

## Kuv Yog Hmoob (I Am Hmong)

Ger (Maiv Ntxawm) Thao, 2020



To this day, I question:  
Why didn't I learn about my history in  
the textbooks?  
Why were Hmong people left out of the story,  
Left out of history as if none of us existed?  
The story of my people is not written in the  
textbooks of history,  
But is written within me and lives through me.  
Hmong people do not have a country to call  
their own  
Even though,  
Our Ancestors traded their lives for death  
And died for our freedom.  
Our Grandparents swam across the Mekong River  
And cried for our joy.  
Our Parents escaped to Thai refugee camps  
And bled for our future.  
Fleeing from bloodshed and persecution  
And living with nightmares of those dark days  
Just for a chance to live,  
All for a chance to have us.  
With survival of the fittest and race to the top  
Instilled in our blood and ingrained in our brains,  
We assimilated forming a new cultural identity...  
I am Hmong American,  
Known as the 1.5 generation,  
Born in Thailand and raised in America,  
Given the opportunity to chase the  
"American Dream."  
So, do not try to tell me that  
Hmong history is being forgotten since it was not  
written down.  
Hmong lives linger in the oral stories we pass onto  
our children,  
In the stitches of our "paj ntaub" clothes.  
So, do not try to convince me that  
Hmong language is being lost since only English is  
valuable in America.

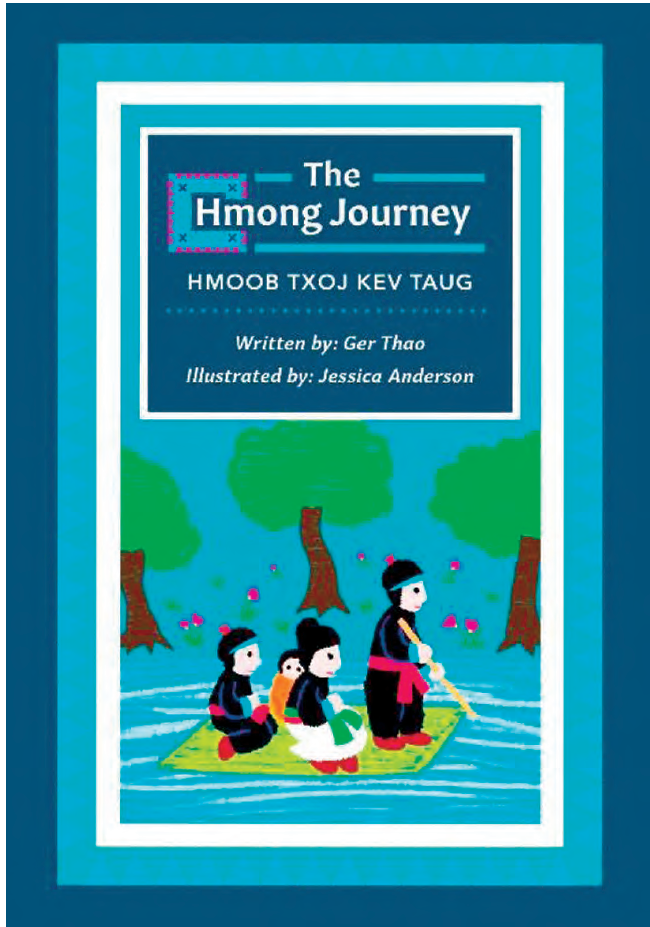
Learning the Hmong language will preserve  
our culture.  
I must be strong and brave  
To show the world that I remember kuv li keeb  
kwm, my roots.  
I am the bridge and prodigy,  
Carrying the weight of my Ancestors' sacrifices,  
Carrying my clan's honor and legacy.  
Although I live in America...  
Kuv Yog Hmoob (I Am Hmong):  
A Hmong girl, a daughter, and sister,  
An immigrant, educator, and scholar.  
I'm a Hmong woman with ambition,  
A fire for justice and a thirst for truth.  
I share kuv zaj dab neeg, my story, with you,  
So that I can reclaim my piece of history.  
Kuv yog kuv Pog Koob Yawg Koob txoj kev  
npau sauv!  
I am my Ancestors' wildest dreams!



### From Immigrant

The Hmong people are an ethnic group from Southeast Asia. Hmong Americans came to this country as refugees from Laos. Our people's past is important and complex. Hmong Americans have a complicated relationship with the United States government. The CIA recruited General Vang Pao of the Royal Army and enlisted Hmong men and boys in Laos to fight in their war. The "Secret War" was an attempt to use local fighters to crush North Vietnamese supply routes that ran through Laos. Men and boys traded their shovels for guns and their dry, dirt stained hands became moist with blood. After decades of war, the Communist takeover in 1975 led to a refugee diaspora across the world, from France to Australia to the United States. Over 100,000 Hmong came to the United States as political refugees.

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Ger's Journey: From Immigrant to Scholar

This war changed our world in so many ways. Through ongoing story sessions with my father Yeng Thao (personal communication, December 25, 2019), I learned that our parents were just kids then. All they knew was to keep going, keep moving, and someone would eventually have mercy. We forgot our parents' struggles and childhood trauma during the war because they didn't know how to talk about it. For four decades they continue to bury the trauma deeper and deeper where the worst of nightmares continue to haunt their dreams. They kept it further away from our generation's eyes and ears because no child should ever have to experience such horrors of traveling to the darkest corners of the jungle where the only hope of living was the rushing sound of

the Mekong River. Our parents and elders did unimaginable things just to survive. Though their hearts, hopes, and spirits were broken, they fought on through the practice of their culture and the power of the community. They did not forget who they were even when all hope seemed to be lost.

Even though they weren't highly educated, our parents placed a high value on schooling and often worked multiple jobs to ensure their children would get the best education available and a safe place to someday call "home." The realization of our parents' sacrifices fueled a drive for us to achieve and work even harder. Now, we look to help the next generation. Serving as the fabric of the Hmong community, the important players in this new chapter is the "1.5 generation." This is the unique generation of those born in Laos or Thai refugee camps and transported to America in their childhood. They represent the link between their parents, who lived through the war and are fluent in Hmong, and their children or younger family members, who were born in America and are fluent in English. They successfully made the transition from immigrants to active citizens. They are the community advocates that are trying to bridge the Hmong communities they live in with the mainstream. This generation are the mentors and role models that pave the way for future and younger generations of Hmong Americans to follow.

I am of the 1.5 generation and this is my story. As a doctoral student and educator who strives to teach and engage in anti-bias, multicultural/multilingual, and social justice education, I am going to use the Teaching Tolerance (Southern Poverty Law Center, 1991) Social Justice Standards as a framework to walk you through my journey from immigrant to scholar. The standards are divided into four domains: Identity, Diversity, Justice, and Action. These are based on Louise Derman-Sparks' (Derman-Sparks, Edwards, & NAEYC, 2010) four goals for anti-bias education in early childhood: Identity, Diversity, Justice, and Activism. I feel that as an educator, it is important to not only "talk the talk but also walk the walk."

## Anti-bias Education Goals

**Identity** Each child will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social/group identities.

**Diversity** Each child will express comfort and joy with human diversity, accurate language for human differences, and deep, caring human connections.

**Justice** Each child will increasingly recognize unfairness (injustice), have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.

**Activism** Each child will demonstrate a sense of empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions.

## Derman-Sparks, Edwards, & NAEYC (2010)

I am currently the Graduate Assistant for the Social Justice in Education Project in Hawai'i with Dr. Amber Makaiau and Dr. Patricia Halagao. This project is a collaboration between the Hanahau'oli School Professional Development Center and the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa College of Education, funded by the generosity and forward thinking of longtime Teaching Tolerance supporters Jana and Howard Wolff. We are working on developing coursework for both public and private school educators from across the state that will support them in learning how to create a social justice curriculum that utilizes local resources and reflects Hawai'i's diverse population, including multicultural, indigenous, Asian, and Pacific-Island perspectives. We are also creating professional development workshops focused on early childhood, gender inclusion, and social justice education. Our objective is that educators will use the materials to supplement their curriculum, to inform their practices, and to create civil and inclusive school communities where children are respected, valued and welcomed participants.

### Identity

"Puag thaum ub...Once upon a time" is the start to every great story. This is kuv zaj dab neeg... my story. There was a little girl born to a lovely,

hard-working Hmong couple, Yeng Thao and Wang Xiong, in the refugee camp of Ban Vinai, Thailand in the year 1987. They decided to name her Maiv Ntxawm (Ger), which means the youngest daughter. Because of the Secret War, her parents made the tough decision to bring the family to the United States for a safer, brighter future. They immigrated to California in 1991. There the Thao Family continued to grow their family of six sons and three daughters and made Butte County their new home.

As soon as we moved to the United States, my parents made it clear that education was a priority. With no English skills, my father set out to learn English, get his driver's license, and get a job as a chef assistant at a Chinese restaurant, a rare feat for a Hmong man of his generation. My father said, "I didn't come to America by choice, but I had to do what was best for my family. I came here, and I'm learning the language and working hard because I want more for you children." My mother, who couldn't speak a word of English and couldn't drive, managed to raise all nine of us and get us through school. This set a high bar for my siblings and me.

Having been born in the refugee camp in Thailand and immigrating to the United States at five-years-old, I remember being the shy quiet Asian girl in the back of the classroom. I was made fun of because I didn't know any English and looked different. We were often told to go back to where we came from. How do you go back when you have no country to go back to? As a little kindergartner, I would always cry to get out of going to class. I just wanted to be in the comfort of my home and my parents' arms. I was ashamed to be Hmong. No one seemed to know what I was going through. I was frustrated, lost, and alone. I just wanted to fit in. I was determined to learn English and become an "American."

Because I tried so hard to fit in, I forgot where I came from. I had lost my sense of identity. Who or what am I: Hmong? American? Hmong American? American Hmong? As a matter of fact, I wasn't even sure of my own name. When I started school, I would write 'Mai Ger' (the English version of my name Maiv Ntxawm). My teacher told me that that

was too long and complicated, so she dropped the Mai off and added the 'i' to Ger, so my name became Geri. Talk about identity crisis! As an immigrant and English learner, I didn't know how to say, "No, that's not my name" so I went along with it. In the Hmong culture, we are taught young to show respect to the elders and our teachers so that's what I did. As teachers, it is important that we learn how to pronounce our students' names and for us to communicate how important and valuable their names are (Souto-Manning, 2016). Now looking back, I wished my teacher would have taken the time to learn and value my name and cultural background, and I would have corrected her.

As a 1.5 generation Asian American, I didn't remember much of my homeland or culture because I came to the U.S. at such a young age. I was struggling trying to keep up with both worlds. I would juggle learning English at school and adapting to the western ways of life and then come home and juggle speaking Hmong to my parents and fulfill the duties of a Hmong daughter. Sometimes the two worlds collided and clashed, so for the next several years, I continued to lose and constantly find myself. The one thing I held onto was the many dab neeg (stories) my Grandma and my parents would share with me about the lush green forests of Laos and how Hmong used to live free and peaceful lives with their agricultural lifestyles. If only my teachers valued and knew my family's history. Lester (2005) reminds us that children often do not see their histories in the classroom, so it is important that educators engage students in learning their own histories from their families because it leads children to see their family members as knowledgeable and capable.

### **Diversity**

In my early years of teaching, I had, as we teachers call it, a "teachable moment." I started my career as a first-grade teacher at Lincrest School in Yuba City Unified School District. It was the first week of school, and one of my students was having a conversation with his friend about who their teachers were. When asked, my student responded

"Miss Thao." The other student asked who Miss Thao was. My student said, "Oh you know, that Mexican lady!" I don't think I look very Hispanic nor do I speak much Spanish. In the Yuba City area, we have a big East Indian population and very few Asian staff or diversity in general. Hearing that conversation was a wake-up call for me. I realized that my students had no idea who I am or where I come from. Not only do my students not know about my ethnicity, my colleagues expressed how little they knew about the Hmong or Asian ethnic groups. Clearly it doesn't exist in the social science/history curriculum nor do I have any literature or time in the classroom to teach them.

On the flipside, I also know firsthand the difficulties of staying in touch with my Hmong heritage. Because I came to the United States at an early age, I learned English easily and shielded my "Hmongness." I was slowly losing my native language. I distinctly remember a moment when I was trying to translate body parts and medical terms at a doctor's appointment for my parents. I tried to explain it to them with my English-thinking mind, and I tried to translate the English words exactly into Hmong. That didn't work so well. I remember my mom saying, "Hmong American children these days don't know how to speak Hmong anymore." To this day, I still remember those words. It was an embarrassing and sad moment for me to realize that I didn't know as much Hmong as I should.

### **Justice**

That realization was part of what led me to take the lead as the program coordinator for the Hmong Language and Culture Enrichment (HLCEP) summer camp in Madison, Wisconsin. I was not the only one looking for a way to connect with my culture. Hmong parents had expressed the wish for some sort of Hmong school, as their children were more comfortable speaking English than Hmong. Non-Hmong parents approached us as well, saying they wanted their children to be able to socially engage in an increasingly diverse world.

The impetus of HLCEP first came to light when a few Hmong parents in the Madison area

networked and discussed their children's academic skills. Lack of cultural support available at schools and low self-esteem were identified as key barriers to their children's academic success. Data from the school district showed that our Hmong students were falling far behind in reading and math. The dialogue snowballed and Hmong parents became aware that their children were not getting enough exposure to the Hmong culture, language, and traditions at home or school. These parents witnessed a fast pace of assimilation into the American culture. Besides the low academic skills of their children, they feared that, someday, their kids would not know what it's like to be Hmong (M.Z. Vue, personal communication, 2012).

I needed to do something. In the Fall of 2012, I started my Masters in Education: Curriculum & Instruction program at California State University, Chico. I knew I wanted to focus on something I was passionate about for my project. I started researching and realized that there wasn't a whole lot of resources or literature on the Hmong people, especially at the elementary level for my young learners. I came across *My Grandfather's Journey* by Allen Say. This was a story about a boy tracing his Japanese heritage. I automatically connected to the character in the story not only because he was Asian, but also because I could relate to the concept of immigrating to a new country and struggling with identity. As I reflected on my childhood as an Asian American, specifically Hmong, growing up in California, I honestly don't remember being able to relate to any of the characters in the readers or books I read in the classroom. I can see why my nieces and nephews had a hard time identifying themselves as Hmong.

I decided to write down my family story. I thought back to bedtime stories my Grandma, Song Vue, would tell me of her childhood and the simple life back in Laos. My parents still remember the Secret War and the harsh traumatic journey from Laos to America as if it were yesterday. The stories became more real when we went back to visit Laos and Thailand in 2009. To them, it was going back home, back to the land of our

ancestors. Somehow every mountain, hill, and river brought back trauma, memories, and stories. To me, the stories were finally coming to life in front of my eyes. It was such an eye-opening experience to see the birthplace of my grandparents and parents and the camp where I was born. This was one of those rare experiences that I wish every Hmong American person could see for themselves so that they may appreciate the sacrifices our grandparents and parents made for us. For Hmong, our stories are oral, passed down, or told through paj ntaub story cloths. These powerful stories still stuck to me after all these years. I felt they needed to be recorded and shared.

### **Action/Activism**

What started as notes on my iPad became a bilingual children's picture book titled, *The Hmong Journey: Hmoob Txoj Kev Taug*. As I drafted, I thought of the message I wanted to pass on to my nieces/nephews and my young learners. I didn't want to sugar coat anything. I wanted them to understand that our story wasn't rainbows and butterflies. They were capable and deserved to know the "real" story. It is a historical, realistic fictional book told from the perspective of a Hmong grandma to her grandchild in the form of a bedtime story about Hmong life and the family's journey first from Laos to Thailand to escape war and persecution and then immigrating to America. I also designed a cultural curriculum to support my colleagues with implementing the basics of Hmong history, culture, and language in the classroom. The cultural lessons were also piloted and implemented in the HLCEP summer program. For the first time in my life, I was finally confident in and proud of my identity. I wanted to instill that in my students as well.

Several studies explore the importance of children being able to see themselves in the literature they read (mirrors) and to be able to experience the life of others (windows). A more recent addition to the "windows and doors" perspective is the "sliding door" where readers are inspired to take action based on what they

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read (Bishop, 1990; Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Tschida, Ryan & Ticknor, 2014). Every time I tell my story, I connect to my audience in such powerful ways—whether it’s a “window” for my non-Hmong students to learn and embrace a different culture or as a “mirror” for my Hmong students to relate to and hear their family’s story.

The first time I read my book to my first graders, their reaction was “Miss Thao, this story is about you. It’s about your family and where you came from.” They were so eager and excited to know that much more about Miss Thao, their Hmong teacher. For Family Day at the Valene Smith Anthropology Museum, as part of their Hmong exhibit, I was invited to share my story. I brought my niece Nina and nephew Dylan along. I had children, parents, college volunteers, and community members sitting on a traditional Hmong placemat “lev” on the ground eagerly waiting to hear my story. As I finished reading, Nina and Dylan said, “Auntie, this story is about us, where Grandma and Grandpa came from.” The looks on their faces and the excitement in their voices were priceless.

As my journey took me to Hawai’i for graduate school, I have been able to share my story with numerous audiences including elementary students and teachers at Hanahau’oli School, international graduate students from the East-West Center, and pre-service teacher candidates from the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa. I also volunteered at Hanahau’oli School supporting teachers in incorporating multicultural approaches to education into their practice and enhancing the experience of students by sharing my own family’s experience immigrating to the U.S.

I did a book reading assembly back in January of 2019 at Hanahau’oli School. After my book reading, the K–1 teachers shared that the students were playing immigration, role playing my story during recess and in class directly following the assembly. The teachers said that the kids had discussions about why people have to move. They also talked about how people might feel if they were not able to be let into a country and

how sad they would be to leave their home. A parent also reported that he thought the assembly on the topic of immigration was fantastic. They used the assembly as a discussion topic at dinner to talk about their own family history and the idea of people who move homes and some of the sensitivities around that. It’s so rewarding to hear that the work I’m doing is making an impact on students’ lives (A. Makaiau, personal communication, January 11, 2019).

## To Scholar

As a frightened little student back in the day, my parents couldn’t get me to stay in school; now they tell me that they can’t get me to leave school and academia. When you know who you are and find what you love, it’s hard to leave. The one thing I know is that teaching and sharing stories will always be a part of my identity. Educating is deep in my blood. I can’t escape it, so I embrace it! As James Baldwin once said, “The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you can alter, even by a millimeter, the way people look at reality, then you can change it!”

There is a lack of publicity and opportunities for our minority authors to be visible to the community. As a former elementary, reading intervention, and English as Second Language teacher, I’ve noticed the lack of interest in reading among our long-term U.S. born students in English learner programs because some students may have never found a love or purpose for reading. The lack of culturally relevant books also play a key role. As an educator, I am always looking for more culturally relevant books to engage my bilingual and multilingual students and certainly there are not enough authors out there. Since then, I have tried to inspire my own students and teacher colleagues to share and publish their stories.

I want to inspire and instill a love of literature in my students’ heritage spoken language(s). I also want to leave a legacy of more published culturally relevant books for classroom usage and future generations to come. In October 2019, a group of educators and parents brought together

Hmong authors from around the country to spark and cultivate a love of reading and writing amongst 250 Hmong youths in grades 7 through 12 in the Twin Cities. The theme was “Embracing the Love of Reading and Writing in the Hmong Language.” The conference was free and open to the general public. It was cosponsored by local partnerships: University of Wisconsin, Whitewater, Minnesota Humanities Center, Hennepin County Library, Osseo Area, and Hmong Educational Resources (HER). There were free books giveaway for young participants to spark the love of reading and writing. As one of the featured authors at this event, I believe we need more experiences like this to develop and sustain pleasure in reading for our communities and grow a nation of readers.

My story is not meant to only share the Hmong or Asian cultures or voices. I truly believe that multicultural stories and literature opens the world to all our children and students. What ties us together is our common struggle and common opportunity. Telling stories is the best way to teach and even understand ourselves. Storytelling provides us with a powerful tool to make change happen. Through personal and cultural stories, children may step into the characters of others very similar or different from themselves. It is for this reason that stories provide the perfect vehicle, now more than ever, for embracing the beauty and acceptance of diversity. It opens the door for dialogue and builds a sense of community.

As I continue to share my story, I realize that I can empower my students to see themselves in stories and books and be proud of their identity. I hope that my story will pave that path for my students, siblings, nieces/nephews, and future children to know that they, too, have a voice and that one day they will share their stories with the world. As spoken by C. S. Lewis in *Shadowlands*, “We read to know we’re not alone.” I say, “We tell and write stories to share that we’re not alone.” We share stories to connect to others. It also gives us a sense of identity and belonging. As educators, we have the power to transform lives with the stories we tell.

I truly believe that in order to teach for social justice in education, we must teach the way we see the world. In teaching bilingual and multilingual children, it is important to see them as capable, to learn from them, and to communicate their importance in the curriculum. We can do this through valuing artificial literacies: acknowledging that everyone has a story to tell, valuing family funds of knowledge: seeing young children and families as skillful and resourceful, and enhancing access and reputation to diverse books: have books in all languages that represent the childrens’ images and languages (Souto-Manning, 2016; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). We must invite our colleagues and students to join us in this movement for social justice to “eradicate racism and intolerance.”

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