

## **The Need for Critical Race Consciousness in Critical Hmong Studies**

by

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### **Abstract**

This conceptual paper draws upon critical race theory (CRT) in education and whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) to reflect on the need for critical Hmong studies to include the development of critical race consciousness as an important goal of the field. The paper focuses on the racism within community and campus contexts in Wisconsin and how critical Hmong studies could empower students to successfully navigate race and power within their personal and professional lives. Wisconsin's racial context includes anti-Hmong hostility, deficit and exotic framings of Hmong culture (DePouw, 2012), and racial triangulation (Kim, 1999) of Hmong Americans as "model minorities" in relation to other minoritized groups such as African Americans, Latinx Americans, or Somali Americans (Ngo & Lee, 2007; Lee, et al., 2017). The common thread is deploying white supremacy through an essentialized and racialized version of Hmong "culture" (DePouw, 2012), not only in mainstream society but also in educational spaces such as the University of Wisconsin System (UW System). To many educational institutions such as the UW System, a focus on culture or identity may appear less threatening because "culture" allows white supremacy and institutional racism to remain unnamed and therefore uncontested. One of the challenges for critical Hmong studies is to try to maintain institutional support while also educating its students to develop critical consciousness around race and other forms of oppression, and to foster student agency to address issues relevant to Hmong American communities. Critical race studies in education and the analytical tool of whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) are necessary to support critical Hmong studies in advancing the goals of critical thinking and agency within institutional and social context.

**Keywords:** critical race studies, whiteness as property, critical Hmong studies

### **Introduction**

This conceptual paper draws upon critical race theory (CRT) in education and whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) to reflect on the need for critical Hmong studies to include the development of critical race consciousness as an important goal of the field. The paper focuses

on the racism within community and campus contexts in Wisconsin and how critical Hmong studies could empower students to successfully navigate race and power within their personal and professional lives. Wisconsin's racial context includes anti-Hmong hostility, deficit and exotic framings of Hmong culture (DePouw, 2012), and racial triangulation (Kim, 1999) of Hmong Americans as "model minorities" in relation to other minoritized groups such as African Americans, Latinx Americans, or Somali Americans (Ngo & Lee, 2007; Lee, et al., 2017). The common thread is deploying white supremacy through an essentialized and racialized version of Hmong "culture" (DePouw, 2012), not only in mainstream society but also in educational spaces such as the UW System.

To many educational institutions such as the UW System, a focus on culture or identity may appear less threatening because "culture" allows white supremacy and institutional racism to remain unnamed and therefore uncontested. One of the challenges for critical Hmong studies is to try to maintain institutional support while also educating its students to develop critical consciousness around race and other forms of oppression, and to foster student agency to address issues relevant to Hmong American communities. Critical race studies in education and the analytical tool of whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) are necessary to support critical Hmong studies in advancing the goals of critical thinking and agency within institutional and social context.

I argue that, for critical Hmong studies to realize meaningful contributions academically, politically, and socially, the field needs to include explicit and intersectional analyses of racism as part of both scholarship and pedagogy. Students need the analytical tools of critical race studies and whiteness as property to make plain the power-laden and often seemingly neutral arrangements in higher education that normalize whiteness as impartial, objective, and as the

baseline for what constitutes “good” scholarship, teaching, and learning (Kuokkanen, 2007; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; Moua & Vang, 2015; Patton, 2016). By exposing seemingly “impartial” or “objective” claims as power-laden, students can move away from Eurocentric values and belief systems and recognize how dominance and power work in education and broader society (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Without this analysis, students—particularly Hmong American students and other students of color—are not provided with the supports needed to divest from the internalized racism that often results from their prior educational socialization (Perez Huber, Johnson, & Kohli, 2006; Moua & Vang, 2015; DePouw, 2016). Internalized racism is defined as:

the conscious and unconscious acceptance of a racial hierarchy in which whites are consistently ranked above People of Color. Internalized racism goes beyond the internalization of stereotypes imposed by the white majority about People of Color. It is the internalization of the beliefs, values, and worldviews inherent in white supremacy that can potentially result in negative self or racial group perceptions (Perez Huber, et al., 2006, p. 184).

CRT and its analytical tools challenge internalized racism by providing institutional and historical context to individual struggles. Without an understanding of how structural injustices shape and constrain personal experiences, students of color may internalize the inequitable outcomes of injustice as personal or cultural shortcomings (Perez Huber et al., 2006).

Conversely, CRT analyses validate the experiences and perspectives of people of color in relation to systemic inequities because the analyses begin with naming power and a rejection of claims to objectivity, universal knowledge, or neutrality (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; Cabrera, Franklin, & Watson, 2017). Whiteness as property, therefore, provides insight into the

institutional context in which critical Hmong studies and other ethnic studies exist by highlighting the ways in which the power dynamics of race and white supremacy influence higher education (Orozco, 2011; Patton, 2016; Cabrera et al., 2017).

### **Critical Race Studies in Education**

Critical race theory (CRT), as defined by Rollock and Gillborn (2011), is a “body of scholarship steeped in radical activism that seeks to explore and challenge the prevalence of racial inequality in society. It is based on the understanding that race and racism are the product of social thought and power relations; CRT theorists endeavor to expose the way in which racial inequality is maintained through the operation of structures and assumptions that appear normal and unremarkable” (n.p.). CRT frames racism as deeply embedded in society to the point that the society itself would have to be dismantled in order to eradicate racism since racism has served such a central, defining role in the United States (Bell, 1992; Tate, IV, 1997). Therefore, as Bell (1992), Tate IV (1997), and other CRT scholars have argued, we should not be surprised when overt racism erupts because it is always present and continuously connected to all areas of institutional life. At the same time, dominant discourses such as colorblindness, race neutrality, and meritocracy deny the salience of race and institutional racism and instead rely on racial deficit theories to explain persistent racial inequities (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Bonilla-Silva, 2015).

CRT challenges dominant discourses and ideologies, and instead names them as “camouflage for the self-interest of powerful elites” (Tate IV, 1997, p. 235). Here it is important to note that dominant discourses include claims of objectivity or neutrality and a false centering of Western knowledge systems as most valid and authoritative (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2002; 2006; Kuokkanen, 2007; Brayboy & Maughan, 2009). As Brayboy & Maughan (2009) observe,

“In its long history, the schooling process for American Indians has been based on a hierarchy of knowledge wherein Indigenous Knowledges (IK) are framed as deficient” (p.3). In addition to Indigenous and First Nations communities, the ways of knowing, being, valuing, teaching, and learning in most communities of color within the United States—including Hmong Americans—have been framed as invalid or as inferior to dominant (i.e., White mainstream) knowledge systems (Valenzuela, 1999; Carter-Andrews, 2012; DePouw, 2012).

The simultaneous obfuscation of power dynamics within dominant claims of objectivity and the invalidation of knowledge systems of communities of color and First Nations is a move intended to normalize and reify power. It is a dehumanizing move in which white people are defined as fully human and those falling outside of whiteness are defined as less human or less worthy of rights, protections, and life itself (Cacho, 2012). In this way, invalidation of knowledge and ways of being are also a physical invalidation; it is revocation of social and political membership and connotation of vulnerability to institutional and individual violence. It is important to maintain a focus on physical as well as social violence when discussing knowledge systems and race. What we know and how we live in the world are intimately connected, and therefore white “knowledge” often becomes embodied as varied forms of violence against people of color and Indigenous peoples.

### **CRT in Education and Whiteness as Property**

Critical race theory in education builds on CRT and centers race and racism in relation to other axes of oppression, thereby providing necessary conceptual tools for the interrogation of educational inequities that youth and communities experience. The causes of these inequities are systemic and historically situated, located within the deeply embedded racism and white

supremacy of U.S. society and its institutions (Tate IV, 1997), and should be considered within that context.

Critical race theory in education locates experiences of racial inequity within the intersection of race and property rights (Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) in order to reveal the power dynamics and dominant interests at work. These power dynamics and dominant interests are outgrowths of the longer history of legal, political, social, and economic white supremacy in the United States. When using the term *white supremacy*, it is important to note that in CRT, this term means something different than is commonly understood. Mainstream discourse often uses *white supremacy* to refer to crude forms of race hatred expressed by far-right extremists such as neo-Nazis or white nationalists. In CRT, *white supremacy* refers instead to “a regime of assumptions and practices that constantly privilege the interests of white people but are so deeply rooted that they appear *normal* to most people in the culture” (Gillborn, 2010, p.2; emphasis in original). Generally, CRT concepts work to de-naturalize and expose the workings of white supremacy and racism in relation to other axes of oppression (Gillborn, 2010).

Whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) is an important analytical tool for examining power and the ideological and material impacts of white supremacy and race. First theorized by critical race scholar Cheryl I. Harris (1993), whiteness as property examines whiteness as both a racial identity and a property interest. In other words, whiteness is something that can be experienced but also used as a resource and form of protection under the law. Harris (1993) identified four components to whiteness as property: Rights of disposition, right to use and enjoyment, reputation and status property, and absolute right to exclude.

## **Rights of Disposition**

In legal terms, the right of disposition of property is the right to “dispose” of, transfer, or alienate property. Harris (1993) argues that whiteness is inalienable, or unable to be separated from or sold by its owner. However, Harris explains that the inalienability of whiteness does not negate its status as property. Instead, she persuasively maintains that it is the inalienability of whiteness that makes it so valuable, enhancing its political, economic, social, and psychological worth.

## **Right to Use and Enjoyment**

An important component of whiteness as property is the ability to deploy it as a resource; to access and take advantage of its protections and privileges. In this way, “whiteness can move from being a passive characteristic as an aspect of identity to an active entity that—like other types of property—is used to fulfill the will and to exercise power” (Harris, 1993, p. 1734). The use and enjoyment of whiteness depends on its status as an object of law and a resource that is recognized and supported institutionally. Simply identifying oneself as white without a reciprocal legal, institutional, and social recognition is insufficient for deployment of whiteness as an active resource or source of protection.

## **Reputation and Status Property**

Reputation and status property refer to the economic, political, social, and psychological interest in being regarded as white, and that to be regarded as white has significant value or something in which a property interest could be asserted. Historical context of legal definitions of race is important here: for a significant portion of U.S. history, legal definitions of whiteness and blackness took place within the context of legal slavery and, later, legal racial segregation (Smedley & Smedley, 2018). To be defined as white under the law while slavery was legal was

to have a property interest in oneself; to be able to own oneself and to assert full personhood. To be defined as “black” under the law at that same time period was to be potentially owned by another; to be denied personhood in favor of legal status as chattel (Harris, 1993). Over time, the law has reinforced the connection between whiteness and personhood, as have other institutions and social norms.

### **Absolute Right to Exclude**

The concept of whiteness, both socially and legally, is built on exclusion and racial subjugation. Whiteness is an inherently empty category, defined not as what it is but by what it is not (Haney Lopez, 1997). Therefore, the right to exclude is a defining act in which those who are able to racially exclude are also performing and reinforcing their status as white. As Harris (1993) explains,

The right to exclude was the central principle...of whiteness as identity, for mainly whiteness has been characterized, not by an inherent unifying characteristic, but by the exclusion of others deemed to be “not white”. The possessors of whiteness were granted the legal right to exclude others from the privileges inhering in whiteness; whiteness became an exclusive club whose membership was closely and grudgingly guarded.  
(1993, p. 1736)

In academia, the “absolute right to exclude” includes spatial and physical exclusion as well as exclusion of ways of being, values, and knowledge systems (Kuokkanen, 2007; Battiste, 2008; Brayboy & Maughan, 2009; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; Cabrera et al., 2017).

### **Whiteness as Property and Critical Hmong Studies**

Colorblindness as an institutional norm and ideology is important to recognize in contextualizing institutional racism and white supremacy in relation to critical Hmong studies.



The dominant discourse of colorblindness that pervades so many higher education institutions is an ideology “in the service of power. They are expressions at the symbolic level of the fact of dominance. As such, the ideologies of the powerful are central in the production and reinforcement of the status quo” (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, pp. 25-26). Colorblind discourse serves to reinforce dominance by denying the existence of historical or contemporary systemic racism and by blaming people of color for their marginalized social positions (Cabrera et al., 2017). Therefore, it hides the realities of white supremacy and institutional inequity and makes it much more likely that white people will continue in structural racial ignorance (Cabrera et al., 2017), thereby making racism the problem of people of color.

Bonilla-Silva (2006) defined four frames of colorblind racism: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism. These are four typical ways in which colorblindness manifests itself in order to ignore the realities of racism and instead blame people of color for their own marginalization. In this way, colorblindness not only serves to avoid addressing race and racism, but also reinforces the false belief that there are spaces that are “race-free” or without inequality and oppression. In the context of higher education, colorblindness functions to individualize racism—“a few bad apples”—thereby leaving the majority of white people to view themselves as outside of race or as racially “innocent” (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

Deflecting and avoiding race is an important component of maintaining whiteness as property. By framing oneself as a universal decontextualized human being rather than a racialized person who exists within specific locations and contexts, white people can deny complicity or responsibility while continuing to benefit from inequitable racial relationships. In other words, white people can maintain the “use and enjoyment” and “reputational” components

of whiteness as property. In critical Hmong studies, colorblindness and whiteness as property are present in the frequent deliberate misunderstanding of the relationship between critical Hmong studies programs' existence and a welcoming campus climate for Hmong American students, and in the type of courses that are often offered in critical Hmong studies.

### Critical Hmong Studies and Campus Climate

This conversation focuses on critical Hmong studies in the University of Wisconsin (UW) System. Wisconsin is home to the third-largest Hmong American population in the United States (Pfeifer & Thao, 2013). In many smaller towns such as Wausau (20%) or La Crosse (10%), Hmong American students make up the largest populations of students of color in the majority-white local school districts. The University of Wisconsin System is also predominantly white, as can be seen in Table 1 (below).

	African American (2017-2018)	Hispanic/Latino (2017-2018)	American Indian (2017-2018)	Southeast Asian American (2017-2018)	Other Asian American (2017-2018)	Hawaiian / Pacific Islander (2017-2018)	White (2017-2018)	Two or More Races (2017-2018)	International (2017-2018)
UW-Madison (Doctoral)	678	1589	60	462 (1.4%)	1445	31	23,066 (72%)	996	3168
UW-Milwaukee (Doctoral)	1552	2256	78	766 (3.7%)	614	17	13,735 (65%)	863	760
UW-Eau Claire (Comprehensive)	103	297	25	224 (2.2%)	110	4	8870 (88%)	244	216
UW-Green Bay (Comprehensive)	106	345	84	141 (1.7%)	69	3	5784 (85%)	192	83
UW-La Crosse (Comprehensive)	73	325	16	118 (1.2%)	95	3	8674 (89.5%)	263	117
UW-Oshkosh (Comprehensive)	248	582	40	335 (2.7%)	124	6	10,565 (85%)	331	83
UW-Parkside (Comprehensive)	375	661	6	24 (0.6%)	126	4	2,715 (65%)	184	71
UW-Platteville (Comprehensive)	114	310	11	46 (0.6%)	56	7	6,816 (89%)	138	103
UW-River Falls (Comprehensive)	105	199	10	98 (1.7%)	53	5	4952 (87%)	137	108
UW-Stevens Point (Comprehensive)	178	284	31	167 (2.1%)	78	7	6803 (86%)	185	123
UW-Stout (Comprehensive)	148	218	26	214 (2.6%)	62	12	7035 (87%)	186	194
UW-Superior (Comprehensive)	38	62	40	9 (0.4%)	21	1	1,888 (80%)	79	219
UW-Whitewater (Comprehensive)	441	684	20	92 (0.8%)	107	5	9119 (82%)	525	123

<b>Cluster Total</b>	<b>4159 (3%)</b>	<b>7812 (5.6%)</b>	<b>447 (0.3%)</b>	<b>2696 (1.9%)</b>	<b>2960 (2.1%)</b>	<b>105 (0.075%)</b>	<b>110,022 (80%)</b>	<b>4323 (3%)</b>	<b>5368 (4%)</b>
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Table 1: UW System Undergraduate Headcount by Institution and Race/Ethnicity (2017-2018)

Only UW-Madison and UW-Milwaukee have less than 80% white students in their overall undergraduate student population.

These predominantly white institutions (PWIs) have shown some demographic movement over time but remain overwhelmingly white, not only in demographics, but also in campus culture and climate. Campus culture, according to Kuh and Whitt (1988, as cited in Cabrera et al., 2017, p. 53), is:

The collective, mutually shaping patterns of institutional history, mission, physical settings, norms, traditions, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that guide behavior of individuals and groups in an institution of higher education which provide a frame of reference for interpreting the meaning of event and actions on and off campus (pp.12-13).

This definition of campus culture refers to the normative behaviors, assumptions, and beliefs that exist within the institution and its environment. It is therefore an environment shaped by what has come before, over time, rather than what one experiences only in the present.

Campus climate is the “current perceptions, attitudes, and expectation that define the institution and its members” (Bauer, 1998, p.2). Since campus climate is connected to perception and attitude, it is not easily measured or quantified and can be thought of in many different ways. There are many dimensions to campus climate such as a) historical context of inclusion or exclusion (Hurtado et al., 1998), b) compositional diversity or number of people of color on campus (Hurtado et al., 1998), c) psychological dimension of how welcoming or hostile students of color perceive the campus to be (Hurtado et al., 1998), d) behavioral component related to general social interactions and intergroup relations on campus (Hurtado et al., 1998), and e)

organizational diversity (Milem & Cabrera, 2012), meaning diversity as a core component of curriculum, tenure policies, budget allocations, and general university policies.

On many UW System campuses, campus climate is addressed mainly through efforts to improve compositional diversity or changing perception of how welcoming campus is. However, organizational diversity remains a challenge. This has real implications for critical Hmong studies within a context of white supremacy because the program may be expected to do a great deal of racial “heavy lifting” in regards to campus climate without accompanying institutional support or sincere investment in the underlying goals of racial, cultural, linguistic, and epistemological equity (DePouw, 2012, 2016).

Several UW campuses have developed Hmong-related coursework or studies programs after Hmong American students and allies engaged in long-term activism to push the institution for inclusion (DePouw, 2016; Lee et al., 2018). At the same time, many Hmong American students continue to feel unwelcome or hypervisible on campus and do not find campus to be a ‘safe space’ in which to learn (Swedien, 2012; Kwan, 2015; DePouw, 2016; Letter to the Editor, 2019; Schorr, 2019). The surrounding communities are often similarly unwelcoming. Almost every UW campus has had racial incidents within their communities (see Table 2 below). Overwhelmingly, the response to these incidents was to treat them as individual aberrations rather than indicators of regional racial climate.

Below is an overview of some incidents, not meant to be comprehensive, to provide a sense of racial climate within UW System campuses and surrounding communities:

Institution	Incident
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**The Need for Critical Race Consciousness in Critical Hmong Studies by Christin DePouw, *Hmong Studies Journal*, 21(2020): 1-30.**

<p>UW-Madison (Doctoral)</p>	<p>Law professor Leonard Kaplan allegedly saying, "Hmong men have no talent other than to kill" and "All second-generation Hmong end up in gangs and other criminal activity" during classroom lecture (Penzenstadler, 2007).</p> <p>Students of color receive threats after initiating social media anti-racism campaign, #TheRealUW (Nashrulla, 2016)</p> <p>UW-Madison's Science Hall was vandalized with a message, "UW 4 Whites Only" (Marshall, 2019)</p> <p>Anti-Chinese, racist graffiti found amidst overall rise in anti-Asian racism on campus (Meyerhofer, 2020)</p>
<p>UW-Milwaukee (Doctoral)</p>	<p>Report identifies ongoing racist incidents against African American students as a factor in education completion rates for African American students at UW-Milwaukee (Herzog, 2017)</p> <p>Student displayed Nazi propaganda poster and suggested "gassing the Jews" at a campus event (Hess, 2019)</p> <p>Multiple African American female students who are Wisconsin residents report being inappropriately charged out-of-state tuition at UW-Milwaukee (Schultz, 2020; Shastri, 2020)</p>
<p>UW-Eau Claire (Comprehensive)</p>	<p>Racist signs and interpersonal racist harassment of Hmong American students in residence halls (WSAW Staff, 2012)</p> <p>Red Lake Ojibwe student finds racist message on her residence hall door (Rogner, 2019)</p> <p>Five football players suspended for racist anti-Black Snapchat messages (Shastri, 2019)</p>
<p>UW-Green Bay (Comprehensive)</p>	<p>Cha Vang, a Hmong American hunter from Green Bay, murdered by James Nichols in alleged hate crime (Saulny, 2007, January 14)</p> <p>UWGB Equity Scorecard (UW-Green Bay, 2013) revealed equity gap in admissions, graduation rates for African American and Native American students</p> <p>Anti-Asian racism targeting Hmong American business owners within the Green Bay community during COVID-19 pandemic (Amundsen, 2020)</p>
<p>UW-La Crosse (Comprehensive)</p>	<p>UW-La Crosse (2013) campus climate survey revealed that students of color are much more likely to experience bullying and harassment than their white peers, more likely to be stereotyped, and more likely to experience discrimination. Students of color reported lower levels of satisfaction with campus and classroom climate, and more likely to consider leaving the university than their white peers. (<i>La Crosse Tribune</i>, 2016).</p> <p>Article in UW-L student newspaper researches history of racism on campus. The overview includes: History of blackface photos in UW-L yearbooks, use of Native imagery in school mascot until early 1990s, racial harassment in residence halls, racist messaging in public places in contemporary times (Balli, 2019)</p>
<p>UW-Oshkosh (Comprehensive)</p>	<p>Racial slur posted on students' door in residence halls (Office of the Chancellor, 2017)</p> <p>Racist messages that targeted Hmong Americans and other minoritized groups circulate among students (Razavi, 2019)</p>
<p>UW-River Falls (Comprehensive)</p>	<p>Racist graffiti threatening Black and Asian American students found on campus (Longaecker, 2009)</p>
<p>UW-Stevens Point (Comprehensive)</p>	<p>UW-Stevens Point addresses more than 20 incidents of racial harassment, such as racist slurs written on residence hall doors, throwing banana peels at African American students, drivers veering toward students of color, racist social media messaging, and one physical assault (Harbit, 2016)</p>
<p>UW-Stout (Comprehensive)</p>	<p>Student wears blackface for Halloween; ongoing racial verbal and physical altercations between white students and students of color off-campus (Schneider, 2015)</p>

	Saudi student killed; appeared racially motivated (Hauser, 2016) although white assailant convicted only of aggravated battery (Associated Press, 2018)
UW-Whitewater (Comprehensive)	Two white female students record video using “n” word (Bayatpour, 2016) UW-Whitewater white male instructor posts a photo of himself squinting his eyes and holding his hands in imitation of an Asian person with the caption “When your crush says she only dates Asians” on social media (Tamanaha, 2018)

Table 2: Some examples of racial incidents at various UW System campuses and surrounding communities

The reality is that critical Hmong studies as a field is not enough to positively improve campus climate because racist campus climates are not due to “ignorance” or lack of academic knowledge. Instead, racist community and campus climates stem from a long history of racial exclusion that is a substantive part of current regional and campus culture and are intimately tied to institutional and interpersonal whiteness as property. Focusing on cultural inclusion, as many institutions do when they discuss critical Hmong studies, does not address *race*. In fact, focusing on culture as if it exists outside of historical or contemporary context serves to racialize and reify culture (DePouw, 2012) and frame it and the people in whom it resides as deficient (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). In order to truly create an equitable, welcoming, and inclusive campus climate, the institution needs to address whiteness and power. This is a process that critical Hmong studies can participate in but cannot complete on its own. Critical Hmong studies can, however, equip its students with critical analyses of race and power so that they have a clearer understanding of the root causes of racism on campus and in broader society.

### **Types of Hmong-Related Courses Offered in UW System**

One of the reasons why critical Hmong studies cannot singlehandedly solve racist UW campus climates, aside from the important fact that white people need to take responsibility for dismantling white supremacy instead of making it the “problem” of people of color, is the way in which UW System campuses tend to structure their Hmong-related coursework. Most UW

campuses that offer Hmong-related courses do not include courses that overtly include a development of critical *racial* consciousness as part of their stated learning goals.

	Hmong Studies Program?	Hmong-Related Courses	Courses Offered
UW-Madison (Doctoral)	<a href="#">Hmong American Studies Emphasis</a> within Asian American Studies Certificate	Yes	Hmong history in Southeast Asia; Refugee history; Hmong social movements in 20 <sup>th</sup> -21 <sup>st</sup> centuries; Hmong American experiences in US
UW-Milwaukee (Doctoral)	<a href="#">Hmong Diaspora Studies</a>	Yes	Hmong language, Hmong language literacy, Hmong American history and culture, study abroad, and internships/apprenticeships
UW-Eau Claire (Comprehensive)	<a href="#">Critical Hmong Studies Certificate</a>	Yes	Hmong American experiences in US; Hmong language; related course on race and culture in education; special topics course in English literature; Indigenous theories and methodologies
UW-Green Bay (Comprehensive)	<a href="#">Hmong Studies Program</a>	Yes* (*but not frequently offered)	Hmong language, introduction to Hmong culture, internships and independent studies
UW-La Crosse (Comprehensive)	<a href="#">Hmong and Hmong American Studies Certificate</a>	Yes	Two courses on ethnic and racial studies; Hmong Americans; Refugees and Displaced People; Vietnam War; two courses on Southeast Asia; Communication and Race; Hmong language
UW-Oshkosh (Comprehensive)	In Development	Yes	Hmong culture, learning styles (in education department)
UW-Parkside (Comprehensive)	No	No	
UW-Platteville (Comprehensive)	No	No	
UW-River Falls (Comprehensive)	No	No	
UW-Stevens Point (Comprehensive)	No	Yes	Two Hmong language courses, Asian American history
UW-Stout (Comprehensive)	No	Yes	Two Hmong language courses; Sociology of Hmong Culture
UW-Superior (Comprehensive)	No	No	
UW-Whitewater (Comprehensive)	No, but Asian American Studies	Yes	Hmong American historical and contemporary issues; Hmong American history and culture;

Table 3: Overview of Hmong-related courses at UW System campuses according to respective campus online course catalogs

As Table 3 (above) indicates, UW-La Crosse and UW-Eau Claire’s Hmong studies certificates include coursework that specifically name race as part of the course focus. Other campuses have courses that may include a discussion of race (UW-Madison, UW-Milwaukee,

UW-Stout, and UW-Whitewater), but it is not directly named in the course title or description. Instead, while most Hmong-related courses and certificate programs owe their existence to Hmong American student activism that explicitly named racism on campus as a factor in why Hmong studies were needed, the Hmong-related courses most frequently offered on UW campuses tend to focus on Hmong language and culture, to the exclusion of a deeper analysis of race and power.

This is problematic for several reasons. First, language and culture exist in historical and social context; therefore, they are impacted by race and racism. Hmong American students, for instance, would not need to wait until the university classroom to substantively engage in formal study of Hmong language if their prior schooling experiences had not denied them access to Hmong language or placed them in an English-dominant setting (Xiong, 2008; DePouw, 2016). The denial of access is connected to systemic privileging of English over other languages and a Eurocentric curricula that often does not include Hmong and/or Hmong American histories; if Hmong Americans are included, the inclusion is more often a cultural add-on rather than a substantive curricular engagement with Hmong/American history or contemporary issues (Valenzuela, 1999; Xiong, 2008; DePouw, 2016; Sleeter & Carmona, 2017).

Second, the socialization that many Hmong American students have received during elementary, middle, or secondary school is one of shaming or invalidating Hmong history, culture or language (DePouw, 2016). In an earlier study of the development of critical consciousness in Hmong American undergraduates, the study participants consistently shared that they had access to Hmong language and traditional Hmong cultural practices in their homes when growing up. However, because most grew up in majority-white communities and attended majority-white schools, they had internalized racist beliefs about their families, cultures, and



languages that led them to avoid or even denigrate Hmong culture and language, and to be ashamed of their families. The versions of Hmong history that they were exposed to were often stories of refugee victimhood rather than more extensive, complex, or agency-focused narratives. The participants shared that developing a stronger understanding of systemic racism and other forms of oppression was key to a shift in both identity and behavior. When they understood root causes of inequities, they were able to value their parents' teachings and knowledge, feel proud of their Hmong names, and be more purposeful in taking action to support their communities and to racism and other forms of oppression (DePouw, 2016). Therefore, critical Hmong studies needs to support development of critical race consciousness in its students (not only Hmong Americans) so that they are "ready to learn". This means helping them to name and address all forms of racism, including internalized racism, and deficit racial framings of Hmong culture, language, and communities so that the students are emotionally and psychologically open to the value of what they are learning.

Finally, Hmong-related coursework that does not name or center race and white supremacy runs the risk of reinforcing a colorblind racism approach to understanding Hmong and Hmong American experiences. Without naming racism, it is difficult for students to understand why refugee resettlement resulted in deep poverty for many Hmong refugees in the United States. Students instead may continue to rely on racial and cultural stereotypes of profound cultural difference and "culture clash" (Ngo, 2008; DePouw, 2012) to explain ongoing tensions between Hmong Americans and white Americans.

An avoidance of racism and white supremacy within Hmong-related courses reinforce whiteness as property on campus—spatially, culturally, and relation to power. It allows the institution to take on the guise of inclusion with minimal effort or risk to the overall culture and

climate of the university. To draw on Harris' (1993) definition of whiteness as property again, the existence of Hmong-related courses enhances institutional "reputation" while allowing the predominantly white space to remain culturally the same. The white cultural dominance of the institution, in turn, ensures ongoing "use and enjoyment" of the benefits and protections of whiteness within that space. One particular benefit is to be able to opt out of being named as a racial being while consuming an 'exotic' or interesting Other culture.

An area that requires further study is the extent to which the lack of organizational diversity (Mirem & Cabrera, 2015) in the UW System contributes to a lack of critical race consciousness as stated learning goals in critical Hmong studies courses. There are many complex factors that shape academic fields of studies, and more evidence is needed to understand how an absence of organizational diversity in administration and in student bodies may influence the way that critical Hmong studies are organized on UW System campuses.

As Table 2 (above) suggests, most of the Hmong-related courses offered on UW campuses do not have a pre-requisite for enrollment. This implies that students who are working toward a Hmong Studies certificate on campuses that offer them may find themselves in courses where there is a large spectrum of prior knowledge and experience (or lack thereof) in relation to critical Hmong studies. This spectrum within the knowledge and experiences of students in a course, in turn, impacts the depth of engagement within the course and may deny more knowledgeable students the opportunity for more complex study. In courses without prerequisites, many begin with the assumption that students will need a basic foundation upon which to build further content and conceptual knowledge. This necessitates a certain amount of repetition of foundational knowledge and time spent addressing misconceptions, which means

the focus of the course centers the students who are least knowledgeable in the subject during this part of the course.

In this sense, the extent to which the course demographics include white students or other students without prior knowledge will potentially disadvantage Hmong American students if they have prior knowledge or experience upon which to develop deeper understanding. Deferring to the least knowledgeable or avoiding race in order to make white students ‘comfortable’ (Leonardo & Porter, 2010) may mean that students of color are made *uncomfortable* or are denied robust learning experiences. This is especially true if one considers knowledge that needs to be communicated in Hmong or that is difficult to express in English.

Whiteness as property is also present in the sense that some campuses rely heavily on internships or apprenticeships as learning experiences within their Hmong studies certificate or program. While students may learn a great deal in an internship or as an apprentice, particularly a language or culture apprentice, these kinds of courses do not confer the same institutional status as other types of learning experiences. The learning experiences may also be more difficult to validate through typical academic or institutional norms because they are focused on ways of knowing, being, teaching, and learning that are culturally appropriate. While the learning that takes place may be considered valid within a Hmong community context, the student’s transcript will imply a less rigorous learning experience due to the perception of experiential learning. Therefore, if a Hmong American student serves as a language apprentice to a Hmong elder, her knowledge may be devalued because it is not framed or “delivered” in a formal academic setting.

This brings up a final way in which whiteness as property is present in the way that PWIs organizationally treat critical Hmong studies coursework—devaluing Hmong epistemologies and framing Hmong-related concepts and content through Western, English-speaking academic

norms. Kuokkanen (2007) points out the limited epistemologies that are included in academia and the ways in which educational institutions reinforce racial and colonial power and subjugation through material and epistemological exclusion. Kuokkanen (2007) argues:

A dialogue can never be neutral; it always occurs in specific historical circumstances and within certain structures in which each subject has a certain position. Just as indigenous discourses have no choice but to negotiate with dominant academic discourses, mainstream discourses cannot escape negotiating with indigenous discourses, even if this is not always acknowledged or if it takes place in the form of appropriation. This sort of ‘negative negotiation’ occurs when the dominant forecloses the marginal and in doing so denies its significance...For indigenous people, negative negotiation is manifested in Eurocentrism, which denies the contributions and knowledge of indigenous peoples, or appropriates their knowledge, or imposes its authority over them. (pp. xvi-xvii)

Excluding ways of knowing, valuing, teaching, learning, and being—even if content knowledge is included—works to invalidate Hmong Americans’ presence in the educational setting and attempts to subordinate their knowledge.

What Kuokkanen (2007) refers to as “negative negotiation” reinforces a relational and interdependent process of racialization in which dominant contributions and knowledge are framed as neutral and appropriate through a process of negation. Dominant knowledge is naturalized as “the best / only way” to come to and evaluate knowledge while knowledges of communities of color and First Nations peoples are invalidated to the extent that they deviate from an assumed racial and cultural norm (Cabrera, et al., 2017).

## Conclusion

Critical Hmong studies are growing on many UW System campuses due to the ongoing activism and struggle of Hmong American and allied students. These students consistently name race and racism as integral aspects of their educational experiences on campus; however, their coursework rarely includes the development of critical race consciousness as a stated learning goal or course focus. As these student activists recognize, it is important for critical Hmong studies to name racism and white supremacy as salient factors in the histories and contemporary lives of Hmong American communities. Without an analysis of root causes of the issues that face these youth and their communities, they are left with incomplete explanations that may reinforce internalized racism rather than encourage agency and a sense of efficacy.

This is where CRT and the concept of *whiteness as property* (Harris, 1996) become useful. Whiteness as property provides insight into the material and ideological functions of whiteness and power in education settings, and how these functions of whiteness work to maintain themselves, even within ethnic studies or multicultural education.

Whiteness as property is an important conceptual tool in understanding how power and race constrain and shape racial inclusion in higher education and in critical Hmong studies. Naming white supremacy and racism as central components of organizational culture in higher education is an important step in creating space for the ongoing work of critical Hmong studies.

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