

Visualizing Change Through Interactive Photography: Transforming Identities, Transforming Research [\[1\]](#)

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In September of 1991 while I was still in the first critical months of establishing my credibility among the people with whom I wanted to work, two Hmong children asked me to teach them "to make pictures" after watching me photograph an ear of corn. My garden plot was adjacent to their families' plot at the Laotian Garden Farm in east Visalia, an agricultural town in California's San Joaquin Valley. My immediate "yes" flagged the beginning of an ongoing endeavor that I, very briefly, thought would be a temporary diversion from my real work: the gathering of hard data from adults. Eventually I came to understand that what happened between us -- what they learned from me and what I learned from them -- struck at the very heart of the research.

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An exhibit of their photographs called *First Works: Young Hmong American Perspectives*, which hung in a half a dozen public and private art venues, was one of the outcomes of our work together. It is not the show that I want to talk about, but rather the process that took us beyond the show. While teaching them the fundamentals of the art form, we created a dialogue that centered on photos, family, culture, community, sex and resistance. Since my research was all about identity formation and how this process is shaped by gender, generation and ethnicity, key issues to locate in both family and community were marginal but emerging voices, transforming identities and alternative ways of self representation. [\[2\]](#) It occurred to me, somewhere between the instruction, the

shooting excursions, and the analysis of proofs, that my marginal but emerging voice in the Hmong community, my transforming identity both as an anthropologist and in relationship to the children, and my changing self representations had just as much to do with our project as theirs -- a twelve year old boy's and a fifteen year old girl's.

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In my broader project I was interested in how Hmong re-create themselves as individuals, members of families and as part of an active community in a new setting. In the process I explored the forms and articulation of alternative consciousness, often called oppositional consciousness. On one level this analysis examined adults' interaction with government Refugee programs and the programs themselves. On another level I looked at how men and women, adults and children made their claims about Hmong culture differently. I had learned from theorists such as Gloria Anzaldua (1987) bell hooks (1989), historian Valerie Matsumoto (1984) and anthropologist Karen Brodtkin Sacks (1989) that most formulations of women's oppositional movement in Black, Latina, Asian and White working class communities weave notions of home, culture, community, work and identity together. Yet, identity also rides on feelings of marginality -- to one's culture, community, and often, home. I found that this idea of contradictory expressions of family, community, and culture was powerfully articulated not only by the women who talked to me but most strikingly by the confidences of their children.

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Let me first give a bit of background to our photographic project. In addition to conducting my research, I was a working photographer. I had planned to systematically record visual images from the lives of Hmong families I worked with to punctuate the text of my dissertation. After I began working with Jamie and Pang (these are pseudonyms), I essentially stopped shooting. Part of this was due to economics since I could not afford to buy film, develop it and print both my photos and theirs. And part of it was due to the images I saw on their proof sheets after just a few

months of instruction. I had tried to teach them the basics of photography--the mechanics of my old manual Nikkormat, the balance of light and shadow, the idea of framing particular shapes from the broader landscape--without telling them what to shoot and how to view the world.

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Although I knew that my influence shaped their initial shootings, two teaching methods helped to reduce my authority. First, when we shot together I encouraged them to take the camera and wander around on their own, and they did. Second, when I left town I would leave them each one of Kodak's disposable cameras with instructions to shoot their neighborhood. My thinking was that we would use the rough images from the disposables to frame the more serious black and white photographs later. It was these very fresh, intimate and compelling images, both the color and the black and white, shot mainly when I was not right there, that convinced me that their photographs reflected their culture and community in a way that mine could not. My concentration on their pictures encouraged them to focus more on photography which in turn served to intensify the interactive process.

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For Jamie and Pang our project came to be about their struggle as emerging artists that reflected their own unique young Hmong perspectives, which often clashed with those of their elders. Our ongoing dialogues became the grounds on which they tested their ideas about language, love and sex, and, for 15 year old Pang, the courage to redefine "traditional"[\[3\]](#) concepts of marriage. They both tried on aspects of their culture to check the fit, rejecting some parts while embracing others. And they both endured considerable criticism from some members of their community for hanging out so much at my place.

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When I began working with the children I had just made difficult but significant breakthroughs with my research and in the Hmong community. I had been held at a distance by all

but one influential clan leader and a small number of women. My acceptance in and my access to the community had taken a recent turn for the better. The choice to work so closely with the children, however, was viewed with a great deal of ambivalence--like most of my actions within the community. It endeared me to some. To others it confirmed suspicions that I only wanted something from them, the extreme of these sentiments being that I would eventually appropriate the family's social security benefits. The first group tended to be women, the second men.

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There are two interrelated aspects of our photo work and time together that can better explain this ambivalence in the community, and what it has to do with the bond between the children and myself. First, we became family. This kinship developed between us at a time when the integrity of the more traditional Hmong family was under continued siege -- both from external structures of power and from internal restructuring. On one front, the Laotian community was making its anger and frustration public over federally funded and county conceived and administered Refugee Employment Programs that misrepresented Laotian families and their needs.[{4}](#) This in turn created pervasive images of Laotian people as not only unskilled but unwilling to work that added to the climate of ill will toward them and to immigrants in general.[{5}](#)

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On another front, Hmong women were actively redefining themselves, publicly rejecting earlier images put forth about them by Hmong leaders as only "housewives"[{6}](#) and as uninterested in community politics--images that were translated into policy decisions and incorporated into the body of Refugee Programs. Different from the men in their community activism, Hmong women sought assistance from women in other Laotian ethnic groups and from a few non-Asian women, including myself, who worked closely with the refugee communities. The third most intimate and contradictory front was located in the home. The primary agents of change there were clearly women and children.

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The critical battles being fought within Hmong families like Jamie and Pang's, were about men's, women's and children's place in their family and community. A brief sketch of the kinds of political and personal restructuring taking place in Visalia illustrates the profound nature of the changes. Male led hierarchical structures of authority were being undermined and challenged on both communal and familial levels: exclusive men's organizations were folding due to internal divisiveness and external manipulation by refugee programs designed to aid such groups; a Laotian woman-led organization began to transform the meanings of leadership and call for programs that are informed by and meet the needs of women and children in the community (Bays 1996); some women began expressing their unhappiness as second wives while many young girls began to reject the notion outright; and through it all, adolescent girls and boys busily reworked the culture of their parents--improvised for the most part, but always filtered through the regional multi-ethnic, multi-mediaed, rocked, rapped and hip-hopped kid culture that they were also busy shaping.

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This last phenomenon has much to do with the second characteristic that marked the relationship between myself and Jamie and Pang. My apartment became a safe place for, among other things, free speech. I admit to some discomfort over the kinds of discourse they wanted to engage in. It was not the content, but rather I knew that their topics of choice were forbidden in front of their parents. So, at first I would say things like, "what would your father do if he heard you talk that way?" We were around each other too much for me to keep up that line of inquiry. More to the point, it was rhetorical and useless since I was only trying to erect some kind of buffer zone between myself and them from the possible onslaught of criticism that would come to both of us from this situation. The topics they reveled in discussing, of course, concerned their budding sexuality, love, marriage and gendered roles and power distinctions. By turns, the children challenged the generation of their parent's culture, and, alternately, used it. What I saw in these debates was, again, a struggle over their place in family, culture and

community. This is also what I saw in their photos. Jamie's passion for spirited and often humorous portraits of children gave way to a series of solemn self-portraits and Pang challenged expectations of obedient Hmong girls by capturing men and older boys -- on film.

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Our interactive photography project provided a method for dealing with what critical and feminist anthropologists have struggled to change in the ethnographic process. These are the grounds of language and representation, hierarchical structures and relationships, objectivist pretensions of traditional anthropological discourse, and inflexible notions of the observer and observed (Caplan 1988; Strathern 1987; Zavella 1993). At the same time, it was also the work with the children that pointed to the inherent difficulties of turning such comfortable ethnographic traditions on their heads. Once relations had changed and barriers broke down, I entered into a deeply personal realm of interaction that no anthropological text even hinted at how I might proceed. My work tools then came from my experience as a mother, from negotiating skills learned in a long, successful and cooperative marriage and as acting mediator in the large dysfunctional family of my birth, and from my working class upbringing.

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Analysis of proof sheets and photographs often amounted to discussions over image content and intent. Just as often the process initiated talk around something their cameras had not focused on but was nevertheless on their minds. What was on their minds were weighty issues that tested the bounds of my objectivity. Jimmy was drifting into gangdom. Pang's friends were running away and could I hide them out? Other friends told me of molestations and beatings, and where could a girl go for an abortion? Besides my teaching duties, my responsibilities as an ethnologist were stretched to psychologist/counselor/motherer.

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Pang's year long resistance to the pursuit of an older,

powerful man who wanted her as his second wife, encapsulated both the kinds of familial and communal changes taking place, and the painful reflections of an anthropologist trying to do the right thing. Pang's lone and steadfast position at once revealed the complexities of these cultural transformations, obliterated any vestige of my objective positioning, and sealed my own reputation, in the eyes of some, as an interloper in the affairs of Hmong people. At first, when Pang came to me for support, I went to my Hmong women and men friends seeking their advice on how to proceed. I needed their help; what should Pang do? Strategies were offered up, none of which worked. I backed Pang in her year long effort by "standing" [{7}](#) with her. Yet, while I feel that I could have done more in her defense, there were rumors that I had gone too far. Even Jamie told Pang that her behavior was disrespectful to her elders. And after almost a year of respectfully taking my cues from Hmong men and women, in this instance I was, as Jamie told me, "diss'in us."

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There is, however, good reason why I was not shunned by the community. First, people were already divided on this issue broadly by gender and generation. Even these divisions were not absolute but suggested nuanced complexities. The woman in her mid twenties who offered Pang several strategic behavioral alternatives to deal with her suitor is a conflicted second wife herself. Second, my investigation of Refugee Programs concurred with and put a factual face on Hmong complaints about the ineffectiveness and misguided implementation of these programs in Tulare County. My findings were discussed in public forums with both Laotian men and women and government administrators present. Third, I wrote grants for the Laotian women's organization, that had been earlier criticized by Lao Family (in the valley, an exclusive men's organization), but that began to create programs that served the entire community. Hmong women leaders had won the respect of most of the community. Eventually, even Lao Family invited them to share office space. So, I was viewed with ambivalence, but so were Jamie and Pang, the women who worked to alter conditions, and ultimately, the suitor who sought to take a girl against her will.

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It should be clear that the photo project was the catalyst for the dialogues that formed our often difficult but loving relationship. I learned to expect the unexpected; that however much I planned my field research, all the interesting stuff happened in the margins of the unplanned, and that I should go with it. The challenges by women and children, especially, ("Will you be here for us two years from now or will you stop when you become a professor or whatever you go on to be"?) crucially constructed both my research questions once I was in Visalia and the way in which I went about doing my research. I was held accountable almost immediately for my actions and writings. Through interactive photography I was able to witness more clearly ongoing cultural, political and generational struggles where meanings of ethnic and gender identities are daily challenged and transformed. More important, it was a way in which the three of us aided one another with our awkward and emerging voices. Jamie started coming back around when Pang's pursuer condemned their photographs as "a waste of time." A nerve had been hit, now Jamie had something to fight for.

Endnotes

1. A version of this paper was first presented at the 1993 American Anthropological Association meetings in Washington, D.C. The invited session was called; *The Personal Impact of Refugee Research: Transforming Identities, Transforming Research*. [\[Return to text\]](#)

2. My dissertation, *Cultural Politics and Identity Formation In a San Joaquin Valley Hmong Community*, published in 1994 at UCLA, was based on research conducted in Visalia, California from 1990 through 1993. I continue working with women in the area as a grant writer for the Asian American Women's Advancement Coalition, a Laotian woman led non-profit that creates social and educational programs for women, children and men in the Visalia Laotian community. [\[Return to text\]](#)

3. Dia Cha and Jacquelyn Chagnon (1993:25) came to question the notion of "tradition" in their analysis of "cultural preservation" policies in refugee camps that tended to "maintain inequities and hierarchies and repress the non-dominant group." I also came to question the meaning of the term "traditional" as it was articulated by some leaders in the Hmong community, especially as it relates to the marriages of girls to older men. Contrary to men's claims that the marriage of eleven and twelve year old girls is traditional, I could not validate it through interviews with Hmong women or the literature that discusses Hmong marriage in Laos (Donnelly 1989:98; Meredith and Rowe 1986:122, for example). The common ages of marriage, fourteen through twenty, documented by these researchers and others confirm data from my interviews. Women I interviewed who married in Laos did so between the ages of seventeen and twenty-one. I found more evidence that these marriages (young girls to men twenty or older) were more often an adaptation to socioeconomic factors in San Joaquin Valley life (and possibly other areas of the U.S.) that leave men with few options. In addition, because older teenaged girls are beginning to resist men, some men seek out eleven through fourteen year old wives. Many of these younger girls lack the knowledge or strength of age and experience with which to resist an older man's will and/or their family's arrangements. [\[Return to text\]](#)

4. This was ongoing and often contentious. I worked with the Asian American Women's Advancement Coalition (AAWAC) in an attempt to make programs relevant to refugee lives. We met repeatedly with the heads of the Department of Public Social Services, Refugee Services and with members of the County Board of Supervisors to list community complaints about refugee programs and to offer advice. We wrote letters to local newspapers where they were published (see Pang Yang 1993; Bays 1994) and presented the Tulare County case at national conferences (Pajhoua Her 1995; Bays 1995) The case is simply this: Refugee Programs funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement should be "culturally and linguistically compatible" (ORR 1992) with refugee communities. In Tulare County they were not. [\[Return to text\]](#)

5. The 1990s have been a particularly anti-immigrant time in California. The passage of Proposition 187, that eliminates health care services for undocumented immigrants and seeks to bar their children from public schools, was dispiriting for both immigrants and immigrant rights activists. California "natives," many of whom are from immigrant and migrant origins, spin contradictory myths about new immigrants; they have either come for the higher welfare payments and are unwilling to work or they take jobs away from citizens. Refugees, whatever their reasons for living in this country, have not been excluded from this home grown brand of xenophobia. [\[Return to text\]](#)

6. Hmong women indeed do most of the housework, but in Visalia they also commonly work outside the home. There is a preoccupation, in welfare and workfare policy, with "heads of households" (almost always men) that ignores women's contribution to family economics and material survival. In Visalia, the primary jobs attained by workfare pay the minimum wage and hold no benefits, so it usually requires two or more paychecks per family to sustain themselves once off of welfare. Although men were targeted by government programs, the reality is that wives and older children also worked. Gail Paradise Kelly (1994:505) discusses Vietnamese immigrant women "housewives" as socialized by American institutions, teachers and refugee camp officials. "Housewife" was the required role for living in America even when most women had worked in Vietnam. All the women I interviewed who were adults in Laos worked as farmers, gardeners, and/or artisans while they also tended children, cleaned, and cooked. Typically, they worked double shifts. [\[Return to text\]](#)

7. I stayed by Pang's side when she knew he would attempt to approach her; usually in public places. I never spoke to him but he tended to avoid her when I "stood" with her. She also came to my apartment after school and just hung out -- talking, reading, taking pictures -- until she knew he had left her house where he often waited in the afternoon. Pang's mother was a friend of mine from the gardens. She told me she felt caught in the middle and did not object to my role as

Pang's friend. As it was, Pang was so distraught by the man's constant harassment that she began to fail in school and for that year, at least, she dropped out. [\[Return to text\]](#)

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