
Paj Ntaub, Plants, and Placenta: Writing Home in the Texts of Hmong American Women

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Abstract

One could argue that it's premature to make any sort of arguments about "Hmong American women writers" as there were few Hmong writers at all until well into the twentieth century after a written language was created. After the last U.S. soldiers left Southeast Asia in 1973, thousands of Hmong, many of whom had assisted the CIA with covert operations in Laos, became refugees of war and migrated to the U.S. An ethnic group with roots in subsistence agriculture and no national ties to speak of, the Hmong saw the Vietnam War and subsequent migrations as part of a 4000-year-old history of conflict and flight through the highlands of modern China, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand-and now to the U.S. Contemporary Hmong American women writers' texts are full of the ghosts of war and homelessness, their stories intricately bound to the community of East-Asian Hmong and first-generation Hmong American women who established their stories in more visceral ways: sharing them orally-both their own and the folktale of Yer (the girl who defeats a man-eating tiger), stitching them into paj ntaub (story cloths), sowing them in the ground with the plants that distinguish their culture and cuisine, and initiating them as they bury the placentas of their children under their homes. These are portable traditions that have allowed "Hmongness" to persist through many relocations; at the same time, they have rooted them in place-in some cases, quite literally. In this talk, I will examine how emerging writers of the Hmong diaspora have injected oral and material traditions into their written forms. Drawing from Kao Kalia Yang's memoir, *The Latehomecomer* (2008), and short stories such as Ka Vang's "Inheriting My Mother's Garden," I will explore how writers attempt to "translate" the labors of their foremothers and their material fruits into a written form that seems to them slight, "academic," even ephemeral in comparison-and yet remain critical to their bids to establish homes at last in the U.S.

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