

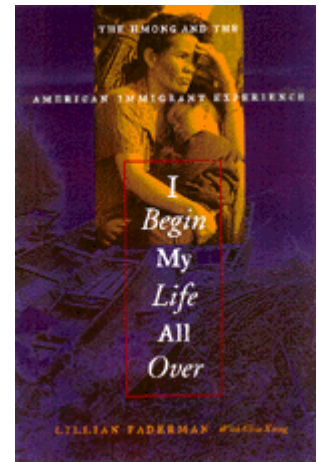
A Mosaic of Voices

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Review of *I Begin My Life All Over: The Hmong and the American Immigrant Experience* by Lillian Faderman with Ghia Xiong (Beacon Press, 262 pp., 1998, ISBN 0-8070-7234-6)

[1]

In another hundred years, as new immigrant groups arrive in the U.S., the children of today's Hmong will hopefully turn to books like *I Begin My Life All Over: The Hmong and the American Immigrant Experience* to gain a perspective on change. For readers in the present, this book provides a much-needed beginning for the integration of the Hmong story into the fabric of American culture. The Hmong experience becomes multidimensional as Lillian Faderman and her assistant-intermediary Ghia Xiong mould the narratives of thirty-six Hmong into the mosaic of the immigrant experience in America. Faderman writes in the Prologue that:



Listening to the Hmong people, young and old, who were my narrators for this oral history, I came to better understand my own experience in America. But much of what they told illuminated not just their lives and my life. They were revealing the fabric that has gone into the making of Americans: they were telling the tale of the immigrants and their children.

[2]

Faderman consciously steers away from difference and toward commonality by using the Hmong to, as the publisher's publicity letter suggests, add "a new chapter to the history of the American dream." She has taken steps to ensure that this is conveyed to the reader in both her framing of the

oral history and the organization of the text. The subtitle, "The Hmong and the American Immigrant Experience," and Faderman's preface to each thematic section readily call upon the reader to see the Hmong as participating in a universal process. Indeed, on a page preceding the dedication, Faderman has selected a quotation from a novelist who captured the experiences of earlier immigrants, Willa Cather: "There are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before." These are invitations Faderman extends which ask us to view the Hmong in a much larger context than our temporal parochialism usually allows.

[3]

Following a sufficient, though at times lacking, introduction to Hmong history and culture, the oral history excerpts are divided between two parts. The rather truncated first part, "The End of a Way of Life," offers all too brief glimpses of village life in Laos, the always troubling stories of escape, and the desolation of existence in Thai refugee camps. The real focus of the collection is "Part II: Becoming American." After a section on arrival stories, the remainder of the book is developed around the specific themes of belief and healing, intergenerational relations, gender, gangs, and "Being American."

[4]

Generally, oral histories segregate the stories of individuals into separate chapters. The coherence of *I Begin My Life All Over* is not from any one individual's story but rather from a finely woven quilt of stories and vignettes. In doing so, Faderman provides multiple perspectives on numerous themes and stages in the Hmong experience. This is done across generations and genders to provide a rich collection of voices and points of view. For example, the section titled "Being American" includes voices of teen agers as well as those of the middle-aged and elderly. The conscious selection of narrators from "older" "middle" and "younger" generations is an excellent approach to telling a story that really is different for each generation. Of particular importance is the inclusion of the voices of youth. The impulse in oral history is to document the memories of older people to

preserve their narratives. It is just as vital, I believe, to preserve the narratives and perspectives of youth.

[5]

A drawback to this approach, however, is readers will never really get to know any of the narrators. Just as one has to step back to see the whole of a mosaic, one must be mindful that *I Begin My Life All Over* consists of fragments of lives selected to tell a larger story. This is a dilemma inherent in people's history: either the individuals become lost among the patterns or the patterns become lost among the individuals. While I value the opportunity to "see" the person behind the construction of the mosaic, some will find it unsettling that the least fragmented story belongs to Lillian Faderman (through her prefaces to each section) and not her subjects.

[6]

Faderman's section prefaces serve three purposes. To provide accessibility they describe information necessary to see the narratives in their Hmong context. Faderman also uses the prefaces to make direct connections with the immigrant process in general. Most prominent, however, are the rich comparisons she draws between the Hmong and her mother's immigration from a 1930's Jewish shtetl in Latvia. This extends to Faderman's own memories as a first-generation American witnessing first-hand the negotiation of identity and bridging of "old world" and "new world" perspectives and practices. By revealing and reflecting upon her own immigrant roots, Faderman shows the connections between two seemingly disparate historical events. Her doing so is, in addition, an invitation for readers to also remember and reflect upon their own immigrant origins.

[7]

An examination of our own past reveals that despite many differences the shared experience of immigration and arrival is salient. Indeed, interaction with Hmong kindled an interest in my own ancestors. Reading Norwegian American author Ole Rolvaag's autobiographical novel *The Third Life of Per Smevik* helped me realize these quiet mountain people were

not all that much unlike my own ancestors in the kinds of struggles and experiences they were having. A hundred years separate the Norwegian and Hmong migrations to the U.S. but there is much less standing between a shared understanding of what it means to exist in the midst of change.

[8]

In a future-oriented culture, the past experiences of ancestors fade in anticipation for what is to come. A firmer grounding in our own histories as newcomers, however, would prepare us to better receive new immigrant groups. If we nonHmong will look to our own predecessors, we will find insights into what it means to leave everything behind and stake hopes to a foreign land and culture. Rolvaag described his own experience of arriving while in his early twenties. In particular, he revealed what he thought was the greatest lesson he learned as an immigrant. It came in the form of:

A feeling of utter helplessness, as if life had betrayed me. It comes from the sense of being lost in a vast alien land. In this case it was largely physical, but I soon met the spiritual phase of the same thing. The sense of being lost in an alien culture. The sense of being thrust somewhere outside the charmed circle of life. If you couldn't conquer that feeling, if you couldn't break through the magic hedge of thorns, you were lost indeed.

[9]

While I applaud Faderman for creating a text which serves to integrate the Hmong into the common American experience of immigration, let us not forget there are crucial differences between immigrants and refugees. Behind her constructed mosaic -- and at times appearing briefly from behind it -- there is the undercurrent of real uniqueness which cannot be easily comprehended by those whose ancestors primarily came to the U.S. as voluntary economic migrants. These are awesome differences shared with other involuntary immigrants (Jews fleeing Facsim, West Africans abducted for use as slaves and Native Americans pushed onto reservations). There is the loss of immediate and extended family; oftentimes harrowing escapes while being hunted followed by long periods in

detention camps which undermine traditional practices and social organization. These are not the differences from the mainstream that exoticize Hmong, rather they are those that too often go unmentioned and when mentioned will more than humanize their experience.

[10]

The trauma and loss of the refugee experience does not fit neatly into Faderman's design to incorporate the Hmong story into an American mosaic. This should not detract from the importance of highlighting what is common between Hmong and other immigrants. Nevertheless, the Hmong are an example reminding us that the immigrant experience is a varied one. With many immigrants arriving in the U.S. as the result of Cold-War and neo-colonialist foreign policies, the Hmong are part of a new common experience in American immigration history: that of the refugee.

[11]

This said, Faderman's work is necessary as a counterweight to the tendency in popular discourse toward a myopic focus on those differences which highlight Hmong uniqueness and otherness in American culture. Rarely will one find mention of Hmong without allusion to such things as the absence of a written language until the 1950's or their animist belief system. When discussion turns to Hmong living in the U.S., special attention is usually given to the technological disparity between life in rural Laos and the West. This is an incomplete noting of difference for it often ignores those differences brought about by the Hmong's refugee experience. Noting those elements which distinguish Hmong from the (fictional) mainstream is not factually wrong. However, it does overemphasize difference and creates an exotic "other." This otherness is then available to foster and reinforce both romantic and prejudicial constructions of Hmong.

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