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## Biliterate Voices of Hmong Generation 1.5 College Women: Suspended Between Languages in the US Educational Experience

This narrative research study involving 13 Hmong college women reveals some of the challenges that multilingual students may face in the American educational system. Using stories told by the participants about their language- and literacy-development experiences, the author identifies commonalities in those experiences. The similarities in their stories suggest that linguistically diverse students may often be inadvertently subjected to marginalizing experiences in their interactions with both educators and classmates. The author offers 3 positive suggestions for addressing critical issues in the US educational system: establishing and equipping the teacher as an agent for social change, promoting critical multiculturalism in the classroom, and legitimizing and giving voice to the minority experience.

### Introduction

Research abounds regarding the challenges that multilingual writers face in colleges and universities and the many different types of programs that institutions have implemented to try to compensate for these challenges. In the spring of 2010, I conducted a qualitative research study in cooperation with several Hmong female students at Simpson University in California. This study differs from many other studies related to multilingual college writers; rather than concentrating on a particular classroom situation or a group of students at a specific point in time, my research focused on a specific ethnic group and explored its members' educational experiences over a longer period. Because of the complexity of the development of biliteracy and my desire to examine the group's experience in a broader context, I used the participants' memories of their lifelong language- and literacy-development experiences as the data source.

Collecting, recording, and analyzing the personal life experiences and stories of minority populations can be challenging because those who have lived certain experiences often do not perceive themselves as possessing valuable information. As noted by Norton (in Nunan & Choi, 2010), people often consider their own experiences and personal histories to be insignificant, espe-

cially people who “have few material resources and a history of inequity” (p. xi). Thus, the study presented here sought to facilitate a narrowly defined group of second language users—Hmong Generation 1.5 women at a small Christian liberal arts college in northern California—in analyzing and sharing their own bilingual and biliterate life experiences. My goal as a researcher was to provide the women in the study with a safe environment and with the support that they needed to recall and reflect on their language and literacy experiences individually, through self-reflection, journaling, group discussion, and one-on-one interviews, and collectively through interaction and group discussions. I hoped that in addition to adding to the research bank on linguistically diverse students in the US, one of the outcomes of this process of remembering and comparing the experiences would result in legitimizing and raising the significance of these experiences for the participants themselves.

### **Research Participants and Context**

This section will provide a brief background of the Hmong population at Simpson University, a general description of the group of women who participated in this project, and an explanation of the reason for limiting the study to women only.

When I started teaching freshman composition at Simpson University, I was aware of the research on linguistically diverse students, which indicates that students from homes where English is not the primary language for communication tend to have different writing and grammatical patterns from other types of students. However, I was still unprepared for the variations in the writing of these students who had received essentially their entire education in English and may even have been born in the US. I was shocked at some of the dissimilarities in the written essays of these students and of students who grew up in English-speaking environments. I also played a more informal role as faculty adviser of the Asian Fellowship, and the Hmong students often engaged me in conversations about the feelings of disappointment and frustration that resulted when they received red-marked essays back from their professors.

Because of the high concentration of Hmong in California and because of the university's Christian denominational affiliation, at the time that I conducted my study, the Hmong were the largest minority group on campus and accounted for roughly 7% of the undergraduate student body. Although the Hmong are a small percentage in the mix of US immigrants, they are highly visible in some areas because they tend to migrate within the country in large groups to certain geographical locations—such as the rural farming areas of California, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. Despite their relatively small US population, because of their uniqueness the Hmong have been studied from many sociocultural perspectives, including their immigration patterns, their strong ties to their families, and their resistance to cultural assimilation. However, Mark Pfeifer, director of the Hmong Resource Center in St. Paul, Minnesota, and editor of the *Hmong Studies Journal*, has cited a need for further research on cultural adaptation and educational outcomes as they relate to language use among Hmong who have been born and raised in the US. He notes that “the de-

finitive work(s) pertaining to Hmong-American interactions with the primary, secondary or higher educational systems have yet to be written” (2005, p. 3).

Throughout their migration history, from China to Southeast Asia and eventually to the US after the Vietnam War, the ability of the Hmong people to preserve their traditional beliefs and practices has been one of the trademarks of their culture. Christian Hmong have a long history with the Christian and Missionary Alliance denomination (with which Simpson University is associated) that dates to around 1950 with the first Christian missionaries who lived among the Hmong in Laos. These missionaries not only introduced the Hmong to Christianity, but they also played a significant part in Hmong history and literacy by developing the first widely used writing system for the Hmong language. Before this time, Hmong had no formal written language. The outcome of the interaction with these missionaries was that large numbers—in fact, entire villages—of Hmong responded to the religion presented by the missionaries (Christian and Missionary Alliance video, Part 1, 2005), and the writing system remains the standard system used by Hmong people around the world.

The Hmong culture views education differently for men and women because the gender roles remain strictly defined in the Hmong culture, resulting in women having limited status within the authority structure of their clans and families. For this reason and to maximize the advantages of my status as a female researcher, I chose to invite only women to be involved in this study because the group discussions would be of a somewhat intimate nature. Walker-Moffat (1995) writes that “motherhood is the Hmong woman’s only basis for power in the traditional Hmong culture” (p. 121), and her level of education holds a distant second place. Therefore, many women marry at a young age and begin producing large families because their value and identity revolve around being wives and mothers. In fact, many of the women in this study voiced that a significant number of their high school friends had already married and started families. During the study, one of the women, Nkauj Choua Shoua (name changed), said this:

It’s depressing because as much education as I receive or how loud I am, I will never have a voice in the Hmong community. ... I will always be someone’s daughter or someone’s wife. ... No Hmong person will ever ask a Hmong woman what she does for a living. That concept in itself is a Western idea. I feel that in a traditional Hmong marriage, you lose your identity. People never ask you what you do for a living. A lot of the wives are very highly educated; you don’t know about it unless you ask them personally. A Hmong woman will always live in her husband’s shadow. Her identity is her husband, even her new name. She will never hear her name again and she will only be known for [her] good wife skills. (Group discussion, April 11, 2010)

Walker-Moffat (1995) further contends that independence and self-sufficiency are not highly valued within the Hmong culture, and the women are not encouraged to develop their personal identities apart from their traditional famil-

ial roles. In addition to cultural tradition, Ngo (2002) offers a second reason that many Hmong women marry early: as an act of resistance against the struggles and marginalizing experiences they face in their homes and in educational settings. Ngo proposes that as Hmong women progress through their secondary education, they realize that even if they complete their educations, they will still have to contend with gender, racial, and cultural inequities to meet their professional and economic goals (2002). This speculation on Ngo's part seems consistent with some of the stories that I heard as I collected my data.

Of the 20 Hmong women on campus at the time this study was conducted, 13 volunteered to participate. Only 2 of the 13 were born outside of the US, and both came to the US before they started school. The women ranged in age from 19 to 26, and they were at various points in their college experiences. Of the participants, 3 were 1st-year college students, 3 were 2nd-year, 1 was in her 3rd year, 3 were graduating at the end of the semester in which the research was conducted, and 3 were recent graduates from the undergraduate program who were pursuing advanced degrees. The group also represented several different fields of study: 5 were in education, 3 in Christian ministry majors, 3 in business, and 2 in prenursing.

The US Hmong exhibit certain economic, familial, and educational patterns. They generally tend to have large families and are often classified as being in the lower socioeconomic class. Only 2 of the participants defined their families as middle class; the rest described their families as living on subsistence farming, surviving on very low incomes, requiring some type of government financial assistance, and/or relying on the income of elder siblings. Of the 13 women, 11 came from families whose sizes ranged from 8 to 13 children. Only 5 of the participants had any older siblings who had completed a 4-year college degree; 7 of them had older siblings with failed attempts at finishing college. Essentially all of the women in this study began kindergarten speaking only Hmong. According to the California Department of Education website, in the 2007-2008 academic year, 50% of Hmong kindergarten students in the state of California tested as beginning English learners, even though it is likely that their families had been in the US for many years. In the same school year, only 33% of the nearly 30,000 Hmong students in the public schools in the state were designated as fluent in their English language skills. Interestingly, Vang (2001) determined that, although 95% of Hmong secondary students graduate from high school on schedule, only 10% to 15% of these students are equipped with the academic skills necessary for success at the university level.

This brief introduction to the Hmong culture and the background of the Hmong students who attend Simpson University will give some context for understanding the description of the project and the results that follow.

### **Research Methodology and Rationale**

Literacy development and language learning are complex processes to study and document because of the multiple intersecting and contributing factors involved; logically, therefore, in the study of the development of *b*iliteracy and *b*ilingualism, the challenges of investigating these processes are multiplied.

Such a multifaceted process is not likely to be effectively studied using traditional empirical research methods. The rationale and methodology for a qualitative research design will be described here.

Relying heavily on the observations and conclusions of the observer-researcher, empirical research generally presents an outsider's perspective of a particular phenomenon by explaining the experience of the research subjects from the viewpoint of the researcher. As I conducted my literature review on linguistically diverse college students, I found many of the studies related to the multilingual writer somewhat dissatisfying because they presented the literacy-development process in a fragmented way. In addition, often the research contained misrepresentations and overgeneralizations, especially concerning populations such as the Hmong, who are often subsumed under more general categories, such as Asian American, which includes vastly different types of Asian peoples who may come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, representing diverse educational, economic, and immigration histories.

Some of the recent research on Generation 1.5 students has tended to focus on the students' performance in the college composition classroom, which seems to be a primary site for their second language challenges to become evident. Other studies, rather than acknowledging the complexity of the individual learner, look at specific issues in the language learning process or focus on how to improve the delivery of education to this population. Thus, these studies reduce the representation of the students to the specific types of grammatical errors that they make or to the level of success of various curricular adaptations or teaching methods. Still other inquiries look at brief snapshots in time and, consequently, lose the sense of the development of biliteracy as a lifelong process. A study of the type I describe here is valuable for US multilingual writers because it allows their voices to be prominent and has the potential to present their experiences over a longer time and in a more vivid and holistic way.

Because of the intricacy and complexity of the development of biliteracy, narrative inquiry offers a potentially effective technique for examining the development of biliteracy. Creswell (2007) identified narrative inquiry as a mode of research that "begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals" (p. 54). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) assert that "lived experience" (p. xxii) is the logical starting point for all social science inquiry. Since "[e]xperience happens narratively" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 19), it can logically follow that researchers should study it narratively. These authors also believe that people are the "embodiments of lived stories" (p. 43). The outcome of my research project was a collection of *lived stories*, vignettes of remembered experiences, which allowed me to examine the differences and commonalities in the experiences of these women. Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) advocate that *small stories* are a more effective means of exploring identity than the larger narratives that are the more traditional products of narrative research. Despite the concerns of empirical researchers, Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) argue that first-person narratives provide a much more meaningful source of data than third-person observations. They also assert that refusing to recognize the importance of first-person accounts of bilinguals regarding their

language learning experiences, in effect, subverts the experiences of an already marginalized population. Johnstone (2002) notes that a person's understanding of her experiences constitutes her reality and that a research subject should be allowed to speak for herself and to pose questions that should be answered by the research. There are a richness and authenticity that can be captured by using the students' own words as a primary source of data.

Of further relevance to this study, Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) provide support for legitimizing "retroactive" first-person narratives (p. 158) as a valuable source of research data. The use of remembered experiences seemed especially suitable for my purposes because I wanted to investigate a process, namely biliterate development, that occurs over many years; unfortunately, I did not have the luxury of conducting a longitudinal study and waiting years to obtain the results. Moreover, I felt that the process of reflection and discussion would be embraced by the Hmong women who were to be the target population of my study.

Atkinson (1998) suggests that more life stories of women need to be recorded in order to give the feminine voice a chance to be heard and to bring a sense of equilibrium to databases that are often dominated by the male perspective. In addition, Reinhartz (1992) strongly makes a case that women are especially suited for interviewing and studying other women: "A woman listening with care and concern enables another woman to develop ideas, construct meaning, and use words that say what she means" (p. 24). The design of this study maximized my status as a female researcher. Because I am a woman, the potential existed for me to be able to create a supportive and empowering atmosphere for the women in my study, thereby greatly enhancing the richness of the information gleaned through the research process.

As support for using journal writing as part of the research process, Haug (1987) contends that reducing one's experiences to writing imbues those experiences with a greater value and significance. Furthermore, she believes that the act of writing can turn the subject of the research into a researcher herself and be a source of empowerment for the writer—especially a writer who is part of a subjugated population:

Writing is a transgression of boundaries, an exploration of new territory. It involves making public the events of our lives, wriggling free of the constraints of purely private and individual experiences. From a state of modest insignificance we enter a space in which we can take ourselves seriously. As an alternative to accepting everyday events mindlessly, we recalled them in writing, in an attempt to identify points in the past where we succeeded in defending ourselves against the encroachment of others. (p. 36)

Cadman et al. (2007) assert that in feminist theory, written memories are viewed as valid data and allow those who might otherwise be silent to share their experiences. In addition, the action of writing down memories is expected to result in the activation of further memories (Onyx & Small, 2001).

Memories allow writers to reconstruct occurrences from the past that contributed to the participants' integration into the social practices around them. From Haug's (1987) perspective and experience, memories are well suited for studying social processes that involve a critical perspective, processes that involve suffering and subordination. She views the research process as a potential act of liberation. Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005) agree that memories have the potential for empowering and liberating marginalized people and that memories have the added advantage of being fairly easy to obtain and can link theory with lived experience. Onyx and Small (2001) advise other researchers that "[t]he trick is to produce the more jagged stuff of personal lived experience" (p. 776). In addition, the researcher must remember that the particular stories that participants choose to write about speak as loudly as the stories themselves. Brodkey (1987) shares the following advice:

One studies stories not because they are true or even because they are false, but for the same reason that people listen and tell them, in order to learn about the terms on which others make sense of their lives: what they take in account and what they do not; what they consider worth contemplating and what they do not; what they are and are not willing to raise and discuss as problematic and unresolved in life. (p. 47)

Even though negative memories and situations may be dredged up during the research process, there is reasonable evidence that the writing done by the participants is more likely to be beneficial than harmful (Duffy, 2004, 2007; Norton, 2000). Haug (1987) believes that the writing of memories can actually free the writer and develop in the writer a greater sense of significance and confidence. I was intrigued by the prospect of using writing, which is often a site of conflict for multilingual writers, as a way of empowering them.

As I mentioned previously, 13 Hmong women volunteered to participate after being presented with a description of the project and the time commitment that would be involved. Once they started the project, all of the women continued until the end. Background and demographic information were gathered through the use of questionnaires. Because one of my goals was to engage these university students as co-researchers, in the initial informational meeting with the women, I described to them some of the research regarding the college writing challenges of college students with linguistically diverse backgrounds. I also presented the women with some of the reasons that researchers and educators gave for these observations and then elicited their suggestions for writing and discussion topics to begin exploring their own experiences.

From this initial meeting, I compiled a set of questions or prompts for them to use as a starting point from which to begin writing their stories. Their writing served as the foundation for succeeding group discussions and interviews. Since there were too many participants to have a productive group discussion all together, I divided them into two groups. Topics for writing and discussion included the language and literacy practices in their homes, their successes and frustrations with their two languages, their educational experi-

ences both before and during college, and finally their roles as women in the Hmong community and the influence of that role on their educations.

The stories were collected through a cyclical process of writing, group discussion, and individual interviews with me, as the primary researcher. When the women came together after writing their stories, they read the stories aloud in the group. As each woman read her story, she often added details and further explanation, and after each story was read, the other women in the group had a chance to ask questions or to share personal experiences that were similar to those of the reader. After each group meeting, I collected the journals and transcribed the recorded conversations. Using this information, I prepared for individual discussions with each of the women, during which I asked questions designed to clarify information and to fill in details of the stories. The topics that were salient in the group discussions served to guide us in developing the next set of writing prompts.

After three cycles of this process, I turned to the task of constructing cohesive narratives from the information gathered through these three methods. In representing the stories, I started with the most complete version of the individual's story and added additional information as available from other sources of data collection. For example, if a participant told the most complete story of a particular incident or situation in her journal, then I used that source of information as the starting point for compiling the narrative. In my retelling of these stories, I took the liberty of inserting additional information provided by the storyteller herself into the appropriate place in her most complete account of the story. I used the participant's own vocabulary, even when there was non-standard use of word forms or verb tenses.

Many of the women demonstrated to some degree their generation's dialectical language distinctions—the extensive use of the word *like*, for example. I removed some of these oral insertions and filler phrases from stories in which they were excessive in order for the reader to be able to focus more fully on the content of the story. As I mentioned above, I did not remove grammatical and word choice distinctions that might be considered inaccurate use of the language by some because I wanted to allow the readers to see for themselves the language usage of each of the participants. I would be the first to admit that the entire story, related in the individual's own words and created by the individual herself, would provide the most reliable representation, but since these participants were neither prepared to nor inclined to tell these stories on their own at this point in their lives, I have endeavored to reconstruct these stories for them, doing my best to retain their original words, intent, and tone.

I then was faced with the seemingly overwhelming task of organizing and analyzing the stories. However, through the next year, I repeatedly read the stories and attempted to pick out recurrent themes. Here are examples of a few of the categories that I used for organizing the stories: conflicts between American and Hmong language and culture, educational experiences before and during college, experiences involving gender, culture and education, and feelings regarding perceived inadequacies in the skills and vocabulary expected for college reading and writing. I searched for commonalities and differences in

their experiences and explored the possible impact that those experiences had on their language and literacy development. I then came up with some suggestions for educators to consider when deciding how to encourage the language development of multilingual writers. I will share these findings and ideas later in the article.

As a final note on methodology, I would like to mention that this group of women was especially suited for this type of research. First of all, their culture is a collective culture that values oral interaction, so they wholeheartedly embraced the discussion and sharing of personal experiences. Second, most of them knew each other and me well before beginning the study, so they were able to trust the group with their stories. Third, as college students, they had the analytical and writing ability to describe and evaluate their personal experiences and those of their peers. These factors greatly contributed to the success of this research design. In the next section of this article, I will share a small sampling of the stories that I collected. Obviously, I am very limited in how many stories I can share in these few pages, but the reader can be assured that for each of the stories I share, five or six more similar stories were shared during the data collection process.

### **Results of the Research**

I will start this section by first sharing the most significant outcome of this study: my own ideological transformation. I naively started this research with a strong bent toward looking at concrete language problems and solutions. However, I started the research by allowing the participants themselves to identify areas for consideration that they perceived to contribute either positively or negatively to their literacy development. Although my original impetus focused on surface language variations, such as problems with grammar or vocabulary, the women consistently pointed to social and cultural issues, including personal interactions in schools, homes, and communities.

Because of my pragmatic nature, I was predisposed to downplay critical issues related to discrimination, injustice, and inequality because I thought that blaming these larger issues in some sense removed responsibility from educators because these problems are difficult for educators to take personal responsibility for and make it difficult for educators to feel that they can make a difference for students on an individual level. I thought that more productive solutions would come from considering how we can teach better and correct gaps in students' language ability rather than how to adjust the inconsistencies in our ideologies. Problems that address educational techniques and language are easier to identify and control when compared to problems associated with the positioning of minority populations in the classroom and community. As it turned out, I was unable to avoid these more complicated and nebulous critical issues because they are the ones that came to the forefront in the discussions. Issues related to feelings of being marginalized and othered were discussed most often, most extensively, and most emotionally. The women who participated in this study essentially never voiced any desire to be more assimilated, just more respected. They did not appear as concerned with fitting in to the US educa-

tional and social structures as with being able to acquire the skills that they needed to be successful with their own educational and professional goals. My original hypotheses were that factors such as deficiencies in language programs or limited use of English outside the classroom were responsible for the fact that many students do not use English in the same way as their peers in college. These kinds of factors may contribute to the phenomenon, but after listening to the women's stories, I reluctantly came to believe strongly that critical issues truly are a major complicating factor that hinders many Hmong students, and likely other minorities as well, from acquiring the English language with the proficiency that they, and their professors, think they need for higher-level academic tasks.

The stories of experiences before college showed that the ESL intervention that was supposed to help their language progression was often actually more of a hindrance than a help. Furthermore, the fact that they were labeled ESL and stigmatized by being pulled out of their regular classrooms likely contributed to their experiences of feeling marginalized. At least in the case of these women in the study, their experiences in college, even in the Christian college, continued to make them feel separate and discouraged participation in the very classroom practices and conversations that could have furthered their language and vocabulary development at the advanced levels required to boost their confidence and ability.

In the following pages, I will relate some of the stories that emerged from my research. The names of the students have been changed, but their stories are largely intact. For this article, where I have removed parts of the stories for brevity, I have inserted an ellipsis in square brackets. The first set of stories relate some experiences of the women when they were in the lower grades of elementary school. The first story is from Meh.

I know I was in ESL in kindergarten. Then for first grade I moved to another state and was in ESL for the first couple months. I really loved to read and I already knew how to read, but for some reason, the first time I went there, the lady told me to read slowly. So even though I could read faster, I read slowly. I'll give you an example. This is how they wanted me to read: The-e-e b-a-a-at i-i-i-s bla-a-a-ack. The-e-e-e ba-a-a-a-t fle-e-e-e-w-w-w. I remember thinking, "I already know how to say this word. Why do you want me to say it slowly?" I would go home and tell my mom, "Mom, you always tell me to read slow. What's wrong with me reading fast?" I was starting to get annoyed by this sort of method, and I always wanted to ask if I could read faster, but then my parents always told me to be a good student and listen to the teachers. I was in this program for two months and I was reading like that. I got so mad every time I had to go, and so one day, I had a new tutor. I got tired, and I think my tutor got tired, too. She said, "Can't you read any faster?" I said, "Yeah, I can read faster!" and I read so fast and she was like "You don't have any problems." She was so shocked. I can remember her tone and voice, "Wow Meh. Here, how about you read this

book to me.” The book had more paragraphs, but I had no trouble reading it. And then after that, they just took me out [of ESL]

We moved back to California when I was in fourth grade. For some reason, the staff had put me in a lower division class. It seems like the staff who are part of placing people judge the person standing in front of them with their eyes and ears. Does this person look white? Does this person speak with an accent? Do the parents speak English well? And I wasn’t sure what was going on because I was a little kid and I didn’t talk much because I was shy and I didn’t know anybody. I just knew that I didn’t have to go at such a slow pace; I didn’t have to do so many worksheets. In the class that I was put in, we had to like pronounce, like re-pronounce, words like “bat” or “hat” and “cake” and just simpler words like that, and I thought, “I’m already in fourth grade. I know how to say these words. It’s not hard for me at all.” The only person I knew at the school was in a different class, and I asked her what her class did and I remember saying, “You guys do things that are good for your mind ... better than pronouncing ‘bat’ with the whole class”

I don’t even know if Hmong was really my first language. I just remember learning in English, but I used both languages, so I didn’t really know whether to put down English or Hmong as my first language. I spoke more in English and spoke better in English. Because of my fear of being put in ESL classes again after moving from school to school, I would always tell my dad to put down English as my first language

Youa thought that in many ways, her ESL instruction was unnecessary because she was presented information that she already knew.

I vaguely remember in fourth grade, during class sometimes, I would be pulled out of class to go over a few things that I thought were kind of ridiculous. I remember looking at pictures and being asked what they were pictures of. “What is this picture of?” “A chair.” For example, he showed me a picture of a table. He would point to the legs of the table and ask me what they were called. I remember it being really simple things, and so I never liked going. I felt I was missing out on some fun things my class was doing while I was gone. So, sometimes, you’re not at a level where you feel like you need to be in ESL because they’re teaching you “A is for apple” and you know that already.

Honestly, the only other thing that comes to mind is that no one in my class liked being pulled out. We all sat at a table. All the Hmong girls, because my fourth grade class had a lot of Hmong students in the class. But I had all these friends, and we were all sitting together. The ESL teacher would come in and all of the Hmong girls would look at each other and silently say, “Oh wow, he’s here. Hopefully it’s not me today.” I remember that very clearly. I can even kind of see how we were sitting, and I can see him walking in and when it’s not you, you say, “Sorry,” to the girl who has

to go, but inside you're saying "Yes! (with a hand pump gesture)" When he did not call us, we would give each other high fives. Or when it's your turn, you're like "Darn!"

Chu Ka shares how she was never in ESL classes until middle school. It appears that when she changed schools from elementary school to middle school, it was determined that she required ESL assistance.

In elementary school, I never received ESL services, although I saw my friends of various races receiving them. I always wondered what it was and why did the people have to leave class sometimes. Then, for some reason, when I was in the sixth grade and entered Junior High School for the first time, I noticed I was put in a class with all the multi-racial people. I noticed that there were a lot of Russians and Mexicans. Otherwise, it looked like a regular classroom, right next to a normal class. I was wondering, "Why am I stuck with all these foreign people?" Then I realized that I, myself, look foreign, too. Until I was put into that class, I didn't think of myself that way. At the end of the semester, I got the award for the highest grade. After excelling in that class for the first semester, they moved me into another classroom that contained all my friends that I knew from elementary school.

In the following story, Hli Chia shared about the discrimination that she felt surrounding the testing practices in her public school.

In high school, the teachers would announce the names of minority students that needed to meet in a particular class to take a test. I hated the fact that my teachers called out the names of students on that list, and none of them were Anglo students. It felt like we, the minority groups, were being singled out, and we pretended not to be embarrassed.

Phoua makes a very astute observation that she was doing better in school than some of the "white" students, but they were never required to take any kind of English proficiency examination.

My language wasn't that much different than the people around me, but I was picked out, just because I had a second language, not based on my ability. They would make us take an English test every year, and I couldn't understand why I got better grades than some of the white students, but they didn't have to take the test. Why can't they take the test, too? So I feel like we were treated differently. My younger siblings are still being placed in ESL classes, and I want to say, "Why are you guys holding them back from their education?"

As is evident from these small parts of their stories, the women often did not feel that they were learning anything worthwhile from their ESL intervention;

thus, they were stigmatized and isolated from the mainstream classroom and derived little or no benefit from the experience. They were separated from their more fluent English-speaking peers with whom they might have benefited from interacting, not to mention that they were often missing valuable content instruction in their primary classrooms.

Aside from what happened in the classroom, one of the most emotional conversations that we had during the course of this research was when we discussed their parents' lack of understanding and involvement with extracurricular activities. Observing the way that other parents participate with their children resulted in these women feeling even more like outsiders in the educational environment. Bao Bai remembers feeling like an outsider after her band concerts when she was waiting outside alone for her parents to come and pick her up.

My parents never had time really to participate much in our lives because they sacrificed their time to work all the time. They didn't come to my band concerts. It made me really sad. After the band concert everybody would run to their parents, but I would just go outside and go call them to come pick me up, and then I would have to wait for like 30 minutes until they came and picked me up.

Chu Ka recalls awards assemblies and back-to-school nights in which her parents were only minimally involved.

Well, like I remember in grade school, I'd be receiving student of the month all the time, no kidding. I remember, we'll sit and they'd announce "Miss Jones' class," and all the little kids would yell, "Chu Ka, Chu Ka, Chu Ka." I remember that a lot. Then I would go up and I would know that like my parents weren't there, and I knew that [it was not that my parents] didn't want to come. It's that whenever that letter does come to the house, that your student's going to receive that award, they don't know how to read it or like they wouldn't understand it. There was a time when I was really surprised my dad came once. I was like happy, though. It made me kind of want to cry. I have never been more proud of myself than when my parents showed up

For 'back to school nights,' my parents never attend because I knew deep down inside, they felt embarrassed that even if they went, they couldn't participate because of their disadvantage of the English language. At the same time, I sometimes wished my parents would attend so that I would have parents to run to when I'm finished performing at back to school nights. It made me feel sad inside, but I didn't want to feel sad because it wasn't my parents' fault or mines. So like for back-to-school nights, we had like a community of Hmong people, so all the kids would gather up and we would just go by ourselves to the back-to-school night because we know our parents wouldn't go because of the disadvantage of not knowing English

Although these extracurricular activities may not have been directly related to their academic endeavors, their parents' lack of involvement made the women feel further othered and alienated from their fellow students in the social context of the educational environment.

The next set of stories will focus on situations in the college classroom. Emma starts out the following story talking about occasions when professors point out the stereotypical differences between cultural groups in an attempt to help the class understand her better. She shares her response to these types of situations.

I personally hate talking about racial issues in class. Actually, I hate talking about it in general. They bring way too much attention to our differences and, most of the time, they are either way too general to one group (i.e. Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Hmong, etc.) or to one person's personal experience. I remember in one of my classes, my instructor made comments throughout the semester about how I was quiet because I was "Asian." I believed that I was quiet because I didn't have anything to contribute to the class, considering it was a completely new concept we were learning and I was merely taking it in for the first time. In another one of my classes, which focused on different cultures, I found myself "trying" to be what the instructor described as "characteristics of Asians"—I was going through an identity crisis during this time and didn't know what to think or who I was. This was so embarrassing and it made me want to miss class when I could. In some ways, by pointing out stereotypical ideas by putting labels on people actually hurts more than fosters growth in a person. Might as well conform to it. He's educating the whole class. You think maybe he's doing it to be respectful but really it's like he's educating the whole class again that you don't speak [in class] because [you're Asian].

I think it was in my sophomore year when I had my first real identity crisis cause I took a class that focused specifically on [cross cultural communication] and in class, I was like, "Oh my gosh, that's who I'm supposed to be," you know, and so throughout the whole course, I was like "Am I supposed to be that way? Oh my gosh, I'm Asian, I should be that way." You know, because years of study and stuff say that this group of people is like this, like stereotypically. It was like an identity crisis. I went home and I was so disturbed by it. Like I was so bothered by who I was and who I wasn't and it was just like the strangest time in my life to get through.

Paj Chia, who is very outspoken, had a lot to say about marginalization in the classroom. She related that she has often felt marginalized by both professors and other students in the college classroom.

There's one professor in particular that always talks about Hmong people in class; he always says like "They're so quiet and they don't talk much and they're very ..., their culture ..., they're really shameful and they turn red when they talk in class." He just always brings it up all the time and so it

makes you just want to be quiet, like, it doesn't really make you want to participate because it's like, he's already said it. In one sentence he can tell the whole class about all the Hmong students.

And then you feel really marginalized in class mostly when you're grouped up into small groups with other people. I think that's when I feel the most marginalized by other students, as well. Because, I don't know about you guys, but when I'm grouped up with like Caucasians or other, you know, people who are more efficient in English or they try to put in all their inputs and yeah we are a little quiet and then I will try to say my input and then they don't ... it feels like they aren't really listening. They're just like, "Oh, OK," and they go back to what they were doing. Then at the end, they always end up using their ideas instead of mine. If this happened only once, it wouldn't bother me as much, but it has happened more than once and I would say every time I was in a group with Caucasians. Another time, it was me, another Hmong woman, and three other Caucasians grouped together. After several meetings of discussion, I asked the Hmong woman if she felt ignored, and she said "Yes! They don't really listen to us." We are the minorities, we aren't as efficient in English as Caucasians, and we are also affirmed in many ways verbally and nonverbally. We are asking for sensitivity, at least I am.

Every time race comes up, there's a lot of tension, even in class or anything. I just hate that tension. It's like so strong, you know, and then it brings up a lot of hurt and a lot of bitterness too because of how you're treated in the past and how you grow up and everything and so I admitted too, like I'm still trying to battle with this. I think that it's always going to be there and so I'm trying to be sensitive to you know that they don't know either, but at the same time, it's like, "Whoa, we're doing our best at understanding too."

I think it would help if [classmates], especially professors too, understand that it's a huge step when Asians do speak in class. I mean I understand the Hmong culture and where they're coming from. I mean I'm more talkative compared to a lot of Hmong girls, but I think that our culture is not competitive and it's not aggressive, like if we want to say something, we're not going to fight to get it out. Like all the Caucasians are raising their hand at once and even though the teacher doesn't pick on them, they're still raising their hands. For Hmong people, if you raise one hand and they don't see you, it's like, "OK, it's OK, it's fine." It's not aggressive or it's not like, "I have to speak my mind!" You know? It's like "Oh, I learned something, OK, it's for my benefit." That's how I do it. "Oh, OK, I don't really have to ask this question," or "Maybe they need it more than I do." That's what I think.

I was intrigued by a shared experience that was remembered and chronicled by two different women—both seniors. This experience occurred in their freshman composition class, and they both remembered it, highlighting its significance in their educational history. Here is one of their stories.

I think that a lot of people ask minorities, “Do you feel marginalized?” And we always say, “Yes, yes,” but we never put our finger on it or say, “This is why.” I know that some people do not even know they are making minorities feel this way, but that’s not the point. One specific example in my college experience was when I was in an English course with another Hmong student. We were watching an Old English movie. If you know Jane Austen, you have to listen carefully to Old English, because it is different and I understand them because I watched them since I was young. I love the wittiness of the way they speak and the humor. The other Hmong student and I laughed the most and seemed to enjoy it the most. Then after the movie, the professor said, “I am surprised that you two seemed to enjoy the video more than the others and understand it better,” trying to say he was surprised that we understood what was going on. I know it was supposed to be a compliment but it did not feel like it. I felt like we were singled out. I felt that yes, we did enjoy the movie a lot and understood the language, but he did not have to point us out because we were different. I think we’re being sensitive to knowing that they don’t know that they’re doing it, but at the same time, I don’t know how to fix it either. And so I think speaking up at that time would have been good if we knew at that time. Cause you don’t know that it’s really happening until after you think about it. It takes awhile for me to realize it or to see that it was offending cause you don’t want to just jump on top of it.

This is an excellent example of the kinds of comments that are often made with reference to minority populations but often slip by without notice. In fact, neither of these women initially felt slighted by this comment, but they later realized that these types of comments are discriminatory and somewhat insulting.

In addition to remarks made by some of their professors, the women also pointed to specific instances in which they felt marginalized by their classmates—most frequently when they were required to work in small-group situations. Pajka shared about instances when she felt marginalized in her interactions in the classroom, partially because coming from a collective culture, she expected the group to work toward consensus.

I remember my freshman year when we were in groups, it was harder to communicate with like other people because they always want to talk first or they’re never like “What do you think?” They’re always just, “Oh I think this, this, this,” and then they never really kind of appreciate the other people. Or kind of like, what do you want, what do you think as a group, and I think the more individual they were, the more I was kind of like, “What’s going on here?” Cause we grew up as a collective group and we always asked each other what we wanted and when everybody has the same, similar answers, this is our answer, instead of like, different here, different there. Everybody has to agree on something to do something, and I felt more marginalized like that. Even if I wanted to do something like this, the

other person who's more confident, they would have the say in it, [rather] than me. (Individual interview, April 28, 2010)

Phoua also emphasized that she often feels like an outsider when it comes to group work in classes.

Classes are good but when it comes to group work or teamwork I feel that I'm not a full participant in the group because I feel like an outcast because I'm not white like them and they seem to look down on me because I don't seem as smart. I guess it's just their stares. Because I know like in [Bible] class, he makes us do group work. Like every time he says, "OK, get in your groups," it's like "Whoosh," I have a space [around me]. I don't want to do it because I know that my group ... I don't know anyone and the whole group are already friends and they know each other. It's kind of like the people around me just kind of like joined in together and I feel like "OK, I don't have a group." I was like, "Can I just join you guys?" and they were like "Sure." So I feel like an outcast, and then like when I go in, they're kind of like, they stare at me, like, "OK, why doesn't she say anything? What is she doing in here?" So it's kind of like, OK, I feel like I'm not a full participant in the group. I give my opinions, but they don't really see my opinions that highly as their friends'. I mean like if I was supposed to state it, they'd be like, "Uh, OK," then like they won't write it on the paper. It's kind of like when you state your opinion, they don't put that into ... like, they don't really respect your opinion; it's kind of like, "Am I dumb?" Or like, "Is what I said not right, that you would think that it's wrong?" It just feels ... it just puts you down, where like, "OK, maybe I shouldn't say anything within the group because they won't even consider my opinion." And so I'll try a bit, but there's some times when I kind of just sit back. (Journal, March 15, 2010; individual interview, March 25, 2010)

These are a few of the stories that contributed to my developing an understanding that, even though these women progress from preschool through college using the English language, they are not full and equal participants in the educational and social experiences of the society surrounding them because of the limitations placed on them by their families, by members of the dominant culture, or by their own decisions as they attempt to negotiate the complex network of conflicting values bombarding them. While their writing may not be as proficient and precise as most college professors would like, the perceived limitations in their writing and language skills are indicative of more significant social issues related to the education of minority students.

I realized that as young children, these women were immersed in English-only classrooms, and although they were taught in English during the hours they were in the classroom, in reality, they were not truly immersed in an English-rich environment. For various reasons, they were often silent in the classroom. In addition, they continued to speak primarily Hmong or "Hmonglish" outside the classroom with their families and friends. Indeed, those who tried

to establish close relationships with children outside the Hmong community were subjected to pressure from their families and friends to stay within the Hmong community friendship circles and, as a result, often abandoned those outside relationships. These young women were unlikely to learn and use mainstream middle-class English because they are not really part of the mainstream middle-class community, either in their educational sites or in the communities outside their insular Hmong societal structures. In their educational experiences, they have always been outsiders, they have lived on the fringes, and they always have been and continue to be othered—even in the college classroom. Norton (2000) would argue that these young women have not been allowed adequate access and entrance into the English-speaking communities in which they live.

### **Recommendations From the Research**

The stories in the previous section were just a small sampling of the stories that the women told about feeling marginalized or othered in their educational experiences. As I mentioned earlier, despite my initial reticence, these stories and others like them convinced me that critical issues may indeed have a significant impact on the ability of minority populations to become a part of the conversation in academia and to become confident and competent in their use of language for academic purposes. Solutions for critical issues are much more complicated than simply changing a curriculum or an assessment instrument or even providing bilingual education or using the latest teaching methods. A focus on critical classroom awareness may be a more fruitful emphasis for a linguistically diverse society such as that of the US. Therefore, I would like to suggest three positive ways for addressing critical issues in the US educational system: establishing and equipping the teacher as an agent for social change, promoting critical multiculturalism in the classroom, and legitimizing and giving voice to the minority experience.

#### ***Establishing and Equipping the Teacher as an Agent for Social Change***

In an educational environment, the teacher is the most effective agent for positive change. Whether or not bilingual or ESL education is offered is less important than the atmosphere in which the education is provided and the power structures and attitudes of the actors involved in the interactions. The development of literacy is never a neutral process for an individual; rather, literacy is part of the power relationship that exists between people in a society. The attitude of the teacher is more important than any particular curriculum or program. Teachers can teach and encourage students to question and challenge the power relations that exist within the educational and social structures, regardless of the curriculum they are required to follow.

The participants in this study indicated that they often felt silenced by professors or other students when their comments in a discussion were not acknowledged or taken up, either in class discussions or in small-group interactions. Instructors must evaluate their own classroom practices and realize that the determination of many minority students to participate in class is very

fragile. It sometimes takes all of the courage that they have to make a comment, and the instructor should be aware that the response to these comments may determine whether or not the student will feel comfortable enough to participate in the class in the future. Critically aware instructors should realize that at formative points in the development of classroom involvement patterns, such as freshman college classes perhaps, until they have established a safe environment for discussion and disagreement, they should concentrate on developing and encouraging a pattern of participation rather than judging (even inadvertently) whether particular responses are worthy of acknowledgment in the classroom. Several of the women told stories about how, in their view, professors did not respond positively to their comments, and they ended these stories with comments such as “I didn’t say anything in that class for the rest of the semester.” Critically aware professors can often set the tone for the way that the students within their classrooms will interact with each other.

In some of their stories, the Hmong women shared that they often were reluctant to participate because they were unsure of the meanings of some of the words the instructors used in their questions; they also thought that they needed more time than other students to process information. This made impromptu classroom discussions very difficult and uncomfortable for them and, thus, they seldom participated, setting up a self-perpetuating cycle, whereby inability to participate results in inadequate language development, which then results in less ability to participate. One possible solution for this would be for instructors to give students discussion topics or discussion questions ahead of time, so they can be prepared for the specific questions that might be asked, allowing them more time to make sure they understand the questions and to work on formulating their answers and developing confidence about a topic in advance.

### ***Promoting Critical Multiculturalism in the Classroom***

A second suggestion for addressing critical issues within the educational system is for educators to develop an understanding of the distinction between *liberal multiculturalism* and *critical multiculturalism*. Kubota (2004) describes the concept of critical multiculturalism as “social transformation by seeking social justice and equality among all people rather than merely celebrating differences or assuming a priori that all people are equal” (p. 37). She maintains that most educators and educational institutions fall into the category of practicing liberal multiculturalism, which encompasses attitudes that are expressed as a sensitivity to, an appreciation for, and an acceptance of diversity in race, ethnicity, and language. The US educational system has a tradition of hosting isolated “celebrations” of difference, such as annual culture shows, rather than incorporating meaningful discussions into the everyday life of the classroom. Liberal multiculturalism masquerades as superficial tolerance and understanding. Kubota (2004) further purports that liberal multiculturalists suffer from a form of *difference-blindness*, which emphasizes that all members of the human race can succeed if they try hard enough and denies that power relationships based on race or socioeconomic status exist in US schools and societies. As

educators, we must not only acknowledge that differences exist, but that inequities exist because of these differences.

Some of the stories above provide evidence that, at least for these women, often even classes that are designed to specifically address diversity are not really helpful in breaking down barriers and creating understanding; rather, they make the minority students feel destabilized and uncomfortable with their identities, without increasing the understanding about them. Even the most well-meaning professors may tend to overgeneralize and trivialize differences between groups of people. Although the women rarely mentioned names of specific professors at the university, I was often able to guess who was involved in the situations that they were describing. Because I know these professors personally, I know that they would be appalled to hear the outcomes of their teaching on the Hmong students, whom they were trying to help.

Many freshman writing and composition books include a diversity emphasis in their selection of readings. In addition, many colleges require courses designed to increase awareness of multicultural issues. Such literature and courses are intended to help students develop an understanding of and appreciation for other cultures, but in reality, these attempts, when not handled with a critical consciousness, have the potential to simplify differences between cultures and peoples and may result in giving students a false sense of understanding a particular culture when, in reality, they have barely scratched the surface of understanding. Teachers must be careful to communicate that this is an issue that cannot be understood easily and must address the issues frequently and in many different circumstances and from many different perspectives.

We also need to counteract the passive acceptance of oppression. In some cases minority populations endure oppression because they are accustomed to it. The Hmong are a population that historically has accepted a lower position within a dominant society, and its members are specifically taught not to challenge those who hold social power over them. They were a minority population in China and Southeast Asia and now in the US. It is important that both the privileged and the oppressed parties understand the inequality that exists. In the case of the Hmong, Pajka shared an instance when she was explicitly taught by her parents that Caucasians are always right:

I think with the Hmong culture, coming to America, we were always oppressed. Because I remember my parents always talking about that Americans are always on top. No matter what we do, they have the say. So I guess for me in my mentality, it's become like my parents where, like Americans always have the say, they have more rights than I do or something like that, because we're the minority

Privileged groups should be aware of and be prepared to counteract such ideas about themselves. Educators—especially those of us who are white—should acknowledge that even though we may be considered experts on cultural issues, we cannot completely understand the minority experience and we should model a humble attitude by inviting and encouraging minority students to help

us. This might involve spending time with them outside of class and helping them to voice and present their experiences in a classroom situation.

### ***Legitimizing and Giving Voice to the Minority Experience***

Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester (2003) observe that the formal educational context rarely provides exposure to vernacular and minority content or the histories and voices of minority language users. With cultures and peoples such as the Hmong, who do not have backgrounds that encourage the written word, this may be more difficult. This final section will explore the importance of legitimizing and giving voice to the minority experience through literature produced by members of minority cultures, which can be accessed to inspire those who are struggling and which might encourage others to write about their own experiences, thereby further increasing the size of the available library.

The discussions conducted during this study seemed to empower the women and raise the awareness that they often do not acknowledge or discuss their oppression, even among themselves. This experience of discussing and confronting issues that perhaps are frequently ignored or hidden may encourage women like those who participated in this study to feel less isolated in their experience, resulting in empowerment and, potentially, in action. Providing a platform for such discussions to occur in an educational milieu outside of a research project is a more difficult problem to solve. Unfortunately, even college campus administrators and leaders do not seem to grasp the broader social and critical implications that need to be addressed; therefore, change is likely to be slow and difficult.

It is essential for minority communities such as the Hmong to express themselves in ways that are accessible to members of their own communities, as well as to other minority populations. Writing is one way to accomplish this goal. In her foreword to *Bamboo Among the Oaks*, as a member of the Hmong community Moua encourages her contemporaries “to write our stories in our own voices and to create our own images of ourselves. When we do not, others write our stories for us, and we are in danger of accepting the images others have painted of us” (Moua, 2002, p. 7). Moua has devoted much of her professional life as an author and editor to stimulating the production of experiential and analytical accounts written by Hmong people themselves and finding ways to make those writings available as a way of legitimizing, sharing, and learning from their collective experiences. Duffy (2004, 2007) demonstrates that the Hmong people are beginning to find and assert their voices through written means, which may have the potential to effect a widespread and lasting impact.

Through the early educational experiences of children, educators should seek to create an environment in which minority students feel empowered to resist stereotyping and essentialization by producing and publishing their own writing. They should be encouraged to feel a sense of pride in their writing despite the possibility that it may contain nonstandard use of English. Skilton-Sylvester relates a story in which one of the Cambodian teenagers who was a participant in her research project providentially had an opportunity to read a

piece of literature by female Asian author Maxine Hong Kingston. The young woman was astounded to read about someone with an experience that she could closely relate to (Hornberger & Skilton-Sylvester, 2003). Such experiences can transform the thinking of minority young people by affirming their own experiences and making those experiences more concrete and understandable. Through the authority associated with publication, these types of writings give credible voice to the experiences of minority populations and can provide non-minority students with increased understanding and empathy with those experiences.

For participating in my study, I gave each one of the women a copy of *Bamboo Among the Oaks* to give them some samples of the writing that their Hmong peers have done and to encourage them to try writing themselves. Whether in response to this book or not, I was recently rewarded by seeing one of the women make a general post on Facebook that simply stated, “Inspired to write more books about the Hmong people ... and to speak more Hmong :)” When the study was completed at the end of spring semester in 2010, I received an email from another participant saying, “Thank you for allowing us to be a part of this process, I really believe that it really helped us as well.”

### **Concluding Thought**

Educators must address critical issues early and consistently because prejudices and preconceptions are developed early in life. One of the women in my study arrived at our group discussions in tears and told the following story about an experience she had just had while working in an after-school reading program in an elementary school.

I almost started crying because this little girl just made fun of me. So there was a map and a worksheet to fill out for their daily geography, and the question was asking what states are in the northern region. Well since I was there for reading, I asked her to read it to me and then she wanted help on the northeast part and so I read it with her and then when we got to “region” she pronounced it “rezhion” and I was like, “No it’s region.” And she was like ‘rezhion’ because that’s how you’re supposed to pronounce it, and I kind of paused for a minute and then she was like, “You can’t speak English clearly, so that’s how you’re supposed to pronounce it. It’s ‘rezhion’ for you because you’re Asian.” So there I was with a little third-grader and here I am the freshman in college, getting told by a little third-grader that I can’t pronounce a word right because I’m not supposed to because I’m Asian. I didn’t think the little girl was going to say something like that. That was an interesting experience.

This interchange was especially interesting because Bao Bai does not have an Asian accent at all. In fact, she has a southern US accent.

Cazden (2000) related a story about a brief classroom discussion that took place in a lower-elementary-grade classroom in which the teacher was being trained to be intentional about equalizing the roles of students of all ethnicities:

In another situation in the combined first and second grade, during a discussion on what Native American author Michael Dorris might look like, a white child said, "They [Native Americans] look just like us". After the teacher gently asked three times, "Who is 'us'?", the child paused and said, "Oh, I think I meant white people. And we're not all white." (p. 260)

This story demonstrates that even at a young age and even though she is not a member of a minority population, this child has been made aware of the language choice that she made and the assumptions behind that language choice from a critical perspective. The instruction in this class of young children has obviously been intentional and consistent and demonstrates that the awareness of critical issues can be taught from a very young age. Those of us who are involved in teaching children or in teaching people who will eventually teach children can reinforce that starting to teach awareness of the issues relating to the way people treat each other in our society can have a significant impact on a child for the rest of her life.

In conclusion, one of my goals was to uncover experiences and stories from the lives of these women that demonstrate the challenges they have faced in their development of biliteracy as a result of the intersecting educational, familial, and social structures present in their lives. Perhaps some of this information will be helpful both to primary and secondary school teachers who are involved in the initial process of aiding present and future generations of US immigrants in their biliterate development and to colleges and universities that are likely to see higher and higher percentages of these students in the postsecondary classroom. I would like to repeat that the women who participated in this study rarely, if ever, talked about wanting to fit in socially or to become like their native English-speaking peers. They did not voice a desire to be more assimilated, just more respected. As educators, we should try to create an atmosphere of critical multiculturalism and an understanding that unfair power structures exist and then look for ways to counteract those structures so that more students will experience respect and acceptance and can participate in ways that maximize their potential for educational, professional, linguistic, and social success.

### **Author**

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