



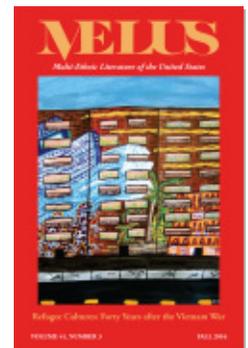
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Writing on the Run: Hmong American Literary Formations and the Deterritorialized Subject

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A history of colonial violence and Hmong running away as a form of resistance has been noted as the primary reason why Hmong do not have a country or a geographic homeland. According to oral stories, Hmong have been running to escape violence and persecution even before US involvement in Southeast Asia forced their displacement to the United States and other countries. In fact, Hmong resettlement in the Southeast Asian countries of Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Burma began in the nineteenth century because of imperial China's invasions and forced assimilation. These stories of political subjugation resulting in the death of the Hmong king and exile from their homelands in China are linked to the loss of writing (Duffy 37) and the destruction of the Hmong writing script—a way to eliminate Hmong social and political life. The Hmong, however, resisted political violence and power through the improvised preservation of writing. Hmong women devised a clever way to disguise their writing in needlework, embroidered script (*paj ntaub*) on their clothing, indecipherable to Chinese invaders and portable while on the run. But “the meanings of these paj ntaub symbols have become indecipherable” even to Hmong (B. Vang xiii).¹ The Hmong story of literacy is intertwined with running from political, economic, religious, and military power (Duffy 4), and running, therefore, establishes Hmong writing as mobile, unhinging literature and subjectivity from the fixity of national and canonical paradigms.

The colonial classification of the Hmong language, in particular, as lacking a recognizable written form has defined Hmong as neither having a geographic homeland nor a history because the textual record maintains the national paradigm (M. Vang 700). Imperialist powers, China and the West, use writing and text as colonial measuring tools to render peoples like the Hmong, who do not have a formal writing system, as illiterate and in need of civilizing. French colonialism and US militarism in Southeast Asia compound colonial notions of Hmong illiteracy and ahistoricity. US state secrecy in its war in Laos (1961-1975) involving the recruitment of Hmong as soldiers, in which Hmong bore the burden of

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violence and displacement, created a historiographical absence about the conflict and the Hmong role. The deliberate silencing of this history combined with forced migration has informed the emergence of the Hmong refugee figure as ahistorical and nongeographical. It is not that Hmong lack writing but rather Hmong writing systems have been unrecognized and lost through the group's colonial history of war and displacement. Because written literature discursively informs and reproduces the nation and its subjects, Hmong refugees, then, are constructed as lacking a nation and are thus difficult to categorize in relation to existing disciplinary knowledge formations, let alone a national literary canon.² Within this context of literary, historical, and geographic erasure, Hmong American literary formations assert writing as a political project of existing and being.

The two volumes this essay examines, *Bamboo Among the Oaks: Contemporary Hmong American Writings* (2002) and *How Do I Begin?: A Hmong American Literary Anthology* (2011), engage with the political and epistemological dilemma of a nonrecognized Hmong writing system and a history of running. The refugee's act of running renders Hmong American literature mobile, in a state of *writing on the run*. The refugee position of being dis/placed articulates the tensions between violence and a desire for home, mobility, and place. While writing on the run escapes persecution and challenges the permanence of the written text, it also reflects the refugee's yearning for home and place. Indeed, writing on the run maps out a Hmong deterritorialized subjectivity that is at once mobile and tied to place and originates with the search for home and belonging that matter to a refugee. A Hmong deterritorialized subjectivity is connected to the persistence of the refugee's condition of homelessness in exile, even for those who were born on the run. Indeed, literature and "bodies are mobile and not fixed identities" (Goeman 120).

Although refugees are constructed as deterritorialized subjects whose political position as stateless and rightless peoples decenters territoriality and the nation-state/citizen hierarchy, the refugee rescue narrative privileges reterritorialization. In the refugee's deterritoriality, the nation-state looms as the site of refuge and reincorporation. This essay delineates Hmong deterritorialization as the refugee's journey through space that recycles the places in which the refugee once lived and continue to exist in the imagination. Deterritorialization represents the two linked processes of Hmong running and writing. It designates the diasporic refugee condition of precarious mobility and the impermanent status of refugees' history, language, and home.

Reading Hmong American literary formations as deterritorialized writing, therefore, questions the written language and texts that are often folded into a national framework. The Hmong American literary anthology exemplifies the deterritorialization of language, asserting the political and collective characteristics of literature. In their foundational piece "What Is a Minor Literature?" (1975), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari explain that in a minor literature, language is

affected by deterritorialization, everything is political, and everything takes on a collective value (59-60). The value of a minor literature means that “literature finds itself positively charged with the role and function of [a] collective[,] . . . [and] it is literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism” (60). Approaching language from a deterritorialized perspective would transform how we relate to our own language (62). The anthology demonstrates the multiple disjunctions, migrations, and locations that inform and destabilize ideas about distinct racial/ethnic histories and their reproduction of the nation in which Susan Koshy situates deterritorialized ethnicity (338). Disconnecting language and literature from the nation-state paradigm expands the diasporic concept of home-making across borders; such an act intervenes in diaspora studies by elucidating the transformative dilemma of questioning the homeland.

This essay is neither a comparative analysis nor does it focus exclusively on form or writing strategies. Rather, the discussion weaves the two Hmong literature anthologies into a conversation about how the epistemological and political question of writing shapes Hmong American literary formations. Therefore, the authors’ assertions about writing provide important framing for the political significance of the anthologies. I also combine an analysis of how the genre of the literary anthology contributes to field formation and functions as an archive for creating lived lives with readings of selected poems and short stories that exemplify the deterritorialization of such lives. The genre of the anthology allows author agency to emerge as a theme that is intertwined with literary themes of writing, migration, home, race, gender, and sexuality, especially because Hmong American literary formations are associated with the materiality of living and existing. Thus, this essay examines the literary anthology for the purposes of understanding the Hmong refugee’s deterritorialized position as simultaneously displaced and diasporic.

Writing on the Run: A Decolonial Practice

Because Hmong migration has been naturalized as nomadism in which Hmong are not grounded in place, Hmong fit the rescue narrative as a people that needed to be saved from war and civilized. But if we understand the Hmong’s act of running as being pushed by colonial violence, war, and state policies, pulled by opportunities, and sustained by a desire for a homeland, then Hmong mobility constitutes responses to colonial and state policies. When during US refugee resettlement a dispersal policy was instituted in order to lessen the burden of Southeast Asian refugees on any one receiving community, Hmong families were separated and often found themselves isolated as the only Asian family in the church communities that sponsored them. They moved to join families, seek warmer climate, and find new opportunities, such as farming in California’s Central Valley. In the wake of welfare reform in the mid-1990s, Hmong families

moved again, out of the Central Valley to find work in the factories of North Carolina, Minnesota, and Oregon. In the 2000s, some entrepreneurial families looking for opportunities followed the lure of owning their own poultry farms in the southern states, investing their entire savings to purchase often non-profitable, failing farms.

The journey and experiences that Hmong Americans write about remap these moves from place to place and emphasize how displacement makes poignant the absence of a Hmong geographic homeland. They also unfix Hmong subjectivity from the racialized rescue and liberation discourse. Pa Xiong's poem, "Running Away from Home," in *Bamboo Among the Oaks* exemplifies how this rescue narrative is not about liberation and visibility but instead makes Hmong experiences invisible. It creates a sense of homelessness for the generation of Hmong Americans who "left before [they were] even born" (6) and experienced refugee flight at a young age, living it through their parents' stories. The poem reflects the refugee's vexed relationship to home as a deterritorialized subject whose existence challenges the very notion of a past origin and a possible future location that is tied to the nation-state. Xiong's poem starts with a reminder of why the narrator is homeless, mainly through a disconnection with the place the narrator's parents called home:

didn't you know?
 I never saw my mountains
 my jungles, my fields of opium
 my home built by my father's two hands. (2-5)

Imagined as a house that was built by hand, this particular notion of home envisions a place that is tied to family. It reclaims the unfamiliar sites of mountains and jungles as places of belonging.

While the homeland for the Hmong refugee exists in memory through the oft-repeated words of mountains and jungles, the temporary place of the refugee camp where the narrator was born is too harsh to recall: "my mind won't let me remember" (13). The refugee camp's deterritoriality outside of the jurisdiction of the state is also a space of confinement encircled by the lines "my eyes saw" (8, 12). Deterritoriality operates within the logic of containment through the camp's deprivation of life, which the young child refugee observes as "the dirt, the water wells / the women quarreling over who got more rice / little dirty kids trading in bones for candy" (9-11). The child's willed forgetting of this place of social death refuses to allow the camp to define the child's past and subject position.³ Growing up in small town America has a similar quality to that of life in the refugee camp in which the protagonist "felt displaced / confined and lost" (38-39). The realities of displacement and confinement are transplanted, just like the refugee, into the US context so that the place of refuge is also a site of violence.

The living conditions that may seem like an exception in the camp actually operate as the norm within US society.

The poem's reminder to the reader that the speaker is "homeless" (1), "born into a refugee camp" (7), "raised in Long Beach" (15), and "[moved] to Porterville" (24) suggests that these places are temporary sites from which to leave rather than places to run to. These temporary homes symbolize violence and pain through the "childhood memories of little white kids / calling me names" (16-17) and the "All-American Town" (25) with its suffocating heat that was "killing me" (37). They periodize violence, displacement, and rescue into distinct, recognizable sites of the nation-state. Indeed, these places and their overwhelming patriotism racialize the refugee and mark her as invisible and nonbelonging. The "liberated" refugee must keep running.

The refugee's leaving is an act of running away rather than simply escaping from the dispossession and racism of an all-American culture of "lunches with ketchup" (18) in which the protagonist does not fit. As such, the refugee is still running even from places of supposed refuge such as Long Beach and Porterville. Kao Kalia Yang writes in *The Latecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* (2008) that the Hmong condition of not having a country means always having to "leave places behind" (2). Writing the refugee's running not only documents the places that refugees leave behind in their journey but also what gets carried as they leave. The locations from which refugees leave and to which they run to allow for the crossing of boundaries, and these locations remain active in how refugees imagine home and identity. In this way, writing allows Hmong Americans to name the camps and US cities as sites of violence but also to remap their journey and home.

Xiong's poem maps a Hmong deterritorialized subjectivity through leaving and place:

I ran
and I ran
and I just
kept running . . . (44-47)

The poem suggests that even written words can slip away, defying their reputation as permanent record. Print culture can be deterritorialized and unfixed to allow for a "historical interpretation of the text that is attentive to the politics of the moment" (Lazo 102). Deterritorializing text enables a reading that is imbued with political intention. With each new line being further indented than the one before, writing on the run does not confine Hmong subjectivity within the discrete boundaries of standard formatting. The trailing words depict the refugee's act of running away, and the written text is a fleeting map of a Hmong deterritorialized subjectivity. Writing, therefore, is intertwined with the transmutation of the refugee's act of running from violence and nation-based places. Writing on the run suggests the impermanence of home, which questions home-making and

“writing to belong.”⁴ It positions home in a limbo that is reconfigured between “fact and fantasy,” what Benzi Zhang describes as “a dialectic sphere open to crossroads, or a shifting terrain related to far-away memories, or an ahistorical moment that has both passed and not yet arrived” (105).

The transmutation of running explicates the deterritorialized subject’s varied imaginations of homeland. Hmong American literary representations of homeland often include mountains and hills. Xiong’s assertion that “I never saw my mountains” (3) and, later, Soul Choj Vang’s reference to “Sky Mountain” (“Here” 21) speak to the elusive places that Hmong refugees/Americans call home. These designations evoke both Hmong oral narratives of living in the higher terrain of Southeast Asia and the popular representations of Hmong as a mountain people. In his short story in *Bamboo Among the Oaks*, “Recovering to the Hills,” the author BC uses the “hill” to represent homeland so that the nondescript geographic terrain of a hill conjures up a nostalgic desire to return. He explains that “everyone had a hill to return to, and I wished that we had one, too” (21). This short story explores the male protagonist’s relationship to Hmong women as a metaphor for the deterritorialized subject’s relationship to home. He writes: “But inside I was afraid that I could never go back to the hills. Each day I thought about her—the Hmong woman who would help me go back to the hills and harvest the rice that had been planted” (20). The conflation of the protagonist’s search for a Hmong woman with a yearning for home presents a gendered configuration of homeland. The woman figure as a stand-in for the homeland and nation is a common practice in nationalist literature and colonial projects. This heteropatriarchal perspective has historically rendered woman as a sexualized figure that can be conquered, raped, and possessed.⁵

At the same time, BC attempts to queer the gendered and sexualized depictions of homeland by revealing the male protagonist’s nonheteronormative desire for Hmong women. He writes: “I thought that maybe I was gay when it came to Hmong women or perhaps I had a phobia of some sort” (18). This sexual dilemma underscores the refugee’s predicament of multilayered (dis)connections because his lack of desire for the opposite sex suggests the queer configurations of a heterosexual anxiety that arises from fear and rejection of the self, produced by racialized constructions of desirability and home. In this case, the Asian male figure is undesirable and undesiring—an effeminate subject in the racial gendered formation of subjectivity. BC further explores the protagonist’s view on Hmong relationships and love as incestuous, in which thoughts about his “Hmong lady” conjure images of his sisters, aunts, cousins, and nieces (19). The Hmong woman’s perplexing position as an unattainable desirable subject and a close relative undergirds the (im)possibility of home. BC’s short narrative queers the desire for Hmong women and conflates woman and nation, which in turn queers the yearning for a homeland that remains unfulfilled for the deterritorialized refugee subject.

The convoluted meanings of home underscored in Hmong American literature's writing on the run can help theorize a literary refugee studies that offers a paradigm shift to produce knowledge beyond territorial boundaries and nation-based canons. It expands on the critical refugee scholarship to establish a cultural critique that centers Hmong epistemologies.⁶ This "body of literature" actively negotiates discourse and power to discursively produce a Hmong deterritorialized subjectivity that challenges the canon of knowledge about this group as perpetual victims. It also challenges the canons of "ethnic" American literary and diasporic anthology by mapping homeland as a place that does not fit neatly within the territorial boundaries of the nation-state. Although homeland represents a physical place for the refugee, it also operates as a site of contestation between the desire to return and the imagination of belonging that goes beyond the confines of territoriality.

Arguably, every "ethnic" American anthology has engaged with the political dilemma of challenging traditional forms of the US American literary anthology that centralizes a Euro-American male perspective even while it purports to celebrate the "democratic spirit of American literature" (Lockard and Sandell 229). The traditional anthology developed along the color line to represent a "literary equivalent to the spatial segregation in the country at large" (229). Many "multicultural" or "ethnic" literary anthologies have been foundational to the formations of disciplines through their collective charting of new directions, in particular, the interdisciplinary fields of critical race, ethnic, women, gender, and sexuality studies. The cultural work of volumes such as *Third World Women* (1972), *Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (1974), and *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings* (1975) uses the genre to "assert participation in the public sphere and citizenship-by-anthology" (Lockard and Sandell 246). Asian American literature gained recognition with the publication of several anthologies in the 1970s, of which Frank Chin et al.'s anthology *Aiiieeee!* was influential in promoting "an Asian American identity that is independent of the determinations of white supremacy," yet one that was decidedly male and removed from Asia (Koshy 325). In addition, these early anthologies and literary critiques tended to develop along nation-based, US-centric boundaries that centered primarily on Chinese and Japanese American literary texts within the emerging canon. The contemporary shift in Asian American critique, instead, explores Asian American subjectivity as a discursive formation (Lee 184). Critiques of US imperialism and war in Asia have become a central part of this shift, of which Southeast Asia figures prominently.⁷

Bamboo Among the Oaks and *How Do I Begin?* are highly conscious of the political, cultural, and social dilemma of missing Hmong perspectives in American literature and public knowledge. These two works emerged from writing collectives and highlight, like other "ethnic" American anthologies before them, the representational diversity of writing through poetry, short stories,

and visual art such as photographs and paintings. Mai Neng Moua, the editor of *Bamboo Among the Oaks*, has edited and published Hmong literary works through the journal *Paj Ntaub Voice* since 1994. The anthology came out of that collective project to cultivate and promote Hmong writers and their writing. The more recent anthology, *How Do I Begin?* is a product of the collaborative work in the Hmong American Writers' Circle (HAWC).⁸ Both anthologies speak to each other through the overlap of writers and themes. In fact, Burlee Vang, coeditor of *How Do I Begin?* explains that he gained inspiration for his own writing through the publication of *Bamboo Among the Oaks* (Introduction xv).

Writing on the run brings the role of the Hmong American writer as cultural producer into conversation with the literary form. The collections provide insight into the authors' relationship to writing that is concerned with creating living and breathing characters and stories and establishing writing as both an individual and collective process. *How Do I Begin?* features each author's photo and a brief autobiographical sketch to explicitly link the author to her/his piece. Sections in both anthologies are organized based on each author's work rather than on themes. This positioning of the authors' stories in relation to each other reveals the piecing together of a different kind of cultural record that creates subject legibility and politicizes Hmong lived experiences. One of the authors, Pos L. Moua, commented at the 2013 Hmong National Conference that his poetry is about "whether or not we have lived." For Moua, living is more important than writing, but living adds to his writing. As such, the anthology can function as a refugee archive, an alternative site of Hmong American cultural and knowledge formation that privileges live-ness and presence.

Indeed, Soul Choj Vang explains in *How Do I Begin?* that writing is about embodying the soul:

One goal of my writing is to generate a conversation among the Hmong about our experiences and how those experiences keep shaping and changing us as a people and as individuals. I believe that a people's body of literature is their soul. The Hmong, as a people, must keep our soul alive through the telling of old stories and nurturing of new ones. ("Soul")

For Vang, writing represents the already dynamic terrain of Hmong life. Naming literary texts and narratives as a "body of literature" allows us to approach them not only in the creative form but also as an aesthetic of embodied stories and histories that are attached to the corporeal bodies of Hmong Americans. Elizabeth Freeman explains that in queer temporality, measuring and counting time moves beyond time's isolation as an analogical unit into attachments that are measured through lived bodies and lives. Vang's statement about creating a Hmong "body of literature" emphasizes that the anthology not only documents and serves as a repository of accumulated texts but also refigures space and time—within Freeman's conceptualization of time as attachments to the body—to emphasize

a refugee literary time that is measured through bodily attachments to home. The stories produce a visceral engagement with belonging that draws a past and imagined homeland in Laos up against the everyday realities of home in the United States.

Creating knowledge through writing is a decolonial practice. Writing as a form of decolonizing the mind links to the “new consciousness” theorized by Gloria Anzaldúa, which breaks down paradigms in order to transform the way “we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave” (102). Writing as a literary practice involves “the possible knowledge . . . of itself as such” because it attends to Hmong experiences as a site rather than an object of knowledge (Minha 6). In particular, the anthologies produced by women of color scholar-activists assert political consciousness through the act of writing, a context in which this essay situates discussion of the two anthologies. These scholar-activists engage with writing to negotiate paradigms of knowledge and power.⁹ Works such as Cherrie Moraga and Anzaldúa’s *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) and Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) establish an experimental form of writing that imbues the creative with the historical and mythical.¹⁰ For instance, reclaiming the mountains and hills as the Hmong homeland suffuses the historical with mythical representations of home to blur the line between what is considered acceptable knowledge and myth. Hmong American literature as exemplified by these two anthologies is not simply an additive subject to multicultural/ethnic and Asian American literary canons. Rather, the poetry and short stories illuminate how Hmong literature can be paradigm shifting for critical refugee studies, diasporic literary studies, and Asian American critique. Indeed, writing illuminates the making and unmaking of the self and the building of a literature. Mai Neng Moua underscores the link between literature and empowerment by declaring that “we have written and are writing our own stories” (15).

How to Begin: Writing into Existence

Running structures the urgency of Hmong stories and changes the literary paradigm of who is a worthy subject or whose perspectives are important to creatively engage. May Lee-Yang asserts in *How Do I Begin?* that a Hmong American writer has the potential to shift the paradigm of power by “creating a world where I exist to re-contextualiz[e] my world for non-Hmong people.” This change in the power structure allows her to write for “someone like me” and invite “others into my world” (“May”). The shift here is about “creating a world” where she can enter and exist, which is encapsulated in her poem, “The Things a Hmong Woman Loves.” These “things” range from food that can be dipped in “chili peppers and fish sauce” (4), such as “baby cucumbers, / unripened papayas, and green mangoes” (1-2), to “utensils, plates, and bowls” (7), especially the “plastic bowls with Chinese cartoons in the center” (14) that are “pivotal to keeping everything

together” (17). Indeed, this seemingly mundane list of things *pivots* the material goods she covets and which are not items of luxury—made of plastic and purchased at the dollar store along with fresh produce and frozen meat—into valuable commodities. These things that she loves chart the complex personhood of a Hmong woman who draws together such items to establish “her worth” and her assets, whether they are the dollars and cents she keeps close to her body and hidden in her bedroom or the chest freezer full of vegetables and meat (18). Shifting the frame of reference for items of value results in a literature and subjectivity that do not conform to white, middle-class sensibilities because they accentuate refugee life.

The phrase “How do I begin?” operates as both a tentative question and a call to action that considers not only the writer’s entry to literature but also how a people’s ways of knowing *enters* into a terrain of history (time) and territoriality (space). Mai Neng Moua highlights this dilemma in her introduction to *Bamboo Among the Oaks*. She asks: “How much Hmong history and culture must I provide before we can have a conversation about Hmong literature?” (3). Moua’s question seeks to reconsider how history and culture can be integral to the project of Hmong American literature without reducing the texts’ engagements with homeland to a search for origin, particularly since the task of tracing a genealogy of Hmong knowledge formation is complicated by its multiple origins and histories of displacements. Such a practice has left cultural knowledge and histories unwritten and at risk of disappearing in Western institutions’ privileging of the written word. “Without written text,” Moua explains, “Hmong voices are overlooked or nonexistent, even in the Asian American studies canon” (6). Hence, the task is not just about *which* Hmong stories to tell but also about *how* to do so in written English in order to be attentive to Hmong voices and creativity. *Bamboo Among the Oaks* is an unprecedented collection because it is a project, for Moua, with new literary documentation techniques that reflect the “artistic soul of the Hmong community” (8). *Bamboo Among the Oaks* and *How Do I Begin?* encourage reading practices that “connect literatures with geopolitical histories and futures” to actively reimagine deterritorialized subjectivities, histories, and home (Lockard and Sandell 249).

The dilemma of “how to begin” brings to the fore how the erasure and silences of the US “secret war” in Laos institutes the unrepresentability of Hmong as knowing and living subjects. Burlee Vang observes that this erasure persists because Hmong stories remain incomplete, to be written by the subject: “I’ve always felt like some fictional character sketched in the space of a blank page where the story has not yet been drafted,” he writes. “The author has abandoned me to the task of writing myself into existence” (Introduction xiv). Vang references how Hmong are problematically characterized as subjects without history, culture, or writing, whose stories lag behind other written narratives. Yet there is possibility in the “not yet drafted” so that Hmong may write how the past and present are filled with their living in order to imagine a livable future.

For Hmong Americans, telling stories is an incomplete process of piecing things together. *Bamboo Among the Oaks* contributing author Mayli Vang writes of “piecing together the tangible facts with the imagined facts” to bring to life lives lost (158). Vang’s short story, “Reflections of My Father,” attempts to recall the life of a father through the narrator’s childhood memories and family members’ stories. Vang writes: “I know that this exercise is meant to fill a void in my life, and I’m doing it with the certain and familiar things in my life: with words” (158). The exercise of playing with words creates critical awareness for the loss, but it also conjures the imagined into being as history and memory. Mai Der Vang, coeditor and contributing author of *How do I Begin?* asks, as a Hmong American writer, “How does one grapple with loss in the face of sustaining a culture that does not have a thoroughly documented history?” In light of this question, Vang articulates that the gaps within family histories can illuminate the very structure of historical silencing.

New memories emerge to fill these gaps, not to recover but to signal the loss. Burlee Vang recalls in his creative nonfiction essay in *How Do I Begin?* “Polaroids of Tom,” his parents’ return home from the hospital after the birth and tragic death of his third brother. He writes that “this part of my memory is unclear, but I’ve always imagined my father going into his bedroom and closing the door, the sound of the lock clicking” (38). In the absence of information about what happened to this third child, the result of unequal access to (prenatal) health care, Vang explains: “[W]hat I imagined filled in the dark spaces, became memory” (40). The blurring between memory and imagination makes up the genealogical trace of Hmong American literature. Vang poignantly emphasizes this indistinct state by stating that “I can no longer tell what I know from what I’ve imagined. The road that leads to him is without footprints, washed long ago by the rain” (46). Writing grapples with the loss to allow history to course “its way through us” (Behar and Gordon 429).

Indeed, writing oneself into existence is a complicated task that requires balancing the familiar and the unknown. Soul Choj Vang’s opening poem, “Here I Am,” in *How Do I Begin?* dwells on the dilemma of how to begin, starting with the more familiar American literary scenes about life represented by picket fences and apple orchards and then shifting the story to the strangeness of playing on a different shore, fleeing political violence, and crossing the Mekong River. In the two opening stanzas, he reveals the conflicted beginning of the Hmong American poet/writer who is “not rooted in this land” and whose story has not been sewn into the landscape (13). Unlike the American poets whose origins are intertwined with well-known US working-class and racialized geographies and literary landscapes, such as

the factories of Detroit,
the vineyards of the Great Valley,
the haunted plantations of the South,

but they were all raised on the plains of Iowa (2-5),

this Hmong American poet begins at a lesser-known place. The characteristics of the landscape, its taste, dust, and pollen, are unfamiliar to the narrator, who must negotiate an entry into it to create a relationship to the canon of knowledge and national citizenry. Here, place conjures history so that the “haunted plantations of the South” bring to the fore the racial violence of American chattel slavery. Furthermore, the “plains of Iowa” invoke the American training of poets and writers at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. Although the histories of economic depression and racial oppression within US geopolitical boundaries continue to haunt contemporary racial politics, these places constitute recognizable markers of decidedly American “ethnic” literature and subjectivity. Hmong writing and subjectivity are wary of territoriality that can suspend Hmong existence as complex subjects.

Vang’s use of the nature metaphor charts a Hmong subjectivity that is not tied to a knowable and national territoriality but runs through places familiar to Hmong in stories:

Shall I start with my birth on Sky Mountain?
 Then follow with my childhood,
 shaping paper planes to ride the wind?
 Or shall I tell of my boyhood,
 playing on the shore of the Dragon River
 that flowed like a cool blue ribbon
 and raged into a yellow monster
 during the monsoon season?

Shall I sing of fleeing
 my homeland, knowing I was leaving
 the mountains and gorges forever?
 Should I sing of crossing
 the Mekong, floating on a bamboo raft?
 Or sing of my coming
 to this land, as a beggar,
 wishing to share my story,
 but unable to speak the language?

If I sing of these things
 who would listen to me,
 who knows nothing of picket fences,
 the sanctuary of apple orchards,
 or the lessons of tornadoes?

I will have to relearn
 and trust my childhood, give
 the wind my song
 and let all who can,
 hear. (21-47)

The poem's narrative flow from birth on "Sky Mountain" to escape across the Mekong and then resettlement in the American dreamscape of picket fences and apple orchards breaks down the nation-state into experiential pieces. It offers a nonlinear and fragmentary narrative of the history of Hmong displacement in which breaks between stanzas represent the disruptions of life caused by forced leaving.

The poem's themes of subjectivity and belonging are intertwined with its structure, in which the written text is organized as verses to a song asking to be sung among the chorus of stories. The parallels between Soul Choj Vang's song poetry and the Hmong *kwv txhiaj* (sung poetry) specifically chart writing within the Hmong oral practice of passing on personal hardship and collective experience. Singing about the struggles of boyhood strikes a delicate balance in the configuration of masculinity that is neither hypermasculinist like the soldier figure nor degenerative like the feminized refugee construct. This is a boyhood that thrives among the rivers and mountains only to be disciplined by the "lessons of tornadoes" (42) in the United States. The phrases "shall I sing" (29) and "If I sing" (38) hint at a tentative offering of the narrator's past, which may be unfamiliar to the reader. The hesitancy in these questions emphasizes the transitory nature of places remembered from childhood that move along with the poem's rhythmic meter and song. It is not only the remembered places but also the literary establishments of Iowa and American Dream locales of white picket fences that can be impermanent. Hence, the picket fences and apple orchards are themselves literary *allusions* of American literature and *illusions* of the American Dream that even other "ethnic" American poets and writers reference but do not live. Perhaps what is more certain is the assertion to relearn, to sing, and to write. The poem's closing urges a letting go of the hesitancy to

give
the wind my song
and let all who can,
hear (44-47)

and plays with the hopeful tune of a song that can be heard unobstructed and perhaps survive when carried by the wind. This hopeful tune points to the possibilities of making a home even when one is on the run.

California's Central Valley as Home and Unlikely Collaborations

In fact, the act of running demarcates the changing meanings of home as a convoluted site of violence and unlikely affiliation for Hmong youth coming of age in California's Central Valley and the plains of the Midwest. *How Do I Begin?* invokes the geographic and social landscape of the Central Valley as a home where Hmong continue to experience hardship. Mai Der Vang characterizes the region as a

“Hmong Paradise,” not in the way that people might imagine San Francisco or Los Angeles but in the sense that “people could really start their lives over, especially after having been through a war” (qtd. in B. Vang, Introduction xvii). The San Joaquin portion of the Valley, stretching from Stockton to Bakersfield, is an under-resourced and underserved region that is home to concentrated Latino and Asian immigrant populations with approximately 47,000 Hmong residents, of which at least 32,000 are in Fresno (“Hmong”). Although this region produces the highest agribusiness revenues in the United States, its major metropolitan areas rank among the poorest in the state and nation as a result of high unemployment rates created by a primarily agricultural economy (“Census”). For Hmong youth, the region is a site to negotiate state, historical, and everyday forms of violence and refuge. Their experiences are shaped by the unavailability of resources, institutional violence, and incarceration but are also enriched by the proximity to other marginalized populations. These factors produce an affiliation across ethnic and racial boundaries that is highlighted in these anthologies.

Xiong’s description of “running away from home” frames the poems in *How Do I Begin?* to show how home is a process of moving and running despite living in a place. In the various poems, the Central Valley, especially Fresno, is depicted through the layered transmutations of home that vacillates between staying rooted and having to be on the run. Soul Choj Vang’s poem, “In My Fresno Backyard,” epitomizes the changing meanings of home for the deterritorialized subject. The poem narrates a Hmong American search for home and meaning through the footprints of an old sneaker of a Hmong US military serviceman. The sneaker’s trek through the different European sites of historical violence and ongoing living struggles is a metaphor for Hmong persistence. The different locations and histories of the shoe and its “missing mate” (7) are imprinted into its tracks and carried back to the Fresno backyard where it “hangs awkwardly / on the branch, next to ripe peaches” (1-2). Suspended between a well-traveled period in the past and its present unused state, the sneaker closes the gap between histories and borders by connecting the Hmong American serviceman to other sites of injustice and carrying those histories back to the United States. Sites such as European castles with “centuries-old ghosts” (14) or the “sharp ruins” (17) of the Berlin Wall chart the haunting structures of militarism and state violence. The endurance of this shoe that once had shiny “purple / racing stripes” (3-4) reflects the stories of peoples who continue to exist despite political persecution. Linking the shoe in the backyard to the mounds of shoes left at Auschwitz establishes a connection between the Hmong plight and that of Jews persecuted during World War II. Vang writes of the shoes:

They even traveled to Auschwitz, Poland,
 where all the participants are gone, but
 where one side’s power lingers
 and the other’s will remains—

in the piles of clippings
 of hair and mounds of shoes
 refusing to rot. (27-33)

The will and power of both Hmong and Jews remain through the hair's and shoes' refusal "to rot." These disparate histories are transplanted and carried to Fresno where Hmong refugees attempt to create a sense of home. The old sneaker symbolizes how Fresno has become a "backyard" of the abandoned US military refuse of the persecuted. This backyard is the unlikely meeting place of meshed and overlapping histories. Tracking the Hmong American soldier's footprints also remaps home as a node of other places.

Fresno and the Central Valley become a return home for not only the military personnel but also the refugees of US global war. For the refugees, violence and abandonment are transplanted to their home in the United States. Two poems by Andre Yang underscore home as a continuous loop of places through which Hmong refugees attempt to re-create a sense of belonging. Through the perspective of a Hmong youth, Yang creates vivid imagery of the new home in "Kingswood Garden Apartment Kid" that is a stark reminder of the girl's previous home, down to the renaming of the apartment as "Zos Vib Nais, a name she knows is reminiscent / of the refugee camp in Thailand" (3-4). While the adults attempt to transplant the familiarity of the refugee camp to their new home in Fresno by renaming the "Kingswood Garden" apartment complex "Zos Vib Nais," the children are too busy indulging in their favorite pastime of "jumping rope barefoot in the parking lot" (6). The poem's rendition of an "apartment kid" who jumps rope barefoot and wipes her nose "streaking mucus across both cheeks" (10) reflects the untidy innocence of childhood but also conveys how children are left unattended to explore when adults are too busy trying to adjust to their (temporary) new home.

The children's perspective conveys the continuous experiences of refugee displacement. Writing children's experiences captures the fluidity of home that is refashioned through the familiarity of dirt stains and jumping rope. Lines such as "[t]he red stain on her shin is the San / Joaquin River in June, a dried run from the / scabs on her knees" (7-9) reveal the connection of the body to earth so that, while the adults carry place names, their children dig into the dirt and connect to it through play. The jump rope metaphor, described as a "whirling / up and its coming back down to signal / the next chance she has to jump back in" (12-14), signifies the circular motion and path of home-making for the deterritorialized refugee subject. Zhang writes in his discussion of Asian diaspora poetry in Canada that "home can no longer be ascribed to a pre-given site of location" but rather is associated with "the difference, distance, and dislocation created by the substitution of a so-called new home for 'home'" (104). Therefore, and as represented in this poem, home is a relationship developed through dislocation and in fact comprises a re-homing process of repositioning foreignness in relation to new cultural dwellings (109).

At the same time, refugee children's play can slip easily between the innocence of a mucous-streaked face of an "apartment kid" to a young man's "joyride" turned into police chase. Yang's "Joyride," dedicated to Uncle CJ, sits on the page opposite "Kingswood Garden Apartment Kid" and narrates the evolution from the tagging for turns between the jump rope players to a "tag along / in someone else's G-ride?" (1-2). This "joyride" of adolescents quickly turns into a police pursuit in which the protagonist must hide

between carport wall and a beat-up Toyota
Cressida, while red and blue flashes sprayed
the alleyway and helicopter searchlights
frisked the Mayfair neighborhood crevices[.] (4-7)

This need to run and hide questions the supposed safety of the new home of Central Valley, where Hmong along with black, Latino, and other Southeast Asian youth become the targets of criminalization and imprisonment that subject them to social death. This region has the highest concentration of penitentiaries in the state of California that disproportionately incarcerate young people of color.

Survival and home are intertwined with a racialized masculinity that is too often represented by the "red and blue flashes" (5) and "helicopter searchlights" (6) of law enforcement. Hiding from the police conjures up the experiences of escape from Laos when "you clung / tightly to your father's back, quiet as a whisper / in water" (8-10), making interchangeable the scenes of flight from war with those from the law. This convergence of the places of violence and refuge emphasize the precarity of home for the deterritorialized subject. The war escapee and the young man hiding from the police enmesh the generational differences in escaping and running away.¹¹ In contrast to the innocence of jumping rope, this youth's play as a "tag along" (1) elevates the stakes of un-belonging. Home is an impossible place that is suspended between innocence and violence.

The abandonment of refugees and immigrants, unattended children, and gang and police violence in the Central Valley comes full circle in the work of Mexican American poet Anthony Cody, where shared histories and experiences of abandonment open the possibility for collaboration and affiliation. As a result of the persistent institutional violence that segregates communities of color and the inequalities that separate writers of color, Hmong American literature attempts to foster important collaborations. The Hmong American literary anthology demonstrates how literary refugee cultural studies may open up new connections of relating to one another across geopolitical borders and racial boundaries. Cody's introduction to his contribution in *How Do I Begin?* illustrates how overlapping experiences make possible the collaborative project of the anthology:

I hope to connect to tangents of the universal human experience and tie us to one another, across oceans, borders, upbringings, and cultures. In this way, I find myself, a Mexican American writer from southeast Fresno, contributing to a

Hmong American anthology, as I attempt to echo the tragedies, routines, and reality of the life I share. (“Anthony”)

Cody’s work in a Hmong American anthology disrupts the ethnic and racial boundaries that typically define such ethnic-based collections. It strengthens the idea that this anthology is concerned with the overarching themes of writing histories, presence, and home for deterritorialized subjects. Cody’s poem, “the unattended,” underscores the inattention to refugee youth by exploring the overlaps and interconnections of shared lives between a Hmong American and a Mexican American schoolmate who “played together just twice at recess” (4).

An unlikely friendship is forged between these two children as they hold hands waiting for their respective family members to pick them up from school “four hours after kindergarten dismissal” (1). Both share the “certainty of desertion” that wells up like puddles across the emptiness of the parking lot (6). Unlike the apartment complex parking lot where children play jump rope, this school lot is filled with abandonment. When the last teacher leaving the school does not pay attention to the two boys, and as afternoon stretches to meet evening in “the branches’ long shadows near our shoe tips” (14), the boys share a rosary prayer. Only the “sorrowful mysteries” (18) of the rosary and the “pine trees” (20) keep watch over them.

When the narrator’s grandfather finally shows up on a bicycle, explaining that the boy’s mother had lost the keys, the walk home conjures stories of migration in the different but shared histories of entries into the United States. The grandfather describes leaving Mexico “orphaned and traveling north” (31) to work on farms for “two pennies a day” (32). He also prayed the rosary on this journey when his body was wracked with fever and was “almost paralyzed” (34). The friend, blong, relates the story of a relative who “was stricken with chills on the flight / to america” (38-39) and dreamed of becoming a bird. The hallucinations and dreams brought on by fever and chills highlight the violence and dispossession that force individuals to endure pain and perilous border crossings. They also symbolize the experiences of leaving as embodied processes that are deeply ingrained in the flesh.

The sense of abandonment prominent in the beginning of the poem where the two boys wait to be picked up is emphasized again at the end:

at home, i am greeted
 with potatoes and cheese,
 prepared from my mother’s guilt.
 instead of homework we watch tv,
 where news of an afternoon drive-by shooting
 is followed by a picture of the pony-tailed
 teenager that picks up blong.
 a gang hotline flashes beneath footage of caution tape
 and a family wailing against a coroner’s van.
 my mother holds me near, as i say nothing.

in the silence, i hear a heartbeat,
 whose i do not know,
 and think of blong, if he is trying to do homework,
 if anyone made him dinner,
 or if he now sits, unattended,
 in a bedroom he can no longer share with his brother. (43-58)

Blong's abandonment is revealed as a consequence of gang violence that resulted in the death of the brother who was supposed to pick him up. In the evening news, the "picture of the pony-tailed / teenager," the "footage of caution tape," and "a family wailing against a coroner's van" are made more poignant against the backdrop of the narrator's knowledge that this teenager is the one who "picks up blong" and that the wailing family is his. The often hypervisible media imagery of violence gains new meaning through the shared knowledge of what it means to be unattended. This teenager might have escaped the violence of war and its aftermath of persecution to arrive in the United States, but he did not make the journey of flight from systems of racism and poverty. Whereas some youth of color barely escape the "joyride" in Yang's poem, too many others are lost to the system.

The poem's structure, in which the two boys' experiences of abandonment flank the passages about their families' border crossing, illustrates the well-remembered details of relatives' journeys that are often cited and become a part of everyday life. As such, refugee escape continues to be a part of everyday lived experience, even for kindergarten-age children. Children tell each other "made-up stories" (8) for comfort while the adults relay their stories so they will not forget. It is the children who become the witnesses of history so that they can create ties, live shared lives, and show empathy to each other. While Soul Choj Vang's "Here I Am" conveys the anxieties of not being legible to white Americans in the land of "picket fences" (40) and "apple orchards" (41), Cody's piece reveals the possibility of youth of color being recognizable to each other and the hope for solidarity through the violence. The children or young adult perspectives present in these poems offer a reflective yet unfiltered lens that helps to configure a refugee aesthetic of collectivity that Espiritu calls the "emerging ties and lives" produced within this crucible of US empire and race (*Body* 185).

Conclusion

Hmong literary formations are important in shaping a collective deterritorialized consciousness and subjectivity. Bee Cha's revelatory essay in *Bamboo Among the Oaks*, "Being Hmong is Not Enough," exposes and explores issues related to the difference between "being Hmong" and "becoming Hmong." He writes: "The future of the Hmong should be what we are trying to create and not just what we are trying to preserve" (33). Such a move would open up the boundaries of Hmong identity as a deterritorialized subjectivity to inform collectivities that

are not defined by ethnicity or nationality. The anthologies *Bamboo Among the Oaks* and *How Do I Begin?* make clear that anthologizing produces a literary culture and political awareness about Hmong racial formation. As the various poems and short stories in the anthologies illustrate, running is a layered and ongoing condition of escaping from war, eluding police and state violence, and creating the conditions of possibility to exist.

Writing on the run critically intervenes in the politics of literary and knowledge formation to shift the paradigm of language, power, and imagination. To write on the run involves shaping how the written text is rooted in oral tradition and practice. Theorizing refugee aesthetics and politics bolsters a form of discipline-building that views what has usually been the object of research as its very subject. As examples, more recent Hmong American anthologies such as *Diversity in Diaspora: Hmong Americans in the Twenty-First Century* (2013) and *Claiming Place: On the Agency of Hmong Women* (2016), although not literary texts, aim to shape the field as Hmong American scholars engage with existing disciplines. Hmong American literary formations, then, can expand how critical refugee studies investigate historical erasure to foreground a critique of power and knowledge from the perspective of peoples who are on the move.

Notes

I thank the anonymous reviewers, guest editors Marguerite Nguyen and Catherine Fung, and the *MELUS* editor-in-chief for the very thoughtful comments and suggestions that strengthened this essay.

1. *Paj ntaub* writing is one among many systems of Hmong writing. The most widely used writing system is the Romanized Popular Alphabet developed in Laos in the early 1950s by missionaries G. Linwood Barney, Yves Bertrais, and linguistic anthropologist William A. Smalley (“About”). Another popular writing system is the Messianic script, Pahawh Hmong, developed in 1959 by Shong Lue Yang. See William A. Smalley, Chia Koua Vang, and Gnia Yee Yang.
2. Viet Thanh Nguyen explains that the Southeast Asian diaspora has been a significant blind spot within a nation-based field such as Southeast Asian studies, which necessitated the emergence of Southeast Asian American studies (916-17).
3. For a full discussion of social death, see Lisa Marie Cacho.
4. Mariam Beevi Lam and Weihsin Gui discuss how diasporic reframings of Malaysian and Singaporean literature, along with those from other Southeast Asian nation-states that were not involved in the Vietnam War, can broaden the scope of Asian American literature to help us understand the histories and experiences of groups who may not traditionally be considered “Asian American.” Hmong American literature’s writing on the run, I suggest, challenges established literary canons because it straddles refugee, Asian American, and diasporic literary formations.

5. For an in-depth discussion of the relationship between heteropatriarchy, settler colonialism, and native feminism, see Andrea Smith and Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, and Angela Morrill. For more on the sexualization of the homeland and how the woman figure is used to represent the nation, see Louisa Schein and Mariam Beevi Lam.
6. For more on key texts that center the refugee figure within Southeast Asian American studies, see Yén Lê Espiritu (*Body*, “Toward,” and “‘We-Win’”) and Mimi Thi Nguyen.
7. For more discussion of Asian American critique, see Lisa Lowe, Kandice Chuh, and Jodi Kim.
8. The anthology is coedited by the members of the Hmong American Writers’ Circle editorial board, including Burlee Vang, Anthony Cody, Yashi Lee, Pos L. Moua, Ying Thao, Mai Der Vang, Soul Choj Vang, and Andre Yang.
9. For more details on how women scholar-activists discuss writing as political, see Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Myriam J. A. Chancy, and Tara Lockhart.
10. For a reading of Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) that discusses how the creative is imbued with the historical and mythical, see Leisa Kauffmann.
11. The theme of Southeast Asian Americans reliving the experiences of war and violence on US city streets is also explored in Bao Phi’s poetry in *Refugeography* (2002) and Ka Vang’s short story, “Ms. Pacman Ruined My Gang Life” (2002).

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