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The American Dream or the American Nightmare: Hmong Studies at PWIs

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Abstract

How does an American Dream turn into an American Nightmare? The American Dream that education is a vehicle for everyone to gain upward social mobility and an opportunity to produce well-rounded citizens has not always been inclusive. Americans who dream of a more inclusive world envision an education system that includes Ethnic Studies curricula, the teaching of race, power, and inequality. This more inclusive American Dream quickly turned into a nightmare where Americans must confront racism and systemic oppression. Similarly, Hmong Studies programs at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) are part of this Ethnic Studies legacy of student activism, inheriting the tensions of achieving the American Dream and living the American Nightmare. This autoethnographic and self-reflexive paper draws on the reflections of three professors of Hmong Studies at PWIs to explore the political context that shaped their journey, pedagogical approaches, and development of courses and programs. This paper (a) advances critical pedagogies of Ethnic Studies by engaging with educator-scholars working at PWIs, and (b) offers examples that illuminate both the joys and struggles of teaching in white-dominant spaces.

Keywords: Hmong Studies, , Ethnic Studies, Pedagogy, PWI

Young people go to college to get an education, advance in their careers, and achieve the American Dream, but wait, why are they required to learn about race? For many, education is a vehicle to achieving the American Dream—the idea that hard work and grit can lead to a thriving career, homeownership, and upward social mobility. In particular, a liberal arts education is part of becoming well-rounded citizens who can represent and protect American freedom, liberty, and justice.

Ethnic Studies and learning about race, power, and marginalized histories became part of public education and the American Dream during the civil rights era. Seeing Ethnic Studies as a civil right, students at San Francisco State College held the longest student strike in 1968, leading to the creation of the first Ethnic Studies programs (Umemoto, 1989). The continued activism from students and the community responding to institutional racism has led to the national upscaling of Ethnic Studies programs. This growth has enraged critics to accuse public education of promoting anti-American and divisive curricula. Ethnic Studies requirements at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) name race as part of the content, but those courses continue to be advertised as cultural appreciation and learning about differences. This political machination has shaped how the

increased demands for Ethnic Studies requirements are implemented amid recent disinvestments in diversity, equity, and inclusion by the U.S. Department of Education.

This autoethnographic and self-reflexive paper draws on the reflections of three interdisciplinary professors of HMoob[29] Studies at PWIs as an entry point for examining the political context that shaped their journeys, their pedagogical approaches, and the development of HMoob Studies courses and programs. Specifically, this paper explores: What are the joys (dreams) and challenges (nightmares) of teaching HMoob-related curricula at a PWI? How do we decenter the colonial, white gaze in HMoob Studies? This paper discusses the struggles of teaching and sustaining such courses/programs. Bringing HMoob Studies into critical Ethnic Studies, we offer reflections for developing curriculum and pedagogy at PWIs from a critical HMoob Studies perspective.

Achieving Our American Dream

The United States of America is depicted as a land of opportunity, where any dream can become a reality despite one's upbringing and socioeconomic status. This American Dream operates as a vehicle for hope against the institutional, structural, and societal inequalities and inequities that exist in the United States. This idea of the American Dream is "a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement . . . regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position" (Adams, 1931, pp. 214–215).

This idea constructs the United States as a land of opportunity that assumes "everyone" includes all Americans, without interrogating who is part of the "everyone." In reality, the American Dream and its promise of success and upward mobility is a façade because the concept of "everyone" has only applied to white, cisgender people—what Lipsitz calls America's historical investment in whiteness (2006). Scholars have argued that as a nation, America was built at the expense of exploitation and violence against slaves (Coates, 2016; Morgan, 1975), Indigenous peoples (Blackhawk, 2006; Reséndez, 2017; Tuck, 2018), im/migrants (Jung, 2006; Ngai, 2004), women (Glenn, 2002; Luibhéid, 2002), and queer people (Bronski, 2012; Puar, 2018). Schools have played a role in erasing Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) knowledge, constructing racially minoritized students as intellectually inferior, and reinforcing the exclusion of women and queer people (Ewing, 2025; Grande, 2018; Grosfoguel, 2013; Oakes et al., 2018; Wilder, 2014). Despite a history of exclusionary policies and practices, schools continue to be seen as a vehicle to achieve the American Dream. The paradox of this exclusion is that it gave birth to the dream of Ethnic Studies, which demanded curricular and institutional inclusion.

For Americans who desire a more inclusive nation, their American Dream might start with the Third World Liberation Front, which challenged Eurocentric U.S. curriculum and gave birth to the Ethnic Studies Movement. Ethnic Studies *is* an American Dream that centers on the history, experience, knowledge, and resilience of BIPOC communities in the United States. Additionally, Ethnic Studies calls for an examination of power dynamics that shape and reproduce inequities through race, class, gender andcolonialism at the structural, institutional, cultural, and societal level. Through understanding these power structures and impacts, students and communities can transform our

[29] We recognize there are many spellings for the group commonly written in English as "Hmong" or "Mong." We utilize different spellings of this group name to represent various dialects, linguistic expression, and pronunciation such as Mong, Moob, Hmoob, HMoob, MHoob, etc. (Mouavangsou, 2024).

society to be more equitable. The dream for Ethnic Studies led to the requirement of Ethnic Studies in K-12 schools in states such as California, Minnesota, Connecticut, Illinois, Oregon, and Washington, *and* across many educational levels such as community colleges and state colleges in California. These are evidence of the Ethnic Studies American Dream becoming a reality.

Intertwined within are dreams for Hmong Studies. In recent decades, student and community activism for Ethnic Studies, especially Hmong/HMoob-specific curricula in states with high concentrations of HMoob population (i.e., California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin), has led to the establishment of Hmong Studies programs. These efforts are reflected by networks of HMoob community-based charter schools, growing numbers of HMoob bilingual and heritage language schools and programs, expanding offerings of study in higher education, and organized policy change efforts to develop teacher preparation programs and graduation requirements across multiple states. Thus, HMoob Studies is a product of Ethnic Studies. We, the Hmong Studies professors, are the dreamers of this American Dream.

As dreamers, we each envisioned a place for HMoob Studies. In the following section, we share how our American Dreams—one that lives out Ethnic Studies dreams as part of the American Dream—led us to where we are now as tenure-track faculty in Hmong Studies programs. Kaozong began with the absence of HMoob Studies which served as her catalyst to hope and dream for HMoob Studies. Similarly, the silencing of HMoob in history and the accusation that HMoob had no history propelled Chong to pursue her PhD in History and become a tenure-track faculty of Hmong Studies. For Choua, her desire to learn and become a HMoob Studies expert is to counter the racist stereotypes about HMoob people. Our dreams were born from our experiences with erasure and how in these moments of despair, we dared to include Ethnic Studies as part of our American Dreams. As a result, we changed the definition of who is an American and created a more inclusive version of the American Dream.

Kaozong's Dream(ing) of Hmong Studies

As a Moob American, child of refugees, and a recipient of our U.S. public school system in California, I can remember going to school and wishing that there were Hmong Studies courses at my high school and universities. When I was a graduate student at the University of California, Davis, I had an opportunity to teach a course of my choosing and I chose to teach a Hmong American Experience course—the first that was officially offered through the Asian American Studies Department and where students could earn a letter grade. To me, this course legitimized Hmong history and experiences within the university—it was the first time that Hmong experience, knowledge, and history was at the forefront of students' learning. This course, while focusing on Hmong American experiences, was validating for Hmong students and for non-Hmong students alike, providing a window to understand Hmong history and experiences through a Hmong lens that builds a community solidarity across shared experiences and differences.

I could not have imagined that many years down the road, I would become an Assistant Professor of Critical Hmong Studies (CHS) at the University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire, teaching the very classes I wished I had taken. Coming into this position was truly an honor and privilege because I knew about the legacy of students, staff, faculty, and the respective Eau Claire community at large who advocated and fought for Hmong Studies to be on this campus. These efforts led to the hiring of the

first CHS tenure-track professor in 2017—and where I (who was a graduate student then), saw that dreams can become a reality: An American dream to have a tenure track faculty and a program specific to Hmong Studies in higher education.

Becoming Hmong Studies as Chong's Dream

When I was younger, someone told me that Hmong people had no history because our history was not documented. This contradicted what I knew about my family and people. My parents told me that we came to the U.S. as refugees because of the Vietnam War conflict in Southeast Asia. How can my family, and Hmong people, not have any history when I was the evidence of U.S. military failure in Southeast Asia? I was furthermore confused when there was no mention of Hmong when we got to the Vietnam War unit in my AP U.S. history class. I remember thinking to myself, how could this be? AP U.S. history was supposed to be the most advanced class and even there, Hmong was absent.

I carried these questions with me into college where I also found no answers. The absence of Hmong continued in the Asian American Studies and Southeast Asian Studies courses I took. In the end, the fight for curriculum inclusion came from the labor and love of myself and other Hmong students. I joined the Hmong student organization at the University of California, Los Angeles and we decided that advocating for Hmong Studies was a priority. Instead of culture shows, we wrote grants to host conferences that highlighted Hmong scholars and their work. I developed my first Hmong Studies course syllabus and reader with two other Hmong peers to show there was enough scholarship to be included in courses.

All these experiences propelled me to pursue a PhD in History. I specifically chose History because of the comment that Hmong people had no history because it was not in any books. I wanted the authority of the PhD to be able to say that Hmong people do have history and I'm writing it. I currently hold one of a handful of Hmong Studies faculty positions in the U.S.—evidence that Hmong Studies dreams do come true.

Becoming HMoob Experts as Choua's American Dream

"Do Hmong people eat cats and dogs?" asked an audience member. I remember holding onto that mic in the middle of the high school auditorium stage, feeling stunned by the words. I swore silently at the atrocities that anyone would accuse HMoob people of such things. "No," I answered rather quickly, trying to move on from this topic as fast as possible. *People are just ignorant because they have never been taught this*, I reasoned with myself. *Not everyone knows that HMoob people are refugees from Southeast Asia, and they can be less judgmental if they had an opportunity to learn about us*. What I did not know as a young high schooler is that the majority of people were not actually interested in seeing HMoob people as part of the American Dream.

Non-HMoob people have always come to HMoob public events expecting HMoob people to perform, teach, and open the doors of our culture to them. However, these individuals have assumed little to no responsibility for learning about HMoob people or taking accountability for their racist fascination. HMoob people are expected to just give free labor and free history lessons, and to offer emotional compassion because non-HMoob people are finally "interested" in us. I used to think that

I should be grateful to have an opportunity to hold the microphone and share the little that I know about HMoob people with the public. It became clear after a few runs on the public stage that the audience was only interested in using me as a quick, cheap, watered-down cultural window.

Experiences like these have led me to dream about having the chance to be the learner of my history rather than the teacher. I wanted space to learn about my history and culture without having to be the one to teach others about my people when I don't even know about us. I studied really hard to prove that I have enough evidence, so that I can be a researcher and a doctor. I wanted to show that I am a legitimate source of knowledge production, that I have spoken with enough people, and I have observed enough examples. I can run numbers and data to illustrate a "truth" worthy of telling the world about. After all of this, the doctoral degree and everything, I have finally proven that I can be a professor. I have enough content and authority to call myself an expert who can teach this topic. I have achieved my American Dream, one where HMoob people are finally included.

I remember feeling excitement and anxiety as I stood in front of class on the first day of teaching a Hmong Studies class. I had carefully designed the course syllabus, reviewed my notes, and prepared my mind to create the best classroom environment that I could. The dream had finally arrived. I was going to be able to hold space for people to critically learn and reflect on their relationship to HMoob people. All students, especially HMoob American undergraduates, were excited that we were finally spending longer than one lecture on HMoob people. Each semester, I have students share about how proud they are to be in community and to create community on campus through the class. Several students testified on student evaluations that they felt seen, affirmed, and "the only class they are excited to come to." I am proud to be creating and holding space for marginalized students on PWI campuses to be themselves. I still hold onto these joys as much as possible.

American Nightmares Haunt Us All

Our American Dream to dismantle systemic oppression and decolonize our classrooms quickly turns into an American Nightmare that challenges the façade of inclusivity and a post-racial society. America has not become more inclusive and continues to cling onto its historical past of racism, colonialism, and cisheteropatriarchal sexism. The upscaling of Ethnic Studies across the nation means Americans have to contend with its oppressive past. Tintiangco-Cubales and her colleagues (2019) wrote that strong Ethnic Studies teachers and programs help "students critique structures of racism and its personal and social impact, as well as challenge oppressive conditions" (p. 21). Moreover, Ethnic Studies pedagogy of anticolonial education, developing sociopolitical consciousness, and enacting institutional changes must reflect the needs of the community. Predominantly white communities, like all others, need Ethnic Studies to know about their particular history, culture, relationships, and futures related to colonial conquest, racial violence, and systemic oppression (Greenberg; 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2010; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). The particularity of predominantly white communities might mean that the community may not be ready to name race and talk about racism directly.

With the growing interest in teaching and learning HMoob histories, experiences, and alternative forms of knowledge production, HMoob Studies programs at PWIs are quickly swept into the nation's machinations to superficially embrace cultural appreciation and celebrate diversity (Hoffman, 1996; May & Sleeter, 2010; Meyer & Rhoades, 2006). Students enter HMoob Studies classrooms expecting

to develop "HMoob cultural appreciation," but they find themselves facing the uncomfortable reality that the U.S. is a racialized empire. In this "discovery," students, specifically white students, often question, minimize, and undermine Ethnic Studies theories and research as opinions of extreme, leftist political agendas. PWI communities do not have the tools to support Ethnic Studies educators or their students to truly engage in transformative changes. As Hmong Studies professors at PWIs, this task proves challenging because we are racialized and tokenized. Our academic freedom, professorial authority, and scholarly expertise are often minimized and ignored. We also must balance how we teach about whiteness with enough compassion for white students and prevent further racial violence towards students of color. This balancing act is how the three of us arrived at the American Nightmare.

Our American Nightmares detail our experiences of practicing and living the ethos and values of Ethnic Studies. While we embraced our position and responsibilities of teaching to the needs of our community, we also engaged in the Ethnic Studies struggle to implement institutional changes. In this section, we each share a story about the specificity of our nightmares. Kaozong reflects on the contradictions of inclusivity at PWIs, critiquing how such institutions tokenize their faculty, mark them as the racialized Other, and sideline Ethnic Studies programs to the periphery. Expanding on how institutions perpetuate racism, Chong's student evaluations and tenure dossier demonstrate that PWIs are quick to utilize anonymity to seclude racist students and racism as isolated events. Even when perpetrators can be identified, such as in Choua's case, PWIs still insist on protecting whiteness. In navigating these American nightmares, our testimonios point to the struggles to implement Ethnic Studies at PWIs and the consequences we each faced personally. Ethnic Studies pedagogy cannot exclusively stay in the classroom, and we argue that part of eradicating the American Nightmare means we are burdened to teach our colleagues, university, and campus community how to be in community with the faculty they hired.

Façade of Inclusivity: The One and Only (Kaozong)

When I developed and taught a specialized course on Hmong American Experience in 2015 as a graduate student, I thought my biggest challenge was finding materials to teach the course. I was not concerned about who my students were, but what if there were not enough "resources" out there to teach this course. At that time, there were no professors in my university who specialized in Hmong Studies, nor was there anyone who had ever taught such a course before (there still isn't). All the readings, assignments, and overall course design were done by me. However, what I have come to realize many years later, as a first-year faculty and the one who leads the Critical Hmong Studies (CHS) certificate Program is that my concern early on was only a small taste of the institutional nightmare.

I recalled when I interviewed for this position, I was asked by the search committee what my vision was for the CHS program. I had told them that I wanted to create another tenure-track line for this program because one person cannot sustain it. There needs to be more than one. While I did get the position, I quickly recognized that my vision for the sustainment of the program was far-fetched. My university was content with having one person fulfill the position; after all, my position and this program were created as a result of racist incidents on campus. My position and this program came after students publicly confronted the university for their lack of accountability, and thus,

maintaining this program is a way to continue that harmony and façade of inclusivity . . . but for how long?

> The existence of The One allows the university to maintain the status quo, to continue to operate in harmony with whiteness while saving face publicly. The One is the perfect representation of the deferred project of inclusion, a project we know is not about justice or equity. . . . To be the One is behaving, obeying the rules of whiteness, maintaining the status quo, and above all, being grateful. (García-Peña, 2022, p. 18)

Within the first few weeks into the fall semester, I would come to understand what *the one* means. I had many encounters with faculty and staff, and although I did not know who they were, they knew who I was. I also received invitations and was sought out to partake in Hmong specific events that were university-wide related but also community events. It became apparent to me that as *the one*, I had become very visible compared to many of my first-year faculty colleagues. The hypervisibility of my presence and the anonymity of these encounters speaks to the cloak of inclusivity and representation. My position is symbolic of the university's continued commitment to inclusivity and a reminder that they have moved on since those racist incidents from the past . . . but have they really?

Being *the one,* and also *the only* is not something to be grateful for. Rather, *the one and only* foreshadows unsustainability with little room for program development and growth. I was operating in survival mode—to survive the first semester of teaching, to acclimate to this new university, climate, and community—miles and miles away from the community where I came from. I was intentional in collaborating with the Hmong Student Association on campus and to create events that would garner more interest in CHS. All of these were rewarding and worthwhile, but it was challenging to be one person. I grappled with the demands of a high teaching load, in addition to contributing to research and service—but most importantly the hopes and dreams of those who saw me in this position.

I recognized that the CHS program will continue to be marginal at my university, despite the continued large enrollment of students in CHS courses each semester. I also recognized this marginalization at my department's awards banquet, where CHS student recipients were awarded at the very end instead of with the other programs' student recipients—almost like a stepchild of the family. However, what continues to ground me is what has sustained my people for centuries, which is our community. Unlike the whiteness of institutions where it demands for One, I leaned into my network of Hmong sister scholars, who like me are navigating these spaces as professors in predominately white institutions. Together, Dr. Chong Moua and Dr. Choua Xiong are a support system for me to reflect and strategize—all while we were still dreaming of more CHS pipelines across many universities. But the truth is, these positions can be created, but can they be sustained? Having one individual hold down the fort as the one and only is not doable—burn out is real—but also the bandwidth to expand and create becomes thinner and as faculty, we get pulled in many directions. After all, we, too, are only human. Professionally, we may be "okay" but personally, our mental health, our well-being are not okay. Eventually, these will collide and impact how we teach, our ability to imagine and grow, and most importantly, the sustainability of us, as faculty within these predominantly white spaces.

> The only real reason it was the most helpful because we all shared the same feeling of confusion, the notes weren't very helpful and can be taken out of context so it was up to us students to interpret it the best we could. The teacher is nice but when it comes to a class like this where note taking is the most important aspect it feels almost pointless when its sometimes so hard to understand what I am writing down when I forget the context later down the line. Thank you and fuck off.
> – Anonymous student evaluation, Fall 2023

"Thank you and fuck off" was how a student ended their anonymous class evaluation for my Introduction to Hmong American Studies class in fall 2023. The rest of the evaluation was the student complaining how they felt confused by the class materials and lectures and how notetaking was "pointless" because "sometimes" it was "so hard to understand what I'm writing down." All of this was coded language for racism. They were upset that they had to learn about a different group of people's history, coming from a different part of the world, with names that they were not familiar with. They were upset that they had to take notes about things they did not know and clearly were not willing to learn. Saying the class content is hard to understand is the equivalent of saying a non-white person's English is hard to understand.

That was my first semester in my first tenure-track job as assistant professor of Hmong Studies and history at a PWI. I was, however, not new to teaching nor to teaching at a PWI. In fact, I had been teaching a version of that class since I was a graduate student at a nearby PWI. I was used to anonymous student evaluations and aware that young-presenting women of color in the classroom received unfair comments. I certainly have received my fair share of critical feedback from students about the amount of reading assigned, the clarity of guidelines about assignments, the clarity of class expectations—and I accept these as part of the job of being an educator.

When I read this evaluation, however, I was shocked, not only by the unmistakable vehemence of the curse words the student used but also because their comments about the class and my teaching were coded language for racist microaggression. This evaluation was the first time I had ever had a student cuss at me—not a single student prior to this had used such violent words in an evaluation. The fact that this happened in a Hmong Studies class and the fact that I am a woman faculty of color who is young presenting are not coincidences. What made this evaluation more insidious was the veiled misogyny, evidenced by the student's comment of "the teacher is nice but," and the fact that it was anonymous.

These violent words stayed with me long after I read them. I deliberately included this evaluation in my first tenure and promotion renewal file. I wanted to make sure I documented this so that the institution knows what happened—that it doesn't get lost and dismissed in the graveyard of anonymous student evaluations. The response from my PWI institution, in many ways, mirrored the anonymity of the student's racist comments. In their letters of support for my renewal, institutional stakeholders at different levels expressed outrage discursively but passed around the responsibility of support. My tenure department framed that incident under the overarching umbrella of me going through the challenges of being a new faculty. The department did acknowledge there was a lack of support and intended to take steps to improve mentoring. At the college level, that committee urged

the department to provide appropriate support for a faculty member at the beginning of their academic career. The dean agreed with the previous suggestions and noted that it was the practice of the college for a mentor to be assigned from the department and the college. Last, the provost's review also urged the department to ensure that I have a strong mentor in place.

The nightmare of teaching Hmong Studies at a PWI for me is the anonymity of the racism I experienced and the anonymity of the response from the institution. Despite passing my first renewal with unanimous votes, there has been little communication and progress in terms of providing me more support at the department and college level. The university is undergoing changes and challenges (like many others in the current context of disinvestment in higher education and attacks on DEI) and perhaps addressing the racist experience of one faculty member is not a priority. Part of the nightmare is also the punting of who should respond and provide support for faculty like me. Until this week, I had not talked to anyone about this incident since turning in my renewal dossier. A colleague, who had read my renewal file and was disheartened about the racist student evaluation, asked if someone had talked to me about it recently. My answer was no. I had forgotten about the evaluation until that conversation. Now, it will linger until I can forget it again.

Nightmare as Pedagogy (Choua)

In 2022, a white male undergraduate accused me: "My example [of interpersonal racism] is going to be Dr. Choua P. Xiong. . . . You have taken what is supposed to be an informative subject diving into the Asian American culture and have corrupted it with your prejudice bigot views." He wrote this as his answer to an exam question about the different levels of racism for an online, asynchronous class on Asian American Studies. This moment was one of my worst nightmares as an instructor of color who explicitly teaches about race at a PWI. Learning about race and racialization is central in all my introductory courses. I believe that students need to understand racism before they can appreciate "culture" and ethnic diversity.

Unfortunately, my dreams of finally teaching students about the specificity of HMoob people through a critical race and Ethnic Studies lens meant that I have to also navigate these nightmares. This student was interested in this course because he wanted to learn about "Asian American culture," but he was not expecting the course to focus heavily on race. He was not ready to face the fact that the entire category of "Asian American" is a racial category and the notion of "culture" is actually about how an entire group of people has been racialized. I knew students were going to resist, but I was not prepared for such direct hostility. Perhaps this type of accusation was possible because it was online and the exam answers were private—only between the student and me, the professor. Students are usually not as confrontational in-person, but this platform enables students to feel emboldened to be hostile. What was most disappointing was not this student's racism, but the lack of support from the institution. Surely, this type of hostility cannot be one that I take up alone as an instructor hired to teach Ethnic Studies for this university.

My colleagues, department chair, and dean were upset that I was encountering racism on our "nice, progressive campus." "This is unlike our students," they promised. "Let's schedule a meeting with this student." During our meeting, they let this student dismiss my expertise and reduced the racial harm that he committed to "ad hominem" behaviors. No one actually addressed how these are repeated acts of racism, nor did they offer any physical protection for me on campus. Originally, they

wanted me to invite this student in for an in-person meeting. I declined because I did not feel safe to let this racist student know how I look in-person. He already knows where my office is and could probably find me. This student had expressed publicly on the discussion boards that the increase of anti-Asian hate crimes during the COVID-19 pandemic "was just a joke," and Vincent Chin's death was not due to anti-Asian hate or racial targeting. I was afraid of this student tracking me in person, and I started changing my routes to school, where I parked, and how often I am in the office. The administrators told me to call campus police if I see anything strange, but they failed to recognize that campus police often questioned if I am even a professor. This university hired me to teach this subject, but yet, the people who are supposed to support and protect my safety suddenly turned me into a nuisance. Administrators started marking me as a problem and troublemaker because they did not have adequate solutions for racist institutional practices.

I am reminded that my existence as an Ethnic Studies professor may be a nightmare for me, but I am also a nightmare for PWIs. They want to celebrate their gestures to include me, but they also have to deal with me when I ask for my humanity and dignity. I realized that this is part of practicing Ethnic Studies pedagogy that challenges students, colleagues, and institutions to confront racism, especially when they do not want to. This student wanted to learn about "Asian American culture," and we have learned about culture. Except, the culture that we are learning about is the culture of racism. While this student did not hesitate to enact their overt racism, a large majority of students were very engaged in learning about culture not as a profound group difference, but as a collective history, past, and present structured by race. Because I am a young, female, and Asian American professor, my Ethnic Studies pedagogy at PWI will always be confrontational, questioned, and undermined. My existence has become a nightmare for PWI as Ethnic Studies programs scale up, and I have become the prime example of interpersonal racism against white fragility.

Conclusion: Ethnic Studies for the People, By the People

Our Hmong Studies dreams build upon the legacy of the student protests for Ethnic Studies in 1968. We are the intended outcomes of Ethnic Studies being the only academic field of study to come from student and community demand. Our stories and experiences, taken together, show how we as individuals have embodied the dream of Ethnic Studies. Our nightmares, however, reveal that the institution has not lived up to the dreams and demands put forth in the 1968 student strike. The main demands of BIPOC students in 1968 were to: (a) establish a School of Ethnic Studies, including a Department of Black Studies; (b) increase admissions for minority students; and (c) hire and retain faculty of color to teach these subjects (Whitson, n.d.). Their vision was forward-looking, going beyond curricular inclusion to focus on structural and institutional change that would ensure the success of Ethnic Studies as full and vibrant academic programs.

Instead of transformative institutional investment, many Ethnic Studies programs at PWIs exist on the margins in curriculum as well as physical spaces on university and college campuses. Our individual accounts of how the dream of Ethnic Studies manifested as nightmares for us reflect this. Kaozong being isolated and the "only one," Chong's experience of anonymous racist microaggression through evaluations, and Choua's hostile racist encounter with a student and then administrators reveal the gap between the dream of Ethnic Studies and the lived reality of faculty of color who teach it.

Almost 60 years later, in the wake of anti-DEI legislation at the federal and state level, the climate for Ethnic Studies is eerily a mirror of the past. Despite this, we, like the students in 1968, remain steadfast in our belief in the transformative power of education and Ethnic Studies to give people the knowledge and tools to enrich their lives and be empowered and good citizens in community with one another (see, e.g., Vang, 2025; Vue, 2021; Xiong, 2023; Xiong et al., 2019). The goal is the same, to continue to work to build Ethnic Studies programs centered on care and reciprocity—an Ethnic Studies that recognizes us and that we recognize in return (see, e.g., Vang, 2018; Vue, 2023; Vue & Mouavangsou, 2021; Xiong & Mouavangsou, 2023; Xiong-Lor, & Xiong, 2026). One that represents the lives and experiences of people we know and love (see, e.g., Lee, 2024; Lo, 2017; Moua, 2023; K. Vang, 2023; T. Vang, 2023; Yang, 2023; Yang & Cushing-Leubner, 2025). We are not anonymous. We have not lived anonymous lives. Our American Dream is an Ethnic Studies that isn't anonymous.

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