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TWO HATE NOTES

*Deportations, COVID-19, and Xenophobia against
Hmong Americans in the Midwest*

Kong Pheng Pha

In February 2020, I received a xenophobic hate note in my campus mailbox regarding President Donald Trump's negotiations with the Lao government to deport Hmong living in the United States back to Laos. The hate note read: "*Deport all Hmong, Deport all illegal aliens HMONGS, ICE & CBP are law enforcement and should be obeyed, No room for criminals, No Amnesty ever.*" I was shaken and unsettled. The xenophobic hate note created intense anxiety for me because I know that my advocacy as a Hmong American scholar and professor teaching and speaking to the media about the deportation issues rendered me a vulnerable target for racists and xenophobes. In the following days, I discussed the deportation negotiations with Laos at length in my course, "Hmong American Experiences in the U.S." My students were furious about the larger American public's ahistorical, inaccurate, and misguided readings regarding the Hmong presence in the United States as forcibly displaced political refugees who fought as proxy soldiers for the Central Intelligence Agency's secret war in Laos in the 1960s and 1970s. One Hmong American student commented that the deportation negotiations made her feel unwanted in the United States. How can I convey that I care about her? My spirit was shattered; I was on edge, demoralized, and fearing for my safety.

The news reports, activism, and social discourse surrounding the deportation negotiations came to a screeching halt when news of COVID-19 broke out all over the world just one month later, in March 2020. While still recovering from a traumatic racist experience with the hate note, I was

thrust into another world of racism and xenophobia amidst the rapidly spreading global pandemic. A familiar wave of anti-Asian racism swept across the United States, as reckless as the virus itself. I was struck by another racist and xenophobic incident when a hate note was taped onto a Hmong American couple's apartment door in Woodbury, Minnesota. The note read: *"We're watching you fucking chinks take the Chinese virus back to china. We don't want you hear infecting us with your diseases!!!!!!!!!! –your friendly neighborhood."*¹ The explosion of racist violence against Asians during the outbreak of COVID-19 exacerbated my fears of being Asian American in western, mostly rural Wisconsin. For my students, the couple, and myself, it is difficult to shake off that unsettling feeling of being targeted by both the U.S. settler state and racists on the ground. I find myself asking how we can turn to each other for support and care in these times of heightened racism.

There is one strand of social discourse that connects the two hate notes directed against me in Wisconsin and the Hmong American couple in Minnesota. The first note conflates Hmong as "illegals" and renders invisible the specific historical context that was the caveat to Hmong political migration to the United States. The second note conflates Hmong Americans with Chinese and China, and renders Hmong Americans invisible and anything but Americans. In the note that I received, the writer deployed the concept of "illegal aliens" towards Hmong to justify our deportation. "Illegal aliens" are understood pejoratively to be subjects whose presence in the United States is unlawful and thus whose existence in and of itself constitutes criminality. The "illegal alien" is reduced to a condition of statelessness because they do not belong in the U.S. nation-state via their lack of legal citizenship and/or formal recognition of their presence. For Hmong, the deployment of "illegal aliens" feels familiar due to the Hmong's historical and political conditions as stateless refugees. Although different from the position of the "illegal alien," nonetheless our deportability even as political refugees serves to remind us that we are neither citizens nor Americans, if not in the legal sense, then certainly in the social sense.

The Woodbury note contained an equally pernicious undertone. It aligns closer to the yellow peril discourse attributed to Asians as diseased invaders. Hmong Americans are effaced by racism, even though Hmong Americans make up the largest group of Asian Americans in the state of Minnesota. Woodbury, a suburb of Saint Paul, is only fifteen minutes from the Twin Cities, the location of the largest enclave of Hmong Americans in the United States. We may conclude that the conflation of Hmong simply as "Chinese" or "Asian" is similar to the ongoing experiences of anti-Asian

racism that all Asian Americans are facing within the U.S. nation at large. Yet, I contend that even the proximity of Woodbury to the Twin Cities could not secure a Hmong American visibility in the time of COVID-19. This invisibility thus reflects the larger and longer history of Hmong American structural eradication within U.S. history from the American imagination through war and militarism. But it all makes sense: erasing Hmong Americans, even though the COVID pandemic has rendered “Chinese” as dehumanizingly hyper-visible, is an intentional way to dehumanize us. And dehumanization enables the exteriorization of the threat as not American, but as Asian (read: disease).

Stamping Out Hate, Creating Care

While the two hate notes have presented palpable systemic and visceral violence for Hmong Americans in the Midwest, Hmong Americans are also forging more ethical formations of care to reclaim our humanity from xenophobic violence and confront the challenges posed during the COVID pandemic. The challenges of creating more sensible forms of care that lie ahead for Asian American studies scholars and activists in the time of intensifying racism—evidenced by the two hate notes—are twofold. First, we need to imagine decolonized ways of care and security that consider the multigenerational and non-nuclear familial structures within diverse Asian American communities. My own family represents a case of this non-nuclear and multigenerational family structure. I live simultaneously in and travel to and from Minneapolis and Eau Claire, a college city in Western Wisconsin. My mother lives with three of my younger siblings and my brother-in-law in an impoverished neighborhood on the north side of Minneapolis, and my father lives and works in a small rural town outside Oklahoma City with his sister (my aunt) and her husband. And lastly, my paternal grandparents, who have lived with my family for nearly ten years, relocated to a Saint Paul suburb to live with my father’s brother (my uncle), his wife, and their two small children, while also traveling back and forth between their other adult children’s homes both in Minnesota and Oklahoma. In these times, we are creating family and community models of care and security for our complex family structure that reject the impulses of individualism and neoliberal self-care management.² In another instance of community care, the Hmong Medical Association created videos in the Hmong language to educate elders about the COVID pandemic and the social distancing mandates of the state while collaborating with a Hmong American tailor shop, City Tailor, to hand-sew and distribute over eight hundred protective

masks to elder care centers and community clinics across the Twin Cities metropolitan area. In a world where hegemonic structures of knowledge around health and disease prevention preclude refugee and immigrant communities of color from accessing life-saving medical knowledge and social care, Hmong Americans are enacting forms of radical care that uplifts and ensures the collective survival.³

Second, there needs to be conjoined intellectual and activist efforts to situate racism both within the physical violence of everyday culture and within public policies in order to facilitate comparative and intersectional organizing. Such connective formulation enables an intersectional approach to anti-racist activism and links the racist and xenophobic discourses of the infectious and diseased “Other” with the undeserving noncitizen deportable subject. Various examples are seen in the activist efforts of ReleaseMN8, a campaign to stop the unjust deportations of eight Cambodian Americans, which has since become a national model for anti-deportation activism. A coalition of Southeast Asian American community organizations, including ReleaseMN8, rallied in solidarity with Hmong Americans opposing President Trump’s negotiations with Laos on the deportation of Hmong. ReleaseMN8 has since assembled the *Southeast Asian American Solidarity Toolkit: A Guide to Resisting Deportations and Detentions from the #ReleaseMN8 Campaign* to assist vulnerable communities in combating immigration injustice and to prevent families from being broken apart by the White supremacist U.S. immigration apparatus. Freedom Inc., a Hmong American, Black, and queer social justice organization additionally has organized against unjust deportations of Southeast Asian Americans for nearly a decade. In the weeks in which the media comprehensively covered the deportation negotiations against Hmong in the United States, activists from Freedom Inc. organized to set up legal clinics for those affected by unjust deportations, just as they have for issues such as domestic violence. Thus, the inhumanity of family separation within deportations is directly relational to the strict social distancing mandates that were implemented in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak in that both scenarios work, explicitly or implicitly, to alienate marginalized communities.

Our collective survival as Hmong Americans, and as Southeast Asian Americans and Asian Americans more broadly, depends on systems of mutual aid that take into account the everyday lived experiences of the most vulnerable within our society.⁴ Hmong Americans have, since the beginning of our resettlement in the 1970s and up to the 2020s, relied on one another to care for our communities in times of crisis. Hmong American health and healing systems rely not on neoliberal forms of self-sufficiency, personal responsibility, or state-based care, but on consulta-

tion with elders and extended-family members in order to reconcile the arbitrary boundaries of both physical and spiritual health. The COVID-19 pandemic is killing us physically, but racism is also killing us spiritually. As news of the pandemic stretched across the United States, my mother tied two sets of black, green, and red fabric on our doors to protect our family from malevolent spiritual energies. A shaman had advised all families to immediately safeguard the home in order to negate the physical and spiritual deaths imminent amidst the global pandemic. In profound ways, Hmong ontologies of health have anticipated that physical welfare always entails affective, emotional, and spiritual welfare. Ultimately, we need to (re)create models of care that resist historical erasure as evidenced by the two hate notes that we received, while complicating the social distancing orders and deportation negotiations that inadvertently or otherwise work to disintegrate non-nuclear, nontraditional, and nonnormative families in ways that foster physical and spiritual well-being.

Notes

1. Maya Rao, "Asian Americans in Minnesota Face Insults, Hostility During Virus Outbreak," *Star Tribune*, March 28, 2020. <https://www.startribune.com/local-asian-americans-face-insults-hostility/569178982>.
2. Jade Begay, "Decolonizing Community Care in Response to COVID-19," *NDN Collective*, March 13, 2020. <https://ndncollective.org/indigenizing-and-decolonizing-community-care-in-response-to-covid-19>.
3. Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese, "Radical Care: Survival Strategies for Uncertain Times," *Social Text* 38, no. 1 (March 2020): 5.
4. Dean Spade, "Solidarity Not Charity: Mutual Aid for Mobilization and Survival," *Social Text* 38, no. 1 (2020): 134–39.