing as “pure” Hmong culture. He recognizes that the Hmong have always adapted as necessary to the cultures surrounding them. This is telling because it communicates his lack of concern for preserving Hmong culture. It seems as though he lacks concern on this subject because he sees culture as always changing, and an effort to maintain Hmong culture in America would likely just result in
what was going to happen anyway: Hmong culture existing in a new form that incorporates substantial aspects of American culture.

If the nebulous and always changing conceptualization of Hmong culture is not something that demands preservation, are there any aspects of it that Hmong individuals are concerned about losing? Are there any cultural traits or practices deemed important enough to make a targeted attempt to maintain? When I asked these questions of interview respondents, there were a number of cultural aspects that were deemed important to continue practicing. In fact, even respondents who expressed a lack of concern for the preservation of Hmong culture provided an answer for this question. These answers ranged from ill-defined “culture,” to more material cultural aspects such as clothing or jewelry, to gathering events discussed in the previous chapter, as well as weddings, and funerals.

Large gathering events like Hmong New Year and J4 were often cited as important to continue practicing. For example, Tswjfwm and Txongpao both discussed New Year’s importance due to its status as a gathering unique to Hmong culture. I have already discussed the opinions these two men share on New Year in the previous chapter, so I will not reiterate their thoughts. However, they were not the only respondents to suggest that these social events play an important role in Hmong culture. During my discussions with Chai and Aranvihn, they shared similar thoughts as well as the reasoning behind their answer:
ZB: Alright, do you think there are any - we’ve already talked about the *qeej* obviously - but are there any important traditions in Hmong culture that you think are really important to keep practicing?

Chai: Well for sure the Hmong New Year. People (wear) traditional Hmong clothes. That’s one thing.

Aranvihn: Yeah cause recently not too many people wear Hmong clothes, and not too many people even own them so...

ZB: So why is that important?

Aranvihn: Well back then it was a way to let other people know how wealthy you were. So there more money you had on your, the more desirable you were to...partner yeah. Because they actually wore the...?

Chai: Coins yeah.

ZB: So is that still done?

Chai: Yeah, there are still coins on there, but it doesn’t really signify wealth really.

Aranvihn: Just to show that you’re Hmong.

Chai: Just tradition I guess.

Chai and Aranvihn’s responses are fascinating because they provide a concrete reason for why they believe that Hmong New Year is important to maintain. They identify the ability to wear Hmong clothing in this particular space as a major reason why the celebration should be continued, as it is not commonly accepted to wear the clothing on a daily basis. Furthermore, they explain that the clothing is worn “to show that you’re Hmong.” This is a prime example of an ethnic symbol and will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

The next aspect of Hmong culture that was frequently raised in response to this question was the practice of traditional Hmong marriages. Often, marriage and funeral ceremonies were mentioned in the same breath, as Xai demonstrates:

_Xai: I still say that we mentioned weddings and funeral several times throughout the interview so I will continue to say that those are very important and very_
significant in our beliefs and practices. It will still be because according to the elders it was like that since the beginning of time and still will be.

Here, Xai explains that Hmong weddings (and funerals) are granted a certain transcendent quality. They have existed in Hmong society for so long, much as they have in Western society, that they have become institutionalized, and therefore carry enormous weight. Muaj goes into more detail about the value of Hmong weddings. He explained that the complexity of Hmong weddings forces him to engage with other Hmong individuals in the area because he would not be able to plan and execute a Hmong wedding himself. He goes on to say:

Muaj: I think they're important because they solidify or they present certain, very important ideas about Hmong culture, marriage, and I think that will always be important so that people will understand the important issues like fidelity and all of those things that are stressed at weddings. I think it will eventually be modified, but I think the essential significant points are presented at the wedding about, you know, getting married, you should be faithful to each other, you should honor each other and care for each other and support – all those things that keep a couple together.

Muaj’s explanation of Hmong weddings sounds similar to a description of a western wedding, but he still conveys the reasons why Hmong weddings are deemed important. The ceremony conveys values to the new couple that they are expected to espouse that fall in line with what is expected in Hmong society.

Seexeng tells the story of his own wedding to illustrate how important they can be to Hmong individuals:

Seexeng: I had a wonderful Hmong wedding. I wish everyone had that wedding. When I had the wedding is specifically asked for traditional rituals, songs and so on. Fortunately my in-laws, they saw the same thing for my wife and me. And they did everything they can to make sure it was beautiful. And it was. And I’m
so grateful for that. And every time I speak of my wedding versus someone else’s, I feel sorry them, because they didn’t get the same treatment. But then I just got reminded a couple days ago, by one of my mentors, “If you read,” because right now we document the process and the rituals. They’re beautiful.[...]

[But] when they wrote it, he said, “Seexeng some of those rituals are so beautiful. I totally get it.” But have you realized, at the end, guess who they talk to and say, “You should be the perfect what?” The talk to the girl. The bride. This is how you should be the bride. They give you the lecture, they give you what to do, what not to do, everything in between. Do they give the same treatment to the guy? This is how you should be a son. I mean mine, they did. But it’s not in the ritual. My brother, my in-law, and everyone pulled me aside and said, “This is how a son-in-law should be. [...] And those are the things [my mentor] said, “As beautiful as your wedding was did you remember that component?” “Yes I did.” That’s what I’m talking about, elements that transcend, but yet benefit everyone.

Seexeng discusses his wedding with pride. It is evident in his statement that he feels fortunate to have been able to have a Hmong wedding, and that in doing so he feels more connected to his Hmong heritage. He describes the rituals as “beautiful,” though he discussed the nature of the ceremony as being one sided, in a sense lecturing the bride-to-be on how she should conduct herself. Seexeng’s family bucked this trend for his wedding, however, and he feels as though his wedding was better off for it. The story he tells of his wedding clearly conveys the important role it played in his life, and he suggests that he believes that most Hmong people would appreciate a similar experience.

Finally, funerals were discussed more frequently than any other aspect of Hmong culture as being valuable and worth continuing. The Hmong funeral is an elaborate process, traditionally requiring an entire weekend of feasting, qeej playing, ceremonial rites, and eventually burial. While I was encouraged by many interview respondents to
attend a Hmong funeral during the course of this research, the opportunity never arose, so I can provide no first-hand experience as to what occurs at a Hmong funeral.

However, interview respondents highlight the important aspects of the practice when they explain why Hmong funerals are important to preserve. For example, Tswjfwm:

ZB: So those particular things you mentioned, why they’re the things you keep – want to keep doing?
Tswjfwm: Because it’s unique to us. Especially this [pointing to a sketch of the qeej in my notebook] [laughs]. Yeah I have a friend who actually plays it at the funerals. He’s got like three of them. So every time there’s a funeral going on they actually do call him up. They like strangers. Calling the spirit back, going home.

Tswjfwm identifies the funeral as important because it a space that is used to play the qeej, the traditional Hmong instrument. The qeej plays a crucial role in the funeral ceremony, and the two are intertwined. Moreover, he identifies the funeral and the qeej as “unique to us.” There is a sense of pride that he conveys when discussing these cultural traits, demonstrating why he believes they need to be maintained. Khou also chose to discuss the Hmong funeral when I asked her this question.

Khou: One of the most important things that we should continue and that the younger generation should learn the value of are things that occur at a funeral. Because depending on age funerals can last up to three or four days, and it’s very rough, but I’ve noticed that a lot of the younger generations think like, “Oh is this necessary, why does it have to go on this long?” So I would like, or I think that funeral practices should be one of the main things that younger generations should learn that’s very important.
ZB: Ok. So what exactly is it about funerals that you think is particularly important to maintain?
Khou: So at funerals they have this drum and they have the instrument that I told you about earlier. And they play them throughout the funeral at different times. And the purpose of that is you’re leading the dead back to where he or
she was born. Till they can find their home, their proper place. It’s very tedious. It’s very tedious and it happens throughout the whole funeral, and I understand that some people can be like, “Oh, does that really need to happen, what’s the importance of this?” But it’s really the thought behind the music at least.

Khou specifically mentions a desire to teach younger generations about funeral practices. She believes that the funeral is important enough to go out of her way to make sure that younger Hmong individuals continue to practice it. Like Tswijfwm, the ritual of guiding the spirit of the deceased back to “their proper place” is the core value of the ritual, and it is this ceremony that characterizes the funeral as Hmong. Khou explains in this passage that the reason Hmong funerals are so important is their deep connection to traditional Hmong religious beliefs. The successful return of the spirit to their place of birth is a crucial aspect of this animist belief system, and in order to perpetuate the Hmong religion/life system, Hmong funerals must be conducted.

There are some drawbacks to Hmong funerals. Due to the extensive nature of the ceremony (the family of the deceased is expected to provide food for hundreds of people for three or four days straight), Hmong funerals can be astronomically and prohibitively expensive. Yuepheng estimated that the average Hmong funeral costs between $40,000 and $50,000, with the cost depending upon the age and life of the deceased. Yong Yia informed me that his uncle’s funeral cost $140,000. Clearly, to a group of people who frequently earn smaller incomes than the national average, this is a problem. However, both of these men, along with many others, are working to alter Hmong funeral practices to mesh with life in the United States.
Yuepheng, along with a group of well-respected Hmong community members, has organized a collective he calls “Hmongism.” The goal of the organization is to construct a space of worship for Hmong who follow the traditional religion, simplifying the process and providing a space for funerals to be conducted at substantially reduced costs. Hmong animist practices have typically been confined to private homes, and while Yuepheng acknowledges that this will still be important, he believes that a temple for the Hmong religion would bring pride to those who attend it, as well as simplified practices that require less time and financial obligation. Yong Yia is working to fulfill a similar goal. Rather than adjust traditional Hmong worship norms, he is simply planning to construct a funeral home for Hmong families. Instead of paying the enormous cost of a three day funeral, a family would have to purchase a lifetime membership for a (comparatively) modest sum, and then would be allowed to use the home for free. Yong Yia expects that this will reduce the cost of funerals for many Hmong families in the area and provide some relief of the financial burdens that have troubled members of the community.

Yuepheng and Yong Yia are attempting to alter practices that have occurred for centuries. Living in an American context has almost forced Hmong individuals to alter these beliefs and traditions, much as Muaj suggested. However, it is still noteworthy that members of this community are undertaking these endeavors because leadership structures that are still in place, like the Eighteen Council, are largely resistant to change. Moreover, most of the individuals I spoke with agree that Hmong funeral rites
are in dire need of change in the United States. Some were clearly baffled that tens of thousands of dollars were still being routinely spent on funerals and applauded men like Yong Yia and Yuepheng for seeking change.

It is clear that nearly everyone I spoke to believes there is some aspect of Hmong culture worth preserving, though many are not concerned about culture loss in general. This speaks to a waning, or at least altered, sense of Hmong identity that has shifted largely due to living in America, as interview respondents explicitly stated. More importantly though, these responses show a conditional desire to maintain a Hmong culture centered on specific practices and beliefs. What’s more, many of these practices exhibit distinctive spatial manifestations. With a few exceptions, the aspects of Hmong culture deemed worthy of protection are played out in specific spaces, both public and private. The spatial components of Hmong New Year and J4 were discussed in the previous chapter, and it is important to remember that no matter what physical space is used, this ethnic gathering is crucial to the maintenance of Hmong identity. Hmong funeral ceremonies, as another example, take place in funeral homes where specific behaviors are accepted and encouraged. There is feasting, music playing, and mourning of the dead that follows a long tradition leading back to Asia. There is also a metaphorical spatial component to this practice, as the soul of the deceased is said to be physically guided back through the course of their life by the qeej player. The funeral song literally traces the person’s geographical life throughout the places they have lived and travelled, ending upon arrival to their place of birth. The link between this
metaphysical space and the actual funeral space is the qeej and the funeral song, which traditionally were only played in this context. This space becomes a representation of lifestyles that are perceived by the Hmong as unique to them, as representations of their identity.

Finally, it is important to ask a question that has become self-evident: if Hmong traditions have been altered by American life, and interview respondents almost unanimously identify with both Hmong and American individuals, to what extent do they perceive these identities as being separate? Put another way, can a person of Hmong heritage in the United States identify as Hmong without identifying as American? There is certainly some evidence that the answer is no. For example, Muaj states explicitly that:

Muaj: I think to me, first and foremost, to be a Hmong person is to be an American. I think Hmong, my ancestry, there are still some Hmong traditions that I know, and for those I know adhere to. And there’s some traditions that I disagree with, and I don’t practice them. And in that sense I think I’m very American [chuckles]. It’s whatever works for you right? And so being Hmong in the Twin Cities today is being American. I understand that Hmong is my ancestry, and I understand that there are events like weddings and funerals, which have their life lessons to teach a Hmong person, any person. And so that’s how I see myself, as a Hmong person living in the Twin Cities. [Author’s emphasis]

For reasons he does not delve into, Muaj recognizes his Hmong and American identities as inseparable. He clearly sees himself as both though, and suggests that some of the Hmong traditions he believes are important convey the same values and life lessons to an American person as they would to a Hmong person. Interestingly, he attributes his ability to pick and choose which aspects of his ethnicity that he practices to his
American sense of self. This is interesting because it may demonstrate that this thought process has become much more fully developed in the United States, even though the Hmong have previously borrowed from other cultures in Asia. Pa Der communicates a similar idea:

Pa Der: I think just what does it mean to be Hmong in America is the fact that, we did come here from a tribal society, now we’re having to adjust to western society. So many things come with that process. Culture loss, losing some of our culture, trying to recreate our culture in a new home country, and then adopting new ways.

Pa Der’s statement is important because she recognizes here that Hmong identity is not being subsumed by American culture and society. Rather than communicating a desire to resist change to American life, she believes that Hmong individuals need to adapt and change, but be aware of their history, their Hmong values, and how these are changing in an American context; and this American context is key. While Pa Der identifies a number of places throughout the Twin Cities that are spaces for the recreation of Hmong identity, she recognizes that these are few and far between and often special occasions that she believes are not valued as highly by the remainder of American society. In this context then, Hmong identities must adapt to American society, and be conditionally maintained so that those pieces that inhibit function in America are left behind in favor of those that still provide value.

This sense of adapting to new ways and reforming and recreating identities in an American context was communicated in other interviews as well. For example, Neal reported:
Neal: So that’s what I’m saying, my experience helped me to be better and better that I do not degrade, I understand, I respect, there are a lot of good things [in Hmong tradition]. But I simply just like my new way, but I do not degrade the old way. I say preserve and learn from them. So basically what I’m saying is I’m still very Hmong, but I add some new things. So I got both. I have a more complete view than the other way.

Throughout our interview, Neal raised the issue of discriminating against other based on their cultural practices. He identified an array of ways that this can happen between Hmong individuals and “mainstream” American, and even between members of the Hmong community. Here he is discussing his father’s funeral, which was conducted in adherence to Hmong tradition, despite Neal’s strong Catholic belief system. He explained that his history, education, and adaption to American society left him unconcerned that he was breaking with Catholic tradition for his father’s funeral. This statement is important because it demonstrates the ways in which Hmong traditions are conditionally continued in the United States. Despite the incredible expense, Neal wished for his father to be buried in the way that he would want, not to have the funeral in a more American style that would match his own beliefs. To Neal, then, the Hmong funeral was important to continue as an expression of his father’s identity.

I will give the last point on this subject to Seexeng, who expressed frustration at the elusive and perplexing nature of identity and how he expresses it. More importantly, Seexeng implicitly discusses the external imposition of identity onto him, and the ways in which the imposition is complicated due to his multiple ethnic identities:

Seexeng: [...] what I’m trying to say every time I speak I talk about what does it mean to be Hmong. And by saying that, it helps me hone in on what it means to
be Hmong. Because I’m not Hmong. I’m not American. I’m both. And so...what is Hmong?

[...]

Do I need to wear the Declaration of Independence on my chest to say I’m American? Do I need to tattoo the American flag on my forehead to say I’m American? What if I do that but in my heart of hearts, I don’t believe it. That’s just my fault. And so to me when I speak about these things I say, “here’s why I feel like I’m American: I pay my taxes. I speak English, fluently or at least as fluently as I can. I contribute to my community. I follow all the laws. And I got a piece a paper says I’m a US citizen. What more do you want from me?” And at the end I flip it around, “I’m pure Hmong. I practice the rituals. I speak Hmong at home.” And what more is that, when you come to my house, my altar thing is there. I speak Hmong, I still do everything that my family, community asks of me to do in the Hmong context. So why am I not Hmong, why am I not American? What is it? So to me, sometimes it’s those tangible things that define who I am. Because like I said, I still practice Hmong rituals and traditions. I still go to funerals. I still do certain rituals to the best of my abilities. And so to me those are elements that make up my Hmongness. Elements that identify me as American.

Though he describes Hmong and American as separate identities, Seexeng clearly acknowledges that he considers himself as belonging to both groups. He expresses a sentiment that is representative of statements provided by many other interview respondents, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly: “I’m both.” He then goes on to explain why he sees himself as both Hmong and American, focusing on material and behavioral aspects of culture that he can view, grasp, and act out in his daily life. To Seexeng, this is the connection between the two identities. Though they may not always interact (“I speak Hmong at home”), he sees both of his ethnic identities as resulting in physical demonstrations of what they mean to him. In a sense, Seexeng describes the boundaries of ethnicity that he falls into. The materials and behaviors he describes are the outcome of ethnic identity-making, and he is frustrated when outside individuals
question his association with one group or the other because he sees no reason why he cannot be both.

The interview respondents to this study clearly demonstrate that they perceive a strong connection between American and Hmong ethnicities. Long past are the memories of arrival in the United States, speaking little English and comprehending even less about American society. Whether they were born here, raised here, or even arrived in early adulthood, these individuals would not describe themselves as solely Hmong or American. More importantly, as some explicitly stated, “to be Hmong is to be American.” The Hmong in the United States do not perceive themselves as so separate from the rest of American society that they constitute a rigid and unchanging group. Put another way, despite a demonstrations of ethnic cohesion, a desire to engage with other Hmong individuals, and a clear conception for what is “mainstream America” and what is not, the Hmong who respondent to this study see themselves as one group of “hyphenated Americans” nine decades after Kallen first coined the term.

Summary

This chapter demonstrates both agreement and divergence from academic literature. While contemporary scholars suggest that immigrant groups typically exhibit a desire to maintain their ethnic identities, the testimony of my interview respondents is tepid on this subject. Certainly, as I have demonstrated, some aspects of ethnicity are
important to these individuals, but many expressed a true lack of concern for the future of Hmong ethnicity. It is impossible to ignore the influences of American society and culture, and as Hmong immigrants acculturate to this “mainstream,” they come to identify with the American in-group as well as their co-ethnics that they arrived with. Children of these immigrants grow up in an American context, and it would be erroneous to expect conceptions of identity and ethnicity to develop before a perceived association with American peers. Clearly identity is complicated beyond what is easily visible on a superficial level. Discussions with these interview respondents clearly show that identities are shifting, contextual, and profoundly impacted by the complex situation in which immigrant groups find themselves.

Going beyond these mostly sociological theories, we can observe a geographical aspect of these issues that might otherwise have been unseen. Hmong ethnic spaces are clearly important tethers between the types of behaviors that have been valued for most of Hmong history and the adaptations that have accompanied their migration to the United States. The previous chapter detailed Hmong ethnic spaces and their perceived importance to the Hmong community based on their (largely) traditional values. However, in this chapter I communicated the ways in which these Hmong identities are not always perpetuated as they once were, complicated as they are by American identities and society. While Hmong ethnic spaces still serve as representations of Hmong ethnicity, it is unlikely that these spaces remain unchanged by American culture, and indeed I will argue that they do not. There must be a bridge
between Hmong and American identities. If they are both considered by individuals to be important and representative of their senses of self, can we see this connected displayed in space? Is it possible to grasp more completely the connection between traditional Hmong values, Hmong identities changed by an American context, and American identities themselves? This will be the subject of the next chapter, as I discuss the role of symbolic ethnicity and the ways in which ethnic symbols are adapted and expressed in space.
CHAPTER 7: SYMBOLIC ETHNICITY AND REPRESENTATIONS IN SPACE

Overview

When scholars examine the ways in which individuals understand their ethnicity, one major factor is the display or embodiment of these ethnicities. One of the more influential writers on this subject, Herbert Gans, discusses symbolic ethnicity as an alternative to the perceived ethnic revival of the 1960’s and 70’s (Gans 1979). Gans hypothesized that given the constraints and pressures of American society and culture, it is difficult, perhaps impossible, for immigrants and to a greater extent their descendants to continue to “live” their ethnicity. Instead, these individuals would choose aspects of the ethnic identity they wanted to embody and display them publically or privately to give weight and meaning to their ethnic affiliation.

This chapter will answer questions related to symbolic ethnicity and representations of ethnicity more generally, and the crucial role that ethnic spaces play when it comes to understanding these concepts. They often serve as spaces for the display, affirmation, and reification of ethnicity, and thus have an important role in this context. Furthermore, these are spaces where ethnicity is complicated by the social pressures of the dominant American culture and strong Hmong ethnic influences that often work in tandem and opposition in the minds of many individuals. Hmong, American, and Hmong-American identities are communicated in these spaces.
The important idea here is that ethnicity is a concept put on display in public places. Embodiment of ethnicity and the display of ethnic symbols become active behaviors in ethnic spaces, which form, perpetuate, and concretize conceptions of identity. These are not spaces for the passive existence of complicated identities and ethnic symbols. They are displayed, worked through, and better understood through active ethnic behavior.

As later generations of Hmong individuals are raised in the United States, it is important to examine the application of symbolic ethnicity to this community. That is, to what extent are traditional Hmong ways of life still lived in the United States? Are aspects of this culture adapted to fit American norms and demands, and if so, why? From the perspective of an outside researcher, it is difficult to answer the first question. Despite conducting some interviews for this research in the respondents’ homes, I was not granted access to their ways of life, how they behave at home and publically on a regular basis, and the extent to which they continue these Hmong practices. Therefore, I will attempt to answer these questions in the context of public gatherings and displays of ethnicity using only information provided directly by interview respondents.

There are two aspects of symbolic ethnicity that are important to address before moving on to interviewee testimony. First, a common critique of symbolic ethnicity is the suggestion that it carries no real value to group members. Essentially, it is “made up” to serve a purpose in a particular place and context, and the individuals who demonstrate symbolic ethnicity really are not members of the ethnic group. Gans
addresses these concerns, arguing that the symbolic nature of these ethnic displays is in no way devoid of value; because value is placed on them by the actors who use these displays to affirm their ethnicity publically, they are still of some importance. More notably, Gans recognizes that ethnicity is socially constructed and in a sense, every ethnic practice is “made up.” Symbolic ethnicity simply allows these practices to continue in a context where they might otherwise die out.

Secondly, authors such as Gans and Waters (1990) argue that this symbolic ethnicity is largely displayed publically as an expression to out-group members of what it means to be a member of the in-group. In a sense, symbolic ethnicity characterizes the ethnic group to those who do not understand it through public display. In the context of the Hmong community, however, I will argue that symbolic ethnicity is used for the opposite purpose. Because so much symbolic ethnicity is displayed at Hmong events that, while ostensibly open to everyone, are mainly targeted at other Hmong individuals, it appears as though the demonstrations of ethnicity are directed to other in-group members.

Interview responses led to the conception of three categories of ethnic symbols that are displayed as representations of what it means to be Hmong. Material symbols, such as the qeej and the paj ntaub (Pa N-tau) that are uniquely Hmong; performance symbols, such as dancing and singing that have been a part of Hmong history for centuries; and visual symbols of shared history that represent the course of time and the struggles faced by the Hmong in the United States and those who came before
them. These symbols will be discussed in the current American context in which the Hmong community exists.

Material Symbols

When considering the power of a symbol, perhaps nothing carries more weight than visual representations of a valued idea. Consider the American flag. Standing in for an abstract yet well-understood set of beliefs, the display of the flag in public and private spaces communicates the identification that the displayers share with the concepts for which the symbol stands. It is no different for a variety of material symbols displayed by Hmong individuals in the Twin Cities. Two are of major importance and are nearly ubiquitous in the Hmong spaces I observed for this research. First, the qeej, the traditional and uniquely Hmong reed pipe instrument, has been discussed previously, but its value as a symbol will be treated in this chapter. Secondly, a type of woven cloth called a paj ntaub is hung and displayed throughout Hmong public spaces. Finally, traditional (or “new traditional”) Hmong clothing is worn primarily at special events to communicate to others that the wearer belongs to the group.

Closely associated with the Hmong funeral ceremony, the qeej (Figure 8) and the sounds it produces play a valuable role in Hmong culture. This reed pipe instrument, producing a sound similar to a deep, thrumming harmonica, has been crucial to the performance of funeral rites for many centuries, and this role has been carried to the
United States. The tones are designed to mimic the tones of the Hmong language, and because the songs played on the qeej are said to guide a deceased spirit back to the place of their birth, Chai explains that:

Chai: [...] it’s basically a way to speak to the spirit.

Chai and Aranvihn, two of the respondents to this study, teach qeej lessons at the Hmong Cultural Center in St Paul. During our interview, they provided some background information and insight into the incredibly valuable role the instrument plays in Hmong culture.

ZB: What do you think would be lost if younger generations didn’t learn the qeej?
Aranvihn: Well um... pretty much everything about the qeej I guess. Because if none of the younger generation learns it and after the older generations pass on, nobody would know what to do. All they would be able to play an old recording of what was played and it wouldn’t be the same anymore.
ZB: So would it still be possible to conduct a funeral ceremony without it? Or is it you now, that integral?
Aranvihn: I mean theoretically it wouldn’t be, but because of our culture it’s an essential part of it. It can’t go without the qeej being played.

Aranvihn demonstrates that the qeej is invaluable to the funeral, and by extension the maintenance of an important aspect Hmong culture. The meaning and value of the Hmong funeral would be diminished without this important musical instrument.

But what is it about the qeej that makes it so valuable as an ethnic symbol? Why do so many Hmong organizations and artists choose the qeej to symbolize their group or characterize their work? When I asked Xai about the Hmong Cultural Center and the ways in which it creates a sense of belonging, he responded:
Xai: It helps especially for the younger kids, it does help them to build a sense of understanding of the Hmong culture, to help them see from a different perspective, “what am I and, and who I am, and why am I Hmong?” And so here at the cultural center we offer a musical instrument class called the qeej. Qeej is a unique musical instrument. I consider it to be an ancient reed pipe instrument that is uniquely Hmong. When you see the instrument you automatically know that it’s Hmong if you’ve seen it before. We teach the kids to play the songs, not just for a funeral purpose but also for entertainment purposes.

Like others, Xai points out that the qeej is uniquely Hmong. Without delving into detail, he also states that there is instant recognition of the qeej as Hmong. This instant

![Figure 8: The qeej](image)

recognition allows for the instrument to be used a symbol that others can associate with Hmong culture and ethnicity quickly and easily. For example, the Hmong Cultural Center uses a collection of items for its logo, one of which is the qeej. Beyond just using the word “Hmong” in its name, the Cultural Center is able to make a visual connection
between itself and its community. The *qeej* then serves a stand-in for the values perpetuated inside this space of learning; traditional Hmong values and practices are taught here along with the myriad of programs that help Hmong immigrants start their lives in the United States.

The Hmong Cultural Center acts as a space for the production of ethnicity and ethnic symbols. Chai and Aranvihn allowed me to observe a lesson, which consisted of the two teachers giving individual lessons to a roomful of about fifteen students, one by one. Listening to each student practice their *qeej*, I realized that this crucial cultural identifier was being reproduced for young boys and girls in the hopes that they will continue this practice in appropriate spaces later on. In this way, the funeral then becomes a space of reproduction. Playing the instrument there is a symbol that Hmong culture is still alive and playing a role in the lives of Hmong individuals, even if it is challenging to fully live this culture in public spaces. Finally, it is noteworthy that Xai explains the changing role of the *qeej*. No longer is the instrument solely used at funerals, and its use is expanding to cultural shows and competitions. This shifting symbolic value will be touched on shortly.

The second major material ethnic symbol often put on display in public places is the *paj ntaub*. This woven cloth is another uniquely Hmong symbol, and comes in two forms, the story cloth and the geometric pattern. The story cloths are often used to illustrate either an aspect of everyday Hmong life in Laos or to communicate a narrative on a single piece of fabric. For example, Figure 9 depicts the exodus of the Hmong from
Southeast Asia by detailing their path from Laos across the Mekong River, into the refugee camps of Thailand, and eventually by plane to the United States. These types of story cloths can be seen in a number of Hmong spaces. They hang outside of many shops in Hmong Village and were put on display in an art gallery titled

“Deep Roots, Lush Leaves,” designed to show the history of Hmong dance, song, and traditional clothing. These *paj ntaub* are profoundly interesting because they not only illustrate the values that many Hmong individuals would like to display in space, but actually depict important spaces themselves. A close examination of key locations on the cloth shown in Figure 9 reveals a shared history that is deemed important enough to recreate in art. Shown alongside fleeing Hmong families adrift in the Mekong are armed soldiers aiming weapons. Ban Vinai refugee camp is characterized by rows of barrack-
like shelters and the buses that eventually shipped so many Hmong to centers to prepare them for life in the United States. The mountains of Laos in the upper right hand corner show the traditional lifeways of the Hmong and the traumatic events of the war. Throughout the scene are Hmong individuals and families dressed in traditional Hmong clothing (-mostly black with brightly colored striping). In this sense then, a *paj ntaub* displayed in space represents the spatial history of the Hmong, and a shared history and experience that is deemed worthy of recreation in the United States. It symbolizes a struggle and indeed the collective memory of a people.

A second form of *paj ntaub* is based not on story, but intricately woven design. This design usually incorporates some sort of geometric pattern, often a series of triangles or a type of flower design (see Figures 10 and 11). During our interview, Sophia and I briefly discuss the symbolism of the geometric *paj ntaub*:

ZB: Yeah so what is symbolic about it?
Sophia: It’s an eternal circle. So I’ve attached personal symbolism, and just for me eternal prosperity, eternal happiness, and it’s the symbol for eternal. Infinity. So lots of ladies will incorporate that in their tapestry.

Another example of an object that is uniquely Hmong, the *paj ntaub* represents an ethnicity and an identity due to its long history of incorporation into Hmong crafts. Though this form of cloth does not have quite the same spatial power as the story cloth, it still enjoys status as an important Hmong object, and is displayed in space in much the same way.
Seexeng gives voice to the importance of placing these material cultural symbols in public spaces, drawing from his own experiences as an artist and his opinions on Hmong ethnicity.

Seexeng: But the overarching goal was to use iconic Hmong imagery or tools or instruments. So when I really think of one element that transcends time and space all the way back to our history and based on all of the experts that research about Hmong, Hmong culture, Hmong identity is the qeej and the paj ntaub. [...] So that and the paj ntaub, and I’m not talking about the story cloth, I’m talking about the abstract paj ntaub, the geometric pattern, usually small. Those two things I’ve found to be transcending. Wonderful identity, wonderful cultural identifier for who we are.

Throughout the interview, Seexeng discusses his desire to communicate his opinions on what it means to be Hmong by using iconic imagery that is uniquely Hmong. Most of these images are material in nature, like the qeej and the paj ntaub, and he describes them as “iconic” and “transcendent.” Seexeng communicates a fear that his artwork will make factually incorrect statements, so he conducted substantial research into Hmong history and society in order to arrive at these iconic images. Basing his artwork off of

Figure 10: The triangle pattern encircles a story paj ntaub depicting Hmong celebration.
these artifacts, he believes he can communicate a sense of Hmong ethnicity. However, Seexeng expressed frustration that his art was not being appreciated or even viewed by members of the Hmong community in various art galleries around the cities. His solution?

Seexeng: “Hey, let me take my art to where the Hmong people are.” So instead of the beautiful gallery space I paid tons of money, like everyone else, knowing that I will not get much out of it, I went to the Hmong New Year. Which is [at the] River Center. So I purchased a little ten by ten space, and I try my best to display it. And that to me was fun. Because I get to see young people, I get to see elders. They come in and sometimes I purposely just step back and watch, and they could be walking thinking, and you know, everything, the normal stuff. [...]To watch people come in, and without saying a word, they just pause, look, get curious, wander, walk away, and then some finally walk up, “Who did this, who is this?” and they came and talked. Then I really had fun. That’s when they start to ask, “Why are you doing this?” “This is who we are. My goal is to get you to start thinking. Why has this guy devoted this much time and energy and resources to do this? Why is this instrument so prominent and vital in all his work?” Then they go home and they see the instrument and they start to think twice about it. So that was my intention. So I brought it right to the Hmong community, in the heart of Hmong community. So that was not enough. J4, July 4th, just occurred. And I decided to go to another segment.

Seexeng’s response is fascinating because he demonstrates the symbiotic relationship between space and ethnic symbols. Where it would otherwise be difficult to communicate these symbols of ethnicity to a wide audience, large gatherings of Hmong individuals provide him the opportunity to display his opinions on Hmong ethnicity. In this way, Seexeng is engaging with symbolic ethnicity by using these iconic themes in spaces where they would be deemed appropriate. Most importantly, Seexeng is using this ethnic space to reify a sense of ethnicity based on transcendent symbols. He places critical importance upon them and wants to communicate this to others, using ethnic
spaces to accomplish this goal. His actions add another layer to the already widely
understood value of these spaces. More than just providing a space for social
interaction, then, Seexeng’s art contributes a sense of symbolism and importance about
what it means to be Hmong.

![Figure 11: Several patterns are shown in this *paj ntaub* (source: Hmong Embroidery).](image)

Finally, wearing traditional clothing is perceived by many members of the Hmong
community as a way to communicate to others that the wearer is a member of their
group. Examining the *paj ntaub* in Figures 9, 10, and 11, the reader can achieve a basic
understanding of the appearance of traditional Hmong clothing. It is typically black,
accented with solid or striped bands of bright colors. However, as Yang (2007) notes,
Hmong costumes have always drawn from the traditions of other ethnic groups living
near them, changing over time to incorporate different styles. This is no different in the
United States, as “new traditional” (as described to me by a contact in the community)
Hmong clothing adds more vibrant colors and patterns to traditional styles (see Figure 12).

Like the material symbols discussed above, Hmong clothing is displayed in public places, often at large gathering events such as New Year and J4. Like the qeej and the *paj ntaub*, this clothing becomes a means for the reification of Hmong identity in space.

![Figure 12: Pageant contestants display the stunning breadth of traditional and non-traditional clothing (Source: Hmong America New Year).](image)

For example, Chai and Aranvihn discuss Hmong clothing in the context of the New Year’s celebration:

ZB: Alright, do you think there are any - we’ve already talked about the *qeej* obviously - but are there any important traditions in Hmong culture that you think are really important to keep practicing?

Chai: Well for sure the Hmong New Year. People (wear) traditional Hmong clothes. That’s one thing.

Aranvihn: Yeah cause recently not too many people wear Hmong clothes, and not too many people even own them so...
ZB: So why is that important?
Aranvihn: Well back then it was a way to let other people know how wealthy you were. So the more money you had on your, the more desirable you were to...partner yeah.
ZB: Because they actually wore the...?
Chai: Coins yeah.
ZB: So is that still done?
Chai: Yeah, there are still coins on there, but it doesn’t really signify wealth really.
Aranvihn: Just to show that you’re Hmong.
Chai: Just tradition I guess.

The pair discusses the historical value of Hmong clothing and how it has changed in the United States. While coins being worn on the clothing no longer denote wealth, the tradition has carried over to the United States, serving as an ethnic symbol and identifier: a person who wears coins on their clothing is Hmong. While this may be a bit simplistic, the symbolism is valid in that members of this group recognize this type of clothing as belonging to their group. It is another material symbol, displayed in space, for the reproduction of Hmong identity. The display of this clothing at Hmong gathering events is one of the most important aspects of this symbol. In “mainstream” public spaces, this type of clothing would likely not be deemed acceptable based on social norms in the same way a German would not be “allowed” to wear lederhosen to a public park. Instead, Hmong ethnic spaces provide a place within which this symbol can be displayed. Those who wear this clothing to New Year’s likely do not wear it on a regular basis, thus contributing to the confirmation of Gans’ hypothesis. However, the value is not lost on those who wear this clothing, as it works to connect the individual to their ethnicity.
What do these material symbols have in common? To begin with, they all are rooted in Hmong lifestyle dating back to Southeast Asia. These symbols, while challenging to “live out,” are still alive and well in Minnesota’s Hmong community, taking on new roles (the *qeej* being played in other spaces than the funeral, to be discussed shortly), reifying identity, and connecting individuals to a sense of ethnicity. More importantly, each is being displayed to other Hmong individuals. Seexeng makes this point about the *qeej* and the *paj ntaub*, placing them in Hmong spaces to communicate a sense of ethnicity to in-group members, and Chai and Aranvihn elaborate when they identify Hmong clothing as a way to “show that you’re Hmong.” In this sense, these material artifacts belie a trend that views symbolic ethnicity as something to be displayed to out-group members. They become objects designed to confirm and elaborate upon, and most importantly, prevent the loss of valuable aspects of Hmong culture.

**Performance Symbols**

The argument could be made that the symbols described above are not examples of displaying symbolic ethnicity. Since these are merely symbols of ethnicity being used in space, it is difficult to tell, especially from an outsider’s perspective, whether or not their application is an example of symbolic ethnicity, or “truly living” the ethnicity, as Gans would suggest is the alternative. Though I would argue that they do in
fact constitute symbolic ethnicity, a stronger argument can be made for the next category of symbols: those that are displayed in the form of a performance. In many Hmong performances, symbols like the qeej and Hmong clothing are used to reinforce the role of the performance as something Hmong, but the performances themselves have been altered by an American context. Despite the fact that performances, such as singing, dancing, beauty pageants, and qeej playing, have played a role in Hmong society for centuries, contemporary performances feature adapted content that reflects the new lifestyles lived by the Hmong in the United States.

These ideas were explained by respondents to this study. For example, Txongpao discusses his belief that dance competitions have changed to incorporate western styles:

Txongpao: I believe those competitions, it follows the western. But they just put on the traditional clothes and acting that are part of the Hmong community. But I believe the idea, and they learn from the western style too.

During our interview, Pa Der spoke about the difference between the content of these performances, and the idea of the performance itself:

Pa Der: No, the practice of having a dance competition is...tradition you know. Done during New Year’s celebrations. But the dances that are going on have actually changed as a result of acculturation. So I think it’s important to separate those two pieces right? So they still go through that ritual you know having the dance competition and so forth. But the actual dance has to be separated from that ritual. Yeah so, because of acculturation now they're doing western danced and so forth, but the value is still the same I think.

Their statements are important for two reasons. First, Pa Der explains that, while the content of dance performances have changed, the ritual or practice of the dance
competition remains important. This is important because it shows that these performances are remarkably adaptable to new contexts, but continuing to display them in Hmong spaces lends credence to their assertions of Hmong identity. Pa Der identifies Hmong New Year as a place where these dances are displayed, implicitly demonstrating that ethnic spaces play a role in the acceptance of new dancing styles.

Second, Pa Der and Txongpao suggest that the performance of these dances is symbolic in nature. Txongpao identifies clothing and acting as the Hmong aspects of many dances, while the rest “follows the western,” suggesting that these performances are no longer being acted out in a solely Hmong way. Pa Der seems to agree when she argues for “[separating the dance] from the ritual.” In this way, these dances become a symbol of Hmong ethnicity, while the ritual of the performance functions as the outcome of ethnic boundary making. The ritual represents an aspect of the social construction of Hmong ethnicity, while the dance has evolved such that it does not enjoy the same conceptual status. Most importantly, though, Pa Der explains that the shifting content of these performances does not tarnish the value of the ritual. She, perhaps unknowingly, confirms Gans’ supposition that engaging with symbolic ethnicity is not inherently less valuable than “living” the ethnicity.

Perhaps the most problematic of these symbols to qualify as such is qeej playing. Because the instrument enjoys such a hallowed status in the minds of many Hmong individuals and has played an important role in Hmong society for centuries, it is perhaps inappropriate to call it a symbol in the strictest definition of the word.
However, when the qeej is removed from the space that gives it such status – the Hmong funeral – it becomes an easier argument to make. In our interview, Khou discussed the qeej in spaces away from the funeral:

Khou: [...in the olden days they would play it - or only elders would play it for funerals, but nowadays the younger generation, and this applies mainly to the men of the culture, and the younger generation is learning that instrument but they’re not playing the instrument solely for funeral practices, they’re playing them for like, enjoyment or maybe sometimes at like culture shows you’ll see the younger generation doing that, which is really cool to see. Because it’s not just solely for funerals anymore.

ZB: So the younger generations are playing this more for fun, how do the older people who are used to only experiencing it at funerals, how do they feel about that, if you know?

Khou: I'm not sure, but I probably think that they wouldn’t be ashamed, because I feel like they think that it’s better that the generation is doing than not doing it at all.

[...]

ZB: Ok, so can you tell me about how it makes you feel to see this instrument being played for a more broad audience?

Khou: I think it’s very cool, partially just because it’s a very challenging instrument to learn, and I think it’s very cool that the younger generation - or like I don’t know what they’re decision is to play that instrument, but I think it’s very cool that they’re doing it either for themselves or their family. So I think it’s a good thing that the younger generation is at least trying, or doing something to stay connected to their roots.

Here, Khou discusses the changing values that are ascribed to the qeej. While the cultural significance of the instrument was once tied only to its ceremonial use at funerals, it is now changing to include elements of entertainment and symbolic demonstration. While no respondent stated this specifically, it stands to reason that if the qeej is used to guide a deceased spirit home, its value would change in a setting where that were not happening. Khou explains that she feels the qeej is still important away from the funeral, and that those who have only experienced it in that setting
might agree with her. It is conceived of as an ethnic symbol, something to “connect to [your] roots,” even when not used for a funeral. In this way, the qeej becomes part of an ethnic display, a symbolic performance of ethnicity that, while still valuable, carries a different weight depending on the context.

Aranvihn echoes Khou when he talks about the qeej away from the funeral:

ZB: So obviously we’ve been talking about the funeral ceremony a lot, but where else does the qeej get played, if anywhere?
Aranvihn: Back then it was said that they used it at weddings as well. Not that I’ve actually seen one being used a wedding these days but, yeah. And we use it during the Hmong New Year, for the festivities, just to show them some entertainment.

Aranvihn characterizes the use of the qeej at Hmong New Year as “just show[ing] them some entertainment,” implying that in this context, the instrument is not afforded quite the same power and prestige it has at a funeral. Space, then, becomes a significant factor in determining the symbolic nature of material forms of ethnic identification. At Hmong New Year, a space designed for use primarily by Hmong people just like a Hmong funeral, the qeej is treated differently. Why? There could be many reasons. First, Hmong New Year is a time for celebration with a different mood and atmosphere than a Hmong funeral. It follows that the character of these places are quite different. More importantly, though, the actual use of the qeej is different in these two spaces. At the funeral it is being used to accomplish a specific goal. At the Hmong New Year, as Aranvihn put it, it is merely for entertainment purposes. Earlier, Seexeng described the qeej as something instantly recognizable as Hmong. So, in this context, it becomes not a tool but entertainment in the form of a well recognized symbol of Hmong ethnicity, and
consequently the act of playing the qeej is an exercise in engaging with and performing symbolic Hmong ethnicity.

Finally, the performance of traditional Hmong songs is another of the symbols that are recognized as historical and important to many Hmong individuals. For example, when I asked Foung about his first Hmong New Year in the Twin Cities, he spoke about his memories of one particular Hmong performer:

Foung: I think it was 1990, early 90’s. New Year’s then was more fun. I went to the Hmong New Year, at the time it was Civic Center, and I saw a Hmong guy, sitting in the way – like row 100, and I can’t see. I can only see finger sized people down there. And I was in my mid twenties. Finally my parents let me out, coming to Minnesota all the way from... I was so excited to see a whole bunch of Hmong here. And I was up in one of the seats, and looking down I see this Hmong guy dressed up in white the size of this little pin, and he sings, he sings on stage and I was so thrilled. I was so thrilled [laughs].

[...] That was my first memory of Minnesota Hmong New Year, sitting in row 100, looking down, and it was...it was just as exciting as seeing Tina Turner at a concert! [all laugh] I don’t know who that Hmong guy is, I don’t remember, but I know he dressed in white.

Here, Foung specifically recalls the performance of a song by a Hmong singer at a New Year’s celebration in the early 1990’s. He pauses occasionally when telling this story, as if the memories of this celebration are suddenly returning to him all at once. It is clear that he places tremendous value on this anonymous Hmong singer performing a representation of their shared ethnicity.

Perhaps the strongest argument suggesting the Hmong’s engagement with symbolic ethnicity comes from Muaj. During our interview, he discussed the performance of traditional Hmong events, such as singing and dancing, and the ways in
which they have changed in the United States, resulting in performances that lack ethnic authenticity:

Muaj: I think, you know, when we came here, the Hmong community in St Paul was still very small. [...] So I think we all growing up looking forward to that, just because you get to go and see people that look like you, and speak your language, and do some of the traditional activities that you are familiar with. But as the community gets bigger, it’s become less personal. So I think over the last... I haven’t gone to a Hmong New Year for the last several years. Because it’s so crowded. And the community is big and it’s impersonal. The activities are very Americanized now. They have a stage and a rock band and people perform, there are dance troupes. And it’s very, very Americanized now. I think that as I’ve gotten older I sort of lost that connection to the New Year.

[...]
And now, the New Year is focused on the pageant, the Miss Hmong Pageant, the Mr. Hmong Pageant. To me, that shouldn’t be the focus of the New Year, but the organizers have made that the focus. And then some of the shows, some of the activities are like singing, talent, it’s more like a talent show. It’s not so much of a – they have a talent competition on stage, dancing, singing, whatnot. And it has gone away from just an expression of culture, cultural arts. It becomes a show, like an American Idol type of thing. So I think that takes away the authenticity of it. Because of that you see a lot of people who come in, they do dance, they do singing, and there’s not much of the traditional, just cultural show. So for me, if I’m looking for a cultural experience that’s authentic to Hmong culture, I don’t find it at Hmong New Year. I still find some of the clothing. But not so much the activities.

Here, Muaj expresses a profound shift in the performance shows at Hmong New Year. He characterizes them as Americanized and lacking in cultural authenticity. He describes the singing and dancing at Hmong New Year as “just [a] cultural show,” suggesting that these performances no longer communicate what is traditionally Hmong, instead merely mimicking the performances of the past. By expressing these thoughts, Muaj helps to support Gans’ hypothesis, that “living an ethnicity” is nearly impossible in the United States, and as a result immigrants and their descendants engage with symbolic
embodiments of ethnicity that do not necessarily mirror traditional practices completely. In fact, Muaj expresses this thought explicitly. He continues:

Muaj: I think the way that culture is displayed now is very different. I mean, in the old days, let’s say if you wanna see someone that sing a traditional song, you don’t usually see that until the New Year. So you have to wait all year to go to the New Year. And they live that, that aspect of the culture at that time. So you go to New Year and then in that setting where it’s appropriate, they’d sing their traditional song. It’s like seeing the Siberian tiger in the wild as opposed to seeing the Tiger in the cage at the zoo. And I think in this country you can get the Hmong culture, the Hmong songs on video, CD, and you can do all of that. So it’s not very...people aren’t living it. It’s a show now. So you could go to the Hmong Cultural Center and you’d see all the instruments of Hmong culture. Instruments, utensils, others. But if you go to Laos you actually see them use that stuff. You can go to the field with this person and actually use the artifacts that you see. So I think culture is presents very different now. It’s just to show you, you don’t really see how it’s used.

Muaj communicates well developed thoughts on this subject, discussing it extensively throughout our interview. He hits the proverbial nail on the head in regard to symbolic ethnicity, claiming the Hmong culture and ethnicity is no longer really lived, only put on display in the form of a show. While Muaj is only speaking about these public displays of Hmong ethnicity, not private home life that may or may not be more closely related to traditional Hmong life, his characterization seems to be shared by others. Many of those I spoke to for this research used words like “Americanized,” or “Western,” to describe these types of performances, as evidenced by earlier interview passages. This demonstrates an implicit understanding that Hmong culture and ethnicity are highly symbolic, at least in public places, and the symbolic performance of this ethnicity now characterizes Hmong spaces to some degree.
However, Muaj’s metaphor of a Siberian tiger is an interesting choice, because it reveals his disapproval of this trend, the connotation being that beauty is lost away from a “natural habitat.” Later in the interview he says that he is not worried about culture loss, but from the above passages it is clear that Muaj would like to see “more authentic” cultural performances. What is more, it is clear that Muaj does not believe that this symbolic ethnicity carries as much weight as “authentic” ethnicity. While Gans argues that symbolic ethnicity does not necessitate loss of value, Muaj might not agree. However, in discussions with other interview respondents, it is clear that there is still value placed upon these ethnic displays, even if they do not mirror exactly traditions of the Hmong in Laos.

However, if there is one ethnic performance that can be qualified as embodying symbolic ethnicity, it is likely Heritage Day, organized by the Hmong Minnesota Student Alliance (HMSA), a student organization at the University of Minnesota. Time constraints once again prevented me from attending this event, but I spoke with Khou about Heritage Day during our interview, and she explained that the major event of the early exhibition is a theatrical play focusing on one aspect of Hmong life. I asked her about what these performances entailed:

Khou: And last year it was like a play with three stories intertwined and these three stories were like traditional Hmong folk tales that people grew up with. ZB: Ok. Could you provide like a real quick synopsis of some of those folk tales? Khou: Yeah. So one of the stories involved a man, and his wife, and then another woman. And the other woman was trying to seduce him and break up their marriage. And the story unfolds and she does so. And [the man] realizes that it was all an act by the other woman and then he returns back to his wife. [...]
ZB: What play are you working on this year?
Khou: We’re working on a play about...oh! Kind of what we were talking about, like traditional views and present views, and how our main character is having a hard time like, adjusting and accepting his father’s traditional ways while he’s more I guess you could say Americanized, he doesn’t really care for it. And then he goes back in time and he sees his father working at the farm and engaging with his parents.

The two plays that Khou describes here provide intriguing insight into the performance of ethnicity. In the span of two years, the HMSA chose subject matter that covers important aspects of Hmong ethnic identification. First, the organization chose a play that reproduces folk tales that most Hmong individuals are familiar with. These stories, like folk tales from essentially any culture, have lessons to teach the audience and draw on a shared sense of memory (more on this idea shortly). The second play she describes attempts to tackle the challenges of second-and-later-generation Hmong who grew up in the United States and likely struggle to fully understand the lives their parents and grandparents led before emigration. In a sense, these two performances display to a largely Hmong audience (though Khou does point out that many who come to Heritage Day are not Hmong) certain conditions of what it means to be part of the group. There is a shared sense of memory surrounding these folk tales, and the Hmong community, as many immigrant communities do, is currently struggling with a generational disconnect while many struggle to keep some aspects of traditional Hmong culture.

Performance symbols are a prime example of the display of symbolic ethnicity. As many interview respondents have described, these performances represent combinations of Hmong and American culture, are removed from their less-symbolic
contexts, or simply were created in the United States. They are no longer being “lived,” as Muaj so cogently explained, but instead performed for large audiences at specified times and adapted to other mediums (videos and audio recordings, for example) as a demonstration of Hmong ethnicity. In this way, performances have become representations of Hmong ethnicity rather than merely an aspect of a life lived as Hmong.

Symbols of Shared History

In the Hmong Village produce room, or “banana market,” two painters, Ger Yang and Zoob Waj Vaj have created three striking and vivid murals. Long Tieng air base covers the entire east wall of the produce room, with general Vang Pao sitting larger than life, the most enormous thing in the room, at its right-most extremity (and thus the center of the room). On the north wall is a jungle setting devoid of people. Covering most of the west wall is a sprawling scene, the banana market on one side gradually transforming into a farming scene on the other. Collectively, the murals communicate through stunning imagery the shared history of the Hmong in the United States.

This sense of shared history has been discussed before. Many of the respondents to this study identify a shared history or background as one of the important aspects of Hmong ethnicity – indeed sometimes the only crucial qualifier. That the conception of a shared history exists in the minds of most of the Hmong in the Twin Cities should not
come as a surprise. While Hmong history extends thousands of years, the recent history of the Hmong who have arrived in the United States is equal parts unforgettable and forgotten. Memories of the war in Laos can be traumatic and unshakeable, but Hmong involvement in the war is rarely taught in American schools, and a large portion of the American public has never heard of the Hmong as a group. Thus, Hmong individuals themselves, justly or unjustly, have the responsibility to communicate these memories.

Beyond these conceptions of a shared history relating to ethnic identity, though, sites of memory throughout the Twin Cities reinforce this history by giving it spatial importance. Hmong history is represented in space, often through artwork, communicating certain representations of this history and perpetuating the memories associated with it. There are three important spatial representations of shared history and memories that I will discuss in this section. Vang Pao, the Hmong general who has been perceived as the symbolic leader of the Hmong in the United States since the exodus from Laos, carries enormous sway with the Hmong community, even posthumously. His likeness is present in nearly every Hmong public space. Second, a project to construct a Hmong and Lao veteran’s memorial communicates a desire to commemorate sacrifice and remember the traumatic events that led to relocation. Finally, the murals in the produce room at Hmong Village display the history of the Hmong who migrated to the United States.

Even an outside researcher like me can get a sense of just how esteemed Vang Pao is in the Hmong community merely by visiting a number of the spaces I did for this
research. For example, in Hmong Village there are at least two prominent depictions of
the general (Figures 13, 16). Often, Vang Pao is shown in full military regalia with a
stern, commanding visage that makes his power and reach apparent. In these portraits,
his leadership is not to be questioned. They communicate the widely held
conceptualization of Vang Pao as a savior-esque figure of the Hmong community,
delivering so many from the ravages of war to the peace and safety of the United States.
Indeed, this is the way that many people remember Vang Pao, and a number of
respondents to this study discussed him in such terms. In reality, Vang Pao was a much
more complex and controversial figure, allegedly coercing child soldiers into the ranks of
his armies by withholding food (Eberle 2008). Further complicating his legacy is his trial
for allegedly plotting to overthrow the Lao government in 2007. Although these charges
were eventually dropped, his tactics (such as collecting money from Hmong families in
exchange for cabinet positions in his new government) paint a different portrait than
those on display in public Hmong space.

It is this complicated legacy that makes portraits like that in Figure 13 so
interesting. American history is certainly not immune to this type of hero-making; a
number of important historical figures are treated as national heroes despite
committing humanitarian atrocities and possessing questionable morals, and while it
seems unlikely that many Hmong individuals have no knowledge of this face of Vang
Pao, it is still interesting to ask why his proud and authoritative likeness is displayed in
Hmong spaces.
Seexeng: [...] if you study the Hmong people, our system - the lineage, the line is to our father, similar to any other culture. But then because our head of the household, the dominant person is one: elder, two: a Hmong man. Then guess who fits into that role in the big spectrum? The only person we know is Vang Pao. I mean we obviously knew the others and all the other people in Laos, but as the people really start to pass on, then only words and only voices from our parents, from our elders say, “You need to respect this man. Without this man we wouldn’t be here.” And I got that, I was so into that. And I was like, “Yes, without his decision, without his contact, without that we wouldn’t be here.” But then as we study, as information start to come about from multiple layers, not just from our parents, not just from our elders, not just from our, you know elders who are expert in Hmong, who are Hmong that offer very narrow – not narrow, but certain type of view.

Figure 13: Vang Pao in military uniform adorns the walls of Hmong Village.

Seexeng explains here that the reverence afforded to Vang Pao likely stems from the Hmong tradition of patrilineal authority. The general is viewed as a father figure to all Hmong individuals in the United States. As such, he also becomes representative of traditional Hmong ways of life. If Seexeng’s comments are accurate and reflect the
opinions, consciously or otherwise, of many members of the Hmong community, Vang Pao’s “presence” in Hmong spaces communicates the value of patriarchal authority for Hmong individuals.

Of course, this is only one interpretation of these displays, and whether or not this patriarchal authority (and indeed the authority of Lao Family, Vang Pao’s organization) should in fact be considered valuable is contested. For example, Tswjfwm comments on Lao Family:

Tswjfwm: I don’t believe in them. Having a system like that. I think they’re corrupt. Like spending food costs on one meeting can be like 1,000 dollars, and there are like seven members at this meeting. This something else. And I was like you know, 1000 dollars on food for seven people? I was like, uhhh that’s a lot of food. And um what else with Lao Family? They took a lot of things out of the Hmong system here. And it’s mainly run by Vang people. There’s not like, any other last names in there, it’s just all Vang, which is very biased.

He seems aware of Lao Family’s role in Vang Pao’s power structure, and identifies the organization’s activities as problematic. His comments show that while Vang Pao is a revered figure, he and his organizations are not without question in the Hmong community.

Still, the reverence for the general is widespread. Look no further than “the War for J4” and the attempts for Lao Family and the Lao Family Social Services to honor Vang Pao more than the other. Ever present in these debates was the desire to display to the Hmong community that Vang Pao is recognized as the spiritual leader of the Hmong in America. Indeed this can be seen in real time, as a portrait of Vang Pao stood on an easel behind the main speakers at the Hmong Freedom Celebration. As a state senator
addressed the gathering crowd of Hmong and non-Hmong visitors, he could not be viewed without seeing Vang Pao peering over his shoulder, as if the general himself were keeping watch over this prized gathering event.

As Seexeng’s comment illustrates, part of the reverence for Vang Pao stems from his role in the deliverance of the Hmong from the war in Laos, and, as many interview respondents discussed, some of the most prominent memories of Laos they have are of death, destruction, and fleeing for their lives. The specter of war is impossible to shake, and because of my own life experiences, I have no ability to truly understand what many of these individuals have been through. Just as prominent as memories of war, though, are memories of sacrifice and heroics, and a group of Hmong individuals is currently seeking funding to construct a Hmong and Lao veterans’ memorial statue on the Capitol lawn in St. Paul (a digital model of the proposed monument is shown in Figure 14). The

Figure 14: The proposed Hmong and Lao veteran's memorial: a bamboo shoot resting atop a paj ntaub (source: TwinCities.com).
monument has not yet been constructed, making it difficult to assess the language used, the physical representation of these themes of sacrifice, and how the space itself might be used. I attempted to contact the committee organizing and planning this site of memory, but was unable to do so. However, I was able to speak with Foung, who works closely with this organization.

Foung: But what the Hmong memorial specifically does is also define history too. Even though the history is tangled with war, to recognize the veterans. But that was the reason that we’re here, through war. We left our country because of war and because we ally with the United States we have to leave.

Here, Foung suggests that the statue is a representation of Hmong history. By creating a memorial statue commemorating those Hmong and Lao soldiers and civilians who lost their lives in the war, the Hmong community in the Twin Cities is reifying a shared history. This shared history of war and exodus and sacrifice is part of Hmong ethnicity, and to some respondents in this study, one of the only things that is necessary to identify yourself as Hmong. The statue, then, becomes a symbol of ethnicity put on display in public space confirming that St. Paul is indeed a home for the Hmong.

I asked Foung what it would mean to him to have a memorial statue to the Hmong and Lao in this public space.

Foung: Well…it means that we’re here. If I look at the perspective of me as a state senator [...] I’m glad that were getting this done to recognize the Hmong American community. And the endurance and dedication of the previous generation that brought us here to this country. So I’m glad that we’re moving on to recognize them at a time that’s already long overdue. That’s the part of the state senator that I am, but as a Hmong descendant that statue is mine. That memorial is mine. And so as another person, as a Minnesotan it’s mine too. It’s ours. It tells history. When I go to the Vietnam memorial down here, it’s also mine, my tax money go to it too. And when I go to fire fighter, that’s also mine.
So it’s a monument to recognize our diversity, to recognize the appreciation of our past generation.

Foung provides interesting opinions regarding the memorial. First, he states that the Hmong and Lao veterans are “long overdue” for commemoration, and from his official position as a state senator, he is happy that this group is finally being recognized. In this sense, he is commenting on Hmong history. This history, to Foung, is important to solidify though physical representation because it contributes both to a sense of being Hmong and to the diversity of the Twin Cities. Second, Foung speaks personally about the statue and communicates a sense of ownership he feels towards it. Based on his own personal identifications (Hmong, Minnesotan) he feels that the statue is representative of him, at least in an abstract sense. The history the statue represents is important to him as a Hmong individual, but the diversity and recognition of past generations memorialized here can apply to anyone Minnesotan.

In its currently planned form, the statue is to be structured as a bamboo shoot resting atop a *paj ntaub*. Foung was not able to communicate details as to why this design was chosen or what accompanying text or pictures will be placed around the monument, but was able to say that the committee had done extensive research to choose the design and supplementary material. Here again though, we see the *paj ntaub* chosen as a representation of Hmong history. This works to confirm Seexeng’s claim that art forms like the *paj ntaub* are transcendent in Hmong history and serve as excellent symbols of the group. Still, not everyone agrees on the format of the memorial. A comment posted on the website dedicated to memorial communicates the
poster’s belief that only a statue of the late general Vang Pao is appropriate to commemorate veterans. This comment is interesting because it illustrates a lack of consensus that art can be used to symbolize Hmong history, but it also shows the extent of the reverence to Vang Pao discussed above. To this commenter, the general is the only symbol necessary to communicate the sacrifice and struggle of the Hmong as a group.

Finally, I will return to the murals adorning the walls of Hmong village. As I have demonstrated, shared memories of Laos and the war are important to many Hmong living in the Twin Cities, and perhaps nothing communicates these ideas better than the Hmong Village murals. These are sites of memory that depict a Laos before the exodus of the Hmong to the United States. They surround the produce room of Hmong Village (Figure 15), linking the lifeways depicted in the paintings with agrarian practices in the United States. When analyzing the paintings, it is important to keep in mind their placement in this space, as well as the themes of heroism, sacrifice, and a sense of ethnic pride that characterize conceptions of a shared Hmong history. It is also important to note that these murals were rarely commented on by the respondents to this study, and any analysis and assumptions drawn from the murals are based on my own thoughts and research done to prepare for this study. What follows is a brief analysis of these murals, focusing on what makes them a prime example of a site of memory and the themes that communicate this shared sense of history.
It is nearly impossible not to notice Vang Pao first. The general sits in the foreground of the Long Tieng mural atop a boulder, arms resting on his knees (Figure 16). He takes up maybe an eighth of the horizontal extent of the painting but covers nearly the entire distance from top to bottom. He has a genuinely warm expression on his face as he smiles down on Long Tieng, as if he were looking down on his creation. In some sense he is. Regardless of his existence, the United States would have become involved in Laos, but Vang Pao took up a leadership role that really made much of what occurred possible. Having a considerable amount of control over the Special Guerilla Unit and other Lao armed forces, the depiction of Vang Pao as a creator makes some sense.

Unnatural colors are few. The sprawling valley is lush and verdant, and the mountains rise clear and azure from the base of the airstrip. Buildings are white. Roads
are a ruddy tan. Even Vang Pao, often depicted in white military regalia, dons greenish tan fatigues. Despite the fact that the painting is clearly “set” during the war, there is no real depiction of violence. Planes and helicopters dot the airstrip and the occasional vehicle can be seen driving down a dusty road, but there are no weapons, no explosions or gunfire, merely suggestions of them. In fact, the plane flying highest over the airbase belongs to Lee Lue, the Hmong fighter pilot who flew nearly 5,000 missions, rescuing American pilots and bombing North Vietnamese positions before his death in combat. Lee Lue flying over Long Tieng places the painting at a time when hope remained high (Figure 17). Lee was reportedly well respected by both Vang Pao and the Hmong as a group, as well as American fighter pilots, and seeing him flying his plane could be construed as an inspiration.
This painting, then, depicts two larger-than-life figures. Lee Lue flies his fighter, but it took looking at this painting quite a few times for me to even notice his name on the fuselage. Despite his good standing and aura of respect, he comes nowhere close to approaching the prestige and heroism embodied by Vang Pao. The general’s warm smile is infectious, and why shouldn’t it be? At this time, the viewer can infer that Vang Pao still believes that the United States has a chance to win the wars in Vietnam and Laos, and the once nomadic (and soon to be diasporic) Hmong people will have their own state high in the hills of Southeast Asia, away from a majority group that treats them with scorn. As a father figure, as a number of interviews have suggested, the Vang Pao of the produce room mural is everything a person could want. He’s organized, strong, passionate, affable and giving. It is impossible to ignore the message laced throughout this entire mural: “we may not have won the war, but without Vang Pao, we wouldn’t be here.”
Beyond depictions of Vang and Lee, both men stand for something greater, a common theme in Hmong oral culture: sacrifice. Both of these men sacrificed greatly for the sake of their people; Lee sacrificed his life, Vang sacrificed the lives of many, and eventually his own as well. More importantly, though, in these two figures, the Hmong who visit Hmong Village can see representations, embodiments of their own sacrifice. Given the massive death toll inflicted upon the Hmong in Southeast Asia, it is difficult to think that there is a first generation Hmong immigrant who did not know anyone killed in the fighting. Lee Lue and General Vang Pao are human embodiments of the hardship, sacrifice, and endurance of the Hmong that has become so rooted in their historical memory.

Opposite the mural of Long Tieng is the banana market (a term used by Tong to describe a place where produce is sold) and farm scene. The most intriguing aspect of the banana market mural is the display of the diverse lifeways lived by the Hmong people in Laos (Figure 18). At the right-most extremity, Hmong individuals lead burdened horses, tend rice paddies, pluck fruit from trees and carry baskets full of crops on their back. The colors are vibrant and inviting, and the scene is busy but peaceful. One woman carries a basket, looking to her left, and our eyes naturally follow her gaze to the left half of the painting. Across rice paddies and a clear, tranquil river valley, we arrive at the market. Hmong dressed in both traditional and non-traditional clothes go about a variety of activities. Huge tables have been erected to sell goods. Vegetables, fish, hot food, and other items not readily identifiable are laid out to see. Some tables
feature people eating and conversing with each other. Again, the background of this painting features clear mountain vistas in blue rising from a perfect green valley.

Figure 18: Hmong farmers tend to crops.

Despite the idyllic nature of the mural, there are a few aspects that are difficult to ignore once seen. A plane flies over the valley as a constant reminder of our time and place. The war is ongoing, and places like the banana market and Long Tieng, at least in retrospect, exist on borrowed time. Secondly, there are two men in this painting that seem out of place, and the reason for this is their skin color. Both are white, and they serve as a reminder of the inescapable presence of the west in Laos (Figure 19). One man, blond, in a long sleeve shirt and jeans, photographs a collection of Hmong women in traditional finery. My knee-jerk reaction is to interpret this as a criticism of the western infatuation with the exotic east, but it really is impossible to make an
assumption like that based on one character is this massive mural. Instead, it may just be foreshadowing. The Hmong have a place in the future of Western countries, and perhaps that is what the artist is choosing to recognize.

Figure 19: At the banana market, a western man photographs some Hmong women (bottom right).

As I stated previously, the mural transitions from a region of production to a region of reproduction. In a sense, then, the painting depicts the relationship between private and public space in Laos. We see the production and harvest of crops, as well as their eventual sale at the market. However, because the Hmong were primarily subsistence farmers in Laos, this is probably not a truly representative scene; it mimics the space the mural occupies. The produce room almost blends into the banana market scene, with the painting simply becoming the next row of produce, the people who occupy it becoming friend and family. Much like the chaotic scene behind us, the viewer
of the mural is forced to move or interrupt the movement of those using the room. If I stop to simply appreciate the painting, I am likely to be overwhelmed. On the surface, this placement might discourage quiet contemplation of the painting, but in reality I think the effect is the exact opposite. I may not be able to examine the finer details unless it is too early for large crowds, but in a way I feel more at one with the painting in these busy moments. It is an appropriate place for the painting to be, and while the finer details may be the lost, the overall effect is enhanced by its hectic surroundings.

One aspect of these two murals is still somewhat difficult to comprehend. If memories of the war are so harrowing, so haunting and visceral and tragic, why include any depictions of the war at all? Vang Pao is obviously an influential figure, but his image is not always set in a place that embodies death. Perhaps it is because in these paintings we see the last moments before the Hmong in America become the Hmong in America. The stage set here represents a branching off point. While not all Hmong left Laos and a considerable number still live in China, these murals are created for the Hmong in America, and this is their history. This is not to say that the Hmong elsewhere did not experience it, but these scenes represent the genesis of Hmong-Americans. The viewer sees Hmong life before, during, and after (as I will describe later) the war, and consequently we are witnessing the transformation of many of the Hmong in Laos into Hmong-Americans. These memories are the memories that all Hmong in America either share or pass down to their children and children’s children. These memories offer a point which Hmong-American’s can identify as, “the moment we became us.”
If the two murals I previously described represent before and during the war, then the third mural, the jungle scene on the north wall, can only represent the relationship between the Hmong and Laos as it currently stands, though the result is sometimes ironic (Figure 20). The viewer sees something unspoiled. The jungle scene is devoid of people, though certainly not of life. Animals of all species scatter the painting, going about their animal ways. An emerald river cascades down a few short, rocky waterfalls and flows through the whole mural. The jungle is green and blue and adorned with flowers, vines and other images of nature. The only hint of anything human is a rickety wooden bridge crossing the river. The bridge begins by arising off the

Figure 20: A jungle scene.
floor of the produce room, a portal to Laos itself. It is almost as if the viewer could step into this now-foreign country at any moment. But then: “No Entry.” The bridge is barred from access by a simple sign that says so much in just two words (Figure 21). “You can’t go back to the Laos of before the war. You are here now.” Vines stretch off the painting onto the plain, white concrete wall of Hmong Village, beckoning the traveler back to Laos, but any progress is impeded by that tiny sign. “It’s time to live your American life.”

So far, the findings of my study corroborate what Moua (2010) suggested in his thesis, that most Hmong in the United States view this country as their “homeland.” This sign is simply a reminder that the Hmong belong here now. It is as if we can visit Laos, and indeed the whole produce room recreates the experience, but we cannot truly return.

Though imagery of Vang Pao, the veteran’s memorial, and the murals at Hmong Village are only three examples of shared memories and history, it is quite clear that they are critically important as symbols of ethnicity. All of these symbols are deemed important enough by groups or individuals to be displayed in public spaces where they serve as representations of a history shared by those who identify themselves as Hmong. Vang Pao’s image is displayed in a wide array of Hmong ethnic spaces, while the murals are permanently situated in one such space. They serve as reminders to other Hmong individuals about what is deemed to be valuable or important. This imagery communicates the patriarchal societal structure that Seexeng described, and works to maintain a connection between the Hmong in the United States and the physical location where Hmong society had survived for some time before their exodus.
However, these symbols do not only take place in Hmong spaces, as the Hmong and Lao veteran’s memorial is to be established on the Minnesota state capitol lawn. It is a statement about the presence of Hmong and Lao individuals in the state. Though ethnic spaces constructed by these groups already exist, the memorial statue would communicate not only that they are in Minnesota to stay, but also that, as a group, Hmong and Lao immigrants have contributed something valuable to American society.

Figure 21: “No entry”: pre-war Laos is no more.
Summary

By now it is clear that ethnic spaces serve as locations where we can see the performativity of ethnic identity. Place pays such a key role is these displays, offering validity to ethnic claims and reinforcing aspects of ethnicity that may already be understood, or by providing a staging ground for the communication of new ideas. Without existing in these spaces, symbols of ethnicity may still carry weight and import, but the vibrancy and immediacy of ethnic displays would ring hollow. Furthermore, the use of these ethnic spaces allows symbolic ethnic behavior to find a home and a voice, and communicate an interpretation of ethnicity that adds to a rich history, and a culture adapting to change in a new context.

Many of those who responded to this study described symbolic ethnic behavior, even though they were unaware that they were doing so. Performances were described as being important for their ritual production rather than serving as “accurate” representations of tradition (a problematic word to use in any event). Furthermore, the “Americanization” of these performances is perceived to strip some of the authenticity from Hmong cultural demonstration. Still, the practice of these behaviors persists, reflecting some degree of symbolic ethnic behavior. Beyond symbolic ethnic behaviors, actual symbols of ethnicity persist throughout the Twin Cities. These symbols are considered important by many members of the community and are routinely used and displayed in conjunction with Hmong spaces, events, and indeed most representations
of Hmong culture in general. Material symbols like paj ntaub and the qeej, along with visual representations of a shared and valuable history pervade Hmong spaces and characterize, to some degree, Hmong culture of both the past and present. These symbols are valued by many members of the community as representations of what it means to be Hmong.

Symbolic ethnicity is a complicated subject and it may be that, because later generations of Hmong individuals have not yet been raised to adulthood in the United States, discussing the behavior of Hmong individuals as “symbolic” is not appropriate. However, as Gans describes symbolic ethnicity, it is clear that these behaviors exist in some capacity among the Hmong in the Twin Cities, or, at least, they are perceived to be occurring by some members of the community. Material symbols put on display, performance symbols that reflect more the ritual of performance than traditional Hmong practices, and the constructed visual imagery of a shared history all serve as either symbol ethnic behaviors or symbols of ethnicity.

Finally, it is important to recognize that most of these symbols and symbolic ethnic behaviors are put on display for other Hmong individuals. While Gans and Waters suggest that symbolic ethnicity is often put on display to out-group members, it is clear that this is not always the case in the Hmong community. Symbolic ethnic practices are frequently an important part of Hmong ethnic spaces, and, as Aranvihn elaborated, they “show that you’re Hmong.” While it may be that these activities take place in Hmong spaces simply because they are integral parts of Hmong society, this may not always be
true either. Hmong organizations like HMSA organize ethnic performances away from gatherings like Hmong New Year and J4, but still engage with the Hmong tradition of performance to an audience comprised mainly of other Hmong individuals. It is difficult for an out-group individual to speculate as to why this is deemed important, but perhaps many worry that Hmong culture could fade over time in the United States and it is considered valuable to show that you are continuing Hmong traditions in some capacity. In any case, it is apparent that symbols of Hmong ethnicity and symbolic ethnic behavior are common in the Hmong community. These symbols are used to represent Hmong culture both internally and to the rest of American society, and are considered incredibly valuable by many Hmong individuals in the Twin Cities.
Houa and I continued talking after I shut off my tape recorder. We had just discussed the international Moua clan symposium she had helped to organize, and she asked me if I would like to see some family photo albums and the book she had written about her life. I agreed, and her husband produced a copy of *Trail Through the Mists*. Houa brought out the photo album and explained some of the pictures to me. The pages of the album are completely filled with family photos; there are no margins to the pages and the photos often share borders. She shows me pictures of her biological children, foster children, and other members of her family. The album contains a photograph of her family’s first steps in America. Evidently someone had captured her and her family taking tentative steps off the airplane that brought them to unknown ground. Houa asks me about my major and I briefly explain how geography is concerned with space, and that I am interested in spaces used by Hmong individuals in the Twin Cities (which she understood from our interview). She tells me that as a Hmong person, “You always need to find your own space. No one will give it to you. You need to fight for your own space. Like this photo album,” she says with a smile, gesturing to the way the pictures crowd the pages. “You can use that quote in your paper.”

Space is not an abstract concept for the Hmong individuals whom I interviewed for this study. It is a very real, tangible thing, and Hmong ethnic spaces are clearly important, with roles to play in the Hmong community of the Twin Cities. Houa makes
this clear. While the struggle for Hmong spaces is beyond the scope of this study, it is clear that the diversity of ethnic spaces discussed here are valued and sought out for a purpose.

This study has demonstrated a critical linkage between ethnic spaces and ethnic identity. These spaces are used for their ability to reinforce and re-create identities, history, and a sense of belonging that could easily be lost in a new country. For the Hmong in the Twin Cities, ethnic spaces offer physical locations for Hmong individuals to gather, share cultural identifiers, and cement conceptualizations of ethnicity. They are celebrated for making the Hmong community visible and cohesive, and for creating the capacity to say “this is who we are.”

However, these spaces serve different purposes. Large gathering events maintain traditional practices while at the same time providing a space for complex Hmong and American identities to be expressed. They sit in a position between “old” and “new.” They are Hmong gatherings, to be sure, but their multi-identity embodiment is evident even in their names: Hmong American New Year, Hmong Minnesota New Year, and the Hmong Freedom Celebration.

Hmong Village and the Hmong Cultural Center offer something different. Spaces of everyday interaction, they reproduce the identities lived by Hmong individuals on a daily basis. Children here experience Hmong culture more fully than they might in a typical day at school. The sight and smell and sounds undoubtedly are familiar, and on a more basic level, these spaces provide validation of Hmong identity in the Twin Cities by
providing outlets for goods and services by and for Hmong individuals, focusing on products that would be difficult to find in other spaces, and professional services owned and operated by other Hmong. The Cultural Center reifies notions of culture by displaying physical artifacts and making available a wealth of resources about Hmong experiences. These spaces often double as sites of memory by providing these materials, but also by physically depicting shared past experiences in the form of artwork and a more catalogued history, like the newspaper adorning the walls of the Cultural Center. In this sense, these spaces also display, reinforce, and recreate Hmong identity.

Identity, however, is multifaceted and highly intricate, and most Hmong individuals in the Twin Cities would bristle at the suggestion that they are not allowed to identify as American as well. As a product of these multiple, shifting identifications, Hmong ethnic spaces also reflect the adoption of certain American cultural patterns and norms. Performativity is important here. Ethnicity does not exist in a vacuum, and the combination of Hmong and American identities needs a stage. These public ethnic spaces, whether everyday places or celebrated annual events, provide an outlet for the display of complicated, shifting, and valuable identities. Performativity has taken on American traits in the form of music, dance, and the English language. However, the performers themselves do not always seek to do so, and sometimes focus on understanding “what it means to be Hmong.”
Some of those who responded to this study perceive a certain amount of falsity or lack of authenticity in the face of this “Americanization.” To some, ethnic spaces that frequently display more Americanized or less authentic cultural shows are considered less valuable than they once were. Still, this is not always the case, and nearly everyone I spoke to recognizes, to some extent, an inability to shift the direction of these performances back to a more “authentically” Hmong experience. More importantly, this shift in substance and style reflects the American identities possessed by many of the Hmong in the Twin Cities, and demonstrates the socially constructed nature of ethnicity. By being present in an American context, American ethnic identity is often adopted and shaped to complement already established and constructed Hmong identities.

There is a symbolic aspect to ethnicity as well. It is increasingly challenging for immigrant groups to continue “living” their ethnicity, often resulting in more symbolic embodiments of ethnicity. This contributes at least in part to perceptions of “inauthenticity.” While successive generations of Hmong individuals adopt more American norms, the performances that are put on display in Hmong spaces do not as strongly reflect “traditional” Hmong practices. In a sense, the symbolic act of the performance (the clothing, the language, or the ritual of the performance) becomes that aspect of Hmong culture on display, altered in part by the changing lives of Hmong individuals. Consequently, these performances become “just a show” and not a representation of the lives of the performers. While this could be considered less valuable by some, others see an inexorable but certainly not detrimental change.
In chapter three, I briefly discussed my outsider status in relation to this project. I believe it allowed me to elicit descriptions and meanings of ethnic spaces that might have been unspoken had I been perceived as a member of the ethnic in-group. However, despite this potential boon I believe that some interview respondents were concerned that, because of my outsider status, I ran a greater risk of misrepresenting Hmong individuals or the Hmong as a group due to my lack of understanding or shared experiences. This can be seen when some interview respondents expressed relief that I was attempting to interview individuals from a wide array of backgrounds, educational levels, and degrees of acculturation. Many of these respondents also took the time to remind me that there is no monolithic Hmong experience, and that I should be sure to avoid making generalized statements in my writing.

This concern presents an interesting avenue for further research. It would likely be quite revealing were a similar study conducted by a Hmong individual. This might lead to more personal or intricate information sharing due to the identification the respondent may feel with the interviewer, though at the expense of the description that played such a key role in the completion of this study. One benefit that a Hmong research would bring to a repeat study would be for interviews to be conducted in the Hmong language, which may have led to more rich description, as all of these interviews were conducted in English. This would have led to a much different study, and serves as a reminder of the qualitative nature of the research. Data were created not just by interview respondents, but through their dialogue with me. Additionally, this would also
have helped the interviewer make stronger and more numerous connections. This is partially due to, again, shared identification, but also because a Hmong researcher who speaks the language would also be able to conduct interviews with those who speak little to no English. Speaking with these individuals would likely result in a more robust and comprehensive study because it would capture the thoughts and feelings of those who are perhaps less exposed to forms of American culture and the English language.

This study also provided a relatively brief overview of many of these ethnic spaces. Another avenue for further research might be to focus on one space while keeping in mind many of the concepts discussed here. Hmong ethnic spaces in the Twin Cities are rich both in their display of Hmong heritage and their role as social gathering spaces. It would be revealing for a researcher to focus on one space, such as Hmong New Year or Hmong Village, conducting interviews about these spaces and performing more intensive participant observation. In a sense, I believe this area could benefit from more ethnographic research.

There remains another aspect of ethnic identification that I did not focus on in detail during the course of this study. Most definitions of ethnicity involve an outsider component – that out-group members or members of the dominant culture define and craft their own notions of what it means to be a member of an ethnic group and apply them such that the in-group becomes defined by them. While this is clearly an important aspect of ethnic identification, I did not have the space to discuss this idea in detail. Some respondents did comment on this notion, however, drawing upon
stereotypes that pervade the discourses of Hmong immigrants in the United States. This would also be a fascinating course for potential research, and I would like to see researchers focus on this aspect of ethnicity with Hmong interview respondents in future publications.

In Chapter 7 I briefly discussed sites of memory in the Twin Cities area and their role in ethnic identification. Places such as the Hmong and Lao veteran’s memorial, and public art like that displayed in Hmong Village are likely not the only areas in the Twin Cities that could fill roles as sites of memory, and further research could be conducted on this topic as well. Geographers (Foote 1997, Dwyer 2000, Foote, Toth, and Arvay 2000, Hoelscher 2003, Alderman 2008) have constructed an extensive literature on sites of memory and commemoration, and further research could engage these authors to a more substantial degree than I have in this work. It would be interesting to see research comparing and contrasting Hmong sites of memory with those of other immigrant groups.

Finally, I believe future researchers could work to juxtapose the spaces created by the Hmong population in the Twin Cities with those in other locations. While the Twin Cities represent the largest concentration of Hmong individuals, there are many other large cities that host sizeable Hmong populations. Cities like Sacramento and Fresno, California, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, could also be the sites of interesting research focusing on Hmong spaces. Furthermore, many of the respondents in this study made statements that reflected their perception of the Twin Cities as a type of
“Hmong capital.” It might therefore be illuminating to gather information about the perceptions of Hmong individuals living in other large cities with substantial Hmong populations. Do they also see the Twin Cities as a Hmong capital? Do they feel that way about their own cities? Answers to these questions may be driven both by perceptions of the Hmong population in these cities and the types of Hmong ethnic spaces there, and would reveal how the groups in these cities perceive the spaces they inhabit compared to those inhabited by other Hmong around the country.

Beyond enriching the literature of ethnic spaces, I have demonstrated that members of ethnic groups are actively aware of the role these spaces play in ethnic identity formation and reification. Despite differing opinions on the value of cultural persistence, most individuals find these places to be important when it comes to maintaining ethnic identity.

This study had also contributed to the growing literature of the Hmong as a group. Despite the fact that Hmong immigrants arrived in the United States nearly forty years ago, there has not been a substantial amount of research regarding the ethnic spaces created and used by this community. While concerns over English language use, education, health concerns, and acculturation stress are common, geographical perspectives on Hmong migration and acculturation in the United States are lacking. By giving voice to those who use and value these spaces, I hope that this study sheds light on an under-researched area. Hmong ethnic spaces in the Twin Cities and the people who use them are vibrant and engaging, and I earnestly hope that future researchers
will answer the call for further research here, partnering with local individuals and expanding the academic literature.

What is clear from the interviews undertaken for this study is that most respondents consider the Twin Cities – and the United States – home. As time passes and the war in Laos fades father into the past, it is becoming increasingly erroneous to call the Hmong “diasporic.” The exodus from Southeast Asia forced the Hmong as a group to adapt to a new country, and the spaces created by this group have helped facilitate this shift. While maintaining Hmong culture as it was in Laos is nearly impossible, it is not impractical to recreate ethnic identities and ethnic spaces that perpetuate similar values and maintain culturally important traditions, and the ethnic spaces developed by the Hmong in the Twin Cities have helped accomplish these goals. Furthermore, by creating these spaces, a sense of belonging has also been forged. Events like Hmong New Year, shopping centers like Hmong Village, and sites of memory like the forthcoming veteran’s memorial aid in the development of a sense of home where Hmong and American identities can be encouraged together in space.

Ethnic spaces have become a ubiquitous, defining characteristic of the American cultural landscape and are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. In the same vein, the Hmong in the United States have also become part of an American plural “culture.” The spaces created by this group help to forge and recreate ethnic identities that work towards maintaining a sense of self based on a valued heritage. Life for those who identify themselves with particular ethnicities can be challenging in the United
States, but ethnic spaces that forge bonds and create a sense of belonging ease these hardships.
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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Can you tell me about the place you lived before you came to the Twin Cities?
   What kinds of places were important to you there?
Can you tell me about some of the places where, when you were a child, you felt comfortable or like you belonged?
Tell me about how you came to live in the Twin Cities.
   After you arrived, what made living here easy? What made it challenging?
Does your family live in the area?
   Do you keep in contact with friends or family members in other parts of the US or Southeast Asia?
Tell me about your first memories of the Twin Cities.
   What people or places made you feel comfortable? Helped you to get accustomed to the region?
Do you believe it’s important to interact with other Hmong people?
   What helps you to do this?
Can you think of any places in the Twin Cities that are important for Hmong people living here?
   What goes on in these places that make them important?
Tell me about the first time you visited one of these places.
   What were you thinking and feeling?
   How does it make you feel to go there now?
Can you tell me about a place in the Twin Cities that Hmong people worked to establish?
   How did that happen?
   Was there any resistance to creating this place?
What types of places aren’t present in the Twin Cities that you think would strengthen the Hmong community?
   Why would this place be important?
Can you think of a place that Hmong people in the Twin Cities would suffer from losing?
   What would be lost if this place were to no longer exist?
Is there anything about being a Hmong person that you think sets you apart from other Americans?
What types of behaviors and traditions do you think are important to Hmong people?
   Is it possible to maintain these traditions in the Twin Cities? What makes it easy or challenging?
APPENDIX B: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

A determination has been made that the following research study is exempt from IRB review because it involves:

Category 2. research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior

Project Title: Space and Identity: Among Ethnicity in Minnesota's Twin Cities

Primary Investigator: Zachary J. Bodenner

Co-Investigator(s):

Advisor: Timothy Anderson

Department: Geography

Jo Ellen Sherow, MPA
Office of Research Compliance

Date 5-16-13

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your application for review. Any additions or modifications to the project must be approved (as an amendment) prior to implementation.
## APPENDIX C: LIST OF INTERVIEW RESPONDENTS

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<th>Name</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Age(if given)</th>
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<td>Retired author and interpreter</td>
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