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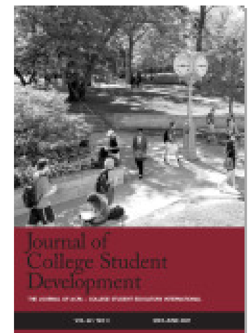

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Visibility, Voice, and Place: Hmong American College Student-Initiated Organizing as Creative Praxis

Rican Vue

While scholars have noted the levels of educational attainment of Hmong Americans compared to East Asian Americans as well as the overall population, this focus has undermined the achievements of Hmong Americans. To shift the discourse on Hmong American students and provide a liberatory perspective, I examined the student-initiated organizing efforts within a Hmong ethnic student organization at a public university in the University of California system. Drawing on interviews with 16 members, document analysis, and participant observation, I found that participating in the organization provides a means for collective action aimed at addressing experiences of invisibility in the social, curricular, and cultural dimensions of the institution. These collective efforts highlight creative praxis that reimagines and constructs Hmong American student place on campus.

The pursuit of higher education amid widespread racial and ethnic inequities remains a challenge for many—one that shapes the lives of Hmong Americans,* a refugee group whose migrations to the United States are a result of the U.S. Secret War in Laos (1964–1973), a conflict related to the war in Vietnam. In the US Hmong Americans are confronted by the segmented economic and occupational structure as well as racialized context (Kula & Paik, 2016); these forces also take shape in education and consequently manifest in educational outcomes (Teranishi, 2010). Hmong Americans face opportunity gaps in higher education admissions and college completion (CARE, 2013; Teranishi, 2010). While these educational outcomes reveal a discrepancy between democratic ideals and practices in education institutions, they are not indicative of Hmong American aspirations, abilities, and potential. Uncovering the ways Hmong Americans engage in anti-oppressive practices is instructive for rectifying these discrepancies, thereby being essential for their full inclusion (Vue, 2018, 2021).

This study illustrates that one problem faced by Hmong Americans in higher education is a condition of *institutional invisibility*, which underscores how Hmong American students are culturally absent, minimized, or unacknowledged in the educational setting. In particular, institutional invisibility refers to both when there is a lack of representation in the compositional diversity of an institution and when institutions do not see nor account for a community; the latter implicates norms and processes within the formal structures of the institution such as programs and policy (e.g., record keeping and reporting). There has been widespread acknowledgment and critique

* In keeping with the voices of participants, I use the terms *Hmong American* and *Hmong* interchangeably, as they did throughout their interviews. Additionally, while I employ the spelling Hmong more commonly used in the scholarship, *Mong* is also used; each has been used independently both to refer to all H/Mong and to reflect intracommunity diversity in language and culture.

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of Hmong Americans' absence from curricula, support services, and education policy (e.g., Kwan, 2015; Teranishi, 2010; Vue, 2013a, 2013b). In addition to having implications for Hmong American students being misunderstood by their peers, faculty, staff, and institutional leaders, this glaring absence also shapes Hmong American students' sense of identity and belonging (DePouw, 2018; Kwan, 2015; Teranishi, 2010; Vue, 2013a, 2013b), with the potential for broader consequences beyond the campus community. For example, campus underrepresentation, whether in the composition of students, programing, curricula, or organizational policies, signals the historical and contemporary forms of exclusion that are impressed into the memory of Communities of Color (Feagin et al., 2014; Vue, 2021).

This institutional invisibility is reinforced ideologically with the dominant framing of Hmong Americans as delinquents (Moua & Vang, 2015; Ngo & Lee, 2007), which positions them as perennial outsiders of higher education (Vue, 2013b). Due to a historical neglect of Hmong Americans in higher education, scholars have taken note of and amplified Hmong Americans' lower levels of educational attainment compared to East Asian Americans as well as the overall population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Yet this focus can reify deficit understandings of Hmong Americans (Poon et al., 2016) and disregard the anti-oppressive efforts of Hmong American university students. Currently, a plethora of examples abound in academic scholarship (e.g., Lei, 2003) and popular media (e.g., Eastwood, 2008) of Hmong American youth whose oppositional behavior effectively reproduces the subordinate social positioning of Hmong Americans. While capturing the consequences of educational inequality and accounting for the reasons that students may "reject" school—including racism and hostile campus climates (Lei, 2003; Ngo, 2002)—this predominant focus obscures the potential for Hmong American students to be subjects of social transformation or what Freire (1970) discussed as agents of liberatory change. Therefore, inquiry into Hmong students' creative praxis is necessary both to understand the ways they critically resist oppressive institutional practices and to disrupt deficit discourses that have undermined Hmong American achievements.

In an effort to shift the discourse on Hmong American students and to give credence to the role of active and committed student resistance in instigating institutional change, for this article I have (a) reviewed literature specific to Hmong Americans in higher education, because they are often either glossed over in discourses on Asian Americans or collectively lumped with Southeast Asian American ethnic groups despite their cultural diversity; (b) foregrounded scholarship on ethnic student organizations as contexts of resistance; and (c) provided creative praxis theory that extends social praxis (Freire, 1970) to Hmong students' creative efforts. This exploratory, instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) of the Hmong Students Association (HSA), a student organization that has worked to counter the institutional invisibility of Hmong Americans at West Coast University (pseudonym), answers the following questions: How does the Hmong student organization facilitate creative praxis? Specifically, how do the student-initiated organizing efforts reveal and counter institutional invisibility? Through my interviews with 16 members, document analysis, and participant observation, the findings demonstrate how HSA served as a means for its members to collectively reflect on their social positioning within the university and to engage in education and advocacy around issues of Hmong student inclusion and visibility. In amplifying Hmong

American voices, these collective efforts counter experiences of invisibility in the social, curricular, and cultural dimensions of the institution. In doing so, Hmong students' creative efforts reimagine and construct their place on campus.

HMONG AMERICANS AND INVISIBILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In higher education settings, it is commonplace for Hmong Americans to encounter peers, faculty, and staff who have limited or no prior exposure to or knowledge of Hmong Americans (DePouw, 2018; Vue, 2013a, 2013b). Based on both phenotype and the racist tendency to assume that Asians are a monolithic group, the ethnic identity of Hmong Americans is unnoticed or considered immaterial despite the social conditions of Hmong Americans being constrained by intersections of race, class, gender, and language (e.g., Ducklow & Toft, 2020; Kwan, 2015; S. Lee, 1997; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Vue, 2021). Indeed, much of the research on the education of Hmong Americans has examined their experiences within a secondary context, documenting how their opportunities are diminished by residential segregation and lower-resourced schools (Teranishi, 2010), racialization, and cultural neglect (Adler, 2004; S. J. Lee, 2005; Thao, 2003). In the postsecondary context, Hmong Americans experience financial barriers (S. Lee, 1997; Xiong & Lam, 2013), have limited representation (Vue, 2013b), report hostile campus climates (Nguyen et al., 2016), and routinely encounter racial microaggressions (Kwan, 2015) and racism (DePouw, 2018; Ducklow & Toft, 2020), all of which are factors that negatively influence academic outcomes and emotional well-being.

A disregard of such experiences that reflects the instrumental nature, that is, the material consequence of ethnicity for Hmong Americans, combines with ignorance of Hmong ethnicity and culture to reveal the contours of institutional invisibility experienced by Hmong Americans (DePouw, 2018; Kwan, 2015; Vue, 2013b). In particular, this invisibility is institutionalized when there is limited representation on campus in compositional diversity, curricula, and policy. For example, Hmong American students at institutions that are predominantly White and where there are a plurality of Asian Americans report a cultural absence and devaluation of Hmong culture in the campus context. DePouw (2018) reported that all 25 of her survey respondents indicated that their peers did not have an appropriate understanding of Hmong history, culture, or language. Hmong Americans also have difficulty finding formal coursework that includes Hmong American identity and culture (DePouw, 2018; Vue 2013b). Institutional data that do not account for Hmong Americans also disregards their academic and social needs (Teranishi, 2010). Many institutions do not disaggregate Asian American and Pacific Islanders—who constitute at least 48 ethnic groups—in enrollment, persistence, and degree attainment statistics (Teranishi, 2010). Hmong Americans have been neglected from campuswide data collection and reporting even at institutions where there are sizeable populations of Hmong American students (Vue, 2013b). These institutional norms and practices illustrate the ways higher education institutions do not see Hmong Americans and are mutually reinforcing of their invisibility in the broader societal context.

ETHNIC ORGANIZATIONS AS CONTEXTS OF RESISTANCE

When institutional norms invalidate African, Latinx, Asian, and Native American (ALANA)

students as campus community members, ethnic organizations are a means to collectively mobilize towards campus inclusion. Historically, ethnic organizations have served as sites of resistance (Chang, 2002; Montelongo, 2002). Today, ethnic organizations continue to bear witness to and buffer ALANA students from racism (Flores & Garcia, 2009; Solórzano et al., 2000) while providing spaces to cope with unwelcoming institutional climates (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008). Beyond cultivating a sense of belonging, ethnic organizations can counter the ways that higher education undermines the cultural identities of Southeast Asian American students (Maramba & Palmer, 2014; Vue, 2013a). Ethnic organizations are also spaces of empowerment that nurture leadership, political consciousness, and community commitments among Asian Americans (Inkelas, 2004; Poon, 2013). Furthermore, ethnic organizations are expressions of bicultural identities that expose power dynamics within institutions (Chung, 2015).

Ethnic student organizations can raise questions and consciousness about institutional practices and climates that are inhospitable. For example, Hispanic and Latina student organizations have played a key role in bringing attention to racial attacks against Latinx students (Delgado-Romero et al., 2004), cultivating social education and encouraging students to "participate . . . in acts of resistance, such as protests, rallies, conferences, and performances" (Revilla, 2004, p. 85). Likewise, case analyses (Dizon, 2011; Rhoads et al., 2002) of pan-Asian organizations in different institutional contexts have highlighted collective action among a diverse membership working to disrupt Asian American student marginality. Rhoads et al. (2002) described the efforts of individuals and groups that come together to challenge the climate of diversity as *collective action*. Similarly, Maruoka (2008) found that members in a South Asian women student organization practiced solidarity as resistance and engaged in efforts to address anti-Muslim violence in the wake of 9/11. These studies demonstrate that ethnic organizations can be sites of agency and liberatory potential (see Freire, 1970) by creating opportunities for individual and institutional transformation when they bring visibility to and amplify the concerns of ALANA students. To demonstrate how the student-initiated efforts of members in a Hmong student organization shaped the institutional environment, I drew on a liberatory framework.

CREATIVE PRAXIS

Creative praxis attends to the role of agency in individual, communal, and institutional change. Goessling and Wager (2020) explained that creative praxis "highlights the social relationships and practices where young people engage in ongoing, never completed or finalized, transformations of their identities and social communities" (p. 4). In presenting Hmong American students as creative agents of change, I suggest that there is a certain level of imagination and inventiveness necessary to maneuver, shift, and transform social institutions that by design are spaces that reproduce existing societal hierarchies and consequently function to limit opportunity for minoritized communities. One way social reproduction of inequality occurs is through traditional education processes that position the roles of student and teacher as dichotomous, which Freire (1970) posited are conduits for oppression, because they socialize passivity, disempowerment, and complicity of unequal social relations. Alternatively, a pedagogical process of inquiry rooted in lived experiences offers a means for the authentic engagement of oppressed groups. Such an educational dynamic is a site of liberatory

potential that activates agency in nurturing the capacity for social praxis, or "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1970, p. 33). According to Freire, genuine transformation must be grounded in the struggles of the oppressed, whose conditions offer an invaluable site of knowledge for understanding and practicing freedom. When Hmong students leverage their own knowledge they embark in a creative process of self-discovery, self-determination in enacting pedagogies that disrupt and transcend the status quo. This site of knowledge and practice is valuable for dismantling oppressive structures in education, because it can expose the persistent exclusion of ALANA students from institutional policy and practices despite rhetoric of inclusion (e.g., Arellano & Vue, 2019; Iverson, 2012). Reflecting on the nature and impact of race and racism, moreover, provides students knowledge and guidance in organizing efforts (Rhoads et al., 2002). For example, this reflection can activate a critical consciousness of Hmong Americans' racial positioning (DePouw, 2018) and a critical memory of resilience (Vue, 2018, 2021), as well as a critique of the racialization of Asian Americans as overrepresented minorities that erases Asian Americans' educational and social struggles and ethnic identities (S. S. Lee, 2006). Calling attention to issues of racism offers both a means of resistance and creativity to pursue alternative selves that are beyond racialized perceptions as well as to charter new social possibilities.

Unlike resistance that reproduces inequality, creative praxis engages resistance that can alter oppressive arrangements through efforts both within and outside of institutions. Importantly, these counterhegemonic actions are guided by both a critique of society and a desire for social justice, allowing for transformational resistance (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). When collectively organized, ALANA students can play an instrumental role in challenging social and institutional norms by initiating education, protesting for change, working institutionally, challenging racism, and serving racial/ethnic communities (Maldonado et al., 2005). In the context of this study, creative praxis informs the conceptualization of ethnic organizations as conduits for Hmong American students to reflect on their positioning and engage in collective action. This theoretical grounding underscores Hmong American student creative praxis that effects transformation in higher education institutions.

METHODOLOGY

I drew from a 9-month inquiry of participation in a Hmong student organization. Freire's conceptualizations of agency and the liberatory potential of education were key ideas informing the inquiry into the role of the ethnic student organization in collective action. Based on themes that emerged during the collection of data, my secondary purpose was to examine how student-initiated efforts responded to institutional invisibility of Hmong Americans on campus. In particular, this instrumental case study of the HSA explores how Hmong American students may both experience invisibility and mobilize to combat it. According to Stake (1995), instrumental cases are valuable for understanding particular issues: herein institutional invisibility as a condition of education and how it is both experienced and resisted. The underrepresentation and obscurity in the student demographic of Hmong American students in conjunction with the explicit goals of the HSA that focus on creating awareness of Hmong American identity and culture are ideal for exploring the ways organizing efforts both reveal and counter invisibility. I discuss these in further detail in (a) the description of the case site (West Coast University), (b) the specific

case of the organization (HSA), and (c) the student-initiated efforts that represent the boundaries of the case.

This study took place at West Coast University, a pseudonym for a public university in the University of California (UC) system. Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students—terms used by the institutions in reporting data during the time of this study—made up a large proportion (over 30%) of the undergraduate student body of this campus and most other UC campuses compared to Hmong American students. Although the number of Hmong students was obscured by limitations in data gathering, a university news article featuring this population provided an estimate of 26 students at WCU. This number is consistent with HSA members' estimates, ranging from 20 to 30, and reflects the obscurity of Hmong Americans on campus. In 2010, the UC system implemented an admissions application that provided AAPI students 23 ethnic options to select from. This was the outcome of a larger panethnic student movement for disaggregated data that included the partnership of faculty, staff, and legislators (Truong, 2007). The efforts of those in HSA, the focus of this study, preceded this outcome and can be understood as distinct from, but loosely coupled with the larger, concerted movement for disaggregated data (see Dizon, 2011; Poon et al., 2017). Participant responses reflect awareness of and, in some cases, involvement in panethnic efforts generally and specifically to data disaggregation efforts. While this larger movement serves as important context, it is outside of the scope of this study. The data for this study were collected sometime within 3 years prior to UC implementing this policy, and thus the findings offer a window into Hmong American student organizing and institutional conditions during that time. To protect the identity of participants the approximate time period is given.

At this time, HSA was one of hundreds of student organizations listed on the university student group webpage. The organization's stated purpose at the time of the study had not changed from its original goals:

> Establish a Hmong identity, promote cultural awareness and be recognized as part of WCU's diversity, . . . [address] the needs and concerns of Hmong students and the larger Hmong community through community organizations, outreach, and advocacy. HSA aims to promote higher education, advocate and take appropriate action on issues confronting Hmong Americans.

This experience of minimization—and concomitant feelings of invisibility recounted by the participants—in part motivated the initial formation of HSA in 1996 with a membership of only 4 students. Activities that promoted awareness of Hmong identity, culture, and history were part of a broader agenda of raising issues around access, opportunity, and inclusion. This was particularly important in light of participants' accounts of ignorance and misunderstanding of Hmong Americans on campus. HSA had a weekly attendance of approximately 12 students at the time of this study. While most self-identified as Hmong American, some were of other Asian ethnic and racial backgrounds. Students who did not identify as Hmong American expressed varied reasons for joining, including being familiar with and having an affinity to Hmong Americans due to shared social circumstance, as well as having no prior exposure and knowledge of Hmong Americans but wanting to learn more. They also shared the organization's goals of enhancing a cultural awareness of Hmong Americans and related advocacy efforts. The organization met formally once a week in a room reserved in the Asian American Studies Department. In these meetings, members socialized and engaged in

community-building activities, but primarily planned for key events (e.g., retreat, culture show) and activities (e.g., fundraising).

Data and Participants

Informed by case study methods (Stake, 1995), I drew from varied sources of data to triangulate analyses. The primary data collection method was in-depth, semistructured interviews. I employed purposive sampling (Patton, 2001): individuals who were members of HSA during the study year were recruited through the organization's email listserv. Respondents and I used email to coordinate interviews. A total of 16 HSA members served as the respondents for this study: 13 self-identified as Hmong American; 3 identified with another Asian American ethnicity, concealed for anonymity. The majority of participants (13) were female. The participants included 3 first-year students, 2 sophomores, 6 juniors, and 5 seniors; 4 were transfer students. Participants' majors spanned disciplines across science (8), social sciences (4), and humanities (4) fields. Thirteen were second-generation immigrants, 2 were 1.5-generation, and 1 student who did not identify as Hmong American was third-generation. Thirteen students were first-generation college students and 3 had at least one parent with a 4-year degree. All were traditional college-aged, full-time students and current members of the organization, with all but 2 identifying as active members. Participants first completed a demographic questionnaire; interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes and were recorded for transcription. The interview protocol was informed by the literature and addressed precollege educational experiences, identities, college experiences, and involvement in HSA.

I also collected documents (organization's web page, programmatic materials including funding applications, organizational brochure, syllabus for the student-initiated course, and culture night presentation script) and participants' observations of organizational meetings and key events, including the annual retreat, cultural show, high school campus visits, and other social gatherings. Regularly attending meetings and events allowed me to observe relevant activities, like discussions surrounding the history and progress of the Hmong course. These observations also provided insight into the motivations, dynamics, and efforts involved in each of the organization's undertakings (like rehearsals, fundraising activities) along with the ways knowledge of identity and advocacy were imparted to new members by the senior students. As a participant observer, I offered advice when it was sought and contributed to events like the annual retreat when asked to provide a presentation of Hmong American leaders and scholars, and I spoke to high school students during the campus visit. According to Chavez (2008), the expectation to participate in community events can overwhelm the researcher; however, I also understand these engagements as integral to what Dillard (2000) discussed as an endarkened feminist epistemology that involves both defining oneself in relation to a community and one's responsibility to a community.

Analysis

I employed an iterative analytic process of open and axial coding of transcripts, artifacts, and observational memos (Saldaña, 2009). Open coding, which involves emergent themes, was used to generate, refine, and capture patterns in the data. These open codes were informed by analytic memos written after interviews and readings of interview transcripts to capture reflections, reactions, and observations. Axial coding, which involves identifying relationships between codes, was conducted by strategically looking for relationships and connections across statements, events, and

open codes. For example, while only a couple of the participants used the term "invisibility" explicitly as a core and salient feature of their experiences, others who did not specifically use this language discussed the significance of the organization in the context of broader minimization, neglect, and ignorance of Hmong Americans, reflecting invisibility as experienced by students collectively. Thus, I found this language to be conceptually relevant, and my use of *invisibility* to describe the institutional conditions comes from the participants themselves. As a central organizing concept, invisibility connected sentiments (e.g., responsibility, challenge) to institutional dynamics (e.g., social, curricular, and structural) underlying the organization's interventions (i.e., cocurricular, curricular, and community). In particular, these student-initiated efforts are the major components of the case that highlight creative praxis in the findings. While the data and analysis yielded other findings, including the role of ethnic organizations in providing support and cultural connection, in this article I focus on explicating student-initiated efforts that address invisibility as an institutional condition.

My position as a scholar who identifies as Hmong American shaped the research process, and I took several steps to ensure trustworthiness. As noted above, I used various sources to triangulate data and analysis and conducted member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1986) whereby (a) participants were provided the opportunity to review their interview transcripts approximately three months after interviews were conducted and (b) HSA members were provided a draft of the resulting paper approximately one year after the study began. Since then, the literature has been updated with more recent and current research on Hmong American higher education; however, the theory and presentation of my findings regarding invisibility and student-initiated efforts remain consistent with the original document provided. Three participants reported reading the manuscript; none had substantive revisions, and one complimented addressing the idea of invisibility that was in the title of the draft (although this participant had not used the specific language in interviews). Finally, with the use of analytical memos (Saldaña, 2009), I documented reflections, insights, and connections across data to reflect on my interpretations, which were guided by critical race and liberatory frameworks (Freire, 1970; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) that underscore education and knowledge production as a contested site with potential to be both oppressive and liberatory. Although explicating issues of power may not always be at the fore of participants' consciousness, in this study participants' own analyses of their conditions demonstrated a similar focus. Importantly, I embrace the idea that knowledge production is neither an objective nor neutral process (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993; Dillard, 2000; Freire, 1970). As such, I centered the voices of Hmong students to honor their struggle to intervene in the oppressive conditions of Hmong Americans and to bring their experiential knowledge to bear upon understanding issues of inequality in higher education.

FINDINGS

> I joined the Hmong Students Association because I wanted to have support, feel at home, as well as be around Hmong students like myself. . . . It is important because if there are issues in the Hmong community, then we need to be able to have discussion just [to] share our thoughts and try to find ways to solve the issue or react in a positive way. (Linda)

Linda's response captures the ways that HSA provided a space that is both inclusive and transformative for its members amid a climate

that is invalidating through institutional invisibility. While participants also discussed how HSA functioned as a home away from home, I focused on the collective efforts of the organization's members and how HSA fostered a liberatory space. Specifically, these findings detail how the organization served as means for creative praxis to increase Hmong student visibility, which was minimized and invalidated by the absent representation of Hmong American culture on the broader campus as well as institutional norms. In this context, Hmong American students' creative praxis worked to reimagine and construct their place on campus.

Making a Presence on Campus to Combat Institutional Invisibility

HSA organized many activities around, as Julie put it, "making a presence on campus." She explained: "People can't help you if they can't even hear your voice or know who you are." Thus, creating a presence involved curricular and cocurricular interventions aimed at increasing the visibility of Hmong Americans institutionally. These interventions primarily served as advocacy but also included education about Hmong Americans' experiences.

On a campus where there were very few Hmong students, participants overwhelmingly felt invisible. Sue described how she had been racialized among other Asians: "There's only about 30 of us, and I feel like we're overlooked because WCU has a large number of Asian people. . . . There are those who are ignorant about [Hmong culture], or people just don't care to know because they just group you with Asian." Participants recalled being overlooked by peers and faculty while calling attention to forms of institutional neglect. For example, Hmong Americans were not distinguished in official university data collection and reporting, and their cultural experiences were absent from course content. Such conditions created not only an invalidating experience, but reinforced the invisibility of Hmong Americans on campus.

Experiences of invalidation began prior to university entrance. Participants recounted the application process as a moment of exclusion with a lasting impression on their sense of belonging and perception of campus climate. At the time of the study, Hmong was not included in the list of ethnicities; instead, "other Asian" was an option with space to write in an ethnicity. Ava highlighted the dispiriting nature of the process and the importance of having the opportunity to ethnically identify: "Being able to say I am Hmong is important, because it's my identity. I'm Hmong. I don't want to be an 'other' person, 'cause it's just really demoralizing." Accordingly, rendering Hmong Americans as "other" casts them off as unimportant. When students go unrecognized within an institution's policy and practice, it signals they will not be accounted for and they will not easily find a place.

In this context, Hmong students incurred a duty to educate, which sometimes alienated them from their peers. Daily encounters with students and faculty with no knowledge of Hmong people pushed participants to reinvest in HSA. They talked about providing education about who Hmong Americans are, but they also expressed ambivalence about it. While all embraced this role, some students had mixed feelings, calling the process gratifying but frustrating, tiresome, and burdensome. Mai elaborated:

> When I'd go out to events, I'd say, "Oh, I'm Hmong." And then I'd have to go into this long spiel of who Hmong people are. And I was like, "Damn, if I'm going to be the representative for Hmong students, I want to do a good job of it. I want to be knowledgeable in my culture and make people better aware of it," because I meet people every day who don't know who Hmong people are.

While Mai "sometimes" liked this role, she also shared: "The majority of the time I don't feel too good about it." Despite a shared sense of responsibility expressed among members, students like Joy found this experience to be overwhelming and looked to HSA as a refuge: "I just don't want to feel like I have to explain myself every time I talk to someone and they don't get it." This expectation led some students to feel a sense of inadequacy even as they challenged the naturalization of institutionalized neglect of Hmong American history and culture. To address the burdens created by institutional invisibility, the members of HSA set out to collectively engage in education and advocacy efforts in the form of curricular interventions, cocurricular interventions, and community outreach.

Curricular Interventions: Affirming Hmong Identity, History, and Knowledge

A central HSA goal was the establishment of a course about Hmong Americans. Amy articulated: "We want to be heard, like our culture and history, and I feel like we haven't gotten people to see that yet. A course would help a lot with that and have the strongest effect." Julie noted the course would be a way to be included in the curriculum and consequently the university:

> We wanted to have a class where we could learn about ourselves. It was primarily for us in the beginning, to give us a little history and background about who we are and where we're from. But it also became a way to be part of the diversity at WCU in the courses they offer.

Julie voiced the concerns of participants who drew connections between campus diversity efforts and the inclusion of Hmong Americans in order to assert substantive significance while also pointing to the contradictions inherent in higher education contexts. These contradictions exist when the expressed value of diversity is not met by actual practices, such as inclusive curricular options and policy. Toward the goal of diversifying the curriculum, participants underscored the value of the comparative knowledge the course could provide. Similar to students in other contexts (e.g., DePouw, 2018; Kwan, 2015), HSA members felt that the absence of Hmong identity and history in course content was a key form of institutional neglect that contributed to dehumanizing educational conditions.

In their efforts to establish the institution's first Hmong course, organization members worked diligently and resourcefully to address a number of challenges—whether real or perceived—identified by institutional agents. Echoing others, Sue recounted the strategies they undertook in a process that the group engaged in over several years:

> They said we didn't have enough research, so we held a conference with people who do research on Hmong people to come and share their research projects. We invited the faculty and staff to come. . . . Another [reason given] was there's no interest. So, my second year we did high school outreach to get [Hmong high school students] to WCU or to come to college in general. So right now we've been meeting with a professor who is willing to teach the course, but they are still not approving it, so we're working with her to get a petition to pass this class.

The challenges raised highlight the intersection of symbolic and material constraints experienced by Hmong Americans. For example, one misperception is that there is not enough research, despite a bibliographic essay (Pfeifer, 2004) reporting at least 450 journal articles focused on Hmong Americans in a 10-year period. This belief that there is not enough research reinforces the rationale that there was not enough interest in Hmong studies and

thus perpetuates the underrepresentation of Hmong American students and faculty. The students' outreach efforts were motivated by the interconnected nature of the under-representation of Hmong Americans on campus and the devaluation of Hmong Americans. Despite facing one challenge after the other, HSA members sustained their efforts and creativity to achieve their aspirations of being agents of change through a continual agitation of institutional norms.

While members addressed these identified obstacles, they took their education into their own hands by instituting a one-unit course on the Hmong American experience. The course was taught by a member of HSA, and Hmong and non-Hmong students were enrolled. Ava described the significance of representation in the course content: "When [the instructor] was lecturing on the cultural aspect or the Hmong people generally, I was like, 'Okay, that's me, and I can relate to that. And for the first time I can apply my personal experiences to the class.'" The student-led course addressed cultural, social, and historical experiences of Hmong Americans drawn from academic research as well as Hmong students' knowledge and experiences. While it validated Hmong identity in the classroom context, students like Linda believed it did not make up for the absence of an official Hmong course, nor did it absolve the university: "You come to a top university, and you can't even learn about yourself. . . . And others want to learn also, so I feel that it's the university's responsibility to provide that." As Julie noted, the limited curricular offerings for smaller ethnic groups like Hmong Americans had implications for the climate and sense of belonging for Hmong Americans.

Cocurricular Interventions: Giving Voice to Challenges and Successes

HSA members implemented a cultural show to build momentum towards a Hmong course offering and, as the finance application noted, "to create awareness of the Hmong American experience." With the limited means for learning about Hmong Americans, the show was an opportunity to highlight Hmong culture and educate the campus on issues, challenges, and successes experienced in Hmong American communities. At the intersection of race and class, issues addressed included anti-Asian racism, youth violence (violence targeted towards Hmong male adolescents and their consequent violent behaviors), peer ignorance of Hmong culture, both isolation on campus and ability to build a supportive co-ethnic community space, success in college, bicultural tensions, and mental health. In their assessment of the show, participants felt it was successful in bringing attention to Hmong American history and experiences. Joy noted:

> It was different because, going to [other cultural] shows, it's just a story. It really has no meaning behind it. You don't really learn anything about their culture, except you see their dances and whatever; but that doesn't really explain what their culture is or what their experience is. I think that we really did show them.

By focusing on issues of race and class, the HSA cultural show highlighted the instrumental nature of ethnicity while challenging uncritical understandings of ethnic culture. This type of cultural presentation demonstrates how culture is constantly negotiated and ever evolving while critiquing institutional and societal inequalities (Vue, 2018, 2021). Drawing attention to HSA members' educational persistence and resistance at the institution, the cultural show also positioned Hmong liberation as the nexus of structure and agency.

Such a critical engagement of culture was important because participants described how peers were often dismissive of the challenges

Hmong Americans faced. Joy shared:

> I don't like that our community is invisible to most people [and] I also feel like there are a lot of bad things in our community when nothing is really being done because no one really knows. . . . I feel like, as a Hmong American at WCU, that it is often my responsibility to help HSA really expose that.

Joy underscored how Hmong identities, experiences, and community needs become invisible when viewed as simply Asian American, especially when being Asian American was culturally marked by being problem-free (Lee, 2006). At best, what was gained as a result of being racialized as problem free was second-class status; what was lost was much more grave, including the conditions needed for full participation in education and society.

Community Outreach: Instilling Possibility and Creating Place

HSA members were also active in community outreach aimed at increasing higher education access and matriculation at WCU. Amy described the significance of Hmong university students conducting outreach to high school students: "It means letting others know that they can do it, too. . . . If they don't think they can get to college or if they want to do anything and don't think they can, then, well, I'm a Hmong person and I did it." Outreach activities were designed to instill possibility in a broader social and cultural context where deficit discourses dominate images of Hmong Americans (Moua & Vang, 2015; Ngo & Lee, 2007).

According to participants, the narrative that unfolded from the lack of visible role models at WCU is that the campus is not a place for Hmong students, discouraging Hmong student matriculation. Ava explained:

> The purpose of the high school program was to draw in more attention from the community and [for us] to serve as role models for those students. People told me there's not a large population of Hmong students at WCU, and people don't know there's a Hmong organization in existence here. They tend to go to somewhere else and choose [another university] over WCU, because there's already an established Hmong organization [there and] there are more Hmong students compared to WCU.

HSA members' organizational efforts brought awareness to how invisibility and underrepresentation were inextricably connected for Hmong American students at WCU. The apparent absence of Hmong Americans at WCU signaled that the campus was neither attainable nor welcoming. In comparison, another UC institution with at least twice the number of Hmong American students appeared more welcoming, and therefore likely to encourage more matriculation.

HSA members' community engagement also had implications for sustaining HSA's community and organizational capacity on campus. Indeed, the small number of Hmong Americans at WCU constrained their visibility, both on and off campus. Participants reported it was difficult to identify one another on campus; several even matriculated to the institution unaware there were other Hmong students. Mai found it difficult:

> Under Asian [American] it was a big number, but Hmong students were only one last year and only two or three this year. So those numbers aren't being represented, and the only people keeping count of that was [our organization]. But, I mean, how concrete is our little data collection?

Mai noted that while Asian Americans collectively make up a racial plurality at WCU, Hmong Americans remained a small minority. Yet, these disparities were not formally accounted for. Though the informal efforts within HSA were limited, they were an attempt to account for the

presence of Hmong in the student demographics. The lack of specific documentation within the institution constrained members' efforts to reach out to prospective and current Hmong students. According to participants, this lack of accounting was connected to the disregard for educational disparities of Hmong students. Nonetheless, HSA members worked to create and facilitate growth of their community by outreaching on and off campus. Creating a presence on campus via community outreach was a project of community affirmation, validation, and inclusion that dispelled the notion that Hmong students had no place at WCU. As such, it was an effort to create place by disrupting the institutional legacy of omission.

DISCUSSION

This research provides insight into how Hmong American university students collectively and creatively resisted institutional invisibility through an organizational space where transformation efforts were cultivated. HSA members were able to create and maintain a liberatory consciousness and identity that (a) involved critical reflection of their positioning and (b) cultivated the potential of collective agency grounded in creative praxis to transform the conditions of Hmong American students. According to Freire (1970), knowledge production that draws on students' lives can foster students who are self-empowered. This is exemplified by HSA members who critiqued the positioning of Hmong Americans within hegemonic constructions of race—notably, the prevailing stereotype of Asian Americans as a monolithic and overrepresented group (S. S. Lee, 2006). This racialized construct was particularly salient at WCU where a large number of AAPIs were enrolled. The consequent invisibility of both the presence *and* underrepresentation of Hmong American students at the institution created an especially unwelcoming climate for Hmong American applicants and matriculants. This underscores that invisibility entails more than just an ignorance of ethnicity, but also the instrumental ways this neglect is reconstituted in the institutional environment.

HSA members pointed to the ways this invisibility not only created isolation and extra burdens, but also had implications for sustaining a community of Hmong American students at WCU, because it constrained their ability to recruit more Hmong American students. In other words, if not countered, institutional invisibility reproduces underrepresentation and hostility in the environment. By attending to the substantive exclusion of Hmong Americans from curricula, demographics, policies, and programming, participants not only revealed the multidimensional contours of institutional invisibility, but like Hmong American students in other contexts (e.g., DePouw, 2018), they understood their conditions as steeped in the institution's structure and culture.

In addition to this critique, HSA members were motivated by a desire for change, which Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) asserted is a necessary precursor to forms of resistance that are transformative as opposed to those that leave structures of inequality intact. Guided by these aims and with their collective capacity, the organization members magnified the voices and visibility of Hmong Americans through activities that aligned with a liberatory and creative praxis, which drew attention to interrelated roles of ethnic student organizations in developing community commitments (Inkelas, 2004) and intervening in racially hostile campus dynamics (e.g., Maruoka, 2008; Poon, 2013; Rhoads et al., 2002). Being a part of a critically conscious and collective ethnic space might explain the different experiences between HSA members and participants in Ngo's (2002) study, who dropped out of college or were pushed out

in the face of isolation in both culturally and racially hostile contexts.

The student-initiated efforts highlighted in this study illustrate the possibility for ethnic organizations to be sites of creative praxis. Through HSA, members defied naturalization of Hmong exclusion and meaningfully positioned Hmong knowledge, history, and experiences as central to campus inclusion in order to create space and claim place for Hmong Americans. In the student-initiated course, the cultural show, and community outreach, HSA cultivated a space where members could draw upon their experiential knowledge to bridge their academic, social, and cultural spheres, which are dominantly constructed as separate in the education of Hmong Americans (Adler, 2004), thereby countering oppressive institutional norms. Importantly, students highlighted the ways education for Hmong Americans is constrained along racial and class lines, as well as offered examples of Hmong American success, such as through their culture show and community outreach. Such complexity of experiences indicates how oppressive forces like racism and classism significantly contour, but do not determine Hmong lives (Vue, 2021). In this vein, like more formalized student-initiated retention programs (e.g., Maldonado et al., 2005), through their advocacy efforts—via educational programming and promoting higher education for Hmong high school students—HSA members embodied, strove for, and reimagined education as a humanizing project. Indeed, by their actions and attitudes, which were positive yet critical, they espoused an understanding of educational success as a form of resistance.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Freire (1970) suggested that the generosity of the oppressor is neither genuine nor stable, underscoring the preservation of dominant group interests. In the context of higher education, false generosity is evident in the varied ways diversity and inclusion initiatives maintain the status of People of Color as "other" (Iverson, 2012). In such a context, Hmong American students may continue to encounter racism and isolation on college campuses, even at institutions where AAPIs make up a plurality and, as we have now learned, even when disaggregated data is collected (Nguyen et al., 2016). Therefore, educational interventions should address the social, curricular, and cultural dimensions of institutions in addition to structural dimensions of policy. Educators have the opportunity to provide advising, facilities, and grants for student-initiated efforts to ethnic student organizations as one way to nurture creative praxis. Because ethnic organizations and their members operate informally as university ambassadors to their communities, such institutional support communicates belonging. Educators can also ensure that educational programming (curricular and cocurricular) affirms both ethnic identity (e.g., Hmong American) and racial identity (e.g., Asian American); ethnic identity is typically more salient within Asian Americans, but often ignored by others, and racial identity can be leveraged as a source of connection and collective action when coupled with ethnic identity (Rhoads et al., 2002), especially when ethnic groups have less structural power (Espiritu, 1992). Furthermore, this study demonstrates that greater support may be needed for minoritized student groups, especially when their numbers are small. Because it is typically understood as a demonstration of need, institutions generally commit more support to minoritized groups when their numbers are greater, but those with smaller numbers also require attention and care. Finally, because data quality continues to be an issue at many institutions, a necessary

precursor to better supporting smaller groups is establishing formal systems to account for the vast diversity of students.

Researchers can support these endeavors by disaggregating data analyses (Teranishi, 2010) while being conscious of how calls for disaggregation may unintentionally naturalize deficit understandings of groups—like Hmong Americans (Poon et al., 2016, 2017)—which effectively reproduce these dehumanizing conditions. In higher education research it has become common place to delineate the oppression of Hmong Americans to the neglect of both their creativity in the face of oppressive norms and the ways they construct and imagine their place in the world through higher education. Researchers can center Hmong Americans' insights and experiences as a site of knowledge towards increasing higher education opportunity. Researchers can also examine how Hmong student organizations function in predominantly White contexts and, more generally, the inter- and intraorganizational negotiations of ethnic student organizations when burdened by institutional climate. Greater understanding of these dynamics better equips educators to support students and organizations.

This study also provides insights for Hmong students. While HSA members' approach may be beneficial to student-initiated change efforts at other campuses, more significant is that these efforts emerged from dialogue that included reflection about social location, institutional condition, and creative agency. In addition to collective action, it should also be acknowledged that the mere physical presence of Hmong Americans at universities is a radical intervention into the roots of educational oppression. Being equipped with this understanding Hmong American students have the freedom to creatively pursue what may otherwise be unimaginable. This involves the ways People of Color have endeavored, as Morrison (1998) articulated, "to convert a racist house into a race-specific yet nonracist home" (p. 5) through creative praxis that begins with change from within.

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