

correspondents at large

Violence, Hmong American Visibility, and the Precariousness of Asian Race

LOUISA SCHEIN AND
VA-MEGN THOJ

LOUISA SCHEIN teaches anthropology and women's and gender studies at Rutgers University, New Brunswick. The author of *Minority Rules: The Miao and the Feminine in China's Cultural Politics* (Duke UP, 2000), she is writing a book, to be entitled *Rewind to Home: Hmong Media and Gendered Diaspora*, on media, transnationalism, and sexuality and gender in the Hmong/Miao diaspora. She is also co-editing, with Purnima Mankekar, a volume on media, erotics, and transnational Asia and is collaborating on two documentary films on the Hmong, one with Va-Megn Thoj and one with Peter O'Neill.

VA-MEGN THOJ is a filmmaker and community activist in Saint Paul, Minnesota. He trained in film and literary theory at Indiana University and in film production at Third World Newsreel. He has written several feature screenplays, including *Die by Night* (2003), and produced and directed documentaries on Hmong social issues, including *Slaughtered in Hugo* (2002), *Death in Thailand* (2003), and *Goodbye Wat Tham Krabok* (2005), as well as a short narrative film, *Flight* (2004). His awards include the Bush Artist Fellowship, the Jerome Artist Grant, and the Media Artist Fellowship.

WHEN THE MURDERS AT VIRGINIA TECH IN SPRING OF 2007 BEGAN TO BE PROCESSED, BY MAINSTREAM MEDIA AND ASIAN AMERICAN COMMENTATORS alike, in tenuously racial terms as the un/intelligible acts of a Korean American student, Seung-hui Cho, some observers of media racialization recalled the spectacularizations of Chai Soua Vang, the Hmong hunter who killed six white hunters in the woods of Wisconsin in 2004. Were these events likely to be discursively linked, and if so what effect would they produce? Would they destabilize tropes of Asian American men as studious, reserved, effeminate model minorities? Would we see the rise, or the return, of a racial menace in the form of gun-toting, ruthless, killer Asian males, and what would be the fallout? What difference would it make to discursive homogenization that one of the killers was Hmong, a member of a group that has articulated awkwardly if at all with prevailing images of Asian Americans?

For our purposes here, we resist leaving unexamined the notion of a signifying chain that would position Cho and Vang cleanly together in a discursive pattern. To be sure, the conflation of all Asian Americans into a singular, undifferentiated category has been rife in American racial discourse and is likewise a strategy of activist agendas. But there are also specificities of immigration history, social experience, regional context, and representational regime that make for important distinctions in the treatment of race in each case. Close reading reveals disparate workings of in/visibility in these two murder stories.

After a troubled Seung-hui Cho killed thirty-two people at Virginia Tech in a matter of hours, the "popculturalist" Jeff Yang mused on his Web site that recent events and media coverage had "swung the image of Asian American males away from the 'meek, passive and mild' end of the spectrum and toward 'violent, bloodthirsty and dangerous.'" *Swing* is an appropriately operative verb, since a pendulum in motion might describe the polar imagings of Asians in the American imaginary. In recent decades, the "model minority"—nerdy, unaggressive, and politically uninvolved—has been thought to hold sway

as the dominant characterization, with periodic ruptures such as the portrait of gangland Chinatown in *Year of the Dragon* (1995) and the murderous, high-achieving high schoolers gone haywire in *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2002). Somewhere midswing falls *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* (2004), which paints Asian males acting out against model minority stereotypes but only as bad boys, not as reckless killers. But did the model minority figure really hold sway, or was it always counterpointed by an Asian menace, one that was probably perpetually foreign even if he lived here and was violent as a matter of cultural essence? In her study of Hollywood cinema, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril,"* Gina Marchetti documents the latter character, one who is also a sexual threat to white women, as far back as the early twentieth century. As H. Bruce Franklin details, during the Vietnam War this menace became concretized as the barbaric Viet Cong, capable of unimaginable tortures.

Beyond the question of how hegemonic the model minority image remains is the question of how ongoing pop images interact, in often unpredictable synergy, with news events in the United States as well as with immigration histories. Did Chai Soua Vang or Seung-hui Cho play a role in shifting discursive norms? If so, we must query whether it was their acts per se or the way they were reported that created the shift.

This brings us to the community responses to the spectacularization of the events. In both cases, as soon as the media announced that the shooters were Hmong and Korean, concern about genericized blame and retribution swept members of those ethnic groups. This alliance of ethnic "community" with perpetrator is a complex process. As Sylvia Chong points out, an interpellation takes place in which a relevant ethnic community is designated by authority, and then those designated assume the resulting identity. She describes the visual interpellation of Asian Americans who on looking into the

photographed face of the killer responded "to the ideological injunction to exist as racialized subjects" (35). And beyond the image of the racialized pan-Asian face was the proliferation of remarks aligning Cho and Vang with specific ethnic collectivities: "Hey, you, Koreans!" "Hey, you, Hmong!"

These ethnic boxes may derive as much from routinized American multiculturalism as from anything else. Somehow the practice of "racial profiling"—originally describing police discrimination based on looks—was transmuted into a kind of cultural profiling under which the wider public took membership in the killers' group to mean a propensity toward similar acts. Ka Vang, a thirty-something Hmong creative writer, recounted the chilling sensation she felt immediately after the Wisconsin event on realizing that a cashier at her local supermarket was looking at her with fear, as if suspecting her of carrying a gun (*Deeper Look*, ch. 12).

One can chart quite consistently such profilings of any American ethnic group that becomes implicated in a media news event. But here's where the effects might part ways: When Seung-hui Cho kills, Koreans worry gravely about a backlash against their ethnic group, about being held accountable simply by virtue of being Koreans. By contrast, when Chai Soua Vang opens fire, Hmong fear that their entire people will be framed as bloodthirsty murderers because it's the first time many Americans have even heard of the Hmong. Prevailing invisibility produces a different semiotics of hypervisibility, as Vang is made to metonymize the Hmong for a public that encounters this group as exotically unknown. Questions are asked about the Hmong as a people, and conjecture fills the knowledge vacuum. Did he do it because Hmong people place little value on human life? Did he do it because the involvement of the Hmong in the Vietnam debacle made them warriors?¹ Or were they already warriors because of their history as a marginal

minority that always had to fight persecution by dominant masters, especially the Chinese?

Such questions stick like thorns in the sides of Hmong Americans, who crave sober recognition in the United States public sphere but who instead are intermittently sensationalized for a criminal or cultural (criminal/cultural?) excess and then left to sink back into the oblivion of the American minority field, where they are rarely “on the list” of players. And each of these questions is made even more sticky by what Hmong Lao history has actually entailed. Those Hmong who migrated from China to Southeast Asia have been no strangers to interethnic strife, but the actual violent conflicts that erupted over the centuries were *ruptures* in their agrarian lives, not ways of life. Nor is it their practice to hand down that conflictual history in the form of lore aimed at fashioning descendants as warriors. Some Hmong in Laos were involved in the Vietnam War, recruited by the CIA for a secret effort to control indigenous Lao and incursive Vietnamese communist activities in the north. Many older Hmong men in the United States do have military histories, but not Vang, who was a small boy when he left Laos and trained as a sharpshooter only later as a member of the United States National Guard. Indeed, these former soldiers have spent years lobbying and demonstrating for recognition as United States veterans, gaining only small privileges but no enduring benefits.

Almost unfathomably, after a quarter century of seeking dignified recognition in the United States, the Hmong who served in Laos found themselves “on the list” in the post-9/11 era when they were identified by the new PATRIOT and Real ID Acts as former guerrillas or terrorists (or as supporters of them). This rendered them ineligible for naturalization and those still overseas ineligible for entry. Broader world events had perniciously conspired to trump the Hmong *lack* of recognition with *mis*recognition as enemy. Paradoxically, both their military al-

liance and their purported enmity were products of American imperialism. Harking back to Vincent Chin, a Chinese American who a quarter century ago was misrecognized as a Japanese and perversely blamed and bludgeoned to death for the dislocations of American workers by the Japanese auto industry, the Hmong who had fought in the employ of the CIA came to be conflated, through popular amnesia, with that paradigmatic Vietnamese enemy they had been conscripted to war against.² Tzianeng Vang, a Hmong court observer, recalls that during Vang’s trial, a white man paced outside the courthouse in camouflage fatigues, flaunting a placard that sneered, “KILLER VANG SEND BACK TO VIETNAM” (see photo opposite).

Turning to the backwoods and to the streets of the midwestern towns of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan, we see the uneasy coexistence of invisibility and hypervisibility playing out through face-to-face encounters on urban turf and in hunting territory. These sites are charged with agonistic tension over resources. In contrast to the national level, Hmong are “known” here—known to be refugees who overtax social services and occupy white space, who speak little English and refuse to assimilate. Far from being blended into the blur of Asian minority faces, they are subject to specific forms of knowledge production in the media and in social institutions that focus in on gang activity, lack of language proficiency, cultural misfit, and economic neediness. Compassion, the impulse that prompted midwestern agencies to sponsor Hmong refugees in the first place, has soured for many. These are also sites where targeted anti-Hmong racism is known through direct experience. Any Hmong in the Midwest, especially the hunters, can recount the relentless harassment of and violent threats against Hmong in the woods and in urban neighborhoods well before the Vang shooting.

In January 2007 Cha Vang, a Hmong father of five, was brutally killed by a white



Photograph by
Tzianeng Vang.

hunter, once again in the woods of Wisconsin. There was little mystery about who had shot and stabbed him, rammed a stick down his throat, and attempted to conceal his lifeless body: the murderer was a white man, twenty-eight-year-old James Nichols, who not only confessed to having done it but told the police that the “Hmong group are bad,” that the Hmong “are mean and kill everything” and “go for anything that moves” (“Nichols”). In the subjectivity of this murderer, there was something about Hmong killing as excess that was particularly deserving of being snuffed out. Importantly, retribution for the 2004 murders, although feared at first, was never avowed by Nichols; rather, his blanket ascription of Hmong killerhood had made Vang his target.

“Killerhood” continues to be attributed to Hmong. A month later, a University of Wisconsin, Madison, law professor made news for telling his class, among other things, that Hmong

men are warriors and that second-generation Hmong tend to end up in gangs. Amid the furor, in which the professor was denounced and defended, someone quietly posted the following sarcastic slur on the *Chronicle of Higher Education Newsblog* in response to the story: “The Madison police blotter speaks volumes about the ‘peace-loving’ Hmong.” Reiterated with impunity in an array of venues, these moments of speech become acts—of epistemic and material violence. And the acts are complemented by silencings. The Wisconsin attorney general refused throughout Nichols’s trial to add hate crime to his charges. The *Chronicle of Higher Education*, which had several times reported on the Madison law story, declined to publish a commentary on it from a group of Hmong academics.³

Asian American visibility politics navigate the rocky straits between bittersweet spectacularizations and a dubious whitening through socioeconomic achievement coupled

with political quiescence. The brutal slayings of Vincent Chin and Cha Vang make telling bookends to a period in which Asian race politics undergo renegotiation. The movement around Chin, beginning in 1982, coincides with the decade in which refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia made their presence felt in American cities. In the following quarter century, geoeconomics put Japan, China, and other “tigers” front and center, coincident with new immigration and strengthened vocalities of American ethnic groups. Concurrently, the collective effort to forget the many culpabilities of the United States in the Southeast Asian wars meant that Vietnam, Cambodia, and especially Laos became almost anathema as identity signifiers. For Hmong Americans, the proliferation of new Asian imagings under globalizing trends seems to have exacerbated their consignment to the past, their iconizing of tradition, their abjection from history. Everywhere minoritized, they remained outside the alternative modernity of Asia and came to emblemize immigrant misfit even within American multiculturalism.⁴ These divergences intimate that the American imaging of an Asian with gun in hand cannot be read as a uniform peril.

NOTES

1. See Schein and Thoj’s “Occult Racism” for a discussion of these two questions, posed by a white commentator on Court TV during the Vang trial, and for an analysis of the overall treatment of the murder and trial.

2. As Robert G. Lee reminds us, during the Vietnam War, the invisibility, the lurkingness of the Viet Cong in the dense jungle led to a broader racialization, a genericization of the enemy, in the form of the “‘mere gook rule,’ whereby any dead Vietnamese could be counted as a dead enemy” (190).

3. The original coverage was published in the *Chronicle Newsblog* on 6 December 2007 (Wasley). The comment about the police blotter was posted on 7 December 2007, but was quickly deleted by the *Chronicle*, according to the editor, as offensive. The commentary by Hmong academics that was declined by the *Chronicle* was eventually published in the online journal *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education* on 14 March 2008.

4. The best-seller popularity of Anne Fadiman’s novel-like *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, about a Hmong family in Merced and their clashes with the American health care system over their child with epilepsy, is the best example of this iconicity.

WORKS CITED

- Chong, Sylvia Shin Huey. “‘Look, an Asian!’: The Politics of Racial Interpellation in the Wake of the Virginia Tech Shootings.” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 11 (2008): 27–60.
- A Deeper Look at the Hmong Hunter Incident*. DVD. New York Asian/Pacific/Amer. Studies Inst., 2005.
- Fadiman, Anne. *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures*. New York: Farrar, 1998.
- Franklin, H. Bruce. *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2000.
- Lee, Robert G. *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1999.
- Marchetti, Gina. *Romance and the “Yellow Peril”: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993.
- “Nichols Pleads Not Guilty in Slaying of Squirrel Hunter.” 19 Mar. 2007. LexisNexis. Rutgers U Libs. 31 Mar. 2007 <http://web.lexis-nexis.com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/universe/documents?_m=7684aa19ff>.
- Schein, Louisa, and Va-Megn Thoj. “Occult Racism: The Masking of Race in the Hmong Hunter Incident: A Dialogue between Anthropologist Louisa Schein and Filmmaker Va-Megn Thoj.” *American Quarterly* 59 (2007): 1051–95.
- Wasley, Paula. “U of Wisconsin Professor Discusses His Remarks about Hmong.” *Chronicle of Higher Education Newsblog*. 6 Dec. 2007. 16 July 2008 <http://chronicle.com/news/index.php?id=3568&utm_source=at&utm_medium=en>.
- Yang, Jeff. “Asian Pop: Angry Asian Men.” *SF Gate* 8 May 2007. 25 Feb. 2008 <<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/g/a/2007/05/08/apop.DTL>>.