

The Social Meanings of Hmong Farming in the U.S. Midwest

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This paper concerns Hmong farming as a social practice that is discursively constituted and constrained. What does farming mean for Hmong Americans of different generations in the Midwest? How is Hmong farming (in contrast to a “universal” notion of farming) represented in the mainstream media, local food movement and sustainable agriculture movement? How do these multiple representations intersect, converge or contradict? Through an exercise of critical discourse analysis in tandem with ethnographic research, I identify a few structuring discourses that shape the collective identity of “Hmong” and “Hmong farmers” specifically: neoliberalism, assimilationism, and environmentalism. The Hmong farmer as a social figure emerges in the interstices of these multiple discourses.

The analysis of discourses has practical implications not just because discourses are sites where marginalized social groups are being objectified and simultaneously express their subjectivity and instantiate resistance. More importantly, discourses themselves are practices – the practice of making meanings and claiming identities, the practice of stigmatizing certain kinds of knowledge and valorizing other kinds. Examining the discursive construction of Hmong farming thus allows us insight into the power dynamics embedded in this social practice.