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From Refugees to Representatives: Exploring Hmong American Political Representation

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From Refugees to Representatives: Exploring Hmong American Political Representation

Sean Mock

Advisor: Prof. Julie Dolan, Political Science

April 26, 2017

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After 14 years of advocacy at the Minnesota Legislature, the Hmong-Lao Veterans Memorial was completed in August 2016. Photo courtesy of MPR News.

Abstract

This past November, Hmong Americans saw success at the Minnesota polls and doubled their representation in the state legislature. Though the first Hmong refugees only began arriving in the United States in 1975, they have made an outsized contribution to state and local governments: to date, 32 Hmong Americans have been elected to city councils, school boards, and state legislatures nationwide. Yet the political science literature on Hmong American political representation remains limited to the first generation of Hmong Americans elected to the Minnesota Legislature. My thesis addresses this gap. By interviewing the latest generation of Hmong American politicians, non-Hmong legislators representing Hmong American constituencies, and political staffers, I uncover how Hmong Americans and their interests are represented in Minnesota politics today. I argue that Hmong American political representation is influenced by the politics of essentialism and resettlement. The politics of essentialism influence Hmong American politicians, who worry that they will be seen as ‘too Hmong’ if they stand and act for their Hmong American constituents. Likewise, the politics of resettlement encompass the Hmong American community’s growing familiarity with the political system and the patriarchal structures that still trouble Hmong American women in politics. By examining the representation of Hmong Americans and their interests in Minnesota politics today, my thesis sheds new light on representation in concept and in practice.

Acknowledgements

My thesis began two years ago as a series of conversations with Prof. Julie Dolan during her walking office hours. Circling the Leonard Center track, we discussed representation, Asian Americans in politics, and the Minnesota Legislature. Eventually, she suggested that I pursue an honors thesis. Serving as my thesis advisor, Prof. Dolan guided my project from start to finish. Her feedback was invaluable as I perused the literature, conducted interviews, and scrambled to write new chapters. My thesis would not have been possible without Prof. Dolan's guidance and mentorship.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The inspiration for my thesis came in 2015, when I was interning at Sen. Fong Hawj's office. At the time, he was the only Hmong American member of the Minnesota Legislature. One day, he told me something that I would linger in the back of my mind for the next year: "If the word 'Hmong' is in five of my bills, it's not good for me!" In other words, Sen. Hawj worried that he would be seen as 'too Hmong.' This idea prompted me to further examine Hmong American political representation. In this thesis, I search for answers to the following research question: *How are Hmong Americans and their interests represented in Minnesota politics today?* With this question in mind, I interviewed 22 Hmong American elected officials, non-Hmong politicians representing Hmong American constituencies, and political staffers. These interviews are unprecedented, as the literature on Hmong American political representation only reaches the first generation of Hmong American elected officials. I argue that Hmong American political representation in Minnesota today is influenced by the politics of essentialism and resettlement. The politics of essentialism make Hmong American politicians wary of 'standing for' and 'acting for' Hmong Americans, influencing their behavior in legislative settings and how they can represent Hmong Americans in comparison with white legislators. Likewise, as a group with only a 42-year history in America, the Hmong American community in Minnesota is still relatively unfamiliar with the political system, does not engage fully with the process of representation, and retains some of its traditional patriarchal structures.

In Chapter 2, I provide a brief history of Hmong American history and politics. Chapter 3 reviews the scholarly literature on the political representation of women, minorities, Asian Americans, and Hmong Americans. In Chapter 4, I explain how I conducted semi-structured interviews with Hmong American elected officials, non-Hmong

politicians representing Hmong American constituencies, and political staffers. Chapter 5 analyzes the politics of essentialism and its effects on symbolic, descriptive, surrogate, and substantive representation. Chapter 6 examines the politics of resettlement and its influences on the Hmong American community's internal politics, familiarity with state and local government, engagement with the process of representation, and gendered politics. Chapter 7 evaluates the influences of resettlement and essentialism in the creation of the recently-constructed Hmong-Lao Veterans Memorial. Lastly, in Chapter 8, I conclude by discussing the implications of my findings on essentialism and resettlement in Hmong American political representation today.

Chapter 2: A Brief History of Hmong America

“We don’t have a country. We are here looking for a home.”¹

The life of Kao Kalia Yang, as described in her memoir *The Latehomecomer*, is in many ways typical of the Hmong American experience. In the wake of the Secret War, where CIA-recruited Hmong guerillas fought against communist Pathet Lao fighters in Laos, Yang’s family searched for a home. Their search took them from Laos to Thailand and finally the United States. In Laos, the family foraged in the jungle to avoid capture by Pathet Lao soldiers. In Thailand, they called the confines of a refugee camp home. When the refugee camp closed, the family was sent to a transition camp, where they were shown how to turn on stoves and flush toilets in preparation for their life in America. Yang was almost seven years old when the family relocated to Minnesota in the summer of 1987.² Like the Yang family, most post-1975 Hmong refugees settled in the United States.³ In 1980, there were 47,430 Hmong Americans living in the US; a decade later, that number had jumped to 94,439.⁴ Today, the Hmong American population is estimated to be 236,434.⁵

Minnesotan life was not easy for the Yang family. Eventually, they found a home, but it was old, molding, and could barely fit them all. Every member of the family was under tremendous pressure. Yang attended school during the day and helped raise her siblings at night. Her parents worked long hours at low-paying jobs. Describing her family’s struggle, Yang writes:

¹ Kao Kalia Yang, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* (Minneapolis: [New York]: Coffee House Press ; Distributed by Consortium Book Sales & Distribution, 2008), 4.

² Yang, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*.

³ Kou Yang, “The American Experience of the Hmong: A Historical Review,” in *Diversity in Diaspora: Hmong Americans in the Twenty-First Century* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2013), 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵ Mark Edward Pfeifer, “Hmong Americans: A Demographic Portrait,” in *Diversity in Diaspora: Hmong Americans in the Twenty-First Century* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2013), 55.

And the adults kept saying: how lucky we are to be in America. I wasn't convinced. I saw them walking in snow drifts, their backs bent, their hands curled to their sides...But when I saw how hard they all worked to keep us in school, to put warm food on the old tabletops, I could not, no matter how discouraged, say: 'This is not enough.'⁶

Despite the hardships they faced in their new country, the Yang family pursued the American Dream. They became U.S. citizens. Yang was the first in her family attend college. The Yang family may still not have a country, but they found a home in Minnesota.

Poverty, homeownership, and education were the Yang family's chief concerns; they are pressing issues for the greater Hmong American community as well. Since 1990, the poverty rate among Hmong American families has dropped from 66% to 26.9%, although that number is still significantly higher than the 10.5% among all U.S. families. Likewise, the average Hmong American family's income (\$45,611) is still significantly less than the average for the U.S. population overall (\$61,082). Homeownership rates saw improvement: in 2010, 47.6% of Hmong Americans owned their own homes, compared to just 13% in 1990. Still, Hmong Americans lag behind the 65.9% homeownership rate of the entire U.S. population.⁷ Lastly, only 11.1% of Hmong Americans over 25 possess a bachelor's degree.⁸

The history of the Hmong in America may only span 42 years, but it is rich with stories of hardship and achievement. Kao Kalia Yang's story is just one of them. There is a Hmong saying on character that goes something like this: "Whether you want to eat or not, at least hold the spoon; whether you want to laugh or not, at least smile." After four decades in America, the Hmong American community continues to struggle, but also has much to smile about.

⁶ Yang, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, 178–79.

⁷ Pfeifer, "Diversity in Diaspora," 2013, 60.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

From Refugees to Representatives

Kou Yang, a professor of Asian American studies at California State University Stanislaus, divides the political history of Hmong America into three stages: first, the Refugee Years, from 1975 to 1991; second, the Turning Point, from 1992-1999; and lastly, the Hmong American period, from 2000 to present. The Refugee Years (1975-1991) began in July 1975, when the first wave of Hmong refugees arrived in America.⁹ Their struggles were not unlike those of the aforementioned Yang family: with little education or vocational training, the first Hmong Americans relied on welfare and public assistance to make ends meet. The first Hmong Americans were also isolated. Attempting to force the Hmong to assimilate into American culture, the government resettled Hmong refugees all over the country. However, this policy only led to a massive Hmong American migration to California as families sought to reunite.¹⁰ In fact, by 1987, more than half the Hmong American population (about 46,000 people) had settled in California; by 1995, Fresno, California was home to the largest concentration of Hmong Americans in the United States.¹¹ However, Hmong America's first political success would take place in the Midwest: in November 1991, Choua Lee was elected to the Board of Education of St. Paul Public Schools in St. Paul, Minnesota. Lee was a trailblazer, the first Hmong American to hold political office.¹² The Refugee Years also saw the creation of Hmong American nonprofits and organizations. Examples of these organizations included Lao Family Inc., the first Hmong nonprofit, whose mission was to provide social services to refugees from Laos; The

⁹ Yang, "Diversity in Diaspora," 5.

¹⁰ James S. Lai, "Eau Claire, WI: The Political Rise of the Hmong American Community," in *Asian American Political Action: Suburban Transformations* (Boulder, Colo: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2011), 201.

¹¹ Yang, "Diversity in Diaspora," 13.

¹² *Ibid.*, 17-18.

Association for the Advancement of Hmong Women in Minnesota, founded to help Hmong American families and women; and the Hmong American Partnership, which focused on creating connections and awareness between Hmong Americans and non-Hmong people.¹³

The Turning Point (1992-1999) was characterized by the emergence of more Hmong American candidates for local office in the Midwest, as well as a migration away from California. In 1992, just as Choua Lee was taking office in St. Paul, Minnesota, Ya Yang was elected to the Board of Trustees in Wausau School District in Wausau, Wisconsin. Yang was the first Hmong American to be elected to office in Wisconsin. He was not the only 'first' of this period: in 1996, Joe Bee Xiong was elected to the City Council of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, becoming the first Hmong American to be elected to an American city council. He opened a door for other Hmong American politicians to follow in his footsteps. Indeed, Hmong Americans have continuously held a spot on the City Council of Eau Claire, starting with Xiong and continuing to the present. In total, the 1990s saw six Hmong Americans elected to school boards and city councils in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Nebraska.¹⁴

The rise of Hmong American politics in the Midwest was a result of the Hmong American migration away from California. In California, where unemployment was high, many Hmong Americans said what Kao Kalia Yang could not: "This is not enough." Seeking better economic conditions and a lower cost of living, so many Hmong Americans moved to Minnesota's Twin Cities—Minneapolis and St. Paul—that it replaced Fresno as the most concentrated Hmong American population in the United States.¹⁵ Like the Hmong American migration to California, the migration out of the state was self-fulfilling: as the

¹³ Ibid., 10.

¹⁴ Ibid., 17–18.

¹⁵ Ibid., 22.

number of Hmong Americans moving to the Midwest increased, other Hmong Americans in California felt more comfortable moving there. In fact, Hmong American history is marked three patterns of migration: the first to America, the second to California, and the third to the Midwest.

Lastly, the Hmong American period (2000-present) is marked by continued political involvement and success, particularly in Minnesota. Hmong Americans finally made it to the Minnesota State Legislature in 2002, when Mee Moua was elected to fill a one-year term in the State Senate. She would serve three more terms before deciding not to seek reelection in 2010. The year 2002 also saw Cy Thao elected to the State House of Representatives; like Moua, he would serve until deciding not to seek reelection in 2010.¹⁶ In 2012, Foung Hawj was elected to the Minnesota State Senate, becoming the third Hmong American to serve in the State Legislature.¹⁷ Hmong Americans also saw political success in California: in 2007, Blong Xiong was elected to the Fresno City Council. Xiong was the first Hmong American to serve on the city council of a large American city.¹⁸ The same year, Noah Lor was elected to the Merced City Council in Merced, California. In total, 17 Hmong Americans have been elected to public office since 2000, the start of the Hmong American Period. This period has also seen high rates of Hmong American voter turnout. In the 2012 presidential election, Hmong American voter turnout was 89%, which was 10% higher than the average for Asian

¹⁶ Ibid., 29–31.

¹⁷ Wameng Moua, “The Nice Guy Finishes First in Race for St. Paul Senate Seat,” *Twin Cities Daily Planet*, accessed September 26, 2016, <http://www.tcdailyplanet.net/nice-guy-finishes-first-race-st-paul-senate-seat/>.

¹⁸ Yang, “Diversity in Diaspora,” 29–32.

Americans. In fact, Hmong Americans tied with Japanese Americans for the highest voter turnout out of all Asian American subgroups.¹⁹

As of the time of writing, there were nine Hmong Americans serving in public office. Every Hmong American who has served in office is shown below, expanded from a similar table in Kou Yang’s historical review of the Hmong American experience:

Elected Officials of Hmong Ancestry, 1991-2017²⁰

Name	Years in Office	Elected To	State
Choua Lee	1991-1995	St. Paul Public School Board	MN
Ya Yang	1993-1994 ²¹	Wasau School District Board of Education	WI
Thai Vue	1993-1996	Lacrosse School District Board of Education	WI
Neal Thao	1995-2002	St. Paul Public School Board	MN
Joe Bee Xiong	1996-2000	Eau Claire City Council	WI
Lormong Lo	1996-2001 ²²	Omaha City Council	NE
Bon Xiong	1997-1999*	Appleton City Council	WI
Neng Ly	2000-2002	Eau Claire City Council	WI
Paul C. Lo	2001-2005	Merced City School Board	CA
Saidang Xiong	2002-2004	Eau Claire City Council	WI
Mee Moua	2002-2010	Minnesota Senate	MN
Cy Thao	2002-2010	Minnesota House of Representatives	MN
Anthony K. Vang	2002-2012 ²³	Fresno Unified School District	CA
Kazoua Kong-Thao ²⁴	2003-2011 ²⁵	St. Paul Public School Board	MN

¹⁹ Richard Daulton et al., “Behind the Numbers: Post-Election Survey of Asian American and Pacific Islander Votes in 2012,” 5, accessed October 4, 2016, <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.469.7016&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

²⁰ Yang, “Diversity in Diaspora,” 32.

²¹ “Wausau School Member Resigns,” *Journal Times*, accessed October 2, 2016, http://journaltimes.com/news/national/wausau-school-member-resigns/article_ba828f31-fc52-5f28-8211-47cbf1c409b2.html.

²² Xiaojian Zhao and Edward J. W. Park, eds., *Asian Americans: An Encyclopedia of Social, Cultural, Economic, and Political History* (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood, an imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2014), 803.

²³ Stephanie Stone, “Dr. Tony Vang to Retire from FUSD,” *ABC30 Fresno*, September 17, 2012, <http://abc30.com/archive/8814275/>.

²⁴ Yang Lor, “Hmong Political Involvement in St. Paul, Minnesota and Fresno, California,” *Hmong Studies Journal* 10 (December 2009): 2.

²⁵ Joe Kimball, “Former School Board Member Kazoua Kong-Thao to Run for St. Paul Council,” *MinnPost*, May 14, 2013, <https://www.minnpost.com/two-cities/2013/05/former-school-board-member-kazoua-kong-thao-run-st-paul-council>.

Thomas Vue	2004-2013**	Eau Claire City Council	WI
Blong Xiong	2006-2015 ²⁶	Fresno City Council	CA
Noah Lor	2007-present	Merced City Council	CA
Vallay Moua Varro ²⁷	2009-2010 ²⁸	St. Paul Public School Board	MN
Kaying Thao	2012-2015	Roseville School Board	MN
Foung Hawj	2012-present	Minnesota Senate	MN
Blong Yang	2012-present	Minneapolis City Council	MN
Dai Thao	2012-present	St. Paul City Council	MN
Michael Xiong	2013-present**	Eau Claire City Council	WI
Chue Vue ²⁹	2014-present	St. Paul Public School Board	MN
Tou Xiong ³⁰	2015-present	Maplewood City Council	MN
Fue Lee	2016-present	Minnesota House of Representatives	MN
Susan Kaying Pha	2016-present	Brooklyn Park City Council	MN
Steve Lee	2016-present	Mayor of Elk Grove	MN
Lee Lor	2016-present	Merced County Board of Supervisors	CA
Mai Vang	2016-present	Sacramento School Board	CA
Brandon Vang	2016-present	Sanger School Board	CA
Kristy Yang ³¹	2017-present	Milwaukee County Circuit Court	WI

**Years in office determined from Appleton City Council yearly reports*

***Years in office determined from Eau Claire City Council meeting minutes*

²⁶ “Blong Xiong - Ballotpedia,” accessed October 3, 2016, https://ballotpedia.org/Blong_Xiong.

²⁷ Yang Lor, “Hmong Political Involvement in St. Paul, Minnesota and Fresno, California,” 3.

²⁸ “Vallay Varro Resigns from School Board to Lead MinnCAN,” accessed October 4, 2016, <http://www.50can.org/what-we-do/news/vallay-varro-resigns-school-board-lead-minncan>.

²⁹ “The Saint Paul Board of Education,” *Saint Paul Public Schools*, accessed October 3, 2016, <http://www.spps.org/boe>.

³⁰ Nengher N. Vang and Jeremy Hein, “Hmong American Leadership and Unity in the Post-Vang Pao Era,” *Hmong Studies Journal* 16 (2015): 6.

³¹ Deandra Corinthios, “Milwaukee County Voters Make History, Electing First Female Hmong-American Judge,” *FOX6Now.com*, April 5, 2017, <http://fox6now.com/2017/04/05/milwaukee-county-voters-make-history-electing-first-female-hmong-american-judge/>.

The Capitol of Hmong America

The Twin Cities is widely considered the Capitol of Hmong America because of its large, concentrated Hmong American population and their political success. Per the Minnesota Historical Society, of the more than 260,000 Hmong in the United States, more than 66,000 of them live in or near the Twin Cities. As such, the Twin Cities metro area is the largest urban concentration of Hmong Americans in the United States. Within the Twin Cities, the majority of Hmong Americans in the Twin Cities live in St. Paul. Blong Yang, the first Hmong American to serve on the Minneapolis City Council, even told me that St. Paul is “the center of the Hmong universe.”³² Moreover, as the chart on the previous page indicates, Minnesota has seen Hmong America’s greatest political triumphs. Half of the 32 Hmong Americans who have served in public office have done so in Minnesota. Furthermore, only in Minnesota have Hmong Americans been elected to the state legislature. Likewise, eight of the 14 Hmong Americans currently in office are in Minnesota.

In June 2016, the Hmong-Lao Veterans Memorial was unveiled on Minnesota’s Capitol grounds. Ten feet tall, the bronze monument resembles a giant bamboo shoot. Its petals bear images of life, war, and relocation—core aspects of the Hmong American experience.³³ The monument also symbolizes a 14-year policy process that saw the state dedicate \$350,000 in funding for its construction.³⁴ It stands as tribute to the sacrifices of Hmong soldiers during the Secret War, as well as the growing political clout of Hmong

³² Minneapolis City Council Member Blong Yang, interview by author, interview 9, transcript, January 10, 2017.

³³ Peter Cox, “New Minn. Memorial Honors Service of Soldiers in ‘Secret War,’” accessed August 16, 2016, <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2016/06/11/lao-hmong-veterans-memorial>.

³⁴ Frederick Melo, “St. Paul: Hmong Vets Memorial Could Soon Be Realized,” *Twin Cities Pioneer Press*, March 28, 2013, <http://www.twincities.com/2013/03/28/st-paul-hmong-vets-memorial-could-soon-be-realized/>; Mai Na M. Lee, “Hmong and Hmong Americans in Minnesota,” *MNopedia*, January 27, 2016, <http://www.mnopedia.org/hmong-and-hmong-americans-minnesota>.

Americans in Minnesota. Overall, though the history of Hmong America is relatively short, the history of Hmong American political representation is even shorter.

Chapter 3: Representation in the Literature

Scholarship on political representation is common, but studies of Hmong Americans in politics are not. Therefore, a gap has emerged in the literature: while scholars have examined the first generation of Hmong American politicians in the Minnesota Legislature, they have yet to turn their attention to the second generation of Hmong Americans currently in office. My thesis responds to this gap, drawing from the literature on women and minorities to inform my discussion of Hmong American political representation today. In this chapter, I examine a wide range of literature on representation conceptually and in practice for women, racial minorities, and Hmong Americans. First, I explain the foundational theories of representation outlined by Hannah Pitkin and other scholars, including the key concept of essentialism. Second, I explore the debate over descriptive and substantive representation in the literature on women and racial minorities in politics. Third, I survey the literature on Asian American political representation, including emerging conceptions of Asian American political incorporation. Lastly, I give an overview of the existing research on Hmong American political representation.

Foundational Concepts of Representation

Hannah Pitkin, who wrote the book on political representation with *The Concept of Representation*, theorized that representatives ‘stand for’ and ‘act for’ their constituents. ‘Standing for’ constituents can include symbolic, descriptive, and surrogate representation. Symbolic representatives mirror their constituents in a politically relevant way. For instance, a Hmong American representative might be considered a symbolic representative of Hmong Americans. Like symbolic representation, descriptive representation focuses on how much a representative resembles their constituents. Representatives stand for constituents in the

literal sense, sharing the same background, interests, or experiences.³⁵ Jane Mansbridge's concept of surrogate representation describes when a representative represents similar individuals outside their own district.³⁶ For instance, a Hmong American representative might not just represent their district—they might also represent Hmong Americans outside their district who identify with Hmong American faces in government. On the other hand, to 'act for' constituents is to advocate for them specifically while in office through substantive representation.³⁷ However, definitions of substantive representation in legislative bodies vary. Substantive representation can take the form of voting, bill introductions, policy entrepreneurship, sponsorship activity, or other essential legislative duties. Also, the link between descriptive and substantive representation (or lack thereof) is frequently debated in the literature.

In theory, descriptive representation benefits historically marginalized groups substantively and symbolically. As Mansbridge argues, descriptive representation fills the space between descriptive and substantive representation by giving marginalized groups the ability to better articulate their interests in legislative bodies. In turn, marginalized groups improve the quality of debate on policy issues affecting their communities. For instance, a legislative body without any Hmong American members may not be able to effectively craft public policy concerning the Hmong American community. In addition, descriptive representation may have symbolic benefits: members of disadvantaged groups begin to see

³⁵ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (University of California Press, 1967).

³⁶ Jane Mansbridge, "Rethinking Representation," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 4 (2003): 522–23.

³⁷ Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation*.

themselves as fit to rule, as do members of the public.³⁸ After all, it can be discouraging to run for office if no one in government looks like you.

However, thinking of representation as ‘standing for’ and ‘acting for’ constituents carries the risk of essentialism. Representatives who stand and act for certain groups can give the impression that they *only* represent and act for those groups. In other words, essentialism is the assumption that members of a certain group share an essential identity and interests. Moreover, essentialism implies that members of certain groups are unable to represent others.³⁹ Sen. Mee Moua, the first Hmong American elected to a state legislature in the U.S., summed up the danger of essentialism in an article on her first term in office: “I want to be at the table when I can add to the discussion because of my experiences or background. But I don’t want to be pigeon-holed.”⁴⁰

Another way of thinking about representation is to see it as a process. In this view, both representation and policy interests are continuously constructed. As Karen Celis claims, “‘Good’ substantive representation is better conceived of as a process, involving debate, deliberation, and contestation over group interests, occurring inside and outside formal institutions.”⁴¹ Group interests constantly change; they are not static, as the ‘standing for’ and ‘acting for’ theories suggest. Observing black members of Congress, Richard Fenno noted that they would adjust their constituency outreach efforts to match redistricting. If redistricting meant a Congressman’s district would include more whites, then the legislator

³⁸ Jane Mansbridge, “Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent ‘Yes,’” *The Journal of Politics* 61, no. 3 (August 1999): 628–57, doi:10.2307/2647821.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 637.

⁴⁰ Christopher Conte, “Diversity in Action; the First Hmong Senator; Mee Moua Typifies the Rich Contributions Foreign-Born Lawmakers Are Bringing to the Legislature Institution,” *State Legislatures* 28, no. 7 (August 2002).

⁴¹ Karen Celis et al., “Constituting Women’s Interests through Representative Claims,” *Politics & Gender* 10, no. 2 (June 2014): 151, doi:10.1017/S1743923X14000026.

would open an office in a predominantly white neighborhood or hire a white staffer to provide surrogate representation.⁴² The question of representation does not end when an African American candidate is elected to office. Instead, the process of representation begins.

Essential to this process of representation is the continuous, performative act of claim-making. Michael Saward conceptualizes representation as a “two-way street,” where the “represented play a role in choosing representatives, and representatives ‘choose’ their constituents in the sense of portraying them or framing them in particular, contestable ways.”⁴³ Constituents make a claim about themselves when they vote for someone whose vision they support, just as representatives make a claim about their constituents when they choose to advocate for certain interests over others. For example, by representing women’s interests, legislators are also claiming that their constituency cares about women’s issues. To represent a group’s interests is to send the message that those interests are worth attention.

But if representatives must choose whose issues to represent, they also choose whose issues to ignore. Multiple groups’ interests are represented, modified, or simply ignored in the process of representation. However, adding more voices to the process of representation can inadvertently drown out others; some interests lose out when representatives group their constituents into representable constituencies.⁴⁴ For instance, the idea of *Latinidad* lumps many Latin American national-origin groups into a single, politically homogenous constituency. The category of Latinos itself creates the group that is meant to

⁴² Richard F. Fenno, *Going Home: Black Representatives and Their Constituents* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

⁴³ Michael Saward, “The Representative Claim,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 5, no. 3 (August 2006): 297–318, doi:10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300234.

⁴⁴ Iris Marion Young, “Deferring Group Representation,” *Nomos* 39 (1997): 349–376; Suzanne Dovi, “Preferable Descriptive Representatives: Will Just Any Woman, Black, or Latino Do?,” *American Political Science Review* 96, no. 4 (December 2002): 729.

be represented.⁴⁵ Varying subgroup interests—Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, etc.—become irrelevant in the face of overarching ‘Latino’ interests. Moreover, issues affecting advantaged constituencies may be represented more than issues affecting disadvantaged subgroups.⁴⁶

Overall, seeing representation as a process is useful because it recognizes that the represented are not a monolithic group. Also, concepts of representation such as ‘standing for’ and ‘acting for’ fit within the larger process of representation. Symbolic, descriptive, and substantive representation describe moments in the ongoing process of representation. Beyond theories of representation as a process, empirical research on the political representation of racial minorities is defined by the debate over whether descriptive representation leads to substantive representation.

Does Descriptive Representation Lead to Substantive Representation?

Some scholars of the political representation of women and racial minorities argue that descriptive representation does not lead to substantive representation. Carol Swain, one of the first scholars to study African Americans in Congress, puts this argument bluntly: “Black faces in political office do not guarantee the substantive representation of the policy preferences of the majority of African Americans.”⁴⁷ According to Swain, whites are able to represent African American interests, just as African Americans are able to represent white interests. In fact, her roll call analysis shows that the strongest influences on a representative’s support of black interests are their political party (Democrat) and region (non-South), not race. Other scholars like Bruce Robeck take this argument further, arguing

⁴⁵ Cristina Beltrán, *The Trouble with Unity: Latino Politics and the Creation of Identity* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁴⁶ Dara Z. Strolovitch, *Affirmative Advocacy: Race, Class, and Gender in Interest Group Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

⁴⁷ Carol M. Swain, *Black Faces, Black Interests: The Representation of African Americans in Congress*, Enlarged ed (Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 2006), 210.

that there would be little substantive difference if white northern Democrats replaced all black representatives.⁴⁸ Similarly, Irene Diamond, who conducted in-depth interviews with members of the New England legislature, found that female representatives do not necessarily see themselves as representing women. As one female legislator told Diamond (emphasis hers):

I have always thought of myself as *more of a person than a woman* right from the beginning, and I have always been treated that way in our town. In fact, the leader of the opposition years ago made some comment to the effect that *I thought like a man...* I thought it was a great compliment to me. He was implying that I wasn't making use of femininity particularly and that I was *thinking on his level as far as reasons go...* I always try to keep everything on a reasonable basis rather than an emotional level.⁴⁹

If this legislator sees herself as a “more of a person than a woman,” then it stands to reason that she will act as a substantive representative for people generally, not women specifically. Having women in office does not guarantee substantive representation of women, especially if they do not see the value or need in representing women’s interests.

But other scholars sidestep this debate, contending that substantive representation of women and racial minorities is stymied by majority-white legislatures and electoral concerns. Descriptive representation leads to attempts at substantive representation, which are not always successful. Substantive representation does not always result in substantive policy outcomes. For instance, Robert Preuhs found that the descriptive representation of Latinos had little influence on ‘English Only’ bills in state legislatures.⁵⁰ Moreover, other scholars have found that gender has far less of an impact on policy outcomes than race. Analyzing

⁴⁸ Swain, *Black Faces, Black Interests*.

⁴⁹ Irene Diamond, *Sex Roles in the State House* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 97.

⁵⁰ Robert R. Preuhs, “Descriptive Representation, Legislative Leadership, and Direct Democracy: Latino Influence on English Only Laws in the States, 1984–2002,” *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (2005): 203–224.

bills introduced and passed in six state legislatures, Kathleen Bratton and Kerry Haynie found that African American legislators are significantly less likely than whites to pass legislation they introduce. Likewise, electoral concerns may limit the substantive representation of African Americans. For instance, the most recent literature on deracialization suggests that African American candidates make situational use of race-neutral strategies to appeal to white moderates while still sending coded messages to black constituents.⁵¹ But if African American candidates must deracialize to win elections, then how can they expect to bridge the gap between descriptive and substantive representation? Moreover, other scholars suggest that Democrats have little incentive to act on the concerns of African Americans, who have been ‘captured’ by the left. In the race to attract white swing voters, Democrats distance themselves from the substantive representation of African Americans.⁵²

Similarly, Mary Hawkesworth argues that predominantly white, male institutions like Congress reject the substantive representation of women of color through the process of race-gendering. Conducting interviews in Congress during welfare reform in the mid-nineties, Hawkesworth found that Congresswomen of color were consistently ignored and kept out of key decision-making positions.⁵³ Disempowered by race-gendered bodies, these women of color sought to “legislate against the grain” and oppose reforms that would have an adverse effect on single mothers and women of color.⁵⁴ Similarly, African American

⁵¹ Franklin Sekou, “Situational Deracialization, Harold Ford, and the 2006 U.S. Senate Race In Tennessee,” in *Whose Black Politics?: Cases in Post-Racial Black Leadership*, by Gillespie Andra (New York: Routledge, 2010).

⁵² Paul Frymer, *Uneasy Alliances: Race and Party Competition in America* (Princeton, N.J.; Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2010), <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=557144>.

⁵³ Mary Hawkesworth, “Congressional Enactments of Race–gender: Toward a Theory of Raced–gendered Institutions,” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 4 (2003): 529–550.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 540.

members of Congress have long used institutional rules to compensate for resistance from white leadership structures. For example, the Congressional Black Caucus has allowed black legislators to amplify their voices and influence in Congress.⁵⁵ Likewise, in Diamond's survey of the New England legislature, a select few female legislators saw themselves as women's rights advocates and tried to provide substantive representation for women.⁵⁶ But in each these cases, there is a limit to how much difference a small handful of legislators can make. These legislators may tirelessly introduce substantive bills that are doomed to die in committee or during floor debates. Their attempts at legislative resistance may not translate into substantive policy outcomes, but at least they are trying.

But another subset of scholars sees the emphasis on substantive policy outcomes as misguided. They argue that substantive representation can take the form of coursework, allocation of resources, bill introductions, sponsorship, and other means not reflected in voting records. For instance, studies have found that African American mayors increase the number of African Americans employed in the public sector.⁵⁷ Scholars have observed a similar dynamic with female mayors and female employment representation.⁵⁸ Likewise, other research suggests that the representation of racial minorities in city councils or other local decision-making positions helps increase the municipal employment of that group to a level proportional to their population.⁵⁹ At the federal level, the impact of substantive

⁵⁵ Swain, *Black Faces, Black Interests*.

⁵⁶ Diamond, *Sex Roles in the State House*.

⁵⁷ P. K. Eisinger, "Black Employment in Municipal Jobs: The Impact of Black Political Power," *American Political Science Review* 76, no. 2 (1982): 380–92; L. Stein, "Representative Local Government: Minorities in the Municipal Work Force," *The Journal of Politics* 48, no. 3 (1986): 694–713.

⁵⁸ Grace Hall Saltzstein, "Female Mayors and Women in Municipal Jobs," *American Journal of Political Science* 30, no. 1 (1986): 140–64, doi:10.2307/2111298.

⁵⁹ T. R. Dye and J. Renick, "Political Power and City Jobs: Determinants of Minority Employment," *Social Science Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (1981): 475–86; Brinck Kerr and Kenneth R. Mladenka, "Does Politics Matter? A Time-Series Analysis of Minority Employment Patterns," *American Journal of Political Science* 38, no. 4 (November

representation has less to do with policy than the allocation of resources: scholars have found that descriptive representation of blacks in Congress has the substantive impact of more federal dollars devoted towards African Americans.⁶⁰ Likewise, bill introduction analyses have shown that women in Congress cosponsor bills related to education, children and families, women's health, and general health issues more frequently than their male counterparts.⁶¹ These findings suggest that substantive representation cannot be measured in bill counts alone. The nature of representation for women and racial minorities means that outright policy victories are much harder to achieve than other forms of substantive representation.

Even if the literature disagrees on the substantive impact of descriptive representation, scholars recognize the importance of feeling represented. For instance, Fenno reported that there were certain cultural and organizational connections with black constituents that only black legislators could make. He describes African American legislators as surrogates responsive to a national black constituency, not just the one in their district.⁶² Similarly, as one African American congressman told Swain, "Black constituents feel comfortable with me, and see that I am comfortable with them." The benefit of this relationship cannot be understated, especially for groups who rarely see themselves represented in government. Overall, the link between descriptive and substantive representation remains hotly debated in the literature.

1994): 918; Rufus P. Browning, Dale Rogers Marshall, and David H. Tabb, eds., *Racial Politics in American Cities*, 3rd ed (New York: Longman Publishers, 2003).

⁶⁰ Christian R. Grose, *Congress in Black and White: Race and Representation in Washington and at Home* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁶¹ Michele L. Swers, "Connecting Descriptive and Substantive Representation: An Analysis of Sex Differences in Cosponsorship Activity," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (2005): 407–33.

⁶² Fenno, *Going Home*.

What About the Asians?

Unlike the literature on other minority groups, research on Asian Americans has almost exclusively focused on descriptive representation. We have a better understanding of how Asian Americans are elected to office than what they do in office. The substantive representation of Asian Americans is rarely studied because Asian American political interests are nearly impossible to define. As a group, Asian Americans are tremendously diverse: a bill that is favored by Chinese Americans may be opposed by Vietnamese Americans, while Indian Americans may have neutral feelings. The label of ‘Asian’ is not enough to guarantee monolithic policy interests. Nonetheless, the literature suggests that Asian American candidates rely on suburbanized support networks to win elections. Once in office, Asian American representatives pursue multiethnic and pan-ethnic strategies, value surrogate representation, and often pursue policies with symbolic value.

Scholars note that unlike African Americans, Asian Americans cannot rely on majority-Asian districts to get them elected to office. Hawaii is the only state that contains majority-Asian districts, so Asian American candidates on the mainland must build coalitions of different groups to have any chance at the ballot box.⁶³ As Pei-te Lien notes, “It is not an exaggeration to suggest that every major political success of the community is a result of cross-racial/ethnic coalition building.”⁶⁴ Likewise, Asian American candidates must pursue pan-ethnic strategies that will attract the support of multiple Asian American constituencies. For instance, Nicholas Alozie found that the percent Asian population was not as important as the percent black population in explaining representation on city councils. His findings

⁶³ Pei-te Lien, M. Margaret Conway, and Janelle Wong, *The Politics of Asian Americans: Diversity and Community* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁶⁴ Pei-te Lien, *The Making of Asian America through Political Participation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 124.

suggest that Asian Americans do not vote as cohesively as African Americans, whose tendency to vote in the interest of their racial group has been documented by scholars.⁶⁵ (In the literature on African Americans, linked fate is the idea that African Americans connect their prospects individually to the prospects of African Americans generally and vote in the interest of their racial group).⁶⁶ Asian American politicians face a dual pressure to appeal to multiple groups inside and outside the category of ‘Asian.’ This multi-ethnic and pan-ethnic strategy has a significant impact on scope of substantive representation for Asian Americans. Like Latino politicians, Asian American legislators must provide substantive representation for multiple groups, not just their own.

James Lai, a leading scholar in the study of Asian American political representation, argues that Asian American political mobilization today is taking place in the suburbs. In newly-incorporated suburbs, where political machines have limited influence over local politics, Asian American politics thrive. The political incorporation of Asian Americans relies on three factors: Asian American candidates, Asian American community-based organizations, and the ethnic media. Asian American candidates must appeal to both non-Asian and Asian American constituents in a two-tiered strategy, akin to the situational deracialization discussed in the literature on African American candidates. Furthermore, Asian American community-based organizations support Asian American candidates and help recruit future elected officials. The ethnic media also helps connect Asian American candidates to the broader Asian American community. Overall, Lai’s framework suggests the

⁶⁵ Nicholas O. Alosie, “The Election of Asians to City Councils,” *Social Science Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (1992): 90.

⁶⁶ Michael C. Dawson, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics*, 1st pbk printing (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1995).

future of Asian American politics relies on the suburbs and the support networks they provide.⁶⁷

Other case studies suggest that surrogate representation is especially important for Asian Americans. In 1992, Michael Woo ran for mayor of Los Angeles. Woo, a Chinese American who formerly sat on the Los Angeles city council, received contributions from 17 different states. About a fourth of his donations came from Asian Americans nationwide, mostly from fellow Chinese Americans.⁶⁸ These donations suggest that Woo represented a constituency far beyond the boundaries of Los Angeles. Woo's candidacy acted as a symbol for Asian America; Woo himself became a surrogate for Asian Americans nationwide who wanted to see themselves represented in government.

Studies of Asian Americans in Congress reveal that Asian American lawmakers are often driven by symbolism and pan-ethnic policy action. For instance, all six Asian Americans in Congress were essential to the passage of the 1988 Civil Liberties Act, which granted reparations and a formal apology presidential apology to every surviving U.S. citizen or legal resident immigrant of Japanese ancestry held in internment camps during World War II. Of these six Asian American lawmakers, five were Japanese American but only two had been interned during WWII.⁶⁹ Because reparations were paid to thousands of Japanese-Americans nationwide, the 1988 Civil Liberties Act can be considered an act of substantive representation by Japanese American legislators for Japanese Americans. Yet the legislation also has clear symbolic value, since it forced the U.S. to apologize for actions it had taken over 40 years prior. Moreover, the debate and news coverage of the bill educated lawmakers

⁶⁷ James S. Lai, *Asian American Political Action: Suburban Transformations* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2011).

⁶⁸ James S. Lai et al., "Asian Pacific-American Campaigns, Elections, and Elected Officials," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 34, no. 3 (2001): 611–17.

⁶⁹ Lien, *The Making of Asian America through Political Participation*.

and their constituents about the internment of Japanese Americans in WWII. Ultimately, as Lien writes, “The passage of the 1988 Civil Liberties Act was considered an improbable legislative success because it was achieved by a numerically negligible...politically fragile, and historically ‘silent’ minority population.”⁷⁰

Similarly, scholars assert that Asian Americans in Congress have embraced pan-ethnic identity and action. For example, Sen. Daniel Inouye, a Japanese American, became a leading advocate for Filipino veterans of WWII. In 1946, Filipino veterans were rendered ineligible for veterans’ benefits when the Philippines became an independent country. As such, they only received half the benefits of other WWII veterans who were not U.S. nationals.⁷¹ It was only after Sen. Inouye’s efforts that money was finally sent to surviving veterans, over 60 years later.⁷² Scholars consider Sen. Inouye’s advocacy an example of pan-ethnic substantive representation.⁷³ Like the bill to redress Japanese internment, these efforts to address past injustices suffered by Filipino veterans had symbolic value. As Lien suggests, Sen. Inouye helped construct an Asian American political identity in the pursuit of social justice.⁷⁴

Hmong American Political Representation

The literature on Hmong Americans has typically remained separate from research done on Asian Americans and other racial minorities. As Mark Pfeifer notes, “Hmong-focused researchers for several years have also had strong institutions of their own promoting research and dissemination...Hmong American studies have very much remained

⁷⁰ Ibid., 94.

⁷¹ Lai et al., “Asian Pacific-American Campaigns, Elections, and Elected Officials.”

⁷² Josh Levs, “U.S. to Pay ‘Forgotten’ Filipino World War II Veterans,” *CNN*, February 23, 2009, http://www.cnn.com/2009/US/02/23/forgotten.veterans/index.html?_s=PM:US.

⁷³ Lai et al., “Asian Pacific-American Campaigns, Elections, and Elected Officials.”

⁷⁴ Lien, *The Making of Asian America through Political Participation*.

on the periphery of Asian American studies.”⁷⁵ In my thesis, I bridge this disconnect. After all, research on Asian American and Hmong American political representation share key similarities. As with the literature on Asian Americans, scholarship on Hmong American political representation is biased towards descriptive representation. More is known about Hmong American candidates for office than elected officials. What little research we have on Hmong Americans political incorporation and elected officials suggests they resemble Asian American lawmakers in their embrace of multiethnic strategies and surrogate representation. Other studies also indicate that Hmong American politicians carefully choose which social movements they will lend support to.

Taeko Yoshikawa, one of the only scholars to examine Hmong Americans in office, found that Sen. Mee Moua pursued a multiethnic strategy of representation that made her appealing to both Hmong and non-Hmong constituents. As the first Hmong American state legislator in the U.S., Moua successfully navigated patriarchal Hmong society as well as the expectations of her constituents, most of whom were not Hmong Americans. Yoshikawa describes Moua’s strategy as a ‘dual identity’ that emphasized her Hmong identity to the Hmong American community and her individuality to non-Hmong constituents.⁷⁶ In doing so, Moua became a “bridge between two distinctive cultures,” creating multiethnic appeal.⁷⁷ During her 2002 campaign, Moua received a significant majority of funding from non-

⁷⁵ Mark Edward Pfeifer, “Hmong American Studies: A Bibliographic Essay,” in *Diversity in Diaspora: Hmong Americans in the Twenty-First Century* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2013), 279.

⁷⁶ Taeko Yoshikawa, “From a Refugee Camp to the Minnesota State Senate: A Case Study of a Hmong American Woman’s Challenge,” *Hmong Studies Journal* 7 (2006): 1–23.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

Hmong donors.⁷⁸ Moua’s multiethnic appeal calls to mind the literature on Asian American political representation, which stresses the importance of coalition-building.

Other research on Hmong American politicians indicates they value surrogate representation but will not support every social movement popular in their community. Sen. Moua saw herself as a representative of the broader Asian American community:

As the first Southeast Asian refugee to be elected to a State legislature, I—along with the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community—was fighting every year to stake our claim in our democracy. I wanted to build a movement where those who have been dismissed, disadvantaged, disenfranchised and disengaged, like those in the AAPI community, could make the marginal difference—be the margin of victory, be visible, exert influence, and wield political power.⁷⁹

Sen. Moua was a surrogate representative whose identity as a Southeast Asian refugee allowed her to stand for constituents well outside her district. However, Jeremy Hein and Nengher Vang concluded that even as a surrogate representative, Sen. Moua carefully chose which movements she supported as a state Senator. Analyzing the content of Hmong newspapers, Hein and Vang found that Hmong faces in office do not guarantee the representation of Hmong social movements—findings that echo the literature on women and minority political representation. Cognizant that their support would have minimal impact and wary of appearing ‘too Hmong,’ Hmong American politicians provided only partial support for local Hmong social movements.⁸⁰

Overall, this literature review exposes several points of agreement and debate on the nature of representation for women and racial minorities, as well as gaps in the

⁷⁸ Yoshikawa, “From a Refugee Camp to the Minnesota State Senate: A Case Study of a Hmong American Woman’s Challenge.”

⁷⁹ Jeremy Hein and Nengher Vang, “Politicians and Social Movements: The Impact of Electoral Victory on Local, National, and Transnational Activism by Hmong Americans in Minneapolis–St. Paul,” *Social Movement Studies* 14, no. 2 (March 2015): 167–68, doi:10.1080/14742837.2014.945159.

⁸⁰ Hein and Vang, “Politicians and Social Movements.”

understanding of Asian American and Hmong American political representation. Scholars agree that representation matters for marginalized groups that have been underrepresented in politics. There is also wide agreement that substantive representation can encompass a wide range of legislative activities. However, scholars disagree on whether descriptive representation leads to substantive representation. In contrast to the extensive research on political representation of women and African Americans, the literature on Asian American and Hmong American representation remains sparse. This gap limits our understanding of Hmong American political representation, especially with regards to the latest generation of Hmong American elected officials. In the following chapter, I discuss how my thesis addresses that gap in the literature.

Chapter 4: Methods

My thesis follows in the footsteps of scholars like Fenno, Swain, and Hawkesworth. Employing in-depth interviews, these scholars maximize detail from a small number of participants. In the same vein, I use qualitative methods to evaluate the current state of Hmong American political representation and the latest generation of Hmong American politicians. Through semi-structured interviews, my study addresses the following research question: *How are Hmong Americans and their interests represented in Minnesota politics today?* In this chapter, I detail my methodology for this research project. First, I describe my rationale for using semi-structured interviews, explaining how the method addresses my research question. Second, I detail my process for conducting and analyzing interviews. I also describe how I used a snowball sample to find new interview participants. Lastly, I discuss the potential limitations of my study.

Rationale

Studying the current state of Hmong American political representation necessitates a qualitative approach. There are simply too few Hmong Americans currently serving in office to generate statistically significant results. Moreover, in my thesis, I wanted to elevate the voices of those who have been elected to represent Hmong Americans. Other scholars of representation employ quantitative approaches that analyze roll call data and bill introductions. While these approaches have clear face validity, my early interviews suggested that such an approach would overlook aspects of Hmong American political representation not directly related to measurable policymaking. For instance, Elizabeth Herr, who is Sen. Fong Hawj's Legislative Assistant, described how Sen. Hawj represents people outside of

his district as one of the few legislators of color in the Minnesota Legislature.⁸¹ But Sen. Hawj's role as a surrogate representative is more conceptual than quantifiable. Likewise, the politics of essentialism and resettlement are difficult to operationalize as variables.

Data Collection and Analysis

I conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with Hmong American elected officials and their staffers, state legislators representing Ramsey County (a Hmong American political stronghold), lawmakers on the legislative board of the Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans, and legislators who supported legislation to fund the Hmong-Lao Veterans Memorial during the 2013-2014 legislative session. (See Appendix A: List of Interview Participants). Due to their semi-structured nature, the interviews resembled conversations more than rigid surveys. I was most interested in hearing how participants approached representation, what they thought were Hmong American political issues, and whether they felt any pressure to represent the Hmong American community. I also asked questions about legislative decision making and the role of the clan system in Hmong American politics (traditionally, Hmong society is divided into 18 clans based on last names and recognition of shared heritage). I also asked some participants about their role in the creation of the Hmong-Lao Veterans Memorial, seeking insight into the substantive representation of Hmong Americans in action. Though participants were free to opt out of any question, none chose to do so. Only one participant refused to be recorded; no participant requested anonymity. Interviews ranged from 20 minutes long to a full hour. Over the course of a year, I collected more than 11 hours of interview audio.

⁸¹ Elizabeth Herr, interview by author, interview 2, transcript, December 7, 2016.

I used the snowball method to expand my sample from eight to 22 people. At the end of every interview, I would ask participants to suggest other people that I could speak with. Starting with Hmong American lawmakers in the Minnesota Legislature, I expanded my sample size to include staffers and non-Hmong legislators with significant Hmong American constituencies. Based on tips from interview participants, I also expanded the scope of my research to include City Council Members Dai Thao and Blong Yang. On a similar note, I was unaware that the Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans (CAPM) had a legislative board until I was informed by an interview participant. That tip allowed me to further extend the sample to include members of CAPM's legislative board. Overall, my use of these qualitative methods allowed me to interview people involved in Hmong American political representation at all level of government in Minnesota. My sample is a diverse set of individuals involved in Hmong American political representation, from the only Hmong American woman currently serving in public office in Minnesota to a white, male representative who shared an interest in pig farming with many of his Hmong American constituents.

Transcribing interviews by hand helped me identify key themes and pick up on details I may have missed in my notes. I also employed the representational frameworks described in Chapter 3. Reviewing every interview, I looked to apply concepts like symbolic, descriptive, surrogate, and substantive representation. I also analyzed interview transcripts for examples that supported other concepts like representation as a process, linked fates, political incorporation, and race-gendered institutions. Lastly, seeking an example of Hmong American political representation in action, I scrutinized the 14-year effort to create the Hmong-Lao Veterans Memorial on Capitol grounds. Using legislative records and news

articles, I pieced together the story of the Memorial. With translation help from Chue Thao, I was also analyzed clips from a Hmong news channel.

Limitations

As a non-Hmong researcher, I had limited success exploring the role of internal Hmong politics in Hmong American political representation. The Hmong American elected officials I interviewed were reluctant to speak on the record about politics within the Hmong American community. A handful of interview participants spoke to me about internal Hmong politics, but only once I had turned off the recorder. Perhaps these interview participants would have shared more with a Hmong American researcher. In this study, my inability to collect qualitative data on internal Hmong politics limits my understanding of its role in the creation of the Hmong-Lao Veterans Memorial and Hmong American political representation today.

Moreover, the qualitative nature of this study comes with a few limitations of its own. First, my findings have limited generalizability. Here, I made conclusions about the *current state* of Hmong American political representation in Minnesota, not Hmong American political representation in general. (In Chapter 8, I discuss whether my findings can be generalized to other refugee and immigrant communities, such as the Somali Americans in Minnesota). Second, my research is also limited in scope. Although Hmong Americans have been elected to office in California and Wisconsin, I focus on Minnesota, the only state where Hmong Americans have been elected to state government. Furthermore, because I prioritized interviews with politicians and staffers, I was not able to interview everyone I wanted. I also found that it was much easier to schedule interviews with elected officials, who are expected to be accessible to the public. Most notably, I was unable to interview Sen. Mee Moua, the first Hmong American elected to a state legislature in the U.S., Susan Kaying

Pha, who was elected to the Brooklyn Park City Council in 2016, staffers at the Coalition of Asian American Leaders, and members of the Lao community who advocated for the Hmong-Lao Veterans Memorial.

There are also some limitations associated with my use of semi-structured interviews. My presence during the interviews may have inadvertently affected participants' responses. Many participants assumed I was of Hmong descent, leading to some awkward moments when I told them I was not. One of my key findings is that the current state of Hmong American political representation is influenced by essentialism; ironically, the same appears to be true for the study of Hmong Americans. The prevailing assumption is that only Hmong Americans research Hmong Americans. On the other hand, my lack of a physical presence in two interviews may have affected participant responses. I was forced to conduct two interviews over the phone rather than in person, which may have discouraged participants from divulging information. Also, given that funding for the Hmong-Lao Veterans Memorial was appropriated during the 2013-2014 session, many legislators may have struggled to remember specific details. Overall, my study is a snapshot of Hmong American political representation in Minnesota today.

Chapter 5: The Politics of Essentialism

My interviews reveal that the politics of essentialism influence Hmong American political representation today. Aware of the assumption that they only ‘stand for’ and ‘act for’ Hmong Americans, Hmong American elected officials are careful to say they represent everyone. In doing so, Hmong American politicians avoid being pigeonholed and politically marginalized. The politics of essentialism color the traditional concepts of representation laid out by Pitkin, Mansbridge, and other scholars in political science. In this chapter, I examine how Hmong American elected officials approach symbolic, descriptive, surrogate, and substantive representation—or choose not to, given the political risks of appearing ‘too Hmong.’ First, in “Standing for Everyone,” I discuss the why Hmong American politicians may be reluctant to see themselves as symbolic or descriptive representatives. Next, in “What Are Hmong American Interests?,” I examine the diversity of Hmong American political issues. Afterwards, in “Substantive Representation with Symbolic Intent,” I argue that the substantive representation of Hmong Americans is currently limited to symbolic measures. I continue the discussion in “How Could You Not?,” examining the behavior of Hmong American politicians in majority-white legislative bodies. Lastly, in “Spreadsheets of Bills,” I debate whether white politicians are better positioned in the current political climate to ‘act for’ Hmong Americans. Overall, the politics of essentialism influence Hmong American political representation by making it so Hmong American politicians have little to gain and everything to lose from ‘standing for’ and ‘acting for’ their Hmong American constituents.

Standing for Everyone

Wary of being pigeonholed, all six Hmong American politicians I interviewed downplayed their role as ‘standing for’ Hmong Americans. For them, symbolic and

descriptive representation have little political value and may even overshadow their own accomplishments in office. Likewise, though Hmong American elected officials acknowledge that they represent people outside of their districts, they see themselves as surrogate representatives of people of color, not Hmong Americans specifically. For Hmong American politicians, there is little to gain but much to lose in being seen as representatives of Hmong Americans. The politics of essentialism ensure that Hmong American elected officials refuse to play into the assumption that they only represent Hmong Americans.

When she ran for the Roseville School Board in 2012, Kaying Thao was asked the question that confronts every Hmong American politician: how will you represent the white kids? As Thao recalls:

A lot of people asked. They thought I was only going to run to represent the Hmong population, which is really interesting because Roseville schools have about 7,600 kids in the student body, but only about 500 are Hmong. And those 500 are [spread] all over the school district. It was such a low population. But the perception that I was only running to serve them and their families was real. That's what people thought.⁸²

Thao's experience is only unusual in that her ability to represent non-Hmong constituents was questioned directly. The same question looms over other Hmong American elected officials. James Chang, a former staffer for Sen. Mee Moua, describes this idea explicitly: "People of color, whether they like it or not, are always going to be pigeonholed...The elected officials who are Hmong right now represent their districts, but there will always be individuals who will look at them and think, 'Oh, they just represent the Hmong population.'" ⁸³ Rep. Fue Lee, who was elected to the Minnesota House of Representatives in 2016, told me that the threat of being pigeonholed is "constantly in the

⁸² Kaying Thao, interview by author, interview 20, transcript, February 9, 2017.

⁸³ James Chang, interviewed by author, interview 1, transcript, December 6, 2016.

back of my mind.”⁸⁴ Similarly, as Blong Yang, the first Hmong American to be elected to the Minneapolis City Council, said: “I think when we started, people were afraid that this Hmong guy can’t represent all these other groups. Nobody says that of a white guy.”⁸⁵ Yang highlights a vexing double standard: unlike white politicians, Hmong American politicians must prove that they are able to represent constituents outside their own ethnic group. Hmong American politicians are seen as foreign, their interests alien to mainstream concerns. During her campaign for Roseville school board, a constituent even told Kaying Thao to change her name to an ‘American-sounding’ one because “people wouldn’t vote for someone that sounded so foreign.”⁸⁶ The danger of essentialism explains why the five Hmong American politicians I interviewed distance themselves from symbolic, descriptive, and surrogate representation.

Even trailblazing Hmong American politicians downplayed their roles as symbolic representatives of Hmong Americans. When I asked Dai Thao what it meant for him to be the first Hmong American to be elected to the St. Paul City Council, his answer was simple: “It means that I just happen to be Hmong American.”⁸⁷ Chang used nearly identical language: “I don’t think [Moua] went into it to be the first Hmong state senator, she went into it to be the state senator...And she happened to be Hmong.”⁸⁸ Similarly, when I questioned Blong Yang on the importance of being the first Hmong American to serve on the Minneapolis City Council, he said it “matters for a couple of seconds.” But even Yang does not place much importance in symbolic representation: “At the end of the day, it

⁸⁴ Rep. Fue Lee, interview by author, interview 14, transcript, January 24, 2017.

⁸⁵ Minneapolis City Council Member Blong Yang, interview by author, interview 9, transcript.

⁸⁶ Kaying Thao, interview by author, interview 20, transcript.

⁸⁷ St. Paul City Council Member Dai Thao, interview by author, interview 8, transcript, January 10, 2017.

⁸⁸ Interview with James Chang.

doesn't really matter because what matters is the work that you do.”⁸⁹ The consistency of these responses at both state and local levels of government suggests that Hmong American politicians are broadly dismissive of symbolic representation. Overall, Hmong American elected officials see little value in symbolic representation, at least publically.

Though these statements may seem disingenuous at first glance, they reflect the political reality facing Hmong American elected officials. Hmong American politicians have clear symbolic value to the Hmong American community. After all, the portraits of several Hmong Americans who have been elected to office—Mee Moua included—decorate the halls of Hmong Village, a popular Hmong market. However, if symbolic representation is to mirror constituents in a politically relevant way, then we must consider what is politically relevant in Minnesota.⁹⁰ There are no majority-Hmong districts in the state; being a symbol of the Hmong community is not enough to win elections. As Sen. Fong Hawj told me, “There’s no Hmong-land out there.”⁹¹ Politically, symbolic representation only goes so far. Once elected, Hmong American politicians have little reason to play up their roles as symbolic representatives, especially since doing so could contribute to the perception that they are only representing Hmong Americans.

But do Hmong American politicians think of themselves as symbolic representatives, even if they publically deny that role? My interview data suggests not. None of the six Hmong American politicians I interviewed told me they thought of themselves as symbolic representatives of Hmong Americans, even on a personal level. In fact, both James Chang and Dai Thao said the idea of a symbolic representative of Hmong Americans died with

⁸⁹ Minneapolis City Council Member Blong Yang, interview by author, interview 9, transcript.

⁹⁰ Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation*.

⁹¹ Sen. Fong Hawj, interview by author, interview 16, transcript, January 27, 2017.

General Vang Pao, an influential Hmong general who passed away in 2011.⁹² Similarly, the Hmong American legislators I interviewed saw themselves as descriptive representatives of their districts generally, but not Hmong Americans specifically. All five Hmong American politicians I interviewed, like every other politician in my sample, had a well-rehearsed answer for who they represent: their district and the state of Minnesota. Rep. Fue Lee, who was just elected to the Minnesota House of Representatives, exemplifies this response:

I grew up in this community in North Minneapolis. A lot of the issues I saw growing up and faced personally were issues that my neighbors did. These issues are issues that don't just affect one racial group. They affect all of us in my district and most of the people here in the state of Minnesota, too.⁹³

Rep. Lee aligns himself with his neighbors and the broader constituency of North Minneapolis and the state of Minnesota, rather than his Hmong American constituency. As with symbolic representation, Hmong American politicians have little to gain from describing themselves as descriptive representatives—especially when there is already the assumption that Hmong American elected officials only represent Hmong Americans. As Blong Yang, the first Hmong American elected to the Minneapolis City Council, told me: “Whatever I do is representation of the Hmong community.”⁹⁴ If Yang is already assumed to only represent Hmong Americans, then openly describing himself as a descriptive representative of Hmong Americans would only add to that perception. These findings support earlier interviews conducted by Takeo Yoshikawa, who noted that Mee Moua, the first Hmong American elected to the Minnesota Senate, who similarly rejected the notion that she was a descriptive representative of Hmong Americans.⁹⁵ All in all, Hmong American

⁹² Interview with Dai Thao; Interview with James Chang.

⁹³ Rep. Fue Lee, interview by author, interview 14, transcript.

⁹⁴ Minneapolis City Council Member Blong Yang, interview by author, interview 9, transcript.

⁹⁵ Yoshikawa, “From a Refugee Camp to the Minnesota State Senate: A Case Study of a Hmong American Woman’s Challenge.”

politicians appear unwilling to link their identities as Hmong Americans to their potential roles as descriptive representations.

Likewise, Sen. Hawj exemplifies the descriptive representation of Asian Americans generally but not Hmong Americans specifically. As Elizabeth Herr told me:

Because Sen. Hawj was the only legislator of Asian descent, a lot of them would utilize our office or call us in the office just because they could identify with us in terms of our culture. Also, another part is that he's an older man. A lot of people in the community identify him as a father figure. In our community, we represent these people and they utilize our office because they can identify with us.⁹⁶

Here, Herr speaks to the value of descriptive representation. Without an Asian American face in office to identify with, many of the Sen. Hawj's constituents would not reach out to his office. Clearly, identity and culture play a significant part in Sen. Hawj's role as a descriptive representative. Even so, Sen. Hawj refuses to be a descriptive representative of Hmong Americans, instead choosing to represent Asian Americans more generally. Overall, with descriptive and symbolic representation, Hmong Americans address the eternal question—how will they represent the white kids?—by deracializing and denying that they represent Hmong American constituents in any special way.

However, two out of six Hmong American politicians in my sample associated themselves with surrogate representation. Even then, these politicians only acknowledged they are surrogate representatives of minorities outside of their districts, not Hmong Americans specifically. For instance, Chang recounts that although Sen. Moua saw herself as representing the East Side of St. Paul, she recognized that women and people of color looked up to her and “found a sympathetic ear in her with their issues.”⁹⁷ In that sense, Sen. Moua acted as a surrogate for women and minorities outside her own district. Likewise,

⁹⁶ Elizabeth Herr, interview by author, interview 2, transcript.

⁹⁷ Interview with James Chang.

Elizabeth Herr, Sen. Founq Hawj's Legislative Assistant, describes surrogate representation in terms of minorities, not just Hmong Americans:

There aren't that many legislators who are minorities, so we represent people beyond our borders...I get a lot of calls from different minority groups, not just Hmong people, who are outside of our district...There's a lot of Somalis and other Southeast Asian groups. As a minority, [Sen. Hawj] represents beyond his borders. We get to know bits and pieces and cultures of all different groups.⁹⁸

Herr is careful to note that surrogate representation occurs for multiple minority groups other than Hmong Americans. As with symbolic and descriptive representation, Herr distances Sen Hawj's office from the representation of Hmong Americans specifically. To avoid the perception that he is only representing Hmong Americans, Sen. Hawj stresses the idea that he represents everyone equally, whether they live inside his district or not.

Nonetheless, even if they refuse to admit so, Hmong American elected officials play a special role in their community. As Bill Fleming, who was a senior advisor to Sen. Hawj's campaign, described: "I think those public officials and aspiring public officials...understand they are taking on more than a Senate district, or more than a House district... They know they have a greater weight and a greater responsibility, not only to the state of Minnesota but to the communities they represent."⁹⁹

The limited applicability of symbolic, descriptive, and surrogate representation in Hmong American political representation suggests that the danger of essentialism outweighs any potential benefit of 'standing for' Hmong Americans. As I discussed in the literature review, scholars theorize that descriptive representation has symbolic benefits for members of disadvantaged groups.¹⁰⁰ While that may be true, Hmong American politicians do not

⁹⁸ Elizabeth Herr, interview by author, interview 2, transcript.

⁹⁹ Bill Fleming, interview by author, interview 21, transcript, February 26, 2017.

¹⁰⁰ Mansbridge, "Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women?"

have the leeway to admit so, especially since their “American-ness will always be questioned,” as Chang told me.¹⁰¹ This theory might be best applied to larger, more generalizable, politically powerful groups like women and African Americans. If there were majority-Hmong districts in Minnesota, then Hmong American elected officials might be more willing to acknowledge their role as ‘standing for’ Hmong Americans. To these politicians, being known as ‘the Hmong senator’ or ‘the Hmong city council member’ is more dangerous than advantageous. Above all else, Hmong American elected officials must prove that they can represent the white kids—even if that means rejecting the idea that they ‘stand for’ Hmong Americans in any special way.

However, there is one other hypothetical benefit of descriptive representation: that members of marginalized groups are better able to articulate their interests in legislatures, city councils, and school boards. In other words, representatives who ‘stand for’ constituents may also ‘act for’ them by advocating for their interests. But what are Hmong American interests? In the next section, I define Hmong American political interests and discuss how they are represented by both Hmong and non-Hmong politicians.

If ‘standing for’ Hmong Americans is risky for Hmong American politicians, then ‘acting for’ them is even more complicated. As with symbolic, descriptive, and surrogate representation, the substantive representation of Hmong Americans is shaped by the politics of essentialism. Hmong American politicians who ‘act for’ Hmong Americans often do so in symbolic ways, shielding themselves from political risk.

¹⁰¹ Interview with James Chang.

What Are Hmong American Interests?

Though they are wary of being perceived as ‘standing for’ their own, Hmong American elected officials acknowledge that they ‘act for’ their Hmong American constituents in a variety of ways. Hmong American political interests are broadly defined; the elected officials and staffers I interviewed claimed that Hmong American issues encompass anything from education to urban farming. While the political science literature has developed various definitions for women’s issues and African American issues, the definition (and therefore the substantive representation) of Hmong American issues is much messier. In the interviews I conducted, the substantive representation of Hmong American interests fell into three categories: Hmong American issues as mainstream ‘American’ issues, racial equity, and specific cultural concerns.

A common claim made by some Hmong and non-Hmong legislators is that there are no Hmong-specific policy interests, making the substantive representation of Hmong Americans indistinct from that of other groups. As James Chang explained to me: “Hmong issues are the same as any other American issue.”¹⁰² Like Chang, Dai Thao described Hmong American issues as “the same things that other Americans care about.”¹⁰³ Similarly, Rep. Lee told me that Hmong American issues “are issues that don’t just affect one racial group. They affect all of us in my district and most of the people here in the state of Minnesota, too.”¹⁰⁴ These responses can be interpreted as a reaction to essentialism and the perceived foreignness of Hmong Americans, echoing the way Hmong American politicians distanced themselves from ‘standing for’ representation to avoid being pigeonholed. Hmong American

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Interview with Dai Thao.

¹⁰⁴ Rep. Fue Lee, interview by author, interview 14, transcript.

politicians who say that there are no Hmong-specific policy issues pursue a strategy of deracialization, drawing a boundary between their descriptive characteristics and policy interests. That strategy appears to have been at least partly successful: even some non-Hmong elected officials that represent Hmong American constituencies, such as Sen. Jeremy Miller, Rep. Sheldon Johnson, and Rep. Rena Moran, supported the notion that Hmong American issues are American issues. As Rep. Moran said, “In a lot of ways, [the journey of Hmong Americans] is similar to my own journey. I think their hopes and dreams are my hopes and dreams.”¹⁰⁵ In fact, many of these non-Hmong politicians described education as the most prominent Hmong American issue—certainly not an interest limited to Hmong Americans. Overall, as Sen. Miller recognized, “the Hmong community’s priorities are similar to anyone else’s.”¹⁰⁶

Taken to its logical extreme, the idea that Hmong American issues are American issues suggests that Hmong Americans do not need substantive representation. As Sen. Roger Chamberlain, a white, male legislator who sits on the legislative board of the Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans, said:

I represent everybody no matter what their color, race, creed, values, or background is...We have more commonalities than differences...I don’t look at [representation] as, ‘What can I do for the Hmong community?’ or ‘what can I do for the Chinese community?’ That’s divisive. What can I do for Americans and Minnesotans that benefit everybody?¹⁰⁷

Here, Sen. Chamberlain sees substantive representation on behalf of Hmong Americans as “divisive.” He is more concerned with representing everybody equally, or at least in a way that seems equal to him. To Sen. Chamberlain, there are no Hmong American

¹⁰⁵ Rep. Rena Moran, interview by author, interview 19, transcript, February 2, 2017.

¹⁰⁶ Sen. Jeremy Miller, interview by author, interview 13, transcript, January 24, 2017.

¹⁰⁷ Sen. Roger Chamberlain, interview by author, interview 4, transcript, December 15, 2016.

issues. Because Hmong Americans are no different than anyone else, they do not require any special attention. Sen. Chamberlain even referred to himself as “colorblind” in representing the “people of the district I serve and of the state of Minnesota.”¹⁰⁸ Yet Sen. Chamberlain’s ‘colorblindness’ and insistence that substantive representation is unnecessary stand in contrast to the activism of many Hmong American politicians. Unlike Sen. Chamberlain, these Hmong American elected officials recognize specific Hmong American interests to be represented substantively.

For instance, several Hmong American elected officials identified equity initiatives as a key part of ‘acting for’ Hmong Americans. As Kaying Thao, who was asked whether she could represent the white kids during her campaign for Roseville school board, told me:

In the political world, there are things you say in public and things you say in private. You compartmentalize what you do in public and in private. While I spoke highly of representing everyone and being there for everyone, a lot of things I did at the board table came through an equity lens.¹⁰⁹

For Kaying Thao, the substantive representation of Hmong Americans is achieved by advocating for racial equity. Tellingly, Kaying Thao sees racial equity advocacy as separate from her claim to represent everyone, suggesting that racial equity is a Hmong American political interest. Similarly, Sen. Fong Hawj pointed to the 2016 session’s racial equity spending package as one of his proudest accomplishments in office. Interestingly, Sen. Hawj also referred to equity at the district level, claiming that he brought much-needed resources to his district and put the East Side of St. Paul “on the radar.”¹¹⁰ Like Kaying Thao, Sen. Hawj ‘acts for’ Hmong Americans through equity initiatives. Always cognizant that he must have a broad appeal, Sen. Hawj is sure to link equity to his district at large. These responses

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Kaying Thao, interview by author, interview 20, transcript.

¹¹⁰ Sen. Fong Hawj, interview by author, interview 16, transcript.

support the notion that equity for people of color is a key Hmong American political issue. Clearly, the substantive representation of Hmong Americans is not just not limited to mainstream ‘American’ issues like education.

At the city level, other Hmong American politicians relate to Sen. Hawj’s focus on equity, even suggesting that the substantive representation of African Americans is equivalent to ‘acting for’ Hmong Americans. In doing so, these Hmong American politicians link the fates of Hmong Americans and African Americans. For instance, as Blong Yang told me about his North Minneapolis constituency: “To some extent, I feel like if I do a great job for African Americans, it just kind of trickles down to all these other groups.”¹¹¹ Likewise, Dai Thao also links the interests of African Americans and Hmong Americans:

I went into this office strategically knowing that if I am elected, I can do a lot more for the African American community...And if there’s issues that I can solve in the African American community, I know that it would benefit the Hmong American community because they’re both people of color and racism impacts them the same way.¹¹²

These comments challenge the usual definition of substantive representation by suggesting that the substantive representation of Hmong Americans can be achieved by ‘acting for’ African Americans. Moreover, they explicitly link the fates of Hmong American and African Americans, underscoring a group consciousness on the part of Dai Thao and Yang. Here, the concept of linked fate gives Hmong Americans and African Americans a shared interest in political representation. Furthermore, both elected officials racialize, rather than deracialize, the concept of substantive representation—a strategy made possible by their diverse, urban constituencies. These interviews suggest that the substantive representation of Hmong Americans is linked to the representation of African American

¹¹¹ Minneapolis City Council Member Blong Yang, interview by author, interview 9, transcript.

¹¹² Interview with Dai Thao.

interests, at least in city government. With larger districts at the state level, Hmong American politicians like Sen. Hawj and Rep. Lee are unable to racialize their representative claim in a similar way to their city level counterparts. On the other hand, city council members like Dai Thao and Blong Yang have the freedom to construct Hmong American political identity in the pursuit of social justice. As Dai Thao told me, “Being Hmong American, I’m in a position to advocate for lots of different communities.”¹¹³

Lastly, several Hmong and non-Hmong politicians said that addressing specific cultural concerns of the Hmong community is a form of substantive representation. For instance, Yang claimed that “any sort of services that are related to LEP [Limited English Proficiency] issues” are Hmong American issues, since many older Hmong Americans are LEP.¹¹⁴ Similarly, Elizabeth Herr, Sen. Hawj’s Legislative Assistant, mentioned a much-needed stoplight in the high-traffic areas around Hmong Village. Sen. Hawj pointed to the creation of a sports field for *tuj lub*, a traditional Hmong game, as one of his proudest accomplishments as a legislator.¹¹⁵ On a similar note, Rep. Tim Mahoney, who represents a sizeable Hmong American constituency on the East Side of St. Paul, spoke about his advocacy for the inclusion of Hmong cultural elements in a Chinese garden in his district. (He was also careful to state that the “majority of issues [the Hmong community] brings up affect the rest of people of color.”)¹¹⁶ Likewise, Rep. Raymond Dehn told me that he is a “big advocate for urban farming” because of the legacy of farming in Hmong culture.¹¹⁷ These examples speak to specific cultural needs within the Hmong American community,

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Minneapolis City Council Member Blong Yang, interview by author, interview 9, transcript.

¹¹⁵ Sen. Fong Hawj, interview by author, interview 16, transcript.

¹¹⁶ Rep. Tim Mahoney, interview by author, interview 12, transcript, January 18, 2017.

¹¹⁷ Rep. Raymond Dehn, interview by author, interview 7, transcript, December 15, 2016.

showing that the substantive representation of Hmong Americans is diverse and varies by elected official. Overall, Hmong American political interests are not just mainstream ‘American’ interests—they also include equity initiatives and specific cultural concerns.

The concept of substantive representation proves far more applicable than symbolic, descriptive, or surrogate representation in the study of Hmong American political representation. Hmong American political interests are so broad that there is less risk for elected officials to acknowledge that they ‘act for’ Hmong Americans. Furthermore, many issues facing Hmong Americans also affect other minority groups, allowing politicians to ‘act for’ people of color generally while still benefitting Hmong Americans specifically. This concept is seen at the state level, where public policy is directed at more generalizable constituencies such as people of color or Southeast Asians. But at the city level, Hmong American politicians have the freedom to explicitly racialize their efforts, even claiming that the substantive representation of African Americans has a trickle-down effect for Hmong Americans. However, the danger of essentialism is still reflected in the way some Hmong American politicians claim that Hmong American issues are the same as mainstream ‘American’ issues. Sen. Hawj concedes that the substantive representation of Hmong Americans could hurt his political appeal:

I want to be more mindful that, being Hmong already, I don’t want to use my ethnicity as leverage. I represent a district where a fourth of the population are Hmong, a fourth are Asian, but the greater Minnesota is more than the diversity I represent. So I have to appeal to them too.¹¹⁸

Ironically, Sen. Hawj’s own ethnicity can be a limiting factor in his efforts to ‘act for’ Hmong Americans—a paradox that I will explore in a subsequent section. Thankfully, Sen.

¹¹⁸ Sen. Fong Hawj, interview by author, interview 16, transcript.

Hawj has a trick up his sleeve: resolutions, which are a low-risk way for him to ‘act for’ Hmong Americans.

Substantive Representation with Symbolic Intent

Resolutions are symbolic documents that are passed by the Legislature but not codified into law. Typically, resolutions are requested by veterans of the Secret War in Laos within the Hmong American community. Resolutions offer a low-risk way for Sen. Hawj to ‘act for’ these Hmong American veterans. Elizabeth Herr, Sen. Hawj’s Legislative Assistant, describes resolutions as unique to Sen. Hawj: “Our office utilizes or writes the most resolutions per legislative session. Just this year alone, I probably have created about 70-80 resolutions. Some offices don’t even write resolutions at all.”¹¹⁹ Each of these resolutions are formally recognized by the Senate. After going through the Rules & Administration committee, resolutions are often signed by the Majority Leader. Resolutions are symbolic in value but substantive in nature; Sen. Hawj ‘acts for’ Hmong American constituents when he delivers the resolutions they ask for.

Within the Hmong American community, the official nature of resolutions are highly valued and respected. As Sen. Hawj explained:

For the Hmong community, since it is a community that is far from being recognized by many mainstream groups, they value that recognition much more. So that’s why it makes sense for me to present them with resolutions. Because who will applaud them? Who will commend them for their work? It’s good that everybody else may have acknowledged them, but if they get acknowledgment from the Senate, it means a lot to them.¹²⁰

As a legislator, Sen. Hawj has the ability give the Hmong American community formal recognition it cannot find anywhere else. Resolutions are a way for Sen. Hawj to ‘act

¹¹⁹ Elizabeth Herr, interview by author, interview 2, transcript.

¹²⁰ Sen. Founng Hawj, interview by author, interview 16, transcript.

for’ Hmong American constituents, particularly veterans, by addressing their wishes to be recognized for their service. While resolutions are not exclusively a Hmong American issue—as Elizabeth Herr was quick to point out—they hold special value for that community, suggesting they play an important role in the substantive representation of Hmong Americans. What’s more, the symbolic nature of resolutions make them a low-risk endeavor.

A typical resolution looks like Senate Resolution 282, which Sen. Hawj introduced during the 2015-2016 legislative session. The resolution’s description reads:

A Senate resolution expressing the sense of the Senate recognizing May 14th as "Minnesota Hmong Memorial Day" for all who have served, died, and suffered in the Secret War in Laos during the Vietnam War in the years 1961-1975.¹²¹

Like most of Sen. Hawj’s resolutions, SR 282 commends the Hmong veterans who fought in the Secret War in Laos. The resolution’s language also praises Minnesota’s Hmong American community, stating that the “Hmong have established a strong and vibrant community enriched with diversity, cultural identity, and economic sustainability.”¹²² Not only does Sen. Hawj honor the Hmong American veterans, he also recognizes the larger community they belong to. The resolution’s signers are then-Senate Majority Leader Tom Bakk, then-Secretary of the Senate JoAnne Zoff, and a total of five Senators, including Sen. Sandra Pappas and Sen. John Hoffman. The only real difference between SR 282 and Sen. Hawj’s other resolutions is that it honors Hmong veterans as a group, not individually. Other resolutions single out individual veterans for recognition, presumably at their request. As Elizabeth Herr told me, “We do these things because they ask us to.”¹²³ Overall, the

¹²¹ “SR 282,” *Minnesota Senate*, accessed February 26, 2017, <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/bills/bill.php?b=Senate&f=SR0282&ssn=0&y=2016>.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Elizabeth Herr, interview by author, interview 2, transcript.

resolution satisfies a cultural need for official recognition, and it is no wonder that they are often requested by Hmong American veterans.

The following table shows the number of resolutions introduced by Sen. Hawj during his first term in office. I use Sen. John Hoffman as a point of comparison because he represents a large Hmong American constituency in Brooklyn Park. Similarly, because every Senate district is broken into two House districts, I include Rep. Tim Mahoney and Rep. Sheldon Johnson, who are Sen. Hawj’s House counterparts. These numbers are taken from the Minnesota Legislature website, which keeps record of the number of bills and resolutions authored each session.

	Resolutions Introduced, 2013-2014	Resolutions Introduced, 2015-2016
Minnesota Senate	248	303
Minnesota House of Representatives	8	3
Sen. Foung Hawj (SD 67)	19 (17 Hmong related)	12 (11 Hmong related)
Sen. John Hoffman (SD 36)	10 (1 Hmong related)	2 (0 Hmong related)
Rep. Tim Mahoney (HD 67A)	0	0
Rep. Sheldon Johnson (HD 67B)	0	0

Additionally, at the time of writing during the 2017-2018 legislative session, Sen. Hawj had already introduced nine resolutions, six of which recognize Hmong American veterans. Nearly all of Sen. Hawj’s resolutions are related to Hmong Americans, a rare example of a substantive good targeted towards Hmong American constituents. While Sen. Hawj distanced himself from ‘standing for’ Hmong Americans, his resolutions have clear symbolic value to that community. Likewise, although Sen. Hawj portrays himself as substantive representative of people of color and his district generally, he also ‘acts for’ his

Hmong American constituents by introducing resolutions in their name. Furthermore, as demonstrated by the table above, Sen. Hawj makes greater use of resolutions than his corresponding House members. This difference suggests that Hmong American constituents prefer to request resolutions from Sen. Hawj only. In the case of resolutions, a Hmong face in the legislature guarantees the substantive representation of Hmong American interests. Similarly, that only one of Sen. Hoffman's resolutions between 2013-2016 was Hmong-related suggests that Sen. Hawj is primarily responsible for representing Hmong Americans through resolutions.

However, Sen. Hawj is not the only legislator to make use of resolutions. Resolutions are a low-risk strategy because they are so widely employed in the legislature. For instance, during the 2013-2014 session, the legislature introduced a total of 209 resolutions. The next session, legislators in both chambers introduced a total of 309 resolutions. In both sessions, Sen. Hawj's resolutions were less than 10 percent of the total resolutions introduced. The number of resolutions that Sen. Hawj introduces is not noteworthy, but their focus on Hmong Americans is. No other policymaking area affords Sen. Hawj the same freedom to 'act for' Hmong American constituents. Symbolic, descriptive, surrogate, and substantive representation all pose some risk to Sen. Hawj, since they could contribute to the perception that he is 'too Hmong' and unable to represent non-Hmong constituents.

Not all Hmong American elected officials use resolutions as extensively as Sen. Hawj. In the House, Rep. Lee has yet to introduce any resolutions (at the time of writing). At the city level, resolutions are occasionally used to recognize Hmong Americans or their community. In 2016, the St. Paul city council passed a resolution proclaiming May 14 as

Hmong American day, echoing Sen. Hawj's Senate Resolution 282.¹²⁴ However, the Minneapolis city council has yet to do the same, perhaps because the Hmong American population is centered in St. Paul and not Minneapolis. As previously discussed, Hmong American elected officials at the city level have more freedom to racialize their representation and 'act for' Hmong Americans or even African Americans. As such, Sen. Hawj's use of resolutions is unique, even among Hmong American politicians. Overall, while resolutions offer interesting insight into Hmong American political representation, they are not the end-all and be-all for Hmong American elected officials looking to 'act for' Hmong Americans.

Resolutions are emblematic of the larger political context that inhibits Hmong American political representation. Minnesota's current political climate encourages the deracialization of Hmong American elected officials. As I discussed earlier, Hmong American politicians distance themselves from 'standing for' Hmong Americans and the concepts of symbolic, descriptive, and surrogate representation. Likewise, Hmong American politicians often make the deracialized claim that that Hmong American interests are the same as mainstream 'American' interests. In this landscape, resolutions stand out because they are the only way legislators can specifically 'act for' Hmong American constituents. Resolutions may be an example of substantive representation, but their impact is primarily symbolic. Whether Minnesota is ready for more than just symbolic impact remains up for debate. At the end of the day, none of the Hmong American elected officials I interviewed were comfortable acknowledging they represent Hmong Americans symbolically or substantively. As Sia Her, Executive Director of the Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans,

¹²⁴ "City of St. Paul - Legislation," *St. Paul City Council*, accessed February 28, 2017, <https://stpaul.legistar.com/Legislation.aspx>.

told me: “In an ideal situation, I wouldn’t want to talk about representation of the Hmong community or the Asian community. I would just want representation.”¹²⁵

How Could You Not?

The politics of essentialism also influence the legislative behavior of Hmong American politicians. As token people of color in majority-white legislative bodies, the Hmong American politicians I interviewed were wary of being ‘othered.’ Furthermore, the current political climate keeps Hmong American politicians from ‘legislating against the grain’ or engaging in other acts of resistance. Still, Hmong American elected officials are driven by their experiences as people of color and the intersections of race, class, and gender in their lives.

While I expected Hmong American politicians to say they engaged in acts of legislative resistance in majority-white bodies, that was not quite the case. Rather, these Hmong Americans spoke to the intersections of race, class, and gender in their own lives as key influences on their legislative decision making. For instance, when I asked Vallay Varro, who served on the St. Paul School Board from 2009-2010, whether she had to push for issues that would have been overlooked otherwise, she told me:

I don't think I ever felt that. I think that we [would] ask questions about the impact of potential policies, curriculum, or whatever topic might be in discussion [on] various communities [of color] ...But how could you not when you're in a school district as diverse as St. Paul? Over 100 home languages spoken within the district and within some of those language groups, many dialects. How could you not ask that?¹²⁶

Indeed, the question of ‘how could you not?’ captures the outlook of Hmong Americans serving in majority-white legislative bodies. How could Hmong American elected

¹²⁵ Sia Her, interview by author, interview 6, transcript, December 15, 2016.

¹²⁶ Vallay Varro, interview by author, interview 22, transcript, March 16, 2017.

officials not be influenced by the intersections of race, class, and gender in their own lives? For Rep. Fue Lee, “growing up with parents who did not have any formal education in a very low income household...really taught me the value of public service or seeing how we could create more opportunities for folks who are less fortunate.”¹²⁷ Likewise, Dai Thao told me that his “experience as a person of color, as a person who has been marginalized, who understands poverty, who’s lived through poverty” motivates him to “serve folks that have been marginalized.”¹²⁸ Here, the salience of race and class contrasts with the white, male representatives I interviewed, who would generally avoid discussing their own identities. That Hmong American politicians are driven by their experiences as people of color—and are open about that influence—is meaningful but is not enough to ensure substantive outcomes.

Only one of the state legislators I interviewed directly supported the idea of the Minnesota Legislature as a race-gendered institution: Rep. Moran, an African American woman who described herself as “one of those women within a disparity of a disparity,” told me she is often “disappointed” by the way her peers see “our communities and our people and our children and our families and our schools.”¹²⁹ To Rep. Moran, it often feels like her peers see her—and people that look like her—as nothing more than racial disparities. Accordingly, Rep. Moran takes it upon herself to educate her fellow legislators, trying to help them understand her perspective as an African American woman. When I asked Rep. Moran how often she must educate her peers, she replied, “All the time. All the time. Every day. Six

¹²⁷ Rep. Fue Lee, interview by author, interview 14, transcript.

¹²⁸ Interview with Dai Thao.

¹²⁹ Rep. Rena Moran, interview by author, interview 19, transcript.

years later, all the time. Every day.”¹³⁰ Rep. Moran also gave an example of the challenges she faces as a member of the minority party:

When I wanted to introduce the Women of Color Opportunity Act, I went to other people in this body to [ask], “what do you think about this?” And they would say, “Well, that word, ‘people of color’—maybe you should use ‘women in poverty.’ Or ‘disadvantaged women.’ I’m like, “How condescending!” ...I cannot use words like that to describe our community. It’s not appropriate, it’s not right.”¹³¹

That her fellow legislators see people of color and women in poverty as identical speaks volumes to the way Rep. Moran is seen at the legislature. In the House, Rep. Moran is one of only three legislators who are women of color.

Perhaps the conditions do not exist for Hmong American elected officials to truly ‘legislate against the grain.’ First, Hmong Americans remain a rarity at all levels of government in Minnesota. For instance, the Minnesota Legislature has seen no more than two Hmong American legislators serving at the same time; the St. Paul and Minneapolis city councils have only just elected their first Hmong American members. Likewise, there is only one instance in which two Hmong Americans have concurrently served on the St. Paul School Board.¹³² Not only have Hmong Americans remained a minority in majority-white legislative bodies, they have also rarely served together. As it turns out, resistance is not an easy burden to bear alone.

Second, Hmong American politicians may feel they are still trying to prove themselves as Americans, leaving little room for acts of resistance. As Blong Yang lamented to me, “I’m not that different. But I think that’s the part that is hard for people. They look at these Hmong folks, these other folks, and they just think, ‘You guys are stuck in 1980 or

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Yang Lor, “Hmong Political Involvement in St. Paul, Minnesota and Fresno, California.”

1976...just fresh off the boat.”¹³³ The same pressures that compel Hmong American politicians to distance themselves from forms of ‘standing for’ representation, also keeps these elected officials from resisting majority-white legislative bodies in the way Hawkesworth expects them to. With more legislative experience, this hesitance may fade. As Bill Fleming, who was a senior advisor on Sen. Hawj’s campaign, suggested, “I know [being seen as foreign] is a concern that they have. A concern like that comes from being different. And I think that experience, the more years they get under their belt and as they grow into leadership and what have you, that will go away.”¹³⁴

Thankfully, Hmong American elected officials can find solidarity in their fellow politicians of color, at least at the state level. This legislative session has seen the formation of a People of Color and Indigenous (POCI) caucus, a first for the Minnesota Legislature. Describing the caucus to me, Rep. Rena Moran could barely contain her excitement: “I am really, really, really excited about our people of color and indigenous caucus...[the] caucus, which is very diverse, represents different ethnic groups that will help us to be more powerful up here in this body.”¹³⁵ The POCI caucus may make acts of legislative resistance possible. As Sen. Hawj told me, “We are all in the same pool, together.”¹³⁶ On the staffer side, female staffers of color have also created their own, so far unnamed caucus. Combined, these efforts may speak to the start of a critical mass of policymakers and staffers of color that challenge the unspoken hierarchy of race, class, and gender in the legislature.

Hmong American elected officials certainly recognize the dangers of being tokens in majority-white legislative bodies. As Fue Lee said, “As one of only a handful of legislators of

¹³³ Minneapolis City Council Member Blong Yang, interview by author, interview 9, transcript.

¹³⁴ Bill Fleming, interview by author, interview 21, transcript.

¹³⁵ Rep. Rena Moran, interview by author, interview 19, transcript.

¹³⁶ Sen. Fong Hawj, interview by author, interview 16, transcript.

color over at the state legislature, it really takes a lot of effort to bring a voice to many of our diverse communities here in the state of Minnesota.”¹³⁷ But at what point does that additional “effort” become a burden? For example, Hmong American politicians are expected to educate their peers on the Hmong American community. Elizabeth Herr told me that Sen. Hawj is seen as an expert on Hmong Americans and immigrants: “A lot of the times other legislators or commissioners from different departments come and ask Sen. Hawj for advice on how to reach out to immigrant communities, as well as Hmong communities, just because the culture is much more different than what they’re used to.”¹³⁸ As tokens, Hmong American elected officials are conscious of the need to prove their ‘American-ness.’ However, acting as the ‘Hmong legislator’ can feel like a form of othering to Hmong American politicians. Being a token can quickly become a burden. Ultimately, as James Chang put it, “I think as a person of color you’re always carrying that weight.”¹³⁹

Spreadsheets of Bills

Ironically, the white legislators I interviewed were more than willing to talk about their efforts to ‘act for’ their Hmong American constituents. One lawmaker offered to show me a spreadsheet of policy efforts aimed at Hmong Americans and other minority groups; another legislator sent me a list of racial and economic justice initiatives he supported during the 2015-2016 legislative session. Paradoxically, non-Hmong politicians have greater political leeway than their Hmong American counterparts to pursue the substantive representation of Hmong Americans. Even so, the ability of white elected officials to represent Hmong American constituents is finally being questioned by their increasingly diverse constituencies.

¹³⁷ Rep. Fue Lee, interview by author, interview 14, transcript.

¹³⁸ Elizabeth Herr, interview by author, interview 2, transcript.

¹³⁹ Interview with James Chang.

Non-Hmong legislators representing Hmong American constituencies were quick to identify their work on behalf of Hmong Americans. Sen. Hoffman’s spreadsheet of bills reflects the growing Hmong American presence in his district. The senator has likely been paying attention to cities like Brooklyn Park, where Susan Pha became the first Hmong American (and person of color) to be elected to the city council in 2016.¹⁴⁰ Similarly, Rep. Rod Hamilton’s list of racial and economic justice initiatives reflects his role as a Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans legislative board member. Moreover, Rep. Mahoney told me that he is responsive to the Hmong American community in his district because “they are the ones bringing the issues from the community to the forefront.”¹⁴¹ Likewise, Rep. Johnson mentioned his Hmong American constituents’ organizing power as “encouragement” to pursue their interests. Overall, while the Hmong American elected officials I interviewed were hesitant to speak about substantive representation, their non-Hmong counterparts feel responsible to ‘act for’ their Hmong American constituents.

Paradoxically, these non-Hmong legislators have more political leeway to ‘act for’ Hmong Americans than their Hmong American counterparts. As Chang told me, “No one ever asks the white guy who gets elected to become President if they can represent communities of color. It’s automatically assumed they can.”¹⁴² The same is true at state and local levels of government. White politicians rarely face their own version of the question that confronted Kaying Thao: how will you represent the non-white kids? With substantive representation, white politicians do not have to worry being seen as ‘too Hmong.’ This

¹⁴⁰ Ibrahim Hirsi, “‘People Were Looking for a Change’: a Q&A with Susan Pha, Brooklyn Park’s First Council Member of Color,” *MinnPost*, December 6, 2012, <https://www.minnpost.com/new-americans/2016/12/people-were-looking-change-qa-susan-pha-brooklyn-parks-first-council-member-co>.

¹⁴¹ Rep. Tim Mahoney, interview by author, interview 12, transcript.

¹⁴² Interview with James Chang.

paradox raises an uncomfortable possibility: that non-Hmong elected officials are better positioned to advocate for Hmong Americans than Hmong American elected officials themselves. Substantively, that possibility may be reality. As long as Hmong American politicians feel pressured to downplay their ‘Hmong-ness,’ their ability to ‘act for’ Hmong American constituents will be limited. But descriptively and symbolically, there is no doubt Hmong American elected officials are better able to represent Hmong Americans than non-Hmong politicians. Describing the value of Hmong American faces in government, Sia Her told me:

Often times, walking into an office that is occupied by a member of one’s ethnic or racial group can make all the difference in the world for members of our community... That sense of welcome into government, into the people’s house. Whether it’s during the legislative process and they’re coming into committee and they see legislator that looks like them, or [whether] they’re walking into a specific legislator’s office, that’s an emotionally powerful signal to members of our community: that they are not always an outsider, that they too can aspire to that position or they too can at least aspire to walk into that office without feeling like they’re walking into the lion’s den.¹⁴³

But even with Hmong American faces in government, the current political climate is a lion’s den for those politicians, who are expected to ‘act for’ Hmong Americans without being ‘too Hmong.’ They must represent the marginalized without marginalizing themselves.

But white politicians, especially those representing diverse constituencies, are finally being asked if they can represent the nonwhite kids. White politicians have more freedom to ‘act for’ Hmong Americans and people of color, but they are also under more pressure from their constituents to do so. Referring to this year’s mayoral race in Minneapolis, Kaying Thao described a colleague who decided not to run for mayor:

He took a step back and thought, ‘you know what? I’m a white male. What am I doing running to represent all these folks of color? There should be a person of color running.’ And that story is becoming more common. I want to say that’s the

¹⁴³ Sia Her, interview by author, interview 6, transcript.

third story I've heard in the last 12 months, where white men had to second guess and ask, 'am I the right person for this?'"¹⁴⁴

Kaying Thao's story is becoming increasingly common. Many of the non-Hmong legislators who represent sizeable Hmong American constituencies recognized that their representation of Hmong Americans could only go so far. Responding to the election of Rep. Lee, Rep. Dehn told me:

[Hmong Americans] are a significant part of our community and I'm excited that they've been able to gain electoral position to actually be able to advocate directly because my advocacy wasn't a personal advocacy... You can bring a certain amount of passion and insert a voice to the needs of the constituents, but not being Hmong American, there's sort of a limit on what I can do.¹⁴⁵

Similarly, Rod Hamilton expressed doubt in his own ability to 'act for' Hmong Americans:

There was a meeting here with an Asian women's group at the Capitol...And they asked me what am I doing to help out the Asian community...I said, "You're asking the only white guy in the room what I'm going to do to help better your community? We've been trying to get it right for hundreds of years and we haven't."¹⁴⁶

Lastly, Rep. Johnson, who is currently serving his ninth term, suggested that he was having similar thoughts to Kaying Thao's colleague:

I think the presentation of greater diversity is in itself—particularly in identity politics—an important thing for some. And I understand that...I think change will occur organically over the next few years. I don't plan to serve in the legislature forever. So then that opens up an opportunity for [change], depending on what the community wants to do.¹⁴⁷

Overall, the politics of essentialism limits the ability of Hmong American politicians act as symbolic, descriptive, surrogate, and substantive representatives. The threat of being pigeonholed looms over all forms of representation. Cognizant of the limited value of

¹⁴⁴ Kaying Thao, interview by author, interview 20, transcript.

¹⁴⁵ Rep. Raymond Dehn, interview by author, interview 7, transcript.

¹⁴⁶ Rep. Rod Hamilton, interview by author, interview 11, transcript, January 18, 2017.

¹⁴⁷ Rep. Raymond Dehn, interview by author, interview 7, transcript.

‘standing for’ Hmong Americans in a state with no majority-Hmong districts, Hmong American politicians deracialize and distance themselves from symbolic and descriptive representation. Likewise, some Hmong American elected officials acknowledge their roles as surrogate representatives of people of color generally and not Hmong Americans specifically. Until Hmong Americans are more politically powerful, the concepts of symbolic, descriptive, and surrogate representation will continue to be an imperfect fit. In terms of substantive representation, Hmong American politicians cater to four definitions of Hmong American interests: first, that Hmong American interests are no different than mainstream ‘American’ interests like education; second, equity initiatives on the behalf of Hmong Americans and even African Americans; third, cultural concerns like LEP issues, urban farming, and sports fields; lastly, resolutions and the cultural need among Hmong American veterans of the Secret War in Laos to be recognized for their service. The current political climate often limits the substantive representation of Hmong Americans to resolutions, which are mainly symbolic in value. Likewise, the lack of diversity in Minnesota state government limits the ability of token Hmong American legislators to ‘legislate against the grain,’ although those conditions may be changing. While non-Hmong politicians have more freedom to ‘act for’ Hmong American constituents, their ability to represent diverse constituencies now faces questions.

Chapter 6: The Politics of Resettlement

The second significant influence on Hmong American political representation today is the politics of resettlement. The concept of Hmong America is a relatively recent, which has broad implications for procedural and cultural aspects of their political representation in Minnesota. The Hmong American community's unfamiliarity with the political system challenges both Hmong and non-Hmong legislators to bring that constituency into the process of representation. Furthermore, the patriarchal tendencies of traditional Hmong culture pose unique challenges to Hmong American women in politics. First, in "The Elusive Role of Hmong Politics," I explain suggest that resettlement did not make internal Hmong politics irrelevant. Second, in "Hmong Folks, You Hardly Ever See Them," I discuss four barriers to the Hmong American community's inclusion in the process of representation. I also analyze the strategies used by both Hmong American elected officials to encourage greater familiarity and political participation by Hmong Americans and other minority, immigrant, and refugee communities. Third, in "A Place at the Table, That's All It Takes," I turn my attention to non-Hmong elected officials and their efforts to bring Hmong Americans into the process of representation. Lastly, in "Hmong American Politics is Still a Little Bit of the New and a Whole Lot of the Old," I examine the unique experiences of Hmong American women in politics, who face the patriarchal nature of traditional Hmong society and gendered double standards. Overall, the politics of resettlement influence the process of representation and the experiences of Hmong American politicians—particularly women—as they navigate majority-white legislative bodies.

The Elusive Role of Hmong Politics

Undoubtedly, the politics of the old country still affect the politics of the new country. Although internal Hmong politics likely influence Hmong American political representation, I had little success getting interview participants to speak about the role of the 18 Clan Council and other key actors within the Hmong American community. (Off the record, several interview participants confirmed that internal Hmong politics play a large role in shaping Hmong American political representation). One of the only interview participants to speak about internal Hmong politics, Minneapolis City Council Member Blong Yang, gave me this example:

Foung [Hawj] and Dai [Thao] and myself go speak at the Hmong New Year. Foung [Hawj] speaks, and he has an entourage of about 20 people behind him. Dai [Thao] speaks, and he has an entourage of about 10 people behind him. Me? Nobody. That's the difference between us. What I mean is that for Foung [Hawj], his approach—in my view—is very top-down. It's [to] get the leaders [to] tell their people to vote and somehow, that works out for him.¹⁴⁸

Yang's anecdote suggests that Hmong politics did not become irrelevant once Hmong refugees arrived in America. Instead, internal politics became even more relevant as Hmong Americans sought to create a political identity in their new home. Unfortunately, though Hmong politics may be an important influence on Hmong American political representation today, I was unable to dive any deeper in my thesis. However, I had more success analyzing how Hmong American elected officials represent their diverse constituencies.

¹⁴⁸ Minneapolis City Council Member Blong Yang, interview by author, interview 9, transcript.

“Hmong Folks, You Hardly Ever See Them”

All four of the Hmong Americans currently serving in office that I interviewed told me they are trying to increase engagement with their minority, immigrant and refugee constituents. These politicians were disappointed that their constituents were not utilizing their offices and engaging with the political process. Indeed, representation is not yet a process for the recently resettled. Instead, representation is one way street, where these Hmong American politicians try to adhere to the wishes of their constituents but do not always hear from them. My interviews suggest four possible explanations: first, that interest in politics ends once Hmong American candidates win elections; second, that the lack of Hmong American faces in government discourages further participation in the process of representation; third, a more general lack understanding about the policy process and potential benefits of engaging with the process of representation; lastly, that the DFL and GOP have not done enough outreach with Hmong Americans. As such, Hmong American politicians and non-Hmong politicians representing Hmong American constituencies have the unique responsibility of kick starting the process of representation for immigrant and refugee communities.

Minneapolis City Council member Blong Yang’s struggle to get Hmong American constituents engaged in the process of representation was typical of the Hmong American politicians I interviewed. When I asked Yang who visits his office the most, he answered, “White people. By a huge margin. It’s not even close. Out of ten, nine people are white. The other one—African American constituents rarely come here, but they come here a little bit more often. Hmong folks, I mean—you hardly ever see them.”¹⁴⁹ Yang, who had previously

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

described his ward to me in terms of its diversity, seemed disappointed by this reality. When I asked Yang why he thought Hmong American constituents do not come to see him, he told me:

I think [Hmong folks] want somebody in a position of leadership just because it speaks to the broader issue of ‘we have somebody,’ but outside of that, they don’t know how to use government...I’m saying this in a general sense, but I don’t think they understand what each level of government does, what they’re responsible for. For the most part, people just don’t know what to do, at least at the city level. I remember in my first year, we had thousands of phone calls. We counted the number of Hmong phone calls: about 20. It’s tiny. What that says to me is that they don’t know how to use government very well.¹⁵⁰

Yang’s comments speak to a frustrating contrast: As a Hmong American elected official, Yang is assumed to only represent Hmong Americans, even though his Hmong American constituents in his ward hardly ever utilize his office. I could also sense Yang’s frustration that he was a figurehead, a symbol of “we have somebody,” rather than being known for his substantive work in office. After all, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, Yang told me that he views his actions in office as much more important than his status as the first Hmong American elected to the Minneapolis City Council. Yet it seems like Yang’s Hmong American constituents do not feel the same way.

Sia Her, Executive Director of the Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans (CAPM), said that the lack of Hmong American faces in government discourages participation in the process of representation. Though Sia Her was careful to say that CAPM “cannot be recognized as a Hmong-driven entity,” she also noted that the Hmong American community had fewer requests of her than she expected:

The Hmong American community is the largest ethnic group under our umbrella, and it’s twice the size of the next largest group. And so given that that is the case, one might assume that we get called on by [the Hmong American] community more often than by any other community. And yet we aren’t called on by [the Hmong

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

American] community more so by any other community...Our smaller ethnic groups call on us as frequently if not more than [the Hmong American] community.¹⁵¹

CAPM engages in its own process of representation, where it surveys and conducts research with Minnesota's many Asian American communities to determine its policy priorities. Based on Sia Her's testimony, it appears the Hmong American community has yet to fully leverage its large population as a member of this process. Perhaps this lack of engagement can be explained by the Hmong American community's preoccupation with the idea of 'having someone' in office, as Yang told me. The Hmong American community's increased political representation may be discouraging Hmong Americans from more fully engaging with the process of representation. If the community believes that having Hmong American faces in government is enough representation, then there is little incentive to pursue the full process.

On the other hand, St. Paul City Council Member Dai Thao points to the Hmong American community's lack of familiarity with the policy process. In his view, Hmong Americans do not participate in the process of representation because they think there is little to gain from doing so. For instance, as Thao told me that Hmong Americans often perceive representation as a process for white Minnesotans:

I think it has more to do with people being able to better navigate the system and have connections and a network. A white person or a white elected may be able to seem like they better help the white community, but I think the reality is it might be because the white community knows that system more. And they have a better network and they're connected to each other. So it seems that way.¹⁵²

By Thao's logic, a Hmong American politician would be able to better help Hmong Americans if the Hmong American community knew the system better. Having Hmong

¹⁵¹ Sia Her, interview by author, interview 6, transcript.

¹⁵² Interview with Dai Thao.

American faces in government is not enough. There must be a network or some other connection to help Hmong Americans navigate the political system. As Blong Yang told me, “If you don’t understand what government does, it’s really hard to benefit from government.”¹⁵³

Another explanation is that the political parties have not made enough of an effort to bring the Hmong American community into the process of representation. According to Bill Fleming, who was a senior advisor to Sen. Hawj’s campaign, neither party has done a good job at reaching out to immigrant and refugee groups. In his view, the GOP gave up on outreach to Hmong Americans because they are a predominantly urban constituency; moreover, Hmong American politicians have overwhelmingly registered as Democrats. But the DFL has not made much of an effort, either:

I think far too few resources is put into really working with these communities by the Democratic party as well. And most of the resources that have gone to organizing have been raised by people like Founj Hawj. People that are active on the ground don't get a lot of help from the Democratic party, and that has to change to facilitate a greater future.¹⁵⁴

The DFL knows Hmong American politicians have registered as Democrats and will continue to do so. After all, every Hmong American legislator since Sen. Mee Moua—the first Hmong American elected to a state legislature in the U.S.—has been a Democrat. The DFL has ‘captured’ Hmong Americans and has no real incentive to reach out and bring that community into the process of representation. Today, the responsibility for outreach to immigrant and refugee communities falls on legislators, not their party.

Perhaps Elizabeth Herr (Sen. Founj Hawj’s Legislative Assistant), has found a way to foster the process of representation for groups unfamiliar with the system. Unlike Blong

¹⁵³ Minneapolis City Council Member Blong Yang, interview by author, interview 9, transcript.

¹⁵⁴ Bill Fleming, interview by author, interview 21, transcript.

Yang, Sen. Hawj's office still receives numerous calls from immigrant and minority constituents. Through the simple act of answering their calls, Elizabeth Herr brings these communities into the process of representation. As she explained:

For immigrant communities or refugee communities, they're a very oral culture, so that just means that they don't use mainstream methods of getting information. This is why I receive so many phone calls from them, because they don't watch the news. They don't do research online, but they [still] want to hear, so they call me quite a bit in the office, asking a lot of questions about what's happening in the session.¹⁵⁵

These communities are clearly interested hearing about the political process. But they come with questions, not demands. Elizabeth Herr may foster increased participation in the process of representation, but it is still a one-way street. She also supports Yang's claim that the Hmong American community is still growing in its political sophistication. That lack of political awareness also seems to extend to other immigrant or refugee communities, too. Clearly, these communities want to be engaged in the political process. That Yang's office receives significantly fewer calls suggests these communities are unsure of which level of government to engage with. After all, the other Hmong Americans involved in Minnesota politics today —Fue Lee, Dai Thao, Blong Yang, and Sia Her—did not say they receive as many calls as Sen. Hawj. Perhaps this difference can be explained by the increased visibility of being a 2nd term state senator, rather than a city council member or first term representative. In any case, Sen Hawj is uniquely positioned to bring immigrant and minority communities into the process of representation. Yet this arrangement begs the question: Without a Hmong face in the legislature, would immigrant or refugee constituents still be calling?

¹⁵⁵ Elizabeth Herr, interview by author, interview 2, transcript.

“A Place at the Table, That’s All It Takes”

After all, Hmong American legislators are not the only ones trying to encourage a process of representation. My interviews with non-Hmong legislators representing Hmong Americans suggest they are also trying to kick start the process with their immigrant and refugee constituencies. Sen. Jeremy Miller told me that he tries to anticipate the desires of his Hmong American constituents in Winona, since they do not come to him directly. Even though Sen. Miller did not receive much pressure from his Hmong American constituents to support the Hmong-Lao Veterans Memorial, he still signed on to the legislation because he thought the issue was important that community. Sen. Miller’s instincts were correct: once he signed on to the bill, Sen. Miller received positive feedback from Hmong Americans in his district.¹⁵⁶ This example adds more credence to the idea that Hmong Americans in Minnesota are not fully engaged in the process of representation. If representation was truly a process, then Sen. Miller’s Hmong American constituents would have lobbied him to support the bill in the first place, instead of showing up once the decision had already been made.

Other non-Hmong legislators were similarly concerned with encouraging the process of representation. Sen. Hoffman who emphasized the diversity of his district, framed the issue as a matter of access:

Access is the first and foremost importance. The only way to get access is that you’ve got to be part of the community. You [need to] be out there, engaging in the conversation with individuals of different communities that you’re representing and making sure that they feel like they have access.¹⁵⁷

Interestingly, Sen. Hoffman focuses on whether different communities “feel like

¹⁵⁶ Sen. Jeremy Miller, interview by author, interview 13, transcript.

¹⁵⁷ Sen. John Hoffman, interview by author, interview 5, transcript, December 15, 2016.

they have access” to his office. Even if the offices of state lawmakers are accessible to constituents, it may not feel that way. Legislators must make a concerted effort to encourage the process of representation, particularly with communities unfamiliar with the system. Likewise, Sen. Tim Mahoney told me that he often meets with Hmong American constituents at Hmong Village.¹⁵⁸ By coming to Hmong Village, Sen. Mahoney hopes that Hmong Americans will feel included in the process of representation. Similarly, Sen. Chamberlain, who is a legislative board member on the Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans, mentioned that he often attends community events like Hmong New Year and Hmong funerals to stay connected to the community.¹⁵⁹ Moreover, Rep. Rena Moran also told me that communities of color are absent from the process of representation. In Sen. Moran’s view, people of color must lobby at the Capitol to be represented:

A lot of the times our community doesn't see this building [the Capitol]. If we don't come up, how can we influence anything? Statewide, [we need to show up] and being present and know the power that this entity has in dictating what we can do back in our community. We still need more to happen to influence the legislative process.¹⁶⁰

According to Rep. Moran, showing up is the single most important part of the process of representation for communities of color. She also pointed to programs that bring people of color to the Capitol, such as the Bush Fellowship, Humphrey Fellowship, Capitol Pathways, and the Wilder Foundation’s Community Equity Pipeline as ways to encourage the process of representation in traditionally underserved communities.¹⁶¹ Overall, Sen Hoffman is right: access is everything. Non-Hmong legislators who prioritize access by

¹⁵⁸ Rep. Tim Mahoney, interview by author, interview 12, transcript.

¹⁵⁹ Sen. Roger Chamberlain, interview by author, interview 4, transcript.

¹⁶⁰ Rep. Rena Moran, interview by author, interview 19, transcript.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

meeting with constituents in popular Hmong American hangouts or supporting the work of diversity initiatives at the Capitol also foster the process of representation.

However, in districts with reliable DFL representation, the value of the process of representation may be overstated. As Rep. Sheldon Johnson told me:

I've been in office for 16 years, so frankly I'm a very predictable DFL vote. I think most constituents understand that I will be supporting [liberal] issues and principles that are Democrat-oriented. So I don't get a whole lot of people coming here demanding things because generally they already know where I stand. I try to reach out to the community through emails and paper ads and all that sort of thing...so people know where I stand on the issues.¹⁶²

For Rep. Johnson, the process of representation functions on an implicit level. After reelecting Rep. Johnson nine times, his constituents already know where he stands on most issues. The usual process of representation—where interest groups and elected officials continuously engage with each other and modify the issues they pursue accordingly—is an imperfect fit here. Since his constituents have already accepted Rep. Johnson's policy positions throughout his 16 years as a representative, they do not feel the need to continuously engage with him. Nonetheless, it is telling how Rep. Johnson still tries to adhere to the process of representation through emails and paper ads. Even long-serving elected officials still feel the need to play their part in the process of representation, lest they appear unresponsive to the needs of their constituents.

In sum, Hmong American political representation is not yet a process. The Hmong American community faces several barriers to the process of representation: its unfamiliarity with the political system, as demonstrated by Blong Yang's complaint that only white people come to his office; the absence of Hmong American faces in government; and the lack of outreach on the part of the DFL and GOP. Though both Hmong and non-Hmong elected

¹⁶² Rep. Sheldon Johnson, interview by author, interview 18, transcript, February 2, 2017.

officials encourage greater engagement with their Hmong American, immigrant, and refugee constituencies, these efforts have yet to be fully realized. Phone conversations and holding meetings in Hmong Village are a start, but those efforts alone are not enough to bring communities unfamiliar with government into the process of representation. Perhaps the newest generations of Hmong Americans will bring fully bring their community into the process of representation, as James Chang suggests: “The younger generation sees the system very solely as theirs and are a bit stronger in claiming that part of America as their America.”¹⁶³ Likewise, Fleming offers his own take on the future of the Hmong American community and the process of representation:

The Hmong have been here 41 years now, and I don't think they've got a lot of help on that front. The Somalis and other people will look to the Hmong experience and [won't] need to spend 40 years getting to this place. But that means individuals, parties, and organizations need to...make sure that they're included. A place at the table, that's all it takes.¹⁶⁴

Ultimately, engagement with the process of representation is not just a Hmong American issue. At a legislative training event hosted by the Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans, an elder Karen man even told me that his peers look to the Hmong American community for its political experience. When Hmong Americans have a seat at the table and a place in the process of representation, so will other immigrant and refugee communities.

“Hmong American Politics is Still a Little Bit of the New and a Whole Lot of the Old”

Scholars like Takeo Yoshikawa, who analyzed Sen. Mee Moua’s campaign to become the first (and only) Hmong American woman elected to a state legislature in the U.S., assert

¹⁶³ James Chang, Interview conducted by author., December 6, 2016.

¹⁶⁴ Bill Fleming, interview by author, interview 21, transcript.

that female Hmong American politicians are faced with the patriarchal nature of Hmong culture. My interviews with Hmong American women in politics support that argument. Sia Her summarized the plight of Hmong American women in government:

Hmong politics is about the 18 Clan Council and gender. It's about class within the community...I look at other women who have come before me and held this position or have held other politically elected offices, and I have seen the ties that bind all of us. And one of the most consistent ties is that of gender...The fact of the matter is that Hmong American politics is still a little bit of the new and a whole lot of the old.¹⁶⁵

Here, I explore the gendered dynamics in Hmong politics described by Sia Her. My interviews reveal three unique challenges facing Hmong American women in politics: first, some Hmong American women feel they receive less recognition from the Hmong American community than their male peers; second, leadership in Hmong American politics remains male-dominated; lastly, some female Hmong American politicians contend with the expectations from their community as well as white America. Overall, these challenges compound the already complex interactions between race, class, and gender for Hmong American women in politics.

Three out of four Hmong American women I interviewed said they felt their accomplishments in the political world were undervalued within their own community. Sia Her explicitly linked that assertion to gender:

It doesn't matter that I am the head of a state agency that represents all Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the state of Minnesota. It doesn't matter. Because I'm a woman. If I walk into a community event and there is another Hmong American [man] who is a council member at the city, it doesn't matter [if] the powers and duties of my office [are greater] relative to the powers and duties of that council member's office. It doesn't matter if I walk into a room and there is a Hmong American man who's an attorney. The level of respect and deference is just so crystal clear.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Sia Her, interview by author, interview 6, transcript.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

In Her's view, the level of "respect and deference" she receives is determined by her own status as a Hmong American woman. When she ran for a seat in the Minnesota House, Kaying Thao had similar feelings. She received less support from the Hmong American community than expected, but was not sure if that was a product of gender or geography: "I don't know if it was because I was a Hmong woman, or if it was because I'm in the suburbs. So I didn't represent a lot of Hmong people. I'm not sure. But I know that if I were a Hmong man, that would be totally different. They would be all out, full force."¹⁶⁷ To further unravel that thread, I asked Kaying Thao how she thought her political career would be different if she was a Hmong American man. Unsurprisingly, Kaying Thao speculated that her political life "would have been much easier." She also inserted class into the equation, saying it felt like there were "a bunch of strikes against me" as a single mom.¹⁶⁸ Taken together, Her and Kaying Thao's experiences suggest that the political contributions of Hmong American women are not valued as highly as those of men.

Then again, this bias could be explained by the seemingly less-prestigious levels of government at which Her and Kaying Thao operate. As Blong Yang states in Chapter 7, the Hmong American community values figureheads, especially those serving in the legislature. School boards and state agencies may not be enough. My interview with Vallay Varro seemingly supports the idea that level of government plays a larger role than gender here. Describing the school board, Varro told me, "Lots of people don't think of it as a very serious position...to be able to do work." In Varro's view, the school board is overlooked for institutional—and not necessarily gendered—reasons. However, Varro acknowledged

¹⁶⁷ Kaying Thao, interview by author, interview 20, transcript.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

that her campaign for the school board seat was helped by her sister, Mee Moua, and the political support her family had developed. Varro had a support network that other Hmong American women like Kaying Thao lacked.¹⁶⁹ Ultimately, it is hard to make a definitive judgement on whether institution or gender plays a larger role for Hmong American women in politics. But it is worth noting that Hmong American politics is a male-dominated affair: none of the Hmong American elected officials currently serving in office in Minnesota are female; likewise, three out of four of the Hmong Americans who have made it to the Minnesota Legislature are men. Sia Her's words are illustrative: "You could be a woman and you could occupy the highest ranking political office in the land, and you would still be treated very differently than a Hmong man... in my time as a young professional, I probably won't see the changes I'd like to see."¹⁷⁰

That the 18 Clan Council is entirely male may explain why there are no female Hmong American elected officials currently serving in Minnesota. The organization plays an important cultural and leadership role within the Hmong American community, which Sen. Hawj explained to me:

The 18 clan council is a cultural system set up so we are still linked to each other. The Hmong ethnic group has no geographical state. So then wherever we are, that's our country, that's our state. But we live scattered out in the whole United States and also other countries, too... So that's the importance of having the 18 Clan Council to link us all together nationally and internationally.¹⁷¹

Sen. Hawj was also careful to note that the 18 Clan Council is apolitical, although its individual members sometimes engage in politics—as was the case during Sen. Hawj's campaign. (Tellingly, individual council members did not get involved during Kaying Thao's

¹⁶⁹ Vally Varro, interview by author, interview 22, transcript.

¹⁷⁰ Sia Her, interview by author, interview 6, transcript.

¹⁷¹ Sen. Fong Hawj, interview by author, interview 16, transcript.

recent race for a seat in the Minnesota House). Sen. Hawj also praised 18 Clan Council's role in preserving Hmong cultural connections, but did not shy away from the organization's "fraternal" nature:

We really need that family tie, although it may seem a little fraternal. It's like a fraternity, driven by men. But now [that] a lot of women leaders in the Hmong community [are emerging], we are still figuring out how we can compromise and fit that in to hand that torch of leadership to our maternal front, the sorority side of our culture.¹⁷²

Indeed, the 18 Clan Council is an entirely male affair: men occupy all five spots on the organization's Executive Board and all 18 seats on its Board of Directors. The 18 Clan Council's patriarchal nature trickles down to Hmong American politics as well. Most Hmong American candidates for state office seek the support of the 18 Clan Council. The organization is also an important player in the policy process, as Sia Her describes:

When we were actively working to pass two bills on gender-based violence, we were very careful about who we chose to activate. We didn't necessarily want to go activate groups in the communities that are politically powerful. They're politically powerful, [but] they may not be knowledgeable about how to navigate the legislative process, [so] they could show up and protest and thereby kill our bills.¹⁷³

Women like Sia Her have led political efforts to address gender-based violence in Southeast Asian communities. Gender-based violence is one of the five issues the Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans has identified as an 'Asian American issue' through its surveys and community outreach, but I could also sense that the issue was a personal one for Sia Her. My interview with Rep. Moran confirmed that feeling:

Sia Her took a very big risk when she said that Hmong women are being abused. It's not okay for the elder men to go back to Laos and bring young girls here and have an impact on Hmong families. She's a Hmong leader who's willing to take a risk and not be silenced because she's a woman. I think that's powerful because families are being hurt. And sometimes we don't want to have our dirty laundry aired. And it's

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Sia Her, interview by author, interview 6, transcript.

hard for people to go against the grain. [She's] a leader who's willing to take those risks.¹⁷⁴

Sia Her may be able to “go against the grain,” but it is also important to note that she was appointed to her position as Executive Director. Elected officials, especially Hmong American women (although there are none currently) may not have the same leeway to air their own community's dirty laundry. However, the influence of the 18 Clan Council on Hmong American politics in Minnesota may be waning. When I spoke with Rep. Fue Lee, who was recently elected to the Minnesota House this year, he downplayed the role of the 18 Clan Council in his campaign:

I knew I did not want to fully participate in that process. I did reach out to different clan leaders or different elders within the Hmong community just to let them know that I was running...I don't know how it may affect other candidates, but when I met other candidates throughout the nation from Hmong descent, they were asking me, “Did you have to go meet with this leader of this clan?” I was like, “Not really.” For me, as a young individual, I still respect and appreciate that process too. But I don't think that at the end of the day that's going to be the main deciding factor for my campaign, which was getting out there and talking to our neighbors and getting them out there to vote.¹⁷⁵

Tellingly, Rep. Lee speaks to his thought process as a “young individual,” suggesting that the influence of the 18 Clan Council may be waning on the newest generation of Hmong American politicians. Certainly, Rep. Lee respects the process of engaging with and winning the support of Hmong elders. But since Rep. Lee represents a (relatively small) Hmong American constituency outside of St. Paul, he may not have needed to win the support of Hmong elders in the same vein as other Hmong American politicians. However, even Sen. Hawj—who is an older Hmong man himself—echoed Rep. Lee. I asked Sen. Hawj whether the 18 Clan Council ever came to him, assuming he would tell me about the

¹⁷⁴ Rep. Rena Moran, interview by author, interview 19, transcript.

¹⁷⁵ Rep. Fue Lee, interview by author, interview 14, transcript.

organization's legislative requests. But Sen. Hawj's response told me that the 18 Clan Council sometimes comes to him to receive advice, not to give it.¹⁷⁶ Overall, though the 18 Clan Council's influence may be waning, the patriarchal structures it exemplifies are not. When I asked Kaying Thao what she thought ideal political representation should look like, her answer was revealing: "For every Hmong man, there should be a Hmong woman."¹⁷⁷

Lastly, two out of four of the Hmong American women I interviewed mentioned the difficulty they had navigating questions of identity as women. Describing her campaign for a seat in the Minnesota House, Kaying Thao said:

I also heard through the grape vine that I didn't get a lot of Hmong support because I was too white and too American... I've grown up with that identity crisis all my life, where I wasn't white enough to be fully in the white crowd, but I wasn't Hmong enough to be in the Hmong crowd. So I've had to straddle these two worlds all my life. It was sad that I heard that rhetoric from a lot of my Hmong colleagues, but at the same time I've lived with it all my life...It's sad that people saw me that way...She said that I wasn't like the other Hmong men. I wasn't going to funeral homes and sitting there all weekend long. That's just not my thing. It's really important to show up and be at places in the community where people can see you, but I also didn't think I had to spend my time there, especially if they weren't my constituents. So it's a hard place to be.¹⁷⁸

It seems that Kaying Thao is too much of everything: too Hmong when she ran for the Roseville School Board and was asked how she would represent the white kids, and too white to win over other Hmong Americans when she campaigned for the Minnesota House. Likewise, it is telling that Kaying Thao was compared to male Hmong American candidates. Even though Rep. Lee did not fully engage with the 18 Clan Council, he was not accused of being 'too white' in the same way Kaying Thao was. Vally Varro can relate: in her own

¹⁷⁶ Sen. Fong Hawj, interview by author, interview 16, transcript.

¹⁷⁷ Kaying Thao, interview by author, interview 20, transcript.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

campaign for the St. Paul School Board, she benefitted from having a white husband and a non-Hmong sounding last name:

I confused a lot of people, I think, when I showed up at the door and I said I'm in fact the candidate or my husband would go door-knocking and say, "Well, I'm her husband." I think that worked to my advantage in some instances because people couldn't immediately say that I was Hmong.¹⁷⁹

Still, Varro told me that she did not want to use her white husband as “leverage” and that she ran using her full name, Vallary Moua Varro. However, Varro was also aware that having a white husband could jeopardize her support among Hmong Americans—yet another gendered concern. Describing this danger, Varro told me, “I think it's still fair to say that when you're not married to a Hmong person, you already have some hurdles, and then when you happen to be a woman, regardless of your ethnicity, you add more hurdles to that.”¹⁸⁰ Both Kaying Thao and Varro faced these hurdles and the struggle to simultaneously appeal to the Hmong American community and white America. But these challenges also forge a unique type of politician. As Varro puts it, “I think what makes us truly unique individuals and communities of people is that we are being pushed against all the time and yet, we keep moving forward.”¹⁸¹

Ultimately, the politics of resettlement has several implications for Hmong American political representation in Minnesota. As a new player in Minnesota’s politics, the Hmong American community is still acclimating to the process of representation. The efforts of both Hmong and non-Hmong elected officials to bring the community into the process of representation range from engagement over the phone to meetings in Hmong Village. Likewise, the politics of resettlement ensure that patriarchal structures in traditional Hmong

¹⁷⁹ Vallary Varro, interview by author, interview 22, transcript.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

culture remain relevant. Not only do female Hmong American politicians receive less recognition than their male peers, they must also confront questions of split identity. For Hmong American women in politics, being ‘too white’ is just as dangerous as being ‘too Hmong.’ Overall, the politics of resettlement influence the process of representation and the experiences of Hmong American women serving as representatives.

Chapter 7: Resettlement, Essentialism, and the Hmong-Lao Veterans

Memorial

In my thesis so far, I have argued that the current state of Hmong American political representation is influenced by the politics of resettlement and essentialism. The 14-year effort to fund the creation of the Hmong-Lao Veterans Memorial is an example of these two influences in action. The politics of resettlement created the cultural need for the Memorial, while the politics of essentialism created a key roadblock for advocates to navigate around. In those ways, the Memorial illustrates the influences of resettlement and essentialism in greater detail. In this chapter, I examine the impacts of resettlement and essentialism on the Hmong-Lao Veterans Memorial, arguing that the statue represents the current limits of Hmong American political representation in Minnesota today. First, in “The War Never Ends in the Hearts and Minds of the People,” I detail the cultural need for a memorial commemorating Hmong involvement in the Secret War in Laos. Second, in “Overcoming the Essentialism,” I examine how advocates for the Memorial overcame the politics of essentialism. Lastly, in “The Limits of Hmong American Political Representation,” I analyze the Memorial in the context of gendered Hmong politics.

“The War Never Ends in the Hearts and Minds of the People”

The cultural politics of resettlement are reflected in the Hmong American community’s need for a statue commemorating their role as CIA-backed guerillas in the Secret War in Laos during the Vietnam War. As recent arrivals to a country that did not recognize their covert role in the Vietnam War, Hmong Americans wanted a memorial to pay tribute to their sacrifices. As Sia Her explained:

The war never ends in the hearts and minds of the people. [The Hmong] have to live with the shame of having lost the war. Then they’re forced to relocate themselves

and make their way to America. In America, they find that no one knows what role they played in the war...I grew up in California, and I remember people thinking, 'Well, these are immigrants that came here to leech off the welfare system.' But little did they know that these were warriors from a different place and a different time that had sacrificed their mothers and their fathers and everyone they loved for a country they had never seen or heard much about.¹⁸²

For the Hmong, the trauma of resettlement and the shame of losing their country was only compounded by the lack of recognition they received in their new home. In America, the sacrifices made by the Hmong were largely ignored. Describing her father, who was a veteran of the Secret War, Kaying Thao said, "Because there was no documentation of anything, no one can prove that he was actually there. He has his stories and his truth and his wounds on his hands."¹⁸³ Veterans like Thao's father wanted a memorial to document their stories and sacrifices.

The prestige of the Minnesota Legislature was key to the Hmong-Lao Veterans Memorial. While the Hmong American community could have created a memorial on its own, it was important to involve the state legislature. As Sia Her observed:

There's that extra special reason of 'it's government.' It's state government. It's one thing for a nonprofit to just fundraise and get the money and build a statue. Is that going to make all that much difference in the eyes of the people if it's a nonprofit? The answer is probably not as much as if it were government...And it's a powerful, powerful message to send to not only the Hmong in Minnesota, but also the Hmong all over the world.¹⁸⁴

Besides the prestige associated with state government, it was also important for the Memorial to be built on Capitol grounds. As Sen. Hawj noted in a 2013 Pioneer Press article on the Memorial, the Capitol is already home to statues depicting Vikings, German immigrants, and other ethnic groups.¹⁸⁵ A statue dedicated to the Hmong would signify a

¹⁸² Sia Her, interview by author, interview 6, transcript.

¹⁸³ Kaying Thao, interview by author, interview 20, transcript.

¹⁸⁴ Sia Her, interview by author, interview 6, transcript.

¹⁸⁵ Melo, "St. Paul: Hmong Vets Memorial Could Soon Be Realized."

shift from ‘resettled,’ to ‘settled,’ solidifying the place of Hmong Americans in Minnesota history and giving veterans the official recognition they were previously denied.

When Sen. Mee Moua and Rep. Cy Thao served their first legislative session in 2003, the possibility of a Hmong-Lao Veterans Memorial inched closer to reality. Though I was unable to interview Sen. Moua or Rep. Thao, Sia Her offered insight into why the first Hmong Americans to serve in the Minnesota Legislature moved quickly to put the Memorial on the agenda:

I think one of the more important variables, if not the most important, was that they’re direct descendants of the generation that fought the war... Given their ages, they were old enough to remember the war, to have memories of their parents and elders crying because they’ve lost the war... So I think for that generation, for those legislators, there was a need... to do something so they could at least help their elders find a place in America, as well as find a way to help mainstream Americans understand what happened faraway and yesterday and to value the contributions of this group of Americans.¹⁸⁶

During the legislative session, Rep. Thao introduced legislation to allow a memorial commemorating Hmong veterans to be placed on Capitol grounds. The bill soon became law, settling the question of where the Memorial would be placed. However, the question of how to fund the Memorial was more difficult to resolve. Efforts to appropriate state funds for the Memorial stalled for the rest of Rep. Thao and Sen. Moua’s time in office. Faced with budget deficits, the Great Recession, the cost-cutting tendencies of Governor Tim Pawlenty, and the Hmong American community’s difficulty raising matching funds for the project, advocates for the Memorial reached an impasse. It was not until the 2013-2014 legislative session that the Hmong-Lao Veterans Memorial would finally be funded.

¹⁸⁶ Sia Her, interview by author, interview 6, transcript.

Overcoming Essentialism and Resettlement

A window of opportunity for the Memorial finally opened during the 2013-2014 legislative session. That year, Sen. Hawj introduced legislation to appropriate \$350,000 in state funds for the Memorial—but only if the Hmong American could match the investment with \$150,000 of its own.¹⁸⁷ (According to the legislators I spoke with, advocates for the Memorial got a good deal here—other projects typically require a larger amount in matching funds). According to Sen. Hawj, the presence of a “supportive governor” in Gov. Mark Dayton and a “more progressive legislature” in both the House and Senate made the bill’s passage possible. Similarly, Rep. Sheldon Johnson also told me that Gov. Dayton was convinced that supporting the Memorial would have electoral benefits. But how did Sen. Hawj and other advocates address the politics of essentialism, considering the Memorial was clearly substantive representation? Also, how did the Hmong American community successfully influence the process of representation, given their unfamiliarity with the political system? My interviews with the bill’s co-authors suggest that Hmong veterans are a group that is viewed positively in the public eye, which allowed a variety of legislators to support the Memorial. Likewise, Sen. Hawj’s leadership at the Capitol helped the Hmong American community better understand the policy process.

From the beginning, Sen. Hawj’s colleagues cautioned him against pushing for the Memorial. As Sen. Hawj recalls, his colleagues told him that “your community will have problems raising that money” and that if “your community doesn’t raise it, you’ll be in trouble.”¹⁸⁸ But Sen. Hawj saw the Memorial as a key issue and wanted to see its completion

¹⁸⁷ “SF 651 Status in the Senate for the 88th Legislature (2013 - 2014),” *Minnesota Senate*, 2013, 651, <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/bills/bill.php?b=Senate&f=SF0651&ssn=0&y=2013>.

¹⁸⁸ Sen. Fong Hawj, interview by author, interview 16, transcript.

to the end. Still, Sen. Hawj was conscious of the risk that he would be seen as ‘too Hmong’ for supporting the Memorial. In the aforementioned Pioneer Press article from 2013, Sen. Hawj is even quoted as saying that “he is a sponsor of 25 additional bills that are not specific to the Hmong community, including legislation to support a proposed science center at Metropolitan State University.”¹⁸⁹ Thankfully, Sen. Hawj was not alone: Rep. John Lesch authored the bill in the House and also saw the Memorial as a personal responsibility. As Rep. Lesch told me, “When Cy Thao left, he handed the bill over to me and said, you get this thing done. He was the one who started it, but he said, ‘You get this thing done.’”¹⁹⁰ Indeed, Sen. Hawj and Rep. Lesch were the ones to get it done.

My interviews with lawmakers in both chambers of the Minnesota Legislature suggest the Memorial attracted broad support because it focused on veterans, a positively constructed group. Sen. Hawj’s bill to fund the Memorial had four co-authors; the bill’s counterpart in the House attracted 15 co-authors. Speaking with nine of the bill’s co-authors, I noticed that many of them chose to support the Memorial because of its importance to Hmong veterans. For instance, Rep. John Persell, a veteran of the Vietnam War himself, told me that the Memorial was a “no-brainer” and that there was “no doubt” in his mind that he should support it.¹⁹¹ Similarly, Rep. Ray Dehn told me that he has been a “big supporter of Hmong American veterans” and that he hoped they “would get recognized for that service.”¹⁹² Likewise, Rep. Alice Hausman, said she hoped the Memorial would help Hmong veterans be “observed in this country and honored.”¹⁹³ The Memorial certainly benefitted

¹⁸⁹ Melo, “St. Paul: Hmong Vets Memorial Could Soon Be Realized.”

¹⁹⁰ Rep. John Lesch, interview by author, interview 17, transcript, January 30, 2017.

¹⁹¹ Rep. John Persell, interview by author, interview 3, transcript, December 13, 2016.

¹⁹² Rep. Raymond Dehn, interview by author, interview 7, transcript.

¹⁹³ Rep. Alice Hausman, interview by author, interview 10, transcript., January 11, 2017.

from its association with veterans. According to Rep. Lesch, “most people recognized that [the Memorial] was really necessary,” so most opposition to the Memorial was on financial grounds.¹⁹⁴ Still, there was some political opposition from other non-Hmong veterans, who felt Hmong veterans were leapfrogging them in having their own official recognition. But in the end, token political opposition to the bill—even from a small handful of non-Hmong veterans—was not enough to derail the Memorial during the 2013-2014 legislative session. Ultimately, the Memorial’s association with Hmong veterans and large number of white co-authors helped Sen. Hawj dodge the danger of essentialism and being ‘too Hmong.’

The Hmong American community also overcame its unfamiliarity with the policy process to raise the matching funds needed for the Memorial. Rep. Fue Lee, who was an intern in the House with Rep. Lesch at the time, recalled that advocates for the Memorial had trouble navigating the process:

I think that some of the folks who worked on the bill may not have fully understood the whole legislative process. Even though we had a Senate author, Senator Fong Hawj, it seems like their work with Rep. John Lesch wasn’t as much as what they offered the Senator. Look, even though we’re pushing [the Memorial] through the Senate, we need to push it over here at the House too.¹⁹⁵

Despite these stumbles politically, the Hmong American community successfully organized around the transactional aspects of the bill. Faced with the task of raising \$150,000 in matching funds for the Memorial, advocates quickly assembled an organizing committee and raised the money in a month. Sen. Hawj also convinced potential funders to see that a window of opportunity had opened for the Memorial:

I told my community, if you don’t do it this time, there will not be another time. So the community in one month got the money. When you get that money, all these

¹⁹⁴ Rep. John Lesch, interview by author, interview 17, transcript.

¹⁹⁵ Rep. Fue Lee, interview by author, interview 14, transcript.

stakeholders, all these legislators felt that the Hmong community was serious enough wanting [the Memorial] to happen.¹⁹⁶

Community members like Yia Michael Thao, a son of a Hmong veteran, were also crucial in raising the money. In a 2013 interview with Suab Hmong News, Thao said fundraising for the Memorial was successful because the effort united Hmong leaders from all 18 clans.¹⁹⁷ The Memorial even attracted donations from the Hmong diaspora in Wisconsin, California, and even France, suggesting that surrogate representation also played a significant role.¹⁹⁸ Overall, the Hmong American community embraced the process of representation, successfully funding its share of the Hmong-Lao Veterans Memorial.

In sum, the story of the Hmong-Lao Veterans Memorial reflects the influence of the politics of essentialism and resettlement on Hmong American political representation. The politics of essentialism posed a challenge to Sen. Hawj, who saw the risk of appearing ‘too Hmong’ as a supporter of the Memorial. But the Memorial’s association with veterans, who are a positively constructed group, as well as its diverse group of supporters, ensured that the danger of essentialism never materialized. The politics of resettlement and the Hmong American community’s unfamiliarity with the political system also posed a challenge. Sensing an open window of opportunity, the Hmong American community quickly embraced the transactional nature of the process of representation to raise money for the Memorial. However, the 14-year process that created the Memorial is not the only story worth examining. It is also worth examining what the Memorial represents in the context of substantive representation and the patriarchal tendencies of traditional Hmong culture.

¹⁹⁶ Sen. Fong Hawj, interview by author, interview 16, transcript.

¹⁹⁷ *Fundraising to Build a Statue for MN Hmong-Lao Veterans Memorial* (Suab Hmong News, 2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hs3vNDvL0jw>.

¹⁹⁸ *Celebrate Reaching Goal to Build Minnesota Hmong Lao Veterans Statue* (Suab Hmong News, 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkfU3Qc5DU8>.

The Limits of Hmong American Political Representation

In retrospect, the Hmong-Lao Veterans Memorial is also emblematic of the limits of Hmong American political representation today. The statue shows that Hmong American political representation today is limited to symbolic measures. Moreover, the Memorial reflects the enduring influence of elder Hmong veterans in the process of Hmong American political representation. Like resolutions, which I discussed in Chapter 5, the Memorial is symbolic in value but substantive in nature. The Memorial has clear symbolic value to the Hmong American community. According to Sia Her, Hmong American veterans needed a symbol like the Memorial because “when the sun sets on their individual and collective lives, they’ll go knowing that their service to their community and to America hasn’t been forgotten and will be remembered long after they’re gone.”¹⁹⁹ But the Memorial’s symbolism extends beyond veterans. In an interview with Suab Hmong News, Sen. Hawj said the Memorial is for Hmong people everywhere, not just Hmong Americans in Minnesota.²⁰⁰ In my interview with Sen. Hawj, he told me that he hopes the Memorial will “resonate” with future generations, even those far removed from the “suffering during the war.” Recalling a gathering of Asian American state legislators in Minnesota, Sen. Hawj jokingly described:

I said, welcome to the land of ten thousand lakes. Minnesota is a land of many gigantic objects, like the Pillsbury Doughboy, Green Giant, and Paul Bunyan and his blue ox. But this year, we’re going to have an Asian bamboo shoot at the State Capitol. I don’t see any other Asian American objects in our state that are giant. Now there’s a giant bamboo shoot!²⁰¹

Though the Memorial serves a symbolic purpose, it was the product of substantive representation. Rep. Cy Thao, Sen. Moua, Rep. Lee, and Sen. Hawj ‘acted for’ Hmong

¹⁹⁹ Sia Her, interview by author, interview 6, transcript.

²⁰⁰ *Celebrate Reaching Goal to Build Minnesota Hmong Lao Veterans Statue.*

²⁰¹ Sen. Fong Hawj, interview by author, interview 16, transcript.

Americans when they advocated for the Memorial. The Memorial's existence also supports the argument I made in Chapter 5: that Minnesota's current political climate encourages Hmong American elected officials to deracialize, limiting the substantive representation of Hmong Americans to symbolic measures. While the Memorial was explicitly racialized, it also benefitted from its connection to veterans. The Memorial is Overall, the Memorial shows that the substantive representation of Hmong American is still dominated by symbolic measures.

But when Hmong American legislators advocated for the Memorial, they were 'acting for' a specific group: older, male veterans. Indeed, the Memorial symbolizes the influence of men, particularly those who fought in the Secret War, in Hmong American politics. As Sia Her explained:

Hopefully I'm not offending anyone by saying this: within every community, there's a power structure, a sociopolitical structure in place. So what happens if you can give the members of the community that are in the traditional structure—the powers that be within the community—something that matters to them? Would that elevate your status in their minds and in their hearts? The answer is yes.²⁰²

The Memorial certainly mattered to these veterans, who appreciated its symbolic importance and valued the official recognition it would provide. Male veterans are certainly the “powers that be” within the Hmong American community. As Elizabeth Herr described, “Of all Hmong groups that are fairly active in the community, of all ages and generations, your veteran groups are going to be your most active groups.”²⁰³ These two viewpoints support the assertion that Hmong American politics is still influenced by the patriarchal nature of traditional Hmong society, an argument I made in Chapter 6. Given the sociopolitical structure that favors older men and the fact that veteran groups are most active

²⁰² Sia Her, interview by author, interview 6, transcript.

²⁰³ Elizabeth Herr, interview by author, interview 2, transcript.

in the Hmong American community, it is no wonder that Hmong American legislators like Rep. Cy Thao and Sen. Hawj advocated for the Memorial.

Furthermore, the Memorial provides an interesting point of comparison. Unlike the movement to address gender-based violence in the Hmong American and other Southeast Asian communities, the 14-year effort to create the Memorial was public and easily engaged multiple groups within the Hmong American community. In contrast, Sia Her had to carefully choose which groups to engage with as she worked to address gender-based violence in the Hmong American community (as noted in Chapter 6).²⁰⁴ Would a statue dedicated to Hmong American women have attracted as much support as the memorial dedicated to male Hmong veterans? Perhaps not. Overall, the Memorial was a product of the substantive representation of elder male veterans in the Hmong American community.

In sum, the Hmong-Lao Veterans Memorial offers telling insight into resettlement, essentialism, and the current state of Hmong American political representation. The politics of resettlement informed the Hmong American community's desire for official recognition and a statue on Capitol grounds. Likewise, the politics of essentialism posed a danger to the Memorial's supporters, who risked being labeled as 'too Hmong.' However, the Memorial's importance to veterans and its many non-Hmong supporters helped advocates avoid this danger. Lastly, the Memorial is also indicative of Hmong American representation and politics within the community. The Memorial serves as a natural extension of Sen. Hawj's resolutions: substantive representation with symbolic value, but permanent and open for the public to see. Furthermore, the Memorial represents the substantive interests of older Hmong male veterans, whose influence still looms large over Hmong American politics.

²⁰⁴ Sen. Fong Hawj, interview by author, interview 16, transcript.

Overall, the Hmong-Lao Veterans Memorial is not just a symbol of the Secret War—the statue also encapsulates the core themes of essentialism and resettlement in Hmong American political representation.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Sen. Hawj's reasons for not wanting the word 'Hmong' in more than five of his bills are now clear. Two years ago, I wondered if Sen. Hawj's concern was common among the second generation of Hmong American elected officials. Now I have an answer: the politics of essentialism permeates every aspect of Hmong American political representation in Minnesota today, from who Hmong American politicians represent to how they define Hmong American political issues. Likewise, the politics of resettlement influence the Hmong American community's engagement with the process of representation and the experiences of Hmong American women in politics. Both essentialism and resettlement were key factors in the 14-year effort to create the Hmong-Lao Veterans Memorial, illustrating the limits of Hmong American political representation today. In sum, my thesis makes three key points about essentialism, resettlement, and the Hmong-Lao Veterans Memorial.

First, 16 years after the first Hmong American was elected to public office in the United States, essentialism remains a pressing concern for Hmong Americans in politics. The politics of essentialism keep Hmong American elected officials from 'standing for' their Hmong American constituents. Likewise, the substantive representation of Hmong Americans today is limited to resolutions and other symbolic measures. Ironically, essentialism ensures that white politicians have more freedom to 'act for' Hmong American constituents than Hmong American elected officials. Overall, the politics of essentialism reduces the quality of Hmong American political representation today by keeping Hmong American politicians from 'standing for' and 'acting for' Hmong Americans.

Second, 42 years after the first Hmong refugee arrived in America, resettlement remains a key influence on Hmong American political representation. Hmong American politics in Minnesota today retains the infighting between 18 clans that characterized Hmong

politics in Laos. Furthermore, as a relatively recent arrival to this country, the Hmong American community remains unfamiliar with the process of representation. Accordingly, both Hmong and non-Hmong elected officials are trying to foster greater political engagement with their Hmong American constituents, bringing them into the process of representation. The politics of the old country also affects the experiences of Hmong American women in politics, whose elevated status places them at odds with the patriarchal nature of traditional Hmong society. In sum, the nature of Hmong American political representation today—especially for women—is influenced by the social and political legacies of resettlement.

Third, the Hmong-Lao Veterans Memorial exemplifies the roles of resettlement and essentialism in Hmong American political representation today. On one hand, the politics of resettlement created the cultural need for the Memorial, since Hmong Americans are only starting to be officially recognized for their role fighting on America's behalf in the Vietnam War. But on the other hand, the politics of essentialism ensured that advocating for the Memorial was a risky endeavor for Hmong American politicians. By courting non-Hmong legislators and uniting the Hmong American community around fundraising, advocates for the Memorial overcame the politics of essentialism. Though it was a successful private-public partnership, the Memorial also demonstrates how Hmong American political representation is limited to symbolism and the preferences of elder Hmong men. Overall, the Hmong-Lao Veterans Memorial illustrates the two main themes of my thesis—essentialism and resettlement—and their influence on Hmong American political representation today.

How long will essentialism and resettlement influence Hmong American political representation in Minnesota? My thesis suggests a couple of possibilities. The politics of

essentialism may become less relevant as more Hmong Americans are elected to office. After all, the Minnesota Legislature has never seen more than two Hmong American legislators at the same time. A critical mass of Hmong American policymakers (or even legislators of color) could keep essentialism from being a concern for Hmong Americans in politics. Moreover, essentialism may become less relevant as Hmong American employment in Minnesota's state bureaucracy increases. Further research should focus on Hmong American political incorporation through the bureaucracy. Will the third generation of Hmong American elected officials in Minnesota mirror the second? Or will a changing political climate free the third generation of Hmong American politicians from the politics of essentialism?

Alternatively, the politics of resettlement may wane with time. As the Hmong American community learns how to influence Minnesota politics, resettlement may become less relevant to Hmong American political representation. Likewise, patriarchal structures within the Hmong American community may lose influence over time. Rep. Fue Lee's decision to eschew the 18 Clan Council during his campaign may indicate that the politics of resettlement is losing influence. Then again, the short history of Hmong America deserves further examination. According to James Lai, the history of Asian American politics is defined by four stages: first, legal and nonvoting political participation from the late 1800s to 1950s; second, protest movements from the 1960s to 1970s; third, electoral politics and group consciousness at all levels of government from the 1970s to the present; lastly, Asian American political incorporation in suburbs with significant Asian American populations from the 1980s to the present.²⁰⁵ However, the first Hmong refugee arrived in America in

²⁰⁵ Lai, *Asian American Political Action*.

1975, skipping half of those stages. Are Hmong Americans experiencing a condensed version of Lai's timeline? Or, having benefitted from the political incorporation of other Asian American groups before them, are Hmong Americans now free to set their own course?

As I discussed in Chapter 4, my thesis presents a snapshot of Hmong American political representation in Minnesota today. But are my findings on essentialism and resettlement be applicable to other immigrant and refugee communities in Minnesota? Rep. Ilhan Omar, who was elected to the Minnesota House of Representatives in 2016, comes to mind. Today, Rep. Omar is the highest-elected Somali American elected official in the United States. Bill Fleming's prediction that "the Somalis and other people will look to the Hmong experience and [won't] need to spend 40 years getting to this place" feels particularly relevant here.²⁰⁶ The Somali American experience in politics may be additive, rather than comparable, to the Hmong American experience. In other words, it may be more useful to study how Somali Americans have learned from Hmong American political representation. Further research should be conducted on the experiences of Rep. Omar and other Somali American politicians to see whether the politics of essentialism and resettlement are still relevant.

Looking back at a year of independent research on Hmong American political representation, my interview with Minneapolis City Council Member Blong Yang comes to mind. During the interview, Yang described Hmong American political representation in Minnesota as "important advances in Hmong American history as well as Asian American history. Hopefully the stuff that we're doing in Minnesota isn't just a footnote."²⁰⁷ If

²⁰⁶ Bill Fleming, interview by author, interview 21, transcript.

²⁰⁷ Minneapolis City Council Member Blong Yang, interview by author, interview 9, transcript.

anything else, I hope that my thesis has shown that the accomplishments of Hmong American politicians in Minnesota are more than a footnote.

Appendix A: List of Interview Participants

1. James Chang
2. Elizabeth Herr
3. Rep. Persell
4. Sen. Chamberlain
5. Sen. Hoffman
6. Sia Her
7. Rep. Dehn
8. Dai Thao
9. Blong Yang
10. Rep. Alice Hausman
11. Rep. Rod Hamilton
12. Rep. Tim Mahoney
13. Sen. Jeremy Miller
14. Rep. Fue Lee
15. Sen. Carolyn Laine
16. Sen. FOUNG Hawj
17. Rep. John Lesch
18. Rep. Sheldon Johnson
19. Rep. Rena Moran
20. Kaying Thao
21. Bill Fleming
22. Valley Varro

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