

**URBAN AGRICULTURE: A TRANSNATIONAL ALTERNATIVE  
ECONOMIC PATHWAY FOR HMONG REFUGEES**

A Thesis  
Presented To  
The Faculty of the  
Department of Sociology  
The Colorado College  
In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Bachelor of Arts

Katherine Cirullo

Spring 2013

On my honor  
I have neither given nor received  
unauthorized aid on this thesis

---

Katherine Cirullo  
Spring 2013

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank Sunflower Farm for allowing me to volunteer for three weeks and conduct interviews with their employees. Furthermore, I am deeply grateful for the Hmong community's graciousness: welcoming me and enthusiastically sharing their stories with me. I would also like to thank Professor Matt Bakker for advising me through this process. Lastly, I am grateful for the Colorado College Venture Grant and the opportunity it gave me to travel and conduct this research.

## **ABSTRACT**

Within the field of migration studies, the study of transnationalism is a relatively new concept with a building body of empirical research. There is ongoing debate over the meaning of the term, its significance as an area of study, and its legitimacy as a concept that can be applied to future generations of migrants. In this paper, I use data gathered from my ethnographic research to present an analysis of a Hmong transnational community in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I illustrate the relationship between their history as a diaspora (and their ascribed refugee identity), their agrarian background, and the urban agricultural movement. I propose that, as refugees, the Hmong exhibit a strong desire to assert their agrarian identity within United States. Thus, they maintain a transnational identity that is reinforced through urban agriculture. Urban agriculture is then an economic pathway in which the Hmong simultaneously assimilate into society and maintain home-country ties. It facilitates the maintenance of a Hmong transnational identity and the strengthening of their transnational community.

## INTRODUCTION

The Hmong, whose name means “free people” or “people of the mountains,” are an ethnic group who share a very vibrant culture as well as a complicated, ambiguous history. They are viewed historically as a people without a home: a diaspora who have been migrating, much of the time by force, since the 1800’s. After facing persecution and brutality for centuries in China, the Hmong found brief solace in the remote hills of Laos, Burma, and Thailand where they led peaceful lives of rural self-sufficiency. However, the 1960’s and 70’s brought about a new period of turmoil and devastation. During that time, the Hmong were recruited by the CIA to fight in a covert operation called the “Secret War” for Laos; a move that would allegedly aid the United States’ interests in the Vietnam War.

This event proved to be a total failure and those Hmong in Laos gained almost nothing in return for their efforts. To escape the violence of war and ongoing retaliation from Laos, many fled to refugee camps across the border in Thailand. Since the mid 1970’s, almost 200,000 of those who made it to Thai camps have been relocated in waves to the United States and their resettlement continues to this day.

With the intention of learning how the Hmong have adapted to life in the United States, I traveled to Milwaukee, Wisconsin to conduct a three-week ethnography of Hmong urban farmers. What unfolded was an insight into the relationship between the Hmong’s history as refugees, their identity as farmers, urban agriculture (UA) in Milwaukee, and the transnational community that has transpired.

In this paper I will first review the literature that comprises the debate over the term transnationalism: its novelty and legitimacy, the varying opinions held on what kind and how much activity constitutes transnationalism, and its likelihood of enduring in future generations. I will then present an analysis of the relationship between the Hmong identity and urban

agriculture. My research shows how the Hmong's prolonged history as refugees is the foundation for their desire to maintain their collective identity as farmers. After years of being controlled, the Hmong are attracted to urban agriculture in Milwaukee as it is a way for them to recreate this agrarian identity while incorporating themselves into US society and asserting their worth as Hmong people. In this sense, their identity is transnational. Furthermore, I explain how urban agriculture is an alternative economic pathway that reinforces their transnational identity and facilitates the spread of a Hmong transnational community. I describe the ways in which the Hmong engage in private forms of UA and forms supported by public organizations, but propose that the latter provides a stronger opportunity for the maintenance of a transnational identity and the reinforcement of this transnational community in future generations.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Transnationalism as an Emergent Field**

The concept of transnationalism is highly contested within sociological literature. There is little consensus as to how the term is defined and what its significance is, as it is a fairly new area of study with a building body of empirical research. Studies of immigration previously focused on the processes that ethnic groups endured upon entering a new host society, specifically the ways in which migrants either fully assimilated into the nation state to which they moved or, in maintaining their ethnic identity, were excluded from that society (Vertovec 2001). This generalized binary theory manifested largely as an attempt to conceptualize the first waves of European immigrants who came to the United States at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Scholars in the field initially supported the polarity of this argument whereby, to move up the socioeconomic ladder, "immigrants would have to abandon their unique customs, language, values, and homeland ties and identities" (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004:1). Alejandro Portes (1996) concisely summarizes commonly held predictions of early scholars. He explains how those immigrants who chose to "remain ethnic" would experience disadvantages and,

subsequently, “the struggles and common poverty of first-generation immigrants will be superseded by the gradual entry of their offspring into mainstream social and economic circles” (P. 3). This would result in a loss of “ethnic” practices and values, a disappearance of labor-market disadvantages and, by the third generation, total assimilation.

This early assimilation model assumed that the longer immigrants (specifically second generation children) stayed in the United States, the more their ethnic identity would fade into an “American” one (Waters 1996). Becoming “American”: learning the language, voting, adopting culture, and achieving economic security for oneself and one’s children, was essentially the superior choice to “remaining ethnic” and it was understood that these options were mutually exclusive (Waters 1999). Whereas standard models of assimilation theorized about European immigrants who came to the United States seeking economic opportunity in a nation of rapid industrialization, recent studies of the influx of non-white ethnic groups show how “remaining ethnic” in present day can actually be advantageous for immigrant groups; that attaining economic success is not directly correlated with totally assimilating or becoming “American” (Waters 1999: 5).

Observed patterns of migration experiences in recent decades show that previous conceptions of assimilation and the dichotomy they propose no longer hold. As a result, transnationalism emerged as a field of study to describe patterns of people who are living their lives in two or more societies at the same time. Levitt (2001) and colleagues argue that, since the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the pressure to “become American” has dissipated and the meaning of “American” has been complicated by society’s growing acceptance of ethnic diversity. Furthermore, the field recognizes how the increasing globalization of our world yields a variety of immigrant experiences based on a variety of contexts; that immigration cannot be summarized into a compact model. The study of transnationalism seeks to understand the dual lives that

migrants lead- economically, politically, and socially- and how these lives occur in multiple spaces in ways that defy previous standards of either totally assimilating into or rejecting one's new host society.

There are both proponents and critics of the emergence of transnationalism as a field of study. One initial area of dispute is concerned with the novelty of the term, where critics claim sending and receiving country ties are nothing new. Scholars of the field recognize this criticism and support evidence of early European migrants who maintained various ties to their home countries; these ties often took the form of remittance sending or letter communication (Levitt 2004). However, Vertovec (2001) contends, "Transnationalism does not represent an altogether new theoretical approach but one that inherently builds upon a number of preceding ones" (P. 576). Though not necessarily new, transnational practices have certainly been overlooked in the past. Robert Smith (2000) argues that transnationalism today should be examined for its effects on both sending and receiving societies. Other proponents of the field contribute to this and argue that the rapid development of advanced communication and travel technology as well as changing political conditions have changed the nature of today's transnational ties and thus it is a noteworthy phenomenon (Vertovec 2001)

There are varying propositions as to how to define transnationalism in a way that differentiates it from previous forms and establishes it as a legitimate field of study. Alejandro Portes *et al* (1999) asserts that specific conditions must be present in order for a group of people to be considered transnational and for the concept to be useful for study. Others recognize that defining a scope of transnationalism is the key to accounting for a variety of migrant experiences (Levitt 2001).

Portes, a leading scholar in the field who advocates for delimiting transnationalism as a narrow and specific concept defines transnational communities as:



...dense networks across political borders created by immigrants in their quest for economic advancement and social recognition. Through these networks, an increasing number of people are able to lead dual lives. Participants are often bilingual, move easily between different cultures, frequently maintain homes in two countries, and pursue economic, political, and cultural interests that require their presence in both (1992: 812).

Portes, Haller, and Guarnizo (2002) conducted a quantitative study in an attempt to further specify what constitutes transnationalism and measure just how present it is amongst migrant communities. They first clarify the conditions of transnationalism, proposing that transnationalism goes beyond any basic connection to homeland in the form of remittance sending or travel back and forth. They also assert that transnationalism should be reduced to economic practices or to those who are *transnational entrepreneurs*. This calls for economic adaptation of migrants in that transnational entrepreneurs do not settle as wage or salaried workers but are firm-owners who, by using their social relations and cultural ties, travel back and forth across national borders to conduct business. Finally, there must be a distinct class of immigrants who engage in this activity on a regular basis.

The results of their study yielded that, while not dominant, there exists a class of transnational entrepreneurs who make up only about five percent of the total immigrant entrepreneurs surveyed. They found that the remaining percentage of immigrant entrepreneurs are solely engaged in domestic enterprises in which their ties do not extend beyond the local community (Portes, Guarnizo, and Haller 2002: 285). This study led scholars to question why a practice that few participate in regularly deserves serious attention. Levitt (2001), Itzigsohn, Cabral, and Hernandez (2000), and others agree that the above defined economic transnational practice alongside other practices that may be less frequent and less economically central together transform all aspects of immigrants lives and the lives of others around them. Itzigsohn *et al* (2000) recognize the importance of Portes' transnationalism: that economic enterprises that span borders can open doors to processes such as social mobility of migrants. However, they add

that other relevant practices are just as valuable for migrants and that these should also be considered transnational.

What has developed is a scope of transnationalism from *core* to *expanded* or *narrow* to *broad*. This scope accounts not only for economic practices but political and cultural practices as well, essentially making up a typology of transnationalism that is relative to the conditions that create each type. Itzigsohn *et al* (2000) describe *broad* or *expanded* transnationalism as

...A series of material and symbolic practices in which people engage that involve only sporadic physical movement between the two countries, a low level of institutionalization, or just occasional personal involvement, but nevertheless includes both countries as reference points (P. 323).

Such activities might include periodically participating in cultural events, occasionally carrying and sending consumer goods across national boundaries and selling them, or participating in hometown ethnic organizations. *Narrow* or *core* transnationalism is considered highly institutionalized, constant, and involving regular travel. Transnationalism might take place in more than one sphere (political, cultural, and economic) or actors may confine their practices to one sphere in particular. Nevertheless, these two tail ends of the scope of transnational practices and the space between them imply that there are multiple dimensions of transnationalism. Still, the question remains just how significant “broad” transnational practices may be.

Scholars have attempted to address this question by conducting ethnographic case studies of various migrant groups, examining migrants’ engagement in transnational practices as well as their identities and experiences in the United States. Glick Schiller *et al* (2006) use data gathered from studies of different immigrant groups in New York City to explain how even those transmigrants who take part in directing small flows of goods from the United States to the homeland strengthen cross border relationships that give meaning to the every day life of the transnational community that they are embedded in. Scholars use the term *transnational social fields* to further explain how transnational practices can extend beyond the limitations of having

to physically travel between nation states. Immigrants are part of social networks and are thus embedded in transnational social fields whereby belonging to such a network exposes one to transnational influences without actually having to come into contact with multiple states or institutions (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004).

Within these transnational social fields the ongoing, intense, and frequent cross border connections of some transpire within communities and affect neighbors and friends in a way that promotes cross cultural ties even for those who do not necessarily move back and forth across borders (Soehl and Waldinger 2012). Certain actors may function as “nodes,” transmitting information, resources, and notions of identity through interaction to those with more indirect ties as a result of migrant social networks (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004: 9-10). While these connections are often informal, their impact can be greatly significant if institutionalized (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). When immigrant networks are institutionalized, transnational influences between active transmigrants and those with looser ties will be stronger. Individuals are embedded in social fields where economic initiatives, political activities, and socio-cultural enterprises all shape a set of social expectations and values that are shared among those involved. “The more institutionalized these relationships become, the more likely it is that transnational membership will persist” (Levitt 2001: 197). Faist (2006), a big proponent of the study of transnational social fields or “spaces”, asserts that these types of connections may actually be a strategy of “survival and betterment” for migrants in their new host society (P. 3).

Scholars in this camp of thought have also studied how broad transnational practices and their ability to carry over to non-migrants create strong linkages that influence the multiple identities that transnationals hold on to. Maintaining multiple identities allows migrants to have some kind of power in a variety of contexts and therefore strategically choose which identity to emphasize depending on their needs. Thus, they can be used for social resistance: “By

maintaining many different racial, national, and ethnic identities, transmigrants are able to express their resistance to the global and political economic situations that engulf them” (Glick Schiller *et al* 2006: 11) It is recognized that some migrants identify more with one society than the other but that the majority maintain “several identities that link them simultaneously to more than one nation” (Glick Schiller *et al* 2006: 11).

For Portes *et al* (2002), transnational entrepreneurship is one way in which ethnic groups who maintain multiple identities or a transnational identity use this as a method of social resistance. It allows them to escape low paid menial jobs such as factory work and pursue a desirable, transnational economic pathway (given, this pathway must be on-going and regular). Furthermore, in a study of West Indian immigrants in New York City, Waters (1991) shows how their transmigrant identity allows them to resist structural conditions of racism and its implications. One element of her study focuses on how those West Indian immigrants who maintain their West Indian identity through cultural transnational practices actually fare better economically and socially than if they were to lose their ethnicity and assume the identity of a “Black American.” Levitt and colleagues add that maintaining multiple identities is a tool for avoiding negative consequences that may come with total assimilation. It allows for the simultaneity of assimilating (in a new sense of the word) and remaining ethnic.

Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) maintain that *broad* transnationalism is as worthy of study as *narrow* transnationalism given the ever changing contexts that either spur or inhibit transnational action. Empirical research in this field is so sparse and new that there are few longitudinal studies that document how migrants’ movement across spaces and their attachment to multiple places varies over time. However, these scholars propose that transnational practices are not constant and linear, but can rotate back and forth. This standpoint accounts for forms of transnationalism that change over time with the relative fluctuations of social, political, and

economic conditions. Over the course of a lifetime, migrants will likely swing between host country integration and high levels of homeland connection, with the middle point being the simultaneity of both (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). This perspective purports that transnationalism and assimilation are not binary opposites.

Another limitation that can be attributed to the recency of the field of transnational studies is the lack of research and information that has been done on the second generation. As previously stated, the early assimilation model proposes that ethnic identities fade over time; that as length of stay in the United States increases, so does one's identity and status as an immigrant. If applied to today's transmigrants, this model would hold that the assimilation of the "second generation" (children born in the United States) would destroy the prospect of transnational communities persisting in future generations. However, Levitt and Waters (2002) state in the introductory chapter to the book The Changing Face of Home that even if this model were to be true, it does not mean that children of migrants would *never* engage in transnational practices: they may just be *broad* or selective. Furthermore, these practices and the social capital that comes with maintaining a transnational identity might contribute to a positive experience in their new society (Waters, 1996).

Fouron and Glick-Schiller (1991) believe that transnationalism can persist through generations for both non-immigrants (native born second-generation) and immigrants alike (those children who migrated at a very young age). Others point to the dangers of overemphasizing the transnationalism of second generations within the literature, for fear of underplaying the ways in which they *do* incorporate and assimilate. However, taking into account the aforementioned possibility of simultaneity, scholars have been quick to recognize how both scenarios can be applied to the second generation; that assimilation and transnationalism overlap (Jones-Correa 2002).

The context of second-generation migrants is that they are largely here to stay. Thus, they learn English, attend school, engage in cultural practices and social norms and sometimes engage in out-marriage (Jones-Correa 2002). Yet, given the amount of influence that transcends between actors with varying levels of ties in transnational social fields, it is essential to recognize the influence that these networks have on the second generation as well. Scholars exclaim that the second-generation learns attitudes, values, and loyalties from their networks and their parents. Within these networks, they also learn about their elder's cross-border engagement. Soehl and Waldinger (2012) hypothesize that as a result of this exposure, the second generation will then *also* engage in some type of transnational practices. Their study shows that parental influence is legitimate, but that the level of second-generation transnationalism varies with the level of parents' transnational involvement. It is important to note that even when making claims about transnationalism within the second generation, the experiences of immigrants span a wide variety of contexts and thus require much future research across groups and over time in order for us to truly understand the ways in which transnationalism challenges old models of assimilation.

### **The Hmong in the Literature**

The Hmong are one group of people whose status as refugees of a place with undesirable conditions for return deserve attention in regards to their transnational practices. Since the mid-1970's the Hmong, along with other Chinese, Khmer, Lao, and Vietnamese refugees, have been relocated in waves to the United States and other European countries. Within the larger history of immigration, this group makes up a small percentage of immigrants who constitute the "Fourth Wave" of migrants—those who arrived to the US in the post World War II period (Pedraza 2006: 39) Whereas the 20<sup>th</sup> century immigrant struggle was referred to as the "child of Capitalism," the struggle of the Fourth Wave immigrants is seen as "the child of Communism," as it includes Cubans, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Chinese, and Soviet Jews (Pedraza 2006: 39). There is

extensive research on “Southeast Asian Refugees” who have been brought here from the horrid conditions of the second Indochina war, but little has been written specifically on the Hmong, perhaps because their story remains widely unheard of and misunderstood today.

Nengher Vang (2011) is one scholar of Hmong migration who has explored the ways in which Hmong refugees in the United States exhibit political transnationalism. He argues that there is a history of Hmong transnational political involvement in the United States in that they are politically active within the U.S. in order to push for political and economic reform in their homeland of Laos. Those Hmong who are politically active in the United States have attempted to raise awareness about the ongoing situation of their people in Laos as a way to change the conditions of those who have been left behind as well as the perceptions that people of the United States have of them as a group of refugees. In a study on the self-ascribed identity and orientations of Hmong refugee leaders in the United States, Jeremy Hein (1996) explains how some leaders feel misunderstood in that, “They [people of the US] want us to go back to Laos because they don’t know why we are here” (P. 293). Other scholars such as Louisa Schein have studied forms of Hmong transnationalism through the media.

My research contributes to the study of Hmong in the United States by explaining the roots of their transnational identity and how, through their involvement with urban agriculture, the Hmong simultaneously assimilate and preserve their culture. Furthermore, urban agriculture functions as an alternative economic pathway that then reinforces the Hmong transnational social field.

### **Urban Agriculture (UA)**

The study of urban agriculture has recently gained attention within academia for a number of reasons. On the most basic level, urban agriculture is a reaction to rising concerns for the state of our environment. Spearheaded by non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations,

urban agricultural initiatives have become popular, sustainable alternatives to the mainstream industrial agricultural system that many consider to be detestable. Industrial agriculture usurps much of our country's arable land for the mass production of corn products, and as a result of the hegemony of industrial agriculture within U.S. government, surviving pastoral family farms do not receive the legislative support to sustain operation. Urban agriculture, on the other hand, transforms and utilizes previously vacant and decrepit urban spaces to combat the ecological impact that corporate food producers accrue upon our environment. Some projects, such as Milwaukee's Sunflower Farm, do this by using sustainable farming practices and distributing food locally; there is some research that has focused on the ecological stewardship of UA. However, the study of urban agriculture within *sociological* literature focuses more on its social impacts: the issue of food security<sup>1</sup> and the ways in which UA mitigates this pervasive problem.

There are a handful of ethnographic case studies that document the health implications and social benefits of urban agriculture. Recent research documents the rise of community gardens in low income urban neighborhoods and their ability to increase overall physical health of participants, empower marginalized community members, reduce crime and violence, and combat the nation's "food desert" problem (Tieg *et al* 2009).

This study adds one more case to the literature on transnationalism, Hmong refugees, and urban agriculture. However, this study does not attempt to wedge the Milwaukee Hmong farmers into a specific category of transnationalism defined in the literature. Nor is it an attempt to discount the aforementioned frameworks for studying urban agriculture. Instead, this paper analyzes how urban agriculture facilitates a Hmong transnational community.

## **METHODS**

---

<sup>1</sup> The World Food Summit of 1996 defined food security as a condition that exists "when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life". The "issue of food security" is when access is disproportionate as a result of economic and social inequalities.



The data for this paper was collected over a three-week period of time in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; a city with the nation's third highest concentration of Hmong. From December 1<sup>st</sup> until December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012 I conducted ethnographic research at various locations and events around Milwaukee, including a nationally recognized non-profit urban farm, the Hmong New Years Celebration, and farmer's markets. I gathered observational data and conducted formal and informal interviews. All participants consented to being a part of this study, and the names of people and organizations have been changed for anonymity.

While in Milwaukee, I interviewed twelve Hmong people from the ages of 18 to 60 years old. Three of the participants were male and nine were female. Formal interviews averaged about an hour long, and lengths of informal interviews conducted at various sites varied widely.

Participants in this study were found through snowball sampling: a method that started with the Hmong employees who work at Sunflower and extended to Hmong throughout the community. Sunflower is a national non-profit organization based in Milwaukee that operates a large urban farm and a number of smaller side projects throughout the city. These side projects include youth gardens, farmers markets, and community training garden plots. While participating as a volunteer at the organization's main farm site, I developed relationships with the Hmong employees. I was assigned tasks at the farm and simultaneously held informal interview conversations with Hmong employees, both of the younger and older generations. Eventually, they led me to locations outside of the farm, where I was able to interact with Hmong farmers not affiliated with Sunflower. After conducting the research, I transcribed and coded the interviews for interpretation. What follows is my analysis of these interactions with a small sample of the Milwaukee Hmong community.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Urban Agriculture: A Transnational Alternative Economic Pathway**

Two foundations of the Hmong's transnational identity are that they are refugees and they are farmers. Because the Hmong are refugees displaced by force, they did not come to the U.S. with the intention of shedding their ethnicity and homogeneously melting into society as "American". They have not isolated themselves as an ethnic community, either. Rather, the experiences they have endured as refugees and ascribed identification with this refugee "status" have actually spurred the maintenance of their agrarian identity. With this, the Hmong farmers in Milwaukee have in fact forged a transnational identity that is reinforced and recreated through their participation in urban agriculture.

First, the Hmong's identification as *refugees* and not immigrants gives them a great amount of determination to succeed in America but hold onto a profoundly important part of their culture; their agrarian identity. They do not want to succumb to the menial labor options that are available to migrants. Thus, by engaging in urban agriculture, they are able to effectively avoid such an undesirable path and instead showcase their Hmong identity and their worth as farmers.

Urban agriculture is then a way by which the Hmong recreate their *agrarian* identity in the U.S.; it is an economic pathway that is an attractive alternative to dead-end, menial factory jobs because it allows them to apply their farming skills and receive economic benefits. Their former identity as farmers in Laos is recreated as urban farmers in the United States.

By harnessing these two aspects of the Hmong identity, they assume a transnational identity. Urban agriculture then facilitates the maintenance of this transnational identity and the reinforcement of a transnational Hmong community. Furthermore, it is attractive for the Hmong on multiple levels: Through urban agriculture, the Hmong are able to maintain ties to their homeland while simultaneously occupying a niche in the United States. This niche legitimates their agrarian identity and is also economically viable. However, the degree to which urban

agriculture carries out these functions varies. My research shows that there are Hmong who have found independent means for engaging in urban agriculture and Hmong who have found organized institutions that support urban agriculture. I discovered that the latter is more economically fruitful than the former and is also more successful at facilitating and spreading the transnational community. This said, I argue that if urban agriculture were better supported (funded, organized) for the Hmong, it would be a more promising economic pathway for them and would both strengthen their transnational community and encourage the maintenance of their identity as transnational Hmong across multiple generations.

### **The Hmong Identity: Transnational Farmers**

The Hmong recognize that they have never belonged to one geological location but have, much of the time by force, been dispersed throughout South East Asia for the past two centuries. In an interview with Maikia, an 18 year-old Hmong woman in Milwaukee, she attempted to recall to me her Hmong history. She described how the Hmong were originally from Mongolia, endured war with the Chinese, were kicked out of China and forced to relocate to Vietnam, then Laos, Thailand, and finally the United States. She explained, “The word Hmong means *free people*. Hmong, we don’t have a land. We are originally of the mountains. But since we are settled here in a world of freedom, we can call it our land.” This is precisely the attitude that many Hmong have taken up in coming to America. Given the impracticality of repatriation to an insecure and dangerous Laos, the U.S. is now a place for them to call home and because of the opportunities that urban agriculture presents, a place where they can also rightfully preserve their identity as farmers.

I spent three short weeks in Milwaukee and quickly realized how strongly the Hmong identify as farmers. Of the twelve Hmong people that I interviewed while in Milwaukee, all

disclosed that they came from a predominantly agricultural background. Chao, an employee at Sunflower Farm, exclaimed how important this was to her:

When we were still in Laos, we would farm. We would farm farm farm until, you know, during the Secret War. And anywhere we could possibly grow anything, we would do that. From place to place we would farm.

Every member from the older generation that I spoke with arrived to the United States from a life of subsistence farming in Laos, where they would grow rice and vegetables, harvest greens from the forest, and raise livestock in order to feed themselves. Some members of the younger generation participated in agriculture back in Laos by helping their parents in the field every day. Others who have spent most of their lives in the United States explained that their parents' lives were based on farming; their days revolved around tending their own parcels of land to support their family. This finding that exists throughout my sample population is also prominent amongst the rest of the Hmong refugee population. In a study of United States refugee adaptation since the 1970's, David Haines (1989:10) outlines general characteristics of immigrant groups by ethnicity, pointing out that 54% of the male Hmong and 93% of the female Hmong in his survey listed "farming/fishing" as their homeland occupational background. This statistic distinguishes the Hmong as a culture of farmers even amongst other South East Asian refugee groups; other ethnic groups in Haines' survey reported a wide range of occupations that were more evenly distributed.

This said, my research reveals how the Hmong's identification as refugees and assumed status ignites their desire to maintain their agrarian identity. All of the Hmong that I interacted with while in Milwaukee migrated to the United States by force. Beginning in the 1970's, these families fled very unfortunate conditions of conflict in Laos and as a result have had to abandon their peaceful lives of *rural* self-sufficiency. Their time spent at the refugee camps in Thailand was under total Thai control; they expressed not being able to grow their own food and by no

means felt secure or at peace. Given the rural-urban migration pattern of the Hmong that I spoke with; their move from the lush hills of Laos to the cold city of Milwaukee, there is no doubt that this group of people initially experienced a similar feeling of being stripped of their identity. However, despite resettling in such an urban environment, they have found a way to maintain this Hmong identity that is centered on their agrarian past.

While some immigrant groups see America as an opportunity to shed their ethnicity and start new, the Hmong are refugees who value their farming identity too much for it to be lost. Thus, the opportunity to engage in urban agriculture --a successful alternative economic pathway-- is highly desirable for the older generation Hmong who felt “Americanized” and degraded in their initial unskilled labor jobs. During an interview with Mao Lee, a Hmong woman who arrived with her parents at a young age in 1978, she intimated to me what she felt to be the profound nature of her status as a refugee. “The Hmong, we are not immigrants. We are not illegal, we did not come here to take your jobs. We are refugees. I had no place to go. But I have as much right to be here as you do.” Mao’s distinct identification with refugee rather than immigrant is a response to the stigma that she assumes is associated with immigrants. Her perception is that society views the Hmong as immigrants and that they are unwanted; that they will undeservingly flood the American job market. She asserts the Hmong are refugees who were forced to migrate but have a right to a place within society. Furthermore, that place should be representative of a Hmong (farming) identity.

Unlike immigrants who came to the United States voluntarily, Mao and other Hmong are not willing to shed their Hmong identity; a process that other ethnic groups often endure in response to the hardships they might face as immigrants in the current labor market. Rather, they hope to continue to use this identity. It holds great significance for them despite a history of

resettlement. In an interview with Ohng, an elderly urban farmer in Milwaukee, she described how living by Hmong culture through farming is a kind of religion for her:

It's the same thing as when you believe in God or when you go to Church or you believe in Jesus. It's just the same thing as that. I believe it's important to remember your own culture. It's important to remember who you are and where you came from. It's what makes you shine.

It is as if, through all the hardships, maintaining a Hmong agrarian identity is a sort of salvation. Maintaining this identity is like a form of retribution for all of the times they have been controlled, moved around, and persecuted, and it allows them to show their roots.

In addition, I found that all Hmong expressed a desire for the Hmong identity to be recognized by society at large. Now that they are here to stay, their hope is to be able to share their own culture with other cultures in the United States. During my research, I attended the Miss Hmong Milwaukee pageant at the Hmong New Years Celebration. When one of the participants was asked how she is going to “get the Hmong name out there,” she responded by saying, “The number one thing I want to do is teach others about my culture, to try to let everyone know who Hmong people are, what we do, and why we are here [their role in the Secret War].” The Hmong express a strong desire to not only maintain a Hmong identity, but to share it for what it is worth. I first argue that by engaging in urban agriculture, the Hmong are fulfilling these hopes by establishing a niche within society that demonstrates their utility as Hmong farmers. In doing so, the Hmong assume a *transnational* identity. Furthermore, urban agriculture is an alternative economic pathway that encourages this transnational identity and thus strengthens the Hmong transnational community.

In addition, this form of transnationalism is best understood as “broad,” given the difficulties that the current unstable and unsafe conditions of their homeland present for maintaining frequent, on-going ties. While many Hmong hope to be able to maintain such regular ties, it is widely understood that repatriation is impractical for those who are now settled

in the United States. Thus, they wish to engage in a permanent and meaningful transnational occupation in the U.S.

During our interview, a former soldier for the CIA sponsored “Secret War” in Laos described to me the present conditions of his counterparts “left behind” and made clear why returning home would be both impractical and undesirable:

You know what happened in my country? Well, it’s sad now too. It is different from back then. Vietnam is still controlling and forcing people away from the mountains and into the lowlands. They [the Hmong in Laos] can’t grow what they want. They can’t live where they want. They are being controlled, moved around. –Mr. Song

Given these conditions and the impracticality of frequently or permanently returning home, the transnationalism of the Hmong involves a virtual flow of culture and knowledge rather than a physical flow of goods or business between the two nations. Scholars such as Alejandro Portes would argue that their broad transnational identity and subsequent economic practices does not actually constitute transnationalism because it is only infrequent, practiced by few, and lacks constant economic transactions between the multiple nations. However, I hold that the Hmong’s perceptions of the present conditions in their homeland and the subsequent impediments to repatriation make it difficult for their practices to fall within the parameters that Portes describes. While their form of transnationalism is “broad,” it is nevertheless significant to the Hmong community.

In talking to the Hmong about their transition to the United States, I did find that they had initial solidarity before finding UA opportunities, and this was due to their common unity as refugees of a farming background. Mao Lee told me about how welcoming and understanding the Hmong U.S. community is with each other:

There is one thing that’s different of the Hmong people from any other race that I’ve seen. It does not matter what last name I have or where I came from. If I just arrived in Milwaukee tonight and I had no place to fall back on...no relatives here...I can go through the phonebook and look for any name that’s Hmong and call them and tell them I

am stuck here. They would take me in with no hesitation. It doesn't have to be family, but it's like a family, it's like a big old family. –Mao Lee, employee at the Hmong American Friendship Association.

Not only do they all make up a refugee population who were forced to exile a country plagued with war, but their frequent interaction with each other and the exchange of common histories and experiences strengthens their bond. Mao Lee very willingly shared with me the initial struggles that her family had to face, trying to “get by” in a place where their previous livelihoods seemed obsolete. “We could not afford a piece of land. My parents were both working minimum wage jobs. In Laos, my mom was a farmer, my dad was a soldier.”

Unsurprisingly, Mao's story overlapped with many of the stories that other Hmong passionately shared with me. They all endured obvious obstacles that migrants must confront across the globe. Most prominently, they had limited knowledge of the English language that inhibited their ability to find work and support their children. Yet, the Hmong have almost unanimously expressed finding safety and security upon settling in the United States: “Once we got here, our life was a lot more stable. We didn't have to worry about running around again. We were able to just sit, stay in one place, and go to school and come back home,” Mao explained in an interview. Largely, these feelings of relief are a result of finding commonalities between each other in their host country. It is clear that the Hmong were able to initially unite in the United States on the basis of their “Hmong” names and that this was helpful to them, but I propose that urban agriculture has given them and will continue to give them another way to unite. It is a forum in which they can recreate their agrarian identity and thus strengthen their bond and their transnational community.

UA is an attractive outlet for the Hmong in Milwaukee because it allows them to interact with each other while preserving their culture and sharing it with the rest of the Milwaukee



community. In an interview with Mao Lee, she explained one reason why the Hmong in Milwaukee continue to garden:

Unlike you, unlike the American people, we don't sit back on our couches and talk. So, when we do something that we used to do anyway....that's when we openly talk and there is no floodgate. You know, we are just working in our little garden or we're planting our seeds because that's how we talk in our culture. It's our interaction.

Not only is UA a forum for interaction and the recreation of their identity, but it is also attractive because it is economically fruitful. While some males that I spoke with initially took on menial factory jobs upon first arriving to Milwaukee, many have since found work within urban agriculture and are enthusiastic about this option. Some women have also found these organized occupational opportunities, and others are involved in independent, non-institutionalized farming. The kind of work that is done within urban agriculture is familiar to them, it is active and healthy, and it allows them to support their family with fresh food and income as I illustrate below. What follows is a description of the various ways in which the Hmong are engaged in this alternative economic pathway and, further, how this fosters the reinforcement of a transnational community.

### **Independent Urban Agriculture**

While part of my study focused on institutionalized forms of urban agriculture such as Sunflower Farm, I found that urban agriculture is also an economic pathway in private, non-institutionalized ways. The independent practice of urban agriculture by many Hmong women and men functions similarly to Sunflower Farm as an alternative economic pathway and is a way in which the Hmong engage with their transnational identity. However, those who participate in independent urban agriculture face challenges that weaken the full effectiveness of this alternative economic pathway in terms of its economic benefits and its ability to truly strengthen the Hmong transnational community. While I do not doubt that these independent practices are beneficial for the Hmong who are involved, I propose that urban agriculture would be more

easily accessible and more economically stable for the Hmong if there were more support, organization, and funding for urban agriculture. This kind of support would help to facilitate the maintenance of a Hmong transnational identity and reinforce the Hmong transnational community for future generations.

Many Hmong women of the older generation have not been able to get a job in the current economy, in part due to insufficient knowledge of the English language and a lack of skills and qualifications. However, they have sought out ways in the city of Milwaukee to independently grow and sell produce in order to sustain themselves and their family. As part of their farming identity, Hmong place high value in fresh, organic food: that is how it was done in their homeland, and that is how they feel they must do it here. In a conversation with Ohng, an elderly urban farmer of Milwaukee, she explained the root of this value:

Back then, we grew organically to not get sick. We used to eat from the forest and the wilderness and we wouldn't get sick. Here, everything has pesticides and chemicals, so here, I grow my own food in my own garden because I want to know where it's coming from. I want to know that it's healthy for me to eat. And healthy for everyone.

During my research, I saw just how active the Hmong are in materializing this standard and maintaining this identity. I found that somewhere between 75 and 85 percent of Hmong tend some type of land, be it a small backyard garden or multiple acre farm. Some parcels of land are tended by just one family, and some are shared by friends. In tending their own land, they are able to grow organic produce. While it is unclear as to how many sell at the markets in addition to keeping the produce for themselves, the percentage is likely high given the Hmong's overwhelming presence at Milwaukee's farmers markets. Essentially, Hmong women take advantage of any opportunity that they can get to sell the vegetables that they grow, even independently of UA organizations. In this sense, they are taking advantage of the opportunity to maintain their cultural practices and share this with the Milwaukee community, all the while supporting themselves.

As part of my ethnographic research, I visited Mitchell Street Farmer's Market: one of many local markets throughout the city of Milwaukee. Though it is managed by Sunflower Farm, an organization for UA, the majority of vendors (particularly in the summer months) are Hmong women who sell their produce independently. While one might argue that this practice is that of a *domestic* ethnic entrepreneur, that is, a form of entrepreneurship that builds upon their ethnicity but does not transcend borders, I maintain that it is a transnational economic pathway in which the Hmong carry out their agrarian identity. These sales involve the virtual transmittance of culture, goods, and knowledge across borders. What follows is an ethnographic vignette that portrays an instance of this transnational practice. It also describes the challenges of independent UA that hinder the strength of this transnationalism.

Mitchell Street Farmer's Market is one of Sunflower's market locations that typically takes place outdoors during the summer. In December when I visited the market, it was relocated indoors on the bottom floor of an apartment building in a predominantly Hispanic section of Milwaukee. With the help of Sunflower Farm (their organization, leadership, and funding), the market operates indoors once winter strikes in order to facilitate the sale of fresh produce to the local community.

I arrived to the market early one morning and noticed Jer Veng (a Hmong employee of Sunflower) and one of Sunflower's interns setting up tables of beautifully green kale, swiss chard, carrots, onions, potatoes, and beets. Their produce was vibrant and freshly washed; tiny water droplets were still present on the leaves. Once Sunflower finished setting up their display tables, a mini-van pulled up and out stepped a very petite, middle-aged Hmong woman carrying two crates full of vegetables. Even though fields were threatened with frost that time of year, Yuon still attempted, and succeeded, in selling her vegetables at the market set up by Sunflower Farm. However, her struggles as an independent farmer quickly became apparent.

Because of Sunflower's greenhouse and hoop-house technology, the organization is able to grow and sell fresh produce year round. Although Hmong women make up the majority of vendors at these markets in the summer, they are seldom present in the winter because they do not have the resources that Sunflower does to grow food in cold weather. I found that they are able to grow enough food to sell from the beginning of the harvest until December, essentially saving up enough money to support and feed their families. But, it is very hard work and this discourages many elderly Hmong from participating. The obstacle of the seasonal Milwaukee weather inhibits this alternative economic pathway from fully encouraging this transnational identity and reinforcing the Hmong transnational community, year round.

Furthermore, of those Hmong vendors who *do* show up to sell at the markets in December, their independent set-up alongside more institutionalized organizations such as Sunflower is drab in comparison; it lacks in quantity and vibrancy due to the harsh late-fall conditions and their lack of resources.

That day, I helped Yuon unload the van full of produce to display on the long fold up table that was provided for her. Instead of using beautifully woven rattan baskets to hold her produce, Yuon used weak plastic crates that were dirty and on the fringe of breaking. It seemed that her display table might be quickly over looked by an interested customer. Nevertheless, she had a variety of typical fall vegetables—brussel sprouts, cabbage, squash and root vegetables. She also had baskets of chilies and herbs that I have only seen in my time spent in Asia. These were crops from her home country, planted as seeds that she was able to obtain online from sources in Laos. Other Hmong women that I spoke with explained that they get native seeds sent to them from relatives back home. In selling vegetables from their homeland, these Hmong women are engaged in a transnational practice that serves both as an alternative economic pathway and facilitator of the Hmong transnational community; it unites the Hmong here with

those still in Laos but this unity is virtual, not physical. They have brought with them knowledge from their agrarian past and thus, these women are easily able to use and conserve the seeds.

Furthermore, they enthusiastically expressed a desire to share this information with others who are interested in their vegetables. As Yuan and I were arranging her baskets, a Hispanic family walked into the market to browse the produce. Yuan eagerly got their attention and pointed them to her display of organic produce that she grew herself. Some of it was dirty, bruised, and very clearly not genetically modified or grown with chemicals—a characteristic different from what consumers are used to seeing at the grocery store and even at Sunflower's table. The exchange between the Hispanic family and Yuan involved bartering with hand gestures and a bit of miscommunication, but Yuan was eventually able to sell her both her chilies and herbs as well as her other vegetables to the family.

Yuan attempted to show them how they could salvage the seeds and replant them, but there was a communication barrier that inhibited the interaction from being a complete success. "Customers are sometimes afraid of buying native Laotian vegetables," she told me. They do not understand how to prepare them. Furthermore, other Hmong I spoke with exclaimed that customers sometimes don't know their food is organic, an issue that comes from a lack of certification. This is a problem for the Hmong because their desire is to share as much of their identity with others and for it to seem legitimate. I propose that this problem could be remedied with the support of an organization. For example, I noticed how Claire, the intern at Sunflower's table, was able to communicate for Jer Veng when there were misunderstandings with customers.

The language barrier between the independent Hmong women and the Milwaukee public is one challenge that they face as independent Hmong refugee farmers, and the lack of legitimate support behind their independent vendor stations is another. In turn, these Hmong women are in

competition for sales with more established organizations at the farmer's markets. This makes the pathway difficult and possibly unattractive, thus hindering UA's ability to fully reinforce the transnational community and identity.

I conclude that while these challenges are present, the independent Hmong farmers' practices represent what Levitt and Glick Schiller describe as pivoting transnationalism; the conditions and contexts of the independent farmers' lives do not allow for the frequent, constant practice of transnational entrepreneurship that Portes calls for. Instead, this kind of transnationalism through UA flows from time to time, sometimes dormant and sometimes active. I suggest that if these barriers were overcome with institutional support such as the installation of greenhouses at small community gardens or produce certification, the economic pathway would be more stable, and thus, the Hmong would find greater ease in maintaining their identity and reinforcing it throughout the community.

### **The Benefits of Institutionally Supported Urban Agriculture**

In contrast to the Hmong who participate in independent farming, Milwaukee has spearheaded UA organizations such as Sunflower Farm that employ Hmong full time. I found that the Hmong are attracted to work at Sunflower Farm because it allows them to unite with others of their culture and finally create a life for themselves while maintaining their farming identity. It allows them to overcome the negative connotations of being perceived as an "immigrant" or being a refugee, because it gives them a satisfying place within society. Samu, a young male employee of Sunflower Farm, felt protected upon resettlement to the United States seven years ago. In an interview, he reflected upon getting a job at Sunflower Farm: "I feel safe here [at Sunflower], I feel security. This is the best thing that has ever happened to me." It is an organized institution of UA that gives the Hmong a sense of worth; it legitimizes their agrarian identity.

Upon my arrival to Sunflower on a bitterly cold December day, I noticed that one of the main greenhouses was occupied by seven Hmong employees, all of whom were male, from the ages of 18 to mid 40's. They were diligently watering the sprouts, moving crates of compost-soil mixtures, and feeding the tilapia in the aquaponics system. What puzzled me was their separation from the rest of the volunteers and staff members, as there were African Americans working next-door in greenhouses alongside white students and other members of the nearby community. While I had originally questioned Sunflower's ability as an institution to serve as an arena for transnational practices—a place where the Hmong can bring their farming skills to Milwaukee and in turn learn from Sunflower Farm and non-Hmong community members, I found that this is present behind a veil; that the Hmong do engage with a transnational identity at Sunflower Farm and Sunflower Farm then successfully strengthens their transnational community.

Working at the farm allows Chao, a female Hmong refugee who arrived here with her family in 1995, to first have a paying job year round and second, a job in which she transfers skills from her farming background to skills at her job in the United States. She described being quickly offered a position when she first showed up at the organization nine years ago, on the basis of her farming background and enthusiasm for what Sunflower does. She told me that this made her feel accepted and appreciated as a Hmong woman in United States society. She also explained that she was able to learn from Sunflower right away while simultaneously teaching to them some of what she knows about agriculture from Laos. In an interview, she expresses a desire to transfer this knowledge to the Hmong community in her homeland:

Growing power has really changed me. It has given me knowledge on learning how to farm and it is also organic, like how we used to do. I want my people to come and learn so one day they will go back to Laos and they will tell my people in Laos how to do it just like this. —Chao, employee at Sunflower Farm

While return home is difficult, the maintenance of a Hmong agrarian identity through urban agriculture is transnational because it involves a cognitive exchange of culture across borders through the exchange of knowledge. When I approached Jer Veng to talk with him during one of my days volunteering at Sunflower Farm, I noticed that he was sitting at his desk and had just inserted a DVD into the small television in front of him. He reclined in his chair and stared at the television with a somber look of nostalgia on his face. When I asked what he was watching, his eyes widened, he lifted his head, smiled, and finally explained to me what the people in the video were doing: mushroom foraging. The video featured Hmong villagers in the hills of Laos, walking through the fields and into the forest in search for mushrooms to pick and bring back to the village. I asked him why he was watching this video, and he explained to me that he was going to translate it for his coworkers at Sunflower, as they are currently initiating a project in the greenhouse to grow various types of mushrooms. In this instance, Jer is engaged in transnational practice by contributing to Sunflower's organization. Furthermore, this practice is successful economically because, as I found, mushrooms are the Farm's most profitable item during the winter season.

Jer's goal was to use knowledge from his home country (learnt through the video that came from Laos and his own experiences) to help Sunflower Farm cultivate mushrooms. Furthermore, his willingness to share this knowledge with me represents an example of the aforementioned desire that the Hmong have to make people aware of their worth as farmers.

As I argued before, UA is attractive because it allows the Hmong to recreate their agrarian identity. Almost all Hmong employees at the farm expressed gratification for the opportunity to work at Sunflower. They are thankful for the opportunity to interact with others their own culture, contribute something (native knowledge and fresh produce) to non-Hmong while working at Sunflower, all the while doing something that they love: farming. "I like



working here because I can be healthy, I can exercise, it is like my own country. I like the pay, I like the other people that I am working with,” said Samu, a young employee at Sunflower. Mr. Song, an older Hmong employee shared a similar appreciation for his job at the farm: “I like it. I get to work, I get to do exercise and it’s like farming. It’s like my culture. It’s good to be around others that are like you. It’s also good to be able to grow your own food.” The Hmong employees appreciate the opportunity that Sunflower gives them for maintaining their identity in a place of work.

Furthermore, UA supported by Sunflower is even more attractive and successful at reinforcing a Hmong transnational community because the Hmong employees at Sunflower are able to make a living. They receive a market basket of fresh vegetables every Friday to take home to their families and are employed to farm year round with the help of greenhouse technology. Some engage in farming solely at Sunflower, while others have small parcels of land on the side through the help of Sunflower. I propose that the organization has increased their ability to succeed in the alternative economic pathway of urban agriculture and this makes it attractive to others who are not already involved. In essence, it widens the transnational social field.

In addition, Sunflower offers Hmong employees the opportunity to take on positions of leadership within the organization, which effectively strengthens the Hmong transnational community by encouraging Hmong participation in UA. Jer, an elder Hmong refugee who has been in the United States for ten years after living in a Thai refugee camp, has assumed the role of managing one of the greenhouses at Sunflower as well as Sunflower’s farmer’s market operations. Similarly, Chao has moved from years of working in the field---planting, picking, and washing---to managing Sunflower’s “back house” (the warehouse) and the marketing team. These are just a few examples of how this particular institution of urban agriculture has provided

the Hmong in Milwaukee with the opportunity to “move up the ladder” within the organization. Thus, it is a place in which they are able to overcome their refugee “status” *through* the successful maintenance and recreation of their Hmong identity. Cultural preservation and assimilation are simultaneous, not exclusive.

As leaders, both Jer and Chao function as a “node” within the Hmong transnational community as they informally recruit Hmong to get involved with the organization, interact frequently with non-Hmong (at farmer’s markets and in business meetings), and ultimately facilitate the spread of the Hmong transnational community. This is an example in support of Levitt and Glick Schiller’s (2004) argument that institutionalized immigrant networks will strengthen transnational influences between those with stronger ties and those with looser ties. By attaining positions of leadership, Jer and Chao showcase the very positive and feasible opportunities that UA holds. They demonstrate to the rest of the community how UA allows for the recreation of Hmong farming identity while simultaneously serving as an economic pathway.

The Hmong American Friendship Association (HAFA) is another example of an organization in support of UA that helps to facilitate and strengthen the Hmong transnational community by providing more UA opportunities to Hmong people. The New Years Celebration is put on in cities around the country each year as a way for the Hmong to unite with each other and with the larger community in celebration of their agricultural season. It celebrates their hard work and their harvests, and provides a space where Hmong can sell their produce in the winter when farmers markets are seldom. This year, hundreds of Hmong attended the event and, as Maikia pointed out to me, there were a great deal of “Americans” there as well. She explained how, through her job at Sunflower, she was able to bring her “American” friends to the event and in turn teach them “a little more about Hmong culture.” Thus, it facilitates the maintenance of the

Hmong identity in the United States and allows for the flow of transnationalism by bringing Hmong culture to the U.S.

Furthermore, HAFA hopes to support the independent Hmong farmers of Milwaukee by way of organized community urban gardens. They have already built an urban garden at the organization's site and are in the process of initiating rooftop garden projects in a few neighborhoods to provide elder Hmong with a space to carry out their agrarian identity. The Hmong agree that gardening or farming allows them to retreat to their "roots" for part of the day and do so collectively. Community gardens for Hmong who are not employed by Sunflower is not a total rejection of American society nor a means of assimilating completely, but allows for the simultaneity of both. In an interview with Mao Lee, an employee of this organization, she illustrates what urban agriculture means to the elder Hmong:

I think it's [UA] wonderful because, they're [the Hmong] being so Americanized during the day time by going to the company or factory. But with our gardens, afterward they can go. They have this little tiny plot of land, it doesn't matter if it's big, a couple of feet long it doesn't matter. They can go and do what the Hmong people always did. When they were farming in groups they would talk, and it would come out so freely. –Mao Lee, employee at HAFA

HAFA's programs would provide more space for the Hmong to interact upon their common identities, recreate their Hmong agrarian identity, be healthy, and bring food home for their families. Even these small gardens could function as an alternative economic pathway. Iah describes her elder's gratitude for this opportunity: "That's her only job, she doesn't have a job. She does that during the summer time and whatever she gets, that's got to last her up until next summer when she can start growing and selling again." For those who have had difficulty purchasing land in the city to farm, HAFA's urban gardening programs will aid Hmong in gaining the full benefits of this alternative economic pathway. They will give elder Hmong more space for growing their own food and, if well supported, opportunity for making profit so that

there would not be any need for a factory job. While the gardens that HAFA plan to implement would be smaller in size than Sunflower Farm, they are not to be overlooked. More support like this would encourage the spread of the Hmong transnational community.

### **Implications for the Second Generation Hmong**

One of the criticisms of transnationalism expressed in the literature is that there is little likelihood for transnational practices persisting through generations. I have argued thus far that the Hmong in Milwaukee are engaged in an alternative economic pathway through urban agriculture, with the institutionalized forms being stronger than the non-institutionalized forms. In terms of this persisting through the second generation, I do not have enough data to come to a conclusion but can only describe the implications that my findings have for future generations. The second generation Hmong that I spoke with do maintain an interest in agriculture, and this is attributed to their exposure to the Hmong transnational identity.

There is evidence within the younger generation of identification with Hmong culture and a desire to maintain it. In talking with the older generation Hmong refugees, I found that their children express a strong interest in helping their parents out at the field. Yuan, who tends her own land and sells her produce at the farmer's markets, spoke of how much her daughter enjoys working at the field, harvesting her own food, and helping her mom. Furthermore, Yuu, a first generation immigrant but a young employee at Sunflower wishes that she had the resources to obtain land of her own so that her entire family, including her young children, could be involved in growing their own, healthy food.

However, it currently seems that the opportunity that life in America presents for higher education supersedes the opportunity that UA holds as an alternative economic pathway for the younger generation. Their interest in attaining higher education versus pursuing a path in urban agriculture also ranges depending on how long members of the younger generation have been in

the United States and, as Soehl and Waldinger (2012) suggest, how exposed the second generation is to their parents' transnational involvement.

I found that those who have recently come to the United States identify as refugees, have limited knowledge of the English Language, and thus have found opportunities such as Sunflower Farm to be very favorable for them; it allows them to financially support themselves here while maintaining their agrarian identity. Others who have been raised in the United States and have little connection with the Hmong transnational social field intend to attain careers unrelated to agriculture and Hmong culture in general. They might not be as attracted to it because they have less of an incentive (they lack a refugee identity) to assert an agrarian identity.

Yet, the possibility of UA as an alternative economic pathway for the second generation Hmong who maintain some transnational identity is not totally lost. Maikia is currently enrolled in University and is very appreciative of the opportunity that the United States allows for her to attain a degree in higher education. However, as an employee at Sunflower, she is also grateful for the opportunity that Sunflower has given her to remain actively engaged in Hmong culture and also be paid for it. Thus, she is appreciative of UA as an alternative economic pathway. When I asked about her plans for the future, she explained that she wants to be start a business that integrates the Hmong and American communities, hopefully through urban agriculture.

I argue that with the institutionalization of urban agriculture programs, UA would become a favorable economic pathway even for the second generation. The feasibility of applying their transnational identity in their occupational field of choice would be greater if these programs were better supported and more available. There would even be opportunity to “move up the latter.” As I have described above, these programs have the ability to foster the simultaneous assimilation and preservation of Hmong culture by reinforcing a Hmong transnational community.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, I draw on the historical context of the Hmong and their ascribed refugee identities to explain their affinity for maintaining their Hmong agrarian identity. I then asserted that this identity is transnational when applied within the United States via the opportunities that Milwaukee presents for farming and the knowledge that Hmong farmers transfer. Urban agriculture has proven to be a profitable pathway for the Hmong that allows them to unite with each other and legitimately assert their agrarian identity as well as their worth as migrants. In doing so, the Hmong defy some previous conceptions of assimilation reviewed in the literature. By maintaining their ethnic identity, they have not isolated themselves nor do they experience labor market disadvantages. Rather, the Hmong have established a niche within society that draws on their agrarian identity, and this niche is advantageous economically and socially. Through urban agriculture they receive income, interact with other Hmong, interact with non-Hmong, and find worth in contributing to the greater sustainable agriculture movement byway of urban farming.

For all of the above reasons, urban agriculture is attractive and thus facilitates the recreation of the Hmong identity and transnational community. I have described a number of the challenges and limitations that independent farmers experience and thus propose that more funding, structure, and organizational support would provide the resources necessary for a stronger transnational community. Supported urban agriculture is more reliable and would thus strengthen the transnational community now and for future generations.

Though my research took place during the winter when the independent Hmong farmers were less active in UA, it is important to note that holding research during the winter pointed me to the real impediments that these independent farmers face in comparison to those who are supported by organizations. However, I do acknowledge that my study surveyed a small sample

of the Hmong Milwaukee community, and thus cannot be generalized to the entire Hmong population. My sample size and research time-frame limit the extensiveness and strength of my findings. Future research should seek to survey a larger sample of Hmong over a longer period of time. In addition, future research that focuses on the second generation might better understand the level of interest second generation Hmong have in maintaining a transnational identity and community. Nevertheless, this paper contributes another ethnographic case to the growing body of literature on transnational migration, urban agriculture, and Hmong people.

## REFERENCES

- Faist, Thomas. 2006. "The Transnational Social Spaces of Migration." *Working Papers- Center on Migration and Development*. 10(1)
- Haines, David W. 1989. *Refugees as Immigrants: Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese in America*.
- Hein, Jeremy. 1994. "From Migrant to Minority: Hmong Refugees and the Social Construction of Identity in the United States." *Sociological Inquiry*. 64(3): 281- 306
- Itzigsohn, Jose, Carlos Dore Cabral, Esther Hernandez Medina and Obed Vazquez. 1999. "Mapping Dominican transnationalism: narrow and broad transnational practices." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. 22(2): 316-339.
- Jones-Correa, Michael. 2006. "The Study of Transnationalism Among the Children of Immigrants: Where We Are and Where We Should Be Headed." Pp. 221-242 in *The Changing Face of Home*, edited by P. Levitt and MC Waters. New York: Russell Sage Foundation
- Levitt, Peggy. 2001. "Transnational Migration: Taking Stock in Future Directions." *Global Networks* 1(3): 195-216.
- Levitt, Peggy. 2004. "Transnational Migrants: When "Home" Means More Than One Country." *Migration Information Source*.  
<http://www.migrationinformation.org/feature/display.cfm?id=261>
- Levitt, Peggy and Nina Glick Schiller. 2004. "Conceptualizing Simultaneity: "A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society." *International Migration Review* 38 (145): 595-629.
- Levitt, Peggy and Mary C. Waters. 2006. *The Changing Face of Home: The Transnational Lives of the Second Generation*. New York, New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Pedraza, Silvia. 2006. "Assimilation or transnationalism? Conceptual models of the immigrant experience in America." *Cultural psychology of immigrants*. 33-54.
- Portes, Alejandro. 1996. "Introduction: Immigration and its Aftermath" Pp 1-8 in *The New Second Generation* edited by A. Portes. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Portes, Alejandro. 1997 "Immigration Theory for a New Century: Some Problems and Opportunities" *International Migration Review* 31(4): 799-825.
- Portes, Alejandro, Luis E. Guarnizo and Patricia Landolt. 1991. "The Study of Transnationalism: Pitfalls and Promises in an Emergent Field" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22(2): 217-237.
- Portes, Alejandro, William J. Haller and Luis E. Guarnizo. 2002. "Transnational Entrepreneurs: An Alternative Form of Immigrant Adaptation" *American Sociological Review*. 67(1): 278-298.



- Veng, Ngher. 2011. "Political Transmigrants: Rethinking Hmong Political Activism in America." *Hmong Studies Journal*. 12(1): 1-46.
- Vertovec, Stephen. 2001. "Transnationalism and Identity." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 27(4): 573-582.
- Waters, Mary C. 1991. *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities*. New York, New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Waters, Mary C. 1996. "Ethnic and Racial Identities of Second Generation Black Immigrants in New York City" Pp 171-197 in *The New Second Generation* edited by Alejandro Portes. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Schiller, Nina Glick and Georges E. Fouron. 1991. "Terrains of blood and nation: Haitian transnational social fields." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. 22(2): 340-366
- Schiller, Nina Glick, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton. 2006. Transnationalism: A new analytic framework for understanding migration. *Annals of the New York Academy of the Sciences*. 645(1): 1-24.
- Smith, Robert C. 2000. "How Durable and New is Transnational Life? Historical Retrieval through Local Comparison" *Diaspora*. 9(2) 203-233.
- Soehl, Thomas and Roger Waldinger. 2012. "Inheriting the Homeland? Transmission of Cross Border Ties in Migrant Families." *Journal of Sociology*. 118(3) : 778-813.
- Teig, Ellen, Joy Amulya, Lisa Bardwell, Micahel Buchenau, Julie Marshall, Jill Litt. 2001. "Collective efficacy in Denver, Colorado: Strengthening neighborhoods and health through community urban gardens." *Health and Place*. 15(4) : 1115-22.