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War's Returns: Refugee Archiving, Living, Refusing

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Abstract

This essay draws on the framework of countercommemoration to reflect on the fiftieth anniversary of Hmong presence in the US as a legacy of unresolved contradictions that highlights Hmong acts of archiving, living, and refusing. It approaches the analysis through an examination of community archiving at an organization called Hmong Museum, refugee testimonies, queer mentorship, and performance, and grassroots organizing to center how these acts of refusal can offer anti-imperialist frameworks and subjectivities in today's precarious present. These acts of living are important sites of analysis because they reflect the ways Hmong refugee knowledge and ideas are rooted in actions that challenge imperialist paradigms of interpreting history and navigating contemporary politics while maintaining an embodied politics of relationality with others. Drawing from critical refugee studies and queer and feminist critiques, this essay investigates how queer and refugee livability asserts the bravery of survival and persistence in fashioning joyous lifeworlds outside the contemporary moment of fear induced through anti-queer and -trans violence and refugee deportations during President Donald Trump's first and second administrations. Building on the potential of critical refugee studies to push back against state violence, we suggest that by reframing Hmong's historical entanglements with the US state through acts of resistance against rather than soldiering for empire, a unique Hmong refugee anti-imperial politics and subjectivity can emerge.

Acts of Archiving, Living, Refusing

In this essay, we reflect on Hmong presence in the US fifty years after the end of the Vietnam War to examine the politics of commemoration and emphasize Hmong acts

of archiving, living, and refusing. We draw on the framework of counter-commemoration to reflect on this fiftieth anniversary as a legacy of unresolved contradictions to emphasize the "lived refuge," as Vinh Nguyen names it, of war's multiple afterlives captured within and through Hmong lived realities.[1] We argue that remembering the fiftieth anniversary of the US defeat in Southeast Asia is an opportunity to strengthen anti-imperialist critiques and actions in the present through insisting on Hmong and Southeast Asian American livability and living as refusal of state violence. Our analysis shows that returning to war through highlighting refugee livability fifty years on in this moment of reinvigorated fascism and militarism must be understood with organizing for queer livability. Indeed, queer Southeast Asian American experiences of state violence links contemporary anti-queer and -trans policies with anti-immigration policies that render life unlivable at multiple intersections. Thus, commemorative moments are full of returns; things that have been returned, things and places we need to return to, our right of return to the land of our ancestors and families, pasts that we keep returning to, and futures that require our returned attention. We further maintain that returning to war allows us to revisit, confront, and conceptualize the ways war returns to our lives in violently disembodied ways, and how we enact resistance by living.

We center the experiences of Hmong refugees displaced after the US secret war in Laos (1960–1975) during the Vietnam War and how this group of refugees enacts community and archiving when their history was not supposed to exist. The US circumvented the 1954 Geneva Conventions, which prohibited foreign countries from intervening in Southeast Asia, by forming a secret proxy army among Hmong, Lao, and other ethnic groups to fight the Laotian side of the Vietnam War. As such, the US dropped over two million tons of ordnance in Laos, making it the most bombed country per capita in history.[2] While the war in Laos was not a secret to those who were directly impacted by it, the state secrecy and historical erasure contribute to what Viet Thanh Nguyen has described as the public's willful refusal to learn the right lessons from the US loss in Viet Nam.[3] This lacuna in our knowledge—our not knowing the full scope of the state's secrets—compels us to continue being inquisitive about the interplay between the past, present, and future. This is a moment to revisit questions about the residues of the Vietnam War and about how Southeast Asian refugees remember and embody the "endings that are not over."[4]

Refugees contend with the complexities of returns in various ways; as subjects displaced from their homelands who can no longer return, as the desire to return to previous modes of life destroyed by war and violence, or as the ways the past returns to haunt them in the present. Importantly, this essay brings together discussions on the archive and return as forms of living in the legacy and presence of multiple wars. Similar to how Davorn Sisavath engages with military waste as an archive of the secret war and how Việt Lê conceptualizes "return engagements" as the intertwined, recurring, and reenacted legacies and strategies of war, culture, and empire, we look to the practices of archiving and living for possibilities to reckon with the forced returning of

refugees and immigrants from the US.[5] Engaging with returns challenges the "good refugee" paradigm and interrogates the military strategy of US imperialism to recruit allies globally, including Hmong during the secret war. In today's context, where anyone—including former refugees—can be recruited to propagate imperial violence, the "good refugee" and "loyal ally" figures are vitally important for empire.[6] That is, the depiction of some Southeast Asian refugees as anticommunist political subjects who are grateful for receiving what Mimi Thi Nguyen calls the "gift of freedom" from the US state (and in the case of Hmong, as willing allies of US empire) renders Southeast Asian presence in the US as an extension of imperial benevolence rather than as an outcome of colonial violence.[7] Specifically, the essay addresses a gap in the literature on archiving war to center Hmong refugee critiques as anchored in embodied experiences.

We examine Hmong American living practices through community archiving, testimonies, queer mentorship and performance, and organizing to center how they can offer anti-imperialist frameworks and methods for cultivating Hmong and Southeast Asian American lifeworlds in today's precarious present. We understand living practices to be the ways Hmong carry knowledge, stories, and affect through their acts of archiving, performing, and agitating as refugees in the US to cultivate habitable systems of lifemaking for their communities. These acts of living are important sites of analysis because they reflect the ways Hmong refugee knowledge and ideas are rooted in actions that challenge imperialist paradigms of interpreting history and navigating contemporary politics. The living practices also maintain an embodied politics of relationality with others. Reflecting on the fiftieth anniversary of the American defeat in Southeast Asia is not just a meditation about our arrivals, but a necessary countercommemoration on what our departures and returns can continue to teach us about ourselves, our society, our nation, and our world at large. It requires us to remember the past differently so that we can dismantle and build the anti-imperialist world we want in the present and future.

Refugee Archives, Living Archives: The Work of Hmong Museum

On March 28, 2025, we visited Hmong Museum, located at the Hmong Village Shopping Center in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Our visit was part of a series of year-long events hosted by Macalester College's departments of American Studies and Sociology as part of their "Peace/Anti-War: Countermemory and Ongoing Struggle, From Vietnam to Palestine" program that served as a countercommemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the US wars in Viet Nam, Cambodia, and Laos.[8] We were interested in Hmong Museum as a site of community-building and "living archive" and, prior to our arrival, we coordinated with its founder and executive director Mai Vang Huizel for archival materials to view during our visit. Vang Huizel mentioned a curious detail during our virtual meeting: Hmong Museum does not actively collect for its physical space or archives, but accepts donations of artifacts, which have been contributed

primarily by non-Hmong individuals and families, for safekeeping. Upon viewing the handmade clothes, story cloths, embroideries, flintlock rifles, and other objects that Vang Huizel had carefully laid out for us, it was jarring to see items that had previously belonged to or were created by Hmong people but had passed through the hands of white Americans who no longer needed (or never had a need for) them and eventually returned them to Hmong spaces. Equally unsettling was the items' disembodied existence in the archive and detachment from being worn or utilized. Furthermore, the items in one garment collection were altered or reconstructed through their circulation as souvenirs among family members.

How history and experience is remembered, archived, and embodied is an ongoing point of negotiation for Hmong Americans due to the secrecy of the US war in Laos. Community-based museums and archives are generative locations for witnessing how Southeast Asians in the diaspora grapple with history in real time fifty years after their displacement to the US. Our visit to Hmong Museum presents a compelling opportunity to explore how one organization is engaging with the questions of history and its impact on the present. Hmong Museum is a grassroots nonprofit community museum and archive established in 2015 and dedicated to preserving and documenting Hmong stories and experiences. It is temporarily located in Saint Paul's eastside within the Hmong Village Shopping Center, a famous mega bazaar that also features various small businesses, a law firm, an urgent care clinic, beauty salons, a pharmacy, a farmer's market, a bustling food court, a DMV, a radio station, boutique shops, and art and photographic murals of Hmong history. Hmong Museum is a women-led organization that implements educational programming and hosts an online archive of narratives created by and for the community. As a "museum without walls," as described by Vang Huizel, Hmong Museum is dedicated to accentuating the knowledge, narratives, and creativity of elders and artists by centering the archiving of "experiences over objects." Educational programming, elder storytelling, video creation, and intergenerational collaborative workshops are prioritized to make Hmong Museum a dynamic organization focused on active doing rather than merely displaying.

Hmong Museum's practices and politics embody what we call a living archive. The living archive denotes the ways knowledge is transmitted among minoritized and marginalized subjects through performance rather than through the written or static text. Performance is a significant element of knowledge in that it is the embodied gesture that enables history to be alive in the present. Diana Taylor's claim about "performance … as an embodied praxis and episteme" is germane to understanding Hmong Museum's practice of transmitting knowledge to visitors and researchers as one that revolves around programming and intergenerational artistic collaboration.[9] Such practices reflect Hmong people's ancestral practices of oral storytelling as a method of disseminating and transferring knowledge, morals and values, and subjective experiences across generations. Ma Vang's book *History on the Run: Secrecy,*

Fugitivity, and Hmong Refugee Epistemologies, further conceptualizes Hmong knowledge as being "on the run" to index both a historical pattern of forced migrations due to overlapping Chinese, French, and American colonialism and imperialism, and as a mode of Hmong refugee being, knowing, and living as they traversed borders and oceans.[10] History on the run reveals how Hmong knowledge is embedded in cultural practices, oral stories, textiles, and art—rather than through the written text—as methods of evading state surveillance, capture, and destruction. This evasion marks Hmong knowledge as fugitive knowledge that is elusive rather than contained as official knowledge within state archives. Such fugitive knowledge is not a linear (re)telling of events, but refers to the paradoxical narrations of history that persist in places and moments in the present that may slip our attention. What history on the run further divulges is the problem of the archive—as a repository of historical records and a container of knowledge—that records in order to obscure Hmong experiences of racism in the US that manifest at the intersections of militarism and policing.[11] Indeed, the archival acts within Hmong Museum function as prompts to its larger project of carrying history and cultivating knowledge through performance.

Hmong Museum's "Exhibits and Collections" section on its website hosts multiple series of active doing and creating, including 1) digital zines and printable coloring books for children; 2) a series called "Hmong Chronicles" which features performances of folktales, love stories, child labor, and dance; 3) tattoo stories; 4) narratives from women pioneers; 5) a short film series about veterans who served in the secret war; and 6) audio, photographs, stories, interviews, and folk songs about Hmong historical and contemporary engagements with water. In these collections, the act of living out and performing history is central to the sharing of knowledge between the content creators and the larger viewing public. Hmong Museum demands its audiences engage with its collections at the experiential level to enact a process of community-building and intergenerational collaboration rather than constructing a static relationship between its collections and the audience.

An archive is not only a repository of the past, but also an ongoing process, practice, and politics that captures life in motion and life on the run. For example, Hmong Museum's "Hmong Chronicles" series "focuses on the revival of Hmong oral traditions through intergenerational collaborations between elders and contemporary artists. The concept is simple: How can Hmong elders pass on oral stories in the traditional way, while encouraging contemporary artists and the next generation to learn and be inspired to re-tell those stories in their own artistic way?"[12] The four videos within the "Hmong Chronicles" series are all collaborative efforts to bring into being experiences of living and persisting.

The first video, "Orphan Boy," retells an orphan story written by playwright May Lee-Yang and performed by a young woman (Phasoua Vang) and two elders (Paj Tsab and Paj Lis Thoj), while the second video, "Child Interpreter," features a mother (Tsai Lee) and daughter (Shoua Lee) sharing a story of the daughter being a child interpreter for her family. "Love Story" is the third video, portraying author Kao Kalia

Yang reading from her father's memoir, *The Song Poet*, while her father, Bee Yang, orates a spoken word poem. Finally, "Origin Story" features two dancers (Russ Ly and Kao Nou Moua) dancing at a local "Hmong spot" at Lake Phalen to Long Lee and Chy Lee's narration of the great flood origin story, directed by spoken word artist Tou Saiko Lee and videographed by Chue Yang. The "Hmong Chronicles" series showcases how intergenerational and community collaborations are central to a Hmong archival practice beyond the written word or hoarding of material objects by drawing from oral traditions and ancestral knowledge to manifest these experiences as contemporary artforms. In this way, knowledge creation is a technique of being present and acting with others to generate new meanings about how life can and should be lived in the aftermath of war and displacement. In turn, stories rooted in presence and place structure Hmong archival practices of transmitting memory, narrating histories, strengthening relationships, and inventing new cultural identities.

The materials that Vang Huizel laid out in preparation for our visit, as well as the ways in which we engaged these materials, also played important roles in demonstrating the living archive. Some of these objects included a flintlock rifle, a powder horn and bag, a priming flask, a pellet-maker hand tool, a cross bow and arrows, a brass mouth harp musical instrument called a *ncas*, a smoking pipe, textiles and story cloth collections, and an assortment of donated handmade garments. As we excitedly examined the objects with a group of local college students and activists from Minnesota 8, an organization fighting against Southeast Asian deportation, an elderly couple visiting the Hmong Village Shopping Center who had arrived before us spontaneously took part in our commotion. Upon seeing the spread of objects on the tables, the two elders immediately picked up the objects with their bare hands in stark contrast to our gloved hands. The elderly woman raised the crossbow and began demonstrating how to use it. The elderly man reflected loudly about his life as he caressed a story cloth hanging on the wall depicting a boy leading a horse carrying water and rice to a village in the mountains. Both elders alternated pointing the flintlock rifle at us and each other. We all then watched with trepidation as they took turns lifting the ncas to their mouths and began blowing on it to generate music!

In mainstream museum and archival curatorial practices, objects are secured behind glass, with strict rules about handling materials. Picking up an old instrument in a museum with one's bare hands and holding it to your tongue and mouth, for example, is usually forbidden. Yet, the spontaneity of the elders' demonstrative act further reflects our assertions about the living archive as carrying and producing knowledge. Vang Huizel stated during a debriefing session after the elders had left, "Objects like the ncas are not inanimate; they have sounds and sensory perception. I was apprehensive about the elders picking up the fragile materials, but I had to remind myself that they *know* how to handle the objects." Indeed, the elders' sensorial and sentimental interactions with the objects imbued them with embodiment and life. Vang Huizel's acknowledgement that the elders know how to handle the objects–and that we are the ones who do not–gestures toward an intimate knowledge that could

not have been accessed had the elders not visited the space. The elderly man's life is stitched in the story cloth, and the flintlock rifle is similar to one he handled in his younger years. In her youth, the elderly woman operated an identical crossbow to hunt birds in her remote Laotian village.

The objects may be stored away in a museum and are seemingly rusty from old age, but they can spontaneously come back to life through the performative act of demonstration and storytelling. Both elders gifted us their historical knowledge without concern for the rules and regulations of the dominant Western museum and archival world, which often treats and displays "ethnic objects" as historical artifacts devoid of life and dignity. We observed in the elders' actions a *refusal* of those very standards. They were not invested in perpetuating the colonial relationship that museumgoers and researchers often adhere to within the museum and archive. They understood knowledge to be a dialectic act rooted in an embodied relationality between objects, people, and memory. Knowledge is a shared process through an impromptu act of intergenerational connection. The elders' embodied history is transformed within the present as they pulled all of us—students, researchers, curators, witnesses—into their narrative act. The living archive as exemplified by the elders' familiar relationships to the objects illuminates the aliveness of Hmong knowledge, creations, and histories.

Hmong Museum's approach of not actively collecting combined with our experience with the elders demonstrates how the living archive can have the potential to enact refugee livability to make sense of the circulation of objects that are sometimes "returned" as artifacts. Thinking with Yến Lê Espiritu and Ma Vang's explanation of refugee livability as the "mundane, creative, and fearless ways of living embedded in refugees' claims of the right to return, to stay, and to move audaciously," expressed through storytelling and performance, we insist on a relation to the archival materials that centers their "humanity, dignity, and futurity."[13] Seeing how the elders imbued the ncas, flintlock rifle, and story cloth with humanity and dignity affirms the necessity of graceful relationality to things and the stories they carry. Therefore, we cannot ignore the reality that while donated with well-meaning intention, white Americans had acquired these Hmong things through their travels to Southeast Asia, the paj ntaub market in the US, or through gifting. While some objects are readily discernible, others such as dolls, clothing, textiles, and jewelry have questionable origins. Additionally, some donated textiles and garments were mortifyingly cut and then resewn by the person who had acquired them, therefore distorting the original objects. There is also no context for the objects other than the name of the donor. Information such as the year of creation, original artisan, or location where the item was acquired is missing. Vang Huizel stated to us, "The more we look at the artifacts, the more questions we have. Each artifact is its own mystery." The notion that these items circulated from an ambiguous space to the homes of white Americans and were returned back to a Hmong community museum and archive represents their missing and disembodied histories.

Vang Huizel's explanation that Hmong Museum is "interested in experience" through programming that gathers people and stories and its collecting emerging from unsolicited donations from non-Hmong individuals reflects how the archive cannot contain refugee lives, as well as how a community-based museum and archive cannot escape the archival drive. Furthermore, not all Hmong American museum professionals and archivists may be committed to these decolonial curatorial practices. In that vein, we observe the ways experiences sit in tension with the archive in how the returned items paradoxically show up as disembodied yet saturated with the missing stories about where they have been. It is refugee subjects, then, who continue to "experiment" with history and storytelling through their performance of embodied knowledges and lived refuge found in a living archive like Hmong Museum.[14]

Queer and Refugee Living as Refusal

Queer and trans people's insistence on living and asserting their embodied humanity also help us understand refugee living as refusal. In this section, we discuss how legislative violence toward queer life exposes the power structures that also govern refugee lives, particularly through deportations. Living in the contemporary moment is an unsettling experience ladened with dehumanizing uncertainty and anxiety. As the US war machine on the international front entrenches its imperial violence further into the Middle East and the Asia Pacific region, it is waging a relentless campaign of legislative terror against queer and trans people on its domestic front. Recent legal maneuvers suppressing drag performances, the implementation of bathroom surveillance laws, the censoring of literature about gender and sexuality, the banning of trans athletes from competitive sports, and the US Supreme Court's 2025 ruling upholding a ban on gender-affirming medical care for trans youth in *United States v. Skrmetti* represents the ongoing backlash against queer and trans visibility. Queer and trans people of color who are situated at manifold intersecting social locations are multiply harmed by racialized anti-queer and -trans legislation that is part and parcel of the US empire's compulsion to control, surveil, and eliminate those deemed to be social and political deviants. Kong Pheng Pha's book *Queering the Hmong Diaspora: Racial Subjectivity and the Myth of Hyperheterosexuality* conceptualizes Hmong refugees as racially ungovernable subjects whose practices and politics of gender, sexuality, and kinship trouble state-based hetero- and homonormativities. The state's failed attempts to assimilate Hmong into heteronormativity through the criminal legal system and legislative bills in the first two decades of the twenty-first century demonstrates how Hmong life, existence, and refusal challenge the state's attempts to remake refugees into respectable sexual citizens with legal rights.[15]

Queer Hmong Americans in particular draw upon vernacular epistemologies and enactments of spirituality, language, and kinship to refuse the assimilationist logics that underlie the white supremacist anti-trans ideologies emblematic of contemporary sexual and queer liberalisms. The contemporary phase of queer liberalism of

purportedly bestowing freedom to selected queer people who fit the mold of white cisgender homonormativity clashes with queer Hmong Americans' refusals to renounce Hmong forms of kinship, marriage, and sociality rooted in community-building, lifemaking, and kin-making. In that sense, queer Hmong American critical imaginations of enacting renewed spiritual and political life, of dreaming new modes of gendered and sexual being that do not yet exist, is a direct affront to the state's ongoing queer and trans violence.[16] As Hmong Americans reached the fifty-year mark of living in the US, queer Hmong Americans insist on cultivating new cultural identities that magnify the boundaries of what it means to be displaced subjects remaking home in the diaspora. That is, queer Hmong Americans are enacting *living as refusal*.

Queer Hmong American living is an act of refusal that insists on the humanity of queer Hmong Americans even as they rub up against seemingly insurmountable political forces. The Twin Cities-based Hmong and Southeast Asian queer nonprofit organization Transforming Generations (TG), for instance, instituted the Drag ON Talent program in 2024, where three Southeast Asian American professional drag artists mentored aspiring drag performers to, as stated by TG's queer justice initiatives coordinator Seng Xiong, live fiercely "beyond the narrative of tragedy."[17] TG executive director Xay Yang stated that the name "Drag ON" is a play on words that pays homage to how "drag artists and LGBTQ+ folks carry on … amidst uncertain circumstances ... and be as courageous as dragons."[18] Legislation attempting to ban drag artistry at Texas A&M University and the University of Texas at Austin in 2025 to comply with President Trump's executive orders targeting "radical gender ideologies" amplifies the high stakes of Drag ON Talent. One of the drag artist mentors, Koobmong Kong, better known through the stage name Khooblah Khon, insists on performing and living by mentoring queer youth to embrace their authentic selves as a form of refusal. The Drag ON Talent mentors and mentees went on to courageously perform at the Twin Cities Pride Fest on Saint Paul's Harriet Island in both June 2024 and 2025 to assert their embodied presence. Queer performance and living as refusal are embodied acts that intervene in the ongoing erasure of queer and trans life in the US; as Khon states, "It's not a scary or bad thing to show who we are."[19] By performing, singing, dancing, mentoring, living, and showing the world precisely who they are, queer Hmong Americans are implementing living as refusal in order for their communities to, in the words of Xiong, "experience stability and get us to places of thriving, building generational wealth, security and camaraderie" fifty years after Southeast Asian refugee displacement to the US.[20]

Legislative violence against queer and trans communities also runs concurrent with state-sponsored xenophobia and refugee deportations, as do the forms of refusals and insistence on living found among those impacted by that same violence. We witnessed in President Trump's first term a dramatic rise in anti-Chinese xenophobia followed by extreme street violence perpetrated against Asians and Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic. President Trump's second term has seen even more draconian anti-immigrant policies and practices, including unlawful and

unjust detention and deportation of Palestinian liberation activists, international students, green card holders, political dissidents, and anyone designated as a threat to the US settler-colonial state. In 2020, President Trump's extortion of Laos to accept deportees from the US instilled widespread fear among Hmong and Lao Americans, following the already expanding deportation measures against Vietnamese and Cambodian Americans.

What began in 2020 laid the groundwork for the mass expulsions of immigrants and refugees in 2025. In March 2025, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), under the direction of the Trump regime, deported to Laos Ma Yang, a 37-year-old mother of five from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Born in a refugee camp in Thailand, Yang arrived in the US as an eight-month-old infant and has lived in Milwaukee as a legal permanent resident ever since she was 7, until that status was revoked in 2022. A conviction for marijuana trafficking in 2020 resulted in her serving two and a half years in prison, which ultimately spiraled into the series of events that led to the revocation of her legal permanent resident status and deportation. Yang has never visited or stepped foot in Laos and does not speak the Lao language. Speaking to a journalist at the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Yang stated, "The United States sent me back to die. I don't even know where to go. I don't even know what to do … How do I rent, or buy, or anything, with no papers? I'm a nobody right now."[21]

We see parallels between Yang's deportation case and the returned objects at Hmong Museum through the decontextualization and disembodiment of both personal lived experiences and national histories. We ask: What intimacies are present in the ways objects and people are forcibly circulated through space and time? At the center of the uneasiness between the deportation of people and returned items is the precarity of refugee experiences and stories as they rub up against political structures such as the military-industrial complex, immigration policies, and international refugee law. Recognizing another instance of US betrayal of Hmong fifty years after the end of the secret war in Laos, Yang lamented, "How do you send us back when we fought for you guys? How is this OK?"[22] Deportation breaks apart space and time by situating Southeast Asian Americans into a temporal vacuum in which the US nation-state's "national security" interests are elevated above the protection of refugee subjects whose displacements were produced by the US itself.

Yang's anguish that she does not "know where to go" and "what to do" reveals the violent disembodied experience induced through deportation. Even as the state claims that Yang is "going" to Laos, the fact that she does not know where to go produces a troubling ontological condition that problematizes the refugee's journey of arrival, departure, and return. Furthermore, Yang's observation that she cannot rent or buy anything as a deported person in Laos with "no papers" means she has been stripped of her abilities to participate in the social and economic activities of the receiving state. She has been reduced to what Giorgio Agamben has termed as bare life in the form of a "nobody."[23] Yang is captured by the state and remade into a liminal subject through her disembodiment across space and time. She is removed from history

through her forced return to a location in which she does not speak the language and to which she has no relationship. Even as Southeast Asian diasporic communities celebrate and commemorate fifty years of living in the US, their sociopolitical statuses remain undefined in that they can easily crisscross the political categories of refugee, legal permanent resident, citizen, or, ultimately a disappeared bare life subject (i.e., "a nobody").

That Southeast Asian American celebration and commemoration is concomitantly tinted with fear of deportation is no anomaly. The contradiction of fear is, as the Critical Refugee Studies Collective has argued, that refugees must bear the burden of proving a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, and/or membership of a particular social group or political opinion to qualify for refugee status.[24] Yet the ongoing fear of deportation—indeed the fear of being disappeared itself—represents an ongoing system of unlivability for Southeast Asians in the US that complicates which nation-state the refugee should be fearful of. The irony at play is that fear accompanies Southeast Asian refugees, from spaces of war to refugee camps, to the urban US. Fear is the vehicle that structures the very fact of someone being able to become—and continues to be—a legal refugee subject. In that vein, how is living in fear of deportation and disappearance by the US considered refugee protection? Is this history worth celebrating and commemorating?

While fear undergirds our current lived realities—fear of speaking out, fear of pushing back, fear of being deported, fear of being disappeared, fear of racist, homophobic, and transphobic legislative and street violence—our everyday living also spills out into places of nonfear and noncaptivity. Recontextualizing the contradictory histories of how Hmong arrived as refugees—and are forcibly returned as permanent legal residents—represents a form of resistance that affirms Hmong's right to remain in place. We insist on a form of Hmong, Southeast Asian, queer, and refugee *livability* as a method of being and existing on our own terms, outside the confines of what the state has prescribed for us. It is an assertion of our truths about the consequences of war and violence by demanding livability in refuge, an insistence that illuminates the ways in which refugees "negotiate, reject, and creatively respond to the legal-political requirements to secure more than refuge and the right to live but the right to live fearlessly."[25] Highlighting queer and refugee livability asserts the bravery of survival and persistence in fashioning joyous lifeworlds outside the prison of fear. Shifting attention to how Hmong Americans are enacting insurgent lives in the unfolding present pivots the conversation of fifty years toward a politics of living rather than a politics of fear. Reiterating Kooblah Khon's declaration, "[I]t's not scary to show who we are!" And indeed, this is the form of queer and refugee living that we insist on.

Countercommemoration as Resistance

Enacting a politics of countercommemoration by reflecting on Hmong lived refuge and the frictions between forced and benevolent returns fifty years after the end of the

Vietnam War can expand our lens on field formation toward anti-imperialist knowledge production and resistance. In critical Hmong studies, there is still much work to do to name the US project in Laos as imperialist in order to demarcate a distinctive Hmong anti-imperialist agenda. The well-trained anti-imperialist critic may question Hmong's "alliance" with the US against other colonized peoples as aiding and abetting empire. If Hmong were fighting for political autonomy and a vision of a future in a decolonized Lao state, laboring as proxy soldiers for the imperialist aggressor seemed to zero out their political drive. A Hmong political agenda seems diffused when that agenda was not centered on what is outwardly decolonial. Although the perspectives of Hmong forced proxy soldiering provide an important critique of US imperialism as a technology of war and empire's excess, limitations still linger in envisioning Hmong subjectivity outside the frame of war, militarism, and masculinized violence.

Such framing of violence shores up the US nation-state's illicit, yet authorized, recruitment of Hmong to fight as proxy soldiers against communism in Laos with its protracted anti-Asian, and specifically anti-Hmong racism, in the domestic space.[26] For example, these forms of state-sanctioned violence played out in the police killings of Fong Lee and George Floyd in Minnesota. Hmong American teenager Lee was callously killed in 2006 by a Minneapolis police officer who was later cleared of any wrongdoing. George Floyd's murder in 2020 by police officer Derek Chauvin, who kneeled on Floyd's neck for eight minutes until he could no longer breathe, galvanized protests and forced institutional changes to address policing and anti-Black racism. From a Hmong American and refugee perspective, Floyd's murder exposed the system of police violence and its intersections with US militarism because Hmong American officer Tou Thao was one of four officers at the scene and participated in Floyd's killing.[27] The narrative of Hmong as "allies" of the state both during the secret war in Laos and as police officers in the contemporary US is embedded in assumptions about their inherent propensity to violence. Hmong's perceived violent predisposition as proxy soldiers and police officers is also entangled in the larger imperial web of capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and white supremacy. Thus, whether Hmong participate in state-sanctioned killing or are being killed by the state, they are embroiled in violence that continues to recall their "warrior skills," transmitted from the secret war to serve the interests of the racist police state. In that vein, it is our call to Hmong Americans and other refugee communities to refuse allyship with the US empire, and instead, forge solidarities with anti-imperialist and social justice movements to deter the expanding US killing machine domestically and internationally.[28]

Countercommemoration, then, is an anti-imperialist act of resistance—which also intersects with feminist, queer, and antiracist thought and action—that deconstructs how these manifold dynamics continue to foster injustice today for a host of minoritized and subjugated peoples. Anti-imperialism, as "a strand of political thought and a form of social and political action […], a foreign policy, a versatile language, and a political cause, […] a cultural formation, a form of subaltern resistance, and a type of historiography" can be grounded in the modes of remembrance, community-

building efforts, and politics of living of the oppressed.[29] Our formulation of anti-imperialism in this moment is not merely circumscribed to activists who have explicitly tried to topple the empire, but extends to all those who continue to enact living as refusal on the ground. Countercommemoration oriented toward anti-imperialism is the "regulatory principle," as socialist critic Richard Seymour calls it, that animates Hmong everyday critique, remembrance, archiving, performance, and living outside the legible parameters of history that is restrained in the imperial archive.[30]

Hmong American grassroots organizing is one site of analysis to rethink Hmong presence in the US as explicitly anti-imperialist. The activities of HIP (Hmong Innovating Politics), a Sacramento-based queer-, trans-, women-, and youth-led organization, reveals an intersectional radical politics anchored in community building, refugee and immigration justice, housing justice, youth leadership, elder civic engagement, cross-racial coalition building, and queer, trans, Black, and Palestinian liberation. In 2025 alone, HIP's youth organizers and elders held retreats for community members to debrief ICE abductions, protested the Trump administration's immigration policies as part of the "No Kings" demonstrations, initiated a boycott campaign against Amazon, and marched for queer, trans, and Palestinian liberation. HIP's social media content is explicitly and strategically aimed at generating an anti-imperial discourse, with one notable image posted to their social media pages in June 2025, several days before the "No Kings" demonstrations protesting President Trump's anti-immigrant and deportation policies, showcasing an individual donning a traditional Hmong skirt and holding the flag of Palestine with the wording "to be HMONG is to actively RESIST." An accompanying description for the image reads: "To be Hmong is to resist together in community and solidarity. We will not be immobilized by fear."[31] The image garnered more than two-hundred-twenty comments and eighty shares on Facebook. Anti-imperialism in the case of HIP is defined through active resistance against fascism through visible activism. Indeed, the various causes championed by HIP over the first half of 2025 take time for scholars to connect and theorize in detail, but their connections are more obvious for people in the streets because their acts of refusal and resistance are grounded in addressing the immediate harms that President Trump's policies play in their lived realities. HIP's cultivation of a movement to include youth and elder lived experiences in their activities reveals an anti-imperial critique and subjectivity rooted in refugee livability that accounts for "community and solidarity" with others. Most importantly, HIP constructs Hmong subjectivity outside the frame of war, militarism, and masculinized violence as *resistance against* empire rather than as *soldiering for* empire.

Our analysis of countercommemoration takes direction from feminist poet Mai Der Vang's reflections on the fiftieth anniversary, i.e., to keep telling "the truth of this war" from Hmong perspectives that name the US government's foreign policy experiments in Laos as imperialist. The mechanisms of war through proxy, in which Hmong became implicated through their forced proxy soldiering, has increasingly defined the contemporary US empire, as seen in the case of Ukraine and Israel. Proxy

wars hide the imperialist nature of conflict by transmuting how wars are fought—not by direct combat troops of a foreign power, but through indirect enlisting of Indigenous subjects as war's conduits. The secret war in Laos thus unmasks the shape-shifting nature of imperialism, which has pivoted away from direct fighting to substituting racialized Indigenous bodies to do the dirty work of empire. Thus, the military activities and deaths in Laos remain systemically nameless to render imperialism in Laos as unknowable, unnamable, and unrecognizable.

Mai Der Vang moves us toward an anti-imperialist position by directly naming the logics of the war in Laos. Vang writes, "Proxy warfare ultimately allows for someone else to die in one's place—in other words, for Hmong to die in the place of Americans, which they did, at an alarming rate, [ten] times as high as their American counterparts. When the United States could no longer uphold its promise and well after the damage had been done, they ended the war in 1975 and packed up to go home."[32] Vang insists that even amidst our daily living, we must return to the war as the war returns to us. She writes, "To continue writing from a place of being Hmong means I can't escape the war. Or rather, it's the other way around. It's that the war can't escape me … I will keep haunting the war and I will keep digging into its wound, [fifty] years since, and perhaps for [fifty] onward."[33] We are hauntingly tethered to the war such that it will not let go of us and we cannot let it go. Haunting and digging as acts of war's returns reflects what Long Bui names as the social waste of American empire that is recycled over time. Contending with empire's residuals is an acknowledgement that "we are still living in an imperialist age."[34]

Our analysis of Hmong archiving, queer and refugee living as refusal, and grassroots organizing to radically reframe subjectivity show how an idiosyncratic Hmong refugee anti-imperialist countercommemoration can look like. The acts of performing a living archive ground Hmong knowledge—and in fact their very existence—in the cultivation of social relations rather than through an optic of coloniality that defines the state archive. Even the Hmong Museum's returned objects—some cut, altered, and damaged—are carefully tended to by Vang Huizel and the volunteer staff. Concomitantly, queer and refugee living as refusal enhances countercommemoration as anti-imperialism through living fearlessly even as the war returns to the domestic front in the form of anti-queer and -trans legislative violence and xenophobia. Our conceptualization of a distinctive Hmong anti-imperialism at the fifty-year mark is grounded in contending with the admittance of Hmong's historical role in perpetuating US imperial violence in Laos through forced proxy soldiering, and the subsequent recognition that we are also responsible for resisting that same violence through acts of archiving, living, and refusing. We are doing this work in relation with critical race and gender studies scholars and cultural workers. We have drawn from analytical tools informed by insights about power, racism, imperialism, militarism, heteropatriarchy, Cold War historiography, and transnational migration to insist on forms of Hmong refugee living that navigate war's returns and our continual return to war. The lateral relationships forged through the mentorship from scholars

in these adjacent fields shape the expansion of critical Hmong studies as an anti-imperial site of knowledge, critique, intervention, and resistance.

Conclusion: Irreconcilable Returns

Writing this essay has been an important opportunity for us to reflect on the unresolved contradictions and legacies of the US wars in Viet Nam, Cambodia, and Laos. As we finalized this writing, President Trump reinstated a travel ban on June 4, 2025, reviving restrictions of arrivals from Muslim-majority countries. In this recent version titled "Restricting the Entry of Foreign Nationals to Protect the United States from Foreign Terrorists and Other National Security and Public Safety Threats," nationals from thirteen countries including Afghanistan, Burma, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Haiti, Iran, Libya, the Republic of Congo, Sudan, and Somalia were fully restricted from entering the US for "foreign policy, national security, and counter-terrorism objectives." The travel ban also includes seven additional countries with partial restrictions, including Burundi, Cuba, Laos, Sierra Leone, Togo, Turkmenistan, and Venezuela.[35] It may appear as a surprise that Laos is on this list as a country that is seemingly a low priority for US foreign policy, national security, and counterterrorism concerns in 2025. Laos is the remaining country among the three former Vietnam War states that has yet to establish a formal repatriation agreement with the US. To be sure, the US has deported more than two hundred individuals to Laos since 1998, with an estimated remaining 4,850 Lao, Hmong, Iu Mien, Khmu and other ethnic minorities on final deportation orders.[36]

These contradictory politics of movement and the urgency of this recent travel ban underscore our argument about living and navigating the saturation of irreconcilable returns fifty years later. President Trump's heightened deportations and executive measures restricting entry from Laos necessitates a rethinking of Hmong's political trajectories and circulation within space and time to account for their shifting lived realities. In sum, the returned artifacts we observed during our visit to Hmong Museum and the people who have been forcibly returned to Laos through deportation represents a decontextualized version of history that only reinforces state violence and imperialist narratives about the Vietnam War even after fifty years. Yet Hmong critiques of US betrayal through deportations, construction of a living archive at Hmong Museum, and cultivation of anti-imperialist resistance and subjectivity through critical refugee studies are key to a countercommemoration in this moment of fear and unlivability.

Notes

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audience members at the East Side Freedom Library for engaging with some of these ideas in the early stages.

1 Vinh Nguyen, *Lived Refuge: Gratitude, Resentment, Resilience* (University of California Press, 2023).

2 "The Fred Branfman and Bouangeun Luangpraseuth Timeline of the American Secret War in Laos," *Legacies of War*, Legacies Library, https://www.legaciesofwar.org/legacies-library

3 Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Americans are Still Learning the Wrong Lessons from Vietnam," *Los Angeles Times*, April 30, 2025, https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2025-04-30/vietnam-war-fall-of-saigon

4 Yến Lê Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* (University of California Press, 2014), 171–88.

5 See Davorn Sisavath, "The US Secret War in Laos: Constructing an Archive from Military Waste," *Radical History Review* 133 (2019): 103–16; and Việt Lê, *Return Engagements: Contemporary Art's Traumas of Modernity and History in Sài Gòn and Phnom Penh* (Duke University Press, 2021).

6 Yến Lê Espiritu, "The Vietnam War and the 'Good Refugee,'" in *The Routledge Handbook of Asian American Studies*, ed. Cindy I-Fen Cheng (Routledge, 2017), 103–16.

7 Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Duke University Press, 2012).

8 Instead of centering military history, war strategy, or foreign policy as central frames of remembering the wars, the organizers of "Peace/Anti-War" highlighted in its public program that the events were imagined as a "counter-commemoration to elevate voices in dominant Vietnam War narratives" to bring attention to the "complex and contradictory living testimonies of Southeast Asian communities who, along with antiwar and anti-imperial insurgents, still face the imprint of those wars" (*Peace/Anti-War: Countermemory & Ongoing Struggle, From Vietnam to Palestine*, event series, Macalester College, 2025).

9 Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Duke University Press, 2003), 16.

10 Ma Vang, *History on the Run: Secrecy, Fugitivity, and Hmong Refugee Epistemologies* (Duke University Press, 2021).

11 Vang, *History on the Run.*

[12] "Hmong Chronicles," Hmong Museum Collections, *Hmongmuseummn.org* https://hmongmuseummn.org/collection/hmong-chronicles/, accessed March 25, 2025.

[13] Yến Lê Espiritu and Ma Vang, "'Livability' and 'Ungratefulness': A Refugee Critique of the Law and Humanitarianism," *Social Inclusion* 12 (2024): 5, https://www.cogitatiopress.com/socialinclusion/article/view/8604

[14] Vinh Nguyen argues that refugee lived experience is an experiment of trying out, working out, and imagining that "direct our attention to how people make sense of being a refugee" (xv). Refugees' experimentation with protection, rights claims, and safety point to the social ongoingness of refuge (Nguyen, *Lived Refuge*, xv, 3).

[15] Kong Pheng Pha, *Queering the Hmong Diaspora: Racial Subjectivity and the Myth of Hyperheterosexuality* (University of Washington Press, 2025).

[16] Pha, *Queering the Hmong Diaspora*.

[17] John Nguyen, "Drag ON Talent Teaches Southeast Asian Youth a Transformative Craft," *Star Tribune*, August 15, 2024, https://www.startribune.com/drag-on-talent-teaches-southeast-asian-youth-a-transformative-craft/601111394

[18] Nguyen, "Drag ON Talent Teaches Southeast Asian Youth."

[19] Nguyen, "Drag ON Talent Teaches Southeast Asian Youth."

[20] Nguyen, "Drag ON Talent Teaches Southeast Asian Youth."

[21] Sophie Carson, "Milwaukee-area Woman Deported to Laos Though She's Never Been There, Doesn't Speak the Language," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, March 14, 2025, https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/local/milwaukee/2025/03/14/south-milwaukee-woman-deported-to-laos-is-stranded-with-few-options/82369691007/

[22] Carson, "Milwaukee-area Woman Deported to Laos."

[23] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford University Press, 1998).

[24] Yến Lê Espiritu, Lan Duong, Ma Vang, Victor Bascara, Khatharya Um, Lila Sharif, and Nigel Hatton, *Departures: An Introduction to Critical Refugee Studies* (University of California Press, 2022), 32.

[25] Espiritu et al, *Departures*, 54.

[26] Kong Pheng Pha, "Two Hate Notes: Deportations, COVID-19, and Xenophobia against Hmong Americans in the Midwest," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 23, no. 3 (2020): 335–39, https://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2020.0027; Kong Pheng Pha, "Colorblindness as

Anti-Asian Racism in the Midwest," *American Studies* 63, no. 3 (2023): 119–42, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/ams.2023.a913949

[27] Kong Pheng Pha, "Unsettled Mourning," in *Sparked: George Floyd, Racism, and the Progressive Illusion*, eds. Walter R. Jacobs, Wendy Thompson Taiwo, and Amy August (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2021), 192–98.

[28] Ma Vang and Kit Myers, "In the Wake of George Floyd: Hmong Americans' Refusal to Be a U.S. Ally," *Amerasia* 47, no. 1 (2021): 1–15.

[29] Ian Tyrell and Jay Sexton, "Introduction," in *Empire's Twin: U.S. Anti-Imperialism from the Founding Era to the Age of Terrorism*, ed. Ian Tyrell and Jay Sexton (Cornell University Press, 2015), 5.

[30] Richard Seymour, *American Insurgents: A Brief History of American Anti-Imperialism* (Haymarket Books, 2012), xvii.

[31] Hmong Innovating Politics (HIP), "To be Hmong is to resist together in community and solidarity. We will not be immobilized by fear," Facebook photo, June 12, 2025, https://www.facebook.com/share/p/17C5BW4ira/?mibextid=wwXIfr

[32] Mai Der Vang, "US Proxy War Displaced My Family 50 Years Ago. We Still Live in the Wreckage," *Truthout*, May 24, 2025, https://truthout.org/articles/us-proxy-war-displaced-my-family-50-years-ago-we-still-live-in-the-wreckage/

[33] Vang, "US Proxy War Displaced My Family."

[34] Long T. Bui, *Returns of War: South Vietnam and the Price of Refugee Memory* (New York University Press, 2018), 171.

[35] The White House, "Restricting the Entry of Foreign Nationals to Protect the United States from Foreign Terrorists and Other National Security and Public Safety Threats," June 4, 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/06/restricting-the-entry-of-foreign-nationals-to-protect-the-united-states-from-foreign-terrorists-and-other-national-security-and-public-safety-threats/. Emphasis on Laos is ours.

[36] Phontham Visapra, "Over 4,800 Lao Nationals Set to Face Deportation from the United States," *The Laotian Times*, January 31, 2025, https://laotiantimes.com/2025/01/31/over-4800-lao-nationals-set-to-face-deportation-from-the-united-states/

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