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Resisting Altruism: How Systematic Power and Privilege Become Personal in One-on-One Community Tutoring

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Resisting Altruism: How Systematic Power and Privilege Become Personal in One-on-One Community Tutoring[1]

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In this qualitative case study of one tutoring relationship, I present new data on the extracurriculum; investigate tutoring as it occurs in community spaces; and argue that individuals can connect across systematic inequalities through personal conversations around picture books, photographs, and other visual and textual materials. Rather than ignore individual positioning within institutionalized power and privilege, tutors and writers can strengthen relationships and make tutoring more effective by evaluating how the systematic becomes personal and intimately known in one-on-one conferencing.

As a community literacy tutor, I find that building meaningful, long-term, and intimate relationships is what makes one-on-one tutoring especially exciting, but also challenging. Community literacy programs often invite a person with better economic footing, more educational opportunity, or other privilege to support someone disenfranchised by institutionalized racism, classism, and other systematic oppression. In turn, tutors find themselves confronting their own race, class, or national privilege, while student-learners are often unsure of how to relate with this person who is supposedly "helping" them. While there are, of course, exceptions to this dichotomy of tutor as privileged and student as disenfranchised, community literacy programs tend to follow a service model, which contributes to Ellen Cushman's arguments against "missionary activism" (14) or an altruistic, Mother Teresa-like stance toward working in the community ("Rhetorician" 19).[2] Within this problematic and pervasive frame of altruism lies potential for individuals to engage with and to understand better their own positioning in systems of power and privilege. How, then, do tutors make connections across institutional inequities that operate on the individual level within one-on-one conferences?

In this article, I identify the intersection between systematic and individual forces by analyzing a case of community tutoring in which differences between tutor and student are magnified. Specifically, I seek to uncover the ways in which individuals draw on and experience power and privilege within the tutoring relationship. I argue against a polite response of ignoring or keeping hidden differences in power and instead maintain that tutoring partners should work together to build conversation about and awareness of their individual positioning. Since Anne Ruggles Gere's call in 1994 to make visible writing practices as they occur outside classroom walls, composition scholars have looked into community spaces to study literacy (Cintron; Cushman; Brandt; Street; Daniell), writing groups (Moss, Highberg, and Nicolas), and service learning (Herzberg; Grabill; Flower). These studies, along with ones on place and space (McComisky and Ryan; Reynolds), have advanced conceptions of "the extracurriculum of composition." To this point,

however, studies of one-on-one tutoring and writing centers have focused on the university or secondary school, and studies of community literacy have examined primarily programmatic or historical issues, rather than the intricate details within tutorials. My study seeks to connect these disparate fields by shedding light on writing-centered tutoring that occurs outside the academy, within a community literacy program, and for the purpose of intensive language learning. Further, I hope to extend current research on white privilege and social change by moving beyond the question of whether power and privilege shape our daily interactions and instead describing how those systems influence individuals. My project offers implications for community literacy as well as for writing centers and other university or campus-based tutorial programs.

Since my initial involvement with a community literacy program in September of 2005,[3] I have worked one-on-one with a Hmong woman who came to the United States a year earlier with refugee status. Roughly my same age, Mai Zong, whose chosen pseudonym means "good girl" in Hmong, is a mother and the only woman in her refugee group who has continued to take English classes. Over the two years that Mai Zong and I have worked together, we have strengthened our relationship in regular one-on-one conferences and through collaboration on a qualitative study of our tutoring partnership. I have recorded fieldnotes, audiotaped a tutorial, and interviewed Mai Zong about her experiences with tutoring. To ensure Mai Zong understood my research and truly provided informed consent, I worked with a coordinator of the community literacy program who translated the consent forms into Hmong and attended a tutorial to explain my research to Mai Zong. Throughout my data collection and analysis, for ethical and methodological reasons, I have sought Mai Zong's feedback and worked to make the research participatory and reciprocal—to benefit Mai Zong through improved tutoring and attention to our bi-weekly meetings. I have also read sections of my fieldnotes to Mai Zong and have talked with her about the content of this article (and an earlier conference presentation). As Mai Zong and I have developed trust and friendship, we have moved from our original meeting place in a community center to our new location in Mai Zong's home. In both of these locations, we have talked about our relational tutoring, and I continue to ask Mai Zong about her perceptions of and reactions to our work together.

What I find most provocative in exploring my tutoring relationship with Mai Zong are the ways in which we identify common ground and work to become friends, even as we are positioned very differently within systems of power and privilege. I see at least three types of asymmetrical power distributions acting on our tutoring relationship: the first stemming from our positions within social hierarchies based on identity (e.g., race, class, and gender); the second reflecting global political and cultural contexts (e.g., the Hmong community positioned within the Untied States), and the third resulting from our institutional roles (e.g., tutor and student). Each of these types of asymmetrical power is veiled and works under the surface to varying degrees. As Peggy McIntosh, Stephanie Wildman, Adrienne D. Davis,

Tim Wise, and others have identified, white privilege—like other forms of institutionalized power and privilege—is made invisible so that whites often find themselves unaware and unreflective about their own unearned advantages. Whether or not tutors realize their positioning within race, class, gender, and other oppression hierarchies, these systems are sure to manifest themselves within tutorials. In my relationship with Mai Zong, I note that I benefit from white privilege, as well as economic and language privilege as a white, middle-class, American woman. I am positioned within the community literacy program as tutor, researcher, and educated English speaker—all institutional roles that assume expertise and the status of teacher over student. At the same time, Mai Zong reminds me that she is privileged in the Hmong community as a mother, as an immigrant to the United States, and as a woman with several years of schooling who aspires for a GED and continued education. Perhaps because of Mai Zong's privilege within her own community, we are able to discuss openly power and privilege in our one-on-one conferences. And as a result, I have become more aware of my own institutional and individual power, both in the tutorial and in the broader United States context.

Concurrently, whereas I benefit from white, middle class privilege, I also experience sexism that allows me to draw analogies among forms of oppression. And Eileen O'Brien maintains that most whites come to antiracist work through some type of approximating experience, such as experiencing sexism, witnessing racism of a close friend or family member, or noticing contradictions between ideals and practices. Not only does my gender allow me to imagine racism, classism, and other forms of oppression for my tutoring partner, but it also provides a point of connection with Mai Zong. As heterosexual women, we assume similar roles as spouses and caretakers. These connections allow us to try more challenging discursive activities (from reading aloud passages to taking field trips to the public library), but differences in power and privilege simultaneously influence how we construct meaning from stories and talk about themes in the contexts of our lives.

To understand how systems of power and privilege influence tutoring relationships and, by extension, tutoring effectiveness, I present a case study of tutor research (as a parallel to and extension of teacher research or action research), which has allowed me to investigate my local context and to improve my own practice. Although I have consulted and collaborated with Mai Zong throughout my research process, this analysis is primarily my own. I consider how friendship can be formed across asymmetrical power relations and how Mai Zong and I act as individuals within broader systems of power and privilege. To describe the nature of our evolving relationship, I relate and analyze stories of my one-on-one interactions with Mai Zong, beginning with our awkward introductions. These stories illustrate how two individuals can connect across inequalities through personal conversations stemming from picture books, photographs, and other visual and textual materials.

Building Proximity from Distance

To provide insight and background into how Mai Zong and I have developed our tutoring relationship, I describe here our process of establishing routines and regular patterns in conferencing. Community literacy programs often allow for flexibility that can be restricted by more structured coursework, worksheets, or scripts. Mai Zong and I have grown closer as we have become more flexible in our interactions, putting aside homework and worksheets in favor of conversation. In our case, picture books have provided the starting point for many of our conversations, but a range of texts or images could do the same.

When Mai Zong and I first met in fall 2005, we experienced frustration. From the first day of meeting my partner, I felt anxious about my ability to help because, as Nancy Grimm reminds writing center tutors, "good intentions" are not enough. I met Mai Zong after one of her ESL classes, and in the rush of introductions, our initial communication broke down. In an effort to negotiate our meeting time and place, I asked Mai Zong when and where she would like to meet, and she responded by nodding her head *yes*. Confused, I tried again: "When would you like to meet? … For tutoring?" This time she shook her head *no*. I wondered whether she was confused, uncertain, or waiting for me to explain. So I pulled out my calendar, pointed to a date, and wrote, this time without asking: "Thursday 2-4pm? October 6th?" Mai Zong repeated my actions by writing the date and time on her notepad, and again she nodded *yes*, which ended my attempt to coordinate our schedules. I clearly remember leaving this first encounter worried about telling, rather than asking, when we would meet. Aware of relative power, I worried about exerting control—not only over scheduling and meeting times, but also over the content or focus of our one-on-one sessions.

Mai Zong recounts this same encounter when she explains how she almost quit tutoring before we even began. She also found communication so difficult not only with this first meeting but also during our initial tutorials that she considered canceling our sessions. She says, "The first time I feel bad because I, I don't understand what you say. And you say more I don't understand. I think I cancel the tutoring … I think the next time I don't go." Interestingly, this early experience of awkwardness and miscommunication contrasts with what Mai Zong has more recently said about our sessions: "I have a good time, a good time to meet you and to make, I don't know, something, to tell, to understand." Mai Zong now experiences our sessions very differently and more constructively, but I wonder what has allowed us to develop closeness and to settle into a comfortable rhythm in tutoring.

The first time Mai Zong and I met after our initial introductions, she brought homework from her ESL classes. The homework included a short story and end questions about leprechauns, a dialogue on ordering food, a spelling test, and a worksheet on hard and soft "g" and "c" sounds. I struggled to pay attention as Mai Zong decoded the story. She asked me for help with pronunciation, but I wanted to chat about the plot—or about anything relevant to her life. Why was she reading about leprechauns, I wondered.

I interrupted, "So, who are these leprechauns?"

"Uhm." She paused, looked at the handout, and read aloud a sentence, "They hope to prevent anyone from taking their gold."

"Ok. They have gold. So, are they rich?"

"Rich? What does that mean?" Mai Zong seemed unsure of why I was questioning her about the story. The more we talked, the more I realized that she had perfected the skill of reading aloud words without internalizing their meaning. To Mai Zong, leprechauns were real people who had money, not magical creatures connected with rainbows and fighting for pots of gold. Her reading reminded me of the simple textbooks I encountered and despised in grade school, and I immediately wanted to try something different.

The following week, after some time spent on her homework sheets, I asked Mai Zong if she would like to do some writing. Instead, she asked about reading, so I pulled out a stack of menus, advertisements, and neighborhood flyers. I also brought several picture books that I proposed we read so that Mai Zong could share them with her four-year-old son. Right away, she smiled and began flipping through the books. She chose two: Margaret Wise Brown's *Goodnight Moon* and David Wiesner's *Tuesday*. The first choice, *Goodnight Moon*, worked particularly well, as the story unfolds with a rabbit (Mai Zong likened this character to her own son) saying goodnight to the objects in his room. Each page provided illustrations of the objects mentioned, so whenever Mai Zong asked about vocabulary, we were able to look to the illustrations for answers. She liked the text enough that she asked me to bring more like it, and she took it home to read with her son.

The next book, *Tuesday*, was drastically different: it presented images without text, so it allowed us to tell the story as shown through illustrations. Narrating the text gave us a chance to practice speaking and to build vocabulary about farms, frogs, jumping, flying, news, and the media. We laughed through several scenes, and Mai Zong enjoyed the subtext (the back story) of pets and late-night workers who see the action but are alone in knowing what has happened as frogs have flown through their town, wreaking havoc. Like the leprechaun story, this book was nonsensical and magical, but this time Mai Zong created the story on her own. She seemed engaged in the plot, able to discuss the action and characters, and entertained by the humorous portrayal of flying frogs. Perhaps most importantly, she again took the book home to her son, where she could teach the story to him. From this point forward, picture books became a means of transferring power, of sharing my tutor role with Mai Zong so that she could teach her son with the same books we rehearsed and read together.

Months later, Mai Zong continued to ask for picture books and settled into a pattern of reading one per week. This ritual united us by providing consistency, but also reinforced a power distinction in that I chose which books to bring to our sessions. I selected a variety of texts so that Mai Zong could choose a few that piqued her interest, but my initial selections in many ways determined the vocabulary or context. For example, Tomie dePaola's *Mice Squeak, We Speak* focuses primarily on animal names and sounds, a

topic that would have little relevance to Mai Zong's everyday life, but one that she told me her son was learning in preschool at the time. Other books allowed Mai Zong to share her expertise on parenting and childhood. One case was William Joyce's *George Shrinks* about a boy who becomes the size of an insect or small rodent. His cat tries to attack him, he is almost washed away by water, and he nearly crashes when flying a toy plane. His parents show up at the end of the book just in time for George to return to his normal size. Mai Zong related how her son would behave in a similar situation, and she laughed about how silly children can be. Because Mai Zong's learning is so connected with her identity as mother, she sees value even in the books that I worry are too disconnected from her everyday life. Our reading of picture books is not without conflict, but even as I choose the books, Mai Zong's experience gives meaning to those books, allowing her to exert authority and expertise. While my role of tutor and Mai Zong's role of student are nonetheless reinforced in this scenario, our reading of picture books has drawn attention to Mai Zong's relative power in the mother-child social hierarchy, thereby highlighting another system of power and privilege that can complicate the others at play in our tutorials.

I realize from talking with other tutors in the community literacy program that using picture books with an adult learner is more than unconventional: it is seen as looking down on my partner. I see the situation in reverse: worksheets underestimate, while reading trade books—whether children's literature or adult novels—assumes ability, interest, and authentic engagement with text. In addition to allowing us to laugh and enjoy the stories, picture books have given us a framework for building vocabulary, reading experience, and concepts of print. Together, we have explored a range of texts, discussed the ways visual and textual elements complement each other, and set an expectation that Mai Zong continue reading on her own. This expectation has led to a library fieldtrip and the knowledge that books can be borrowed, browsed, and enjoyed at home. Rather than completing worksheets in isolation, reading picture books has become an activity with great importance, something that taps into Mai Zong's role as a mother and opens difficult and personal discussions about systematic power in our lives.

Struggling with Power Differentials

As Mai Zong and I discuss picture books and meet over months that have turned into years, conversations *both* bring us together *and* expose power and privilege. While we position ourselves as allies and friends, we also identify inequities that challenge our relationship. I find that as we connect as individuals through humor, shared interests, and even common fears, we also connect as members of larger groups—as heterosexual women who are married and assume caretaking roles (Mai Zong as a mother and me as a teacher). While shared gender, age, and martial status connect us, systems of power and privilege create felt inequalities in access, representation, and material realities. These disconnects, like our connections, reveal systematic and institutionalized barriers that work beyond the individual level. For

example, my access to education, work, and a living wage illustrate my white, middle class, and American privilege. For Mai Zong, immigration to the United States has come with refugee status and a period of public assistance for housing and education; she is relatively privileged within the Hmong community, as she is a mother and an educated woman who can read and write in Hmong and is now learning English. Still, Mai Zong encounters American systems of racism, classism, and nationalism compounded with the difficulty of communicating in a new language she is just beginning to learn—all factors illustrating culturally located power in the United States and subordination of the Hmong people on an international scale. In my local relationship with Mai Zong, the systematic becomes personal, as our experiences and viewpoints often look very different.

A review of our tutoring cancellations, for example, reveals our different positions and the types of choices we make on a regular basis. Over the period of several months, I canceled our tutorials four times: twice for professional conferences, once for an on-campus workshop, and once for a conference call. All four cancellations were scheduled ahead of time and resulted in professional development activities that help both my education and my career (hence, they carry economic value). In contrast, Mai Zong also canceled our sessions four times: once when her son was sick; once when he was dropped off too early; once when her sink was broken, and once when she had traveled out of town to "get chickens" over spring break. With the exception of the spring break travel, none of these cancellations were scheduled, and all were related to the care of her family and household. Of course these cancellations are rooted in responsibility and agency. Mai Zong would certainly not choose to switch places with me (in fact, she feels sad that I have so few family members and no annual family gatherings), but our cancellation patterns distinguish our different class membership and expose my middle class privilege. While I have been able to schedule cancellations that potentially strengthen my economic position, Mai Zong's cancellations could not have been planned and might arguably take away from her economic footing.

The context surrounding our tutorials (the context that influences these cancellations, for example) has a profound effect on tutoring, just as the talk—or what happens within our conferences—does. The act of scheduling our one-on-one conferences exposes power and privilege in the same way that reading and responding to picture books do. The question, then, is how do we build effective, meaningful, and relational tutoring across these inequities? In this section, I discuss what brings us together and then turn to the divisions that challenge and complicate easy friendship. Both connections and divisions are brought to the surface largely through storytelling that arises from our use of picture books and photographs. Commonalities based on gender are products of the same structuring forces that lead to disconnects, and gender, therefore, serves as a fulcrum on which our relationship hinges.

To establish points of connection, Mai Zong and I draw on personality traits—which are often seen individual, but reflect structural forces—to discuss likes and dislikes, including our favorite foods, television shows,

movies, and books, all of which can be read as gendered. For instance, Mai Zong and I find common ground based on shared aversions and fears. After reading aloud Ezra Jack Keats's *Goggles!*, we agree that we are both too scared to ride a motorcycle. We would rather walk, ride bikes, drive cars, or take the bus. Mai Zong tells me about her recent efforts to earn a driver's license, so she can drive herself to the community garden two miles away from her apartment. From talk about transportation, we turn to a discussion of gardening and our favorite fruits and vegetables. We exchange recipes and discuss dinner plans for that evening. During Leo Lionni's *Inch by Inch*, Mai Zong shares her fear of caterpillars and worms. I express my dislike for spiders, which leads into talk about Mai Zong's favorite show, *Fear Factor*. We pause with exclamations of "eugh!" and "awh!" when we imagine eating caterpillars or having roaches crawl over us. Mai Zong tells me about several episodes of *Fear Factor*, which she enjoys for the visual content, even when she does not understand the language, as is the case with many picture books. While these points of connection might be seen as mere circumstance because any two women are unlikely to share the same fears, they show how Mai Zong and I build connections by distancing ourselves from motorcycles and bugs—a distancing that strikes me as feminine. Even as we defy gendered expectations by continuing our educations and asserting ourselves as strong women, we still fit some gendered stereotypes, which provide us with similar stories to tell and preferences to disclose.

In addition to building connections through dislikes, we find commonality through shared interests in crafting and working with children, which are again evidence of shared gender and socialized femininity, which are structural and systematic in nature. When reading aloud Laura Joffe Numeroff's *If You Give a Moose a Muffin*, we encounter the words "sewing," "needle," and "thread," all words that Mai Zong is interested in learning because they support her seamstress work. We compare my crocheting with her sewing, and Mai Zong asks me to bring crochet needles and yarn to our next session. For several weeks, Mai Zong and I talk while crocheting. I show Mai Zong one of my afghans, and she, in turn, shows me several aprons she is making for friends. A few weeks later, she gives me a Hmong story cloth she has sewn for me. Similarly, when reading David Shannon's humorous texts *No, David!* and *David Goes to School*, we relate by laughing and sympathizing with the mother and teacher characters who constantly scold the naughty boy, saying "No! No! No!" and offering other reprimands, such as "Shhhhh!" and "Quiet down now." I tell stories from my experience in schools, and Mai Zong recounts what her son has recently said and done. For example, he often picks up commands from his preschool and uses them in conversation with Mai Zong. One time he even told her, "Pay attention." The points of connection Mai Zong and I build are not limited to shared experiences or preferences, but include situations we are able to imagine and appreciate for each other. In this case, Mai Zong relates to the David character as a mother, while I relate to him as a past child and teacher. Our connections are not based on sameness, but on mutual understanding, interest in the other person, and a shared context for laughter.

At the same time that Mai Zong and I have developed our relationship based on commonalities reflecting our shared identities as heterosexual women, we have also experienced a range of disconnects that are likewise more than a matter of individual dislikes or divides. Rather, these disconnects expose our unequal status positions within systems of race, class, and national privilege. While both Mai Zong and I have relocated to the Midwest, we moved from different distances and for very different reasons. I chose to move across the country to continue my education, while Mai Zong came as a refugee and agreed to resettle in a country where she must learn both a new language and new way of life. Having grown up in refugee camps in Thailand, Mai Zong has known a life where her agency has always been restricted, where relocation was more a matter of necessity than choice. Our disconnects, therefore, are not simple differences, but matters of inequality that draw attention to global politics and even national, cultural, or racial identity.

As an example, while Mai Zong and I connect based on shared gender, we also identify how our gendered roles are constructed differently based on our economic and cultural positions. When reading David Wiesner's *Tuesday*, Mai Zong and I stop at the illustration of a man eating a sandwich and drinking milk to name our favorite foods. Mai Zong is shocked that I am a vegetarian and asks in several subsequent sessions, "What do you eat? You don't eat chicken? You don't eat beef? You don't eat fish?" She is curious by my vegetarianism, but also confused about why I choose to spend more money on tofu and soy products rather than to purchase meat. She is especially surprised that my husband is also vegetarian, as she says that her spouse asks her to prepare special meat-based dishes just for him.

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Our conversations on food reflect not only the privileged economic position that allows me to afford vegetarian meals but also differences in our marital relationships. Mai Zong's husband is considered extremely open-minded among the Hmong men because he supports her education, but he also expects her to prepare dinner for him. My ideal of egalitarian relationships conflicts with Mai Zong's lived experience, so that even while recognizing my privileged economic position, I find myself quick to judge Mai Zong's marital relationship and having to back up and interrogate my own political stance. Likewise, as we talk about our husbands, Mai Zong worries about why I do not have children and is confused why I would make this choice. As I describe a notion of privilege based on class, education, and career, Mai Zong explains that for her in the Hmong community, power, privilege, and "blessings" come with children. From Mai Zong's point of view, I have little social standing and limited experience until I am a parent. But my point of view not only carries economic weight in the United States context, but is

also symbolic of American views that have conflicted with and subordinated Hmong communities in the United States.[4]

These differences in how we experience gender and heterosexuality may lead to judgment as I wonder about Mai Zong's marital relationship and as she questions my decision not to have children. However, our attempts to discuss and understand these differences actually strengthen our relationship so we come to want for the other person what we believe brings status, whether income, career, children, or family. Because we care for each other, I want Mai Zong to feel economically secure and educationally empowered, and she wants me to enjoy a supportive, extended family. Conversation about our marriages and families, like our laughing over scary insects and dangerous motorcycles, indicates the powerful role of socialized femininity, but this time it also highlights important differences in those roles. Further, these conversations illustrate the ways in which power and privilege are historical and cultural constructions. We are each socialized into values, and the gaps between what Mai Zong and I see as providing us with status helps us to identify a potential for challenging and changing those constructions. As we relate stories and seek to understand each other's positioning, we uncover the socialized and systematic nature of privilege as well as culturally located power that influences us as individuals within the Hmong community and broader United States context.

Institutionalized systems of power and privilege become immediate and personal when sharing stories, both those from picture books and those from our everyday lives. Discussion of socioeconomic class within our cultural contexts arises, for example, through reading Gene Zion's *Harry the Dirty Dog*, which leads Mai Zong to express shock that a dog would not only live indoors, but also be bathed in the family's tub. Mai Zong believes that animals are dirty and cannot imagine them in the same bathtubs as humans, something I have taken for granted for as long as I can remember. In Thailand, Mai Zong had to carry water from a few blocks away, boil it, and then use the same water to bathe all members of her family. She never sat in a bathtub until coming to the United States and says that the indoor warm water is what she likes most about her new apartment. She asks whether I have one or two bathrooms, and I answer, "just one." Then she says that many Americans "have money" and "are rich." I agree that we have much more money and ask whether she has seen the really big houses like the Governor's Mansion. She says yes, but then adds, "houses here have many rooms, one room for each person." *Uh, oh*, I think. My house has two bedrooms for just my spouse and me. I realize that I am "rich" (and not "middle class") by Mai Zong's estimation. Economic privilege, which is constructed as abstract, if not invisible, particularly for those who have it, becomes individual and immediate through these exchanges.

Inequities in power and privilege become further illustrated (this time visually) when looking through library books on Hmong culture: Sheila Cohen's *Mai Ya's Long Journey,* Nora Murphy's *A Hmong Family*, and Dia Cha's *Dia's Story Cloth*. As Mai Zong and I discuss different photographs in these books, she teaches me about games, customs, and life as she has experienced

them both in Thailand and in the United States. We look at photographs from the Ban Vinai Refugee Camp in Thailand, where Mai Zong was born, where children lived within wire fences, and where she remembers her family being numbered. One photograph shows a family marked by a number "BV002949" with each child wearing tags "1.2," "1.3," and so on. Mai Zong explains that families had to be counted and kept together.

When looking at story cloth designs, Mai Zong tells me that she became a seamstress and worked all day on sewing after she married at age fourteen. Mai Zong was one of only a few girls to complete six years of school in Thailand and to learn how to write in Hmong. She tells me with pride about her educational background, which provides her privilege within her family and the Hmong community, yet still leaves her disadvantaged in the United States. Mai Zong's position again calls attention again to the systematic nature of power and privilege, as she has enjoyed a privileged status within the local Hmong community, but the community as a whole is made Other and disenfranchised in the wider United States context. Mai Zong's detailed stories of Hmong New Year celebrations could easily be read as exotic, while a pet story like *Harry the Dirty Dog* is presented as so normative in the United States that it furthers an "ideal" based on a white, middle-class, suburban, heterosexual family. The juxtaposition of the dog story with books on Hmong culture opens conversation of our relative privilege and power in the United States and internationally.

At the same time as reading picture books, Mai Zong suggests that we exchange photographs of our families, perhaps because our conversations have already stretched into our personal lives and beyond more formal, or "academic," topics. I bring recent pictures of my parents' summer visit to Wisconsin and plan to share some online photo albums from past vacations, both in the continental United States and to Europe and Hawaii. My photos largely convey a tourist perspective by showcasing places I visit rather than people in my family and community. They capture special events instead of everyday life. In contrast, Mai Zong has brought five envelopes of photographs from her mid-teens in Thailand to mid-twenties in the United States. Her photos show a large family of twenty siblings plus many in-laws and friends. She tells me not only about her husband and son but also about her extended family and where they have moved within the United States. As Mai Zong narrates each photograph, she describes the living conditions depicted in the photos: houses are three-sided wooden structures with dirt floors, and laundry hangs out in the streets near kids playing "pov pob," a traditional ball game. In contrast to these images of daily life, a number of photographs chronicle Hmong New Year celebrations, as women wear colorful, traditional dress, and men don silver necklaces with large locks and many layers or aluminum or other metal. Mai Zong reports that her family has made these garments and necklaces for years, and she proudly points to an intricate apron design she stitched by hand, again indicating her position of privilege among the Hmong.

The more we talk, the more I worry about how my own life is depicted differently in the photographs—not because I imagine that Mai Zong would want to trade positions, but because my own privilege seems so extreme and insensitive. A mass of material wealth characterizes my life: from my two-bedroom house and my vacations with leisure time to my digital camera and computers for creating online photo albums. More than the picture books, the photographs lead us to confront my privilege in a sharp, rough-edged way, as I tell Mai Zong where I have traveled and where I plan to visit next. I struggle with how to present my identity in a responsible way that is truthful and still critical of the systems that allow for inequities in income, access, and representation. And I question whether my years growing up are too dissimilar to Mai Zong's—whether I can presume to build a friendship based on mutual liking or shared gender. At the same time, I worry about how I represent and write about Mai Zong's life without depicting her experiences as Other or exotic. With Mai Zong, I stumble through explanations of how my photographs show privilege (American, middle-class, white privilege), but it is truly through writing about our conversations—through the research process we undertake together and through reading fieldnotes and earlier drafts of this paper—that we are able to discuss our lives and notions of what we call "rich" and "family." We agree to continue discussing our lives, which paves the way for exploring the systems that create our relative status and positioning. We return to the photographs in subsequent tutorials and also give photos to each other—not only as a site of literacy learning but also as a way to understand and remember each other's values.

The disconnects and divides Mai Zong and I encounter based not only on our different cultural backgrounds but also on my race, class, and national privilege are not diminished, but instead become part of the way we construct conversations and interactions with one another. Effective tutoring, based in a long-term relationship, should not hide these differences but should recognize and expand upon an awareness of what separates us—and how systematic oppression unfairly organizes our lives, giving some of us advantages and limiting the experiences and access of others. While the differences in power and privilege limit our understandings of each other's position, we are still able to imagine what the other person has experienced and to build connections across real power differentials. What I hope this analysis shows is that tutors can identify connections with their partners, yet also recognize and work to understand differences in material realities. Building friendship does not negate attention to oppression, but instead asks us to evaluate how systematic power and privilege becomes personal and intimately known in one-on-one conferencing. While the process of developing a caring, affiliative, and critical relationship takes time and effort, this relationship-building is essential for tutoring partners to choose to continue working together, and, therefore, for community literacy programs to sustain their work in communities. Further, genuine consideration of power and privilege arises not from structured reading or writing activities, but from unstructured talk, which may stem from discussions of texts, pictures, or other materials we encounter within

tutorials. Community literacy tutors can interrogate the common, but problematic, frame of altruism by looking at their own positioning within institutionalized power and privilege and by involving their partners in discussion and collaborative research into this question as well.

Tutoring within Systems of Power and Privilege

This case study of tutor research is situated in a particular time and place and specific to tutor and student, but it raises questions about the role of power and privilege in community literacy programs and in tutoring more generally. Although Mai Zong and I bring unique literacy histories and expectations for tutoring into our work together, our relationship shows how any instructional interaction is shaped by individuals' positions in the world. Even as we identify commonalities and find ways to connect across difference, Mai Zong and I experience inequities in our everyday material realities. Those inequities influence our ongoing relationship as well as the nature of community literacy tutoring. How and whether we uncover our participation in systems of power and privilege shape not only one-on-one relationships, but also overall tutoring effectiveness, since tutoring is made possible through personal contact and interactions among tutoring partners.

Because long-term, lasting instruction often equates with effectiveness, it is worth noting that Mai Zong and I have continued working together longer than any other tutoring pair originally matched through the Hmong Language, Literacy, and Jobs Project (HLLJP). While a number of factors might account for this fact, our negotiated instructional approach has allowed us to talk openly and even comfortably (as friends) about what separates us. Rather than ignore social status, relationships can be strengthened and tutoring made more effective when we call attention to our positions and make those conversations part of the work of community literacy.

Awareness of systematic power can not only shape tutoring relationships, but also influence the overall effectiveness of tutorials. For example, when asked what she finds valuable about one-on-one conferences, Mai Zong says that she enjoys hearing an American speak: "It's good for me to listen." She explains that I speak more quickly than her ESL teachers, so my speech is more similar to what she encounters in grocery stores or pharmacies. She recently asked a store clerk to help her find lunch bags, an event she reported to me as "a first." This example illustrates how Mai Zong not only recognizes but also draws on my language privilege to claim more power and agency for herself. Privilege can work in unexpected ways, which can and should be interrogated so that we might better understand its impact on one-on-one tutorials. In the case of my work with Mai Zong, our mutual exploration of power and privilege through research and conversation has made possible our ongoing collaboration.

This research points toward implications for tutors as well as for directors of community literacy programs. Both tutors and those who conduct tutor education should pay attention to the types of power extended to both tutoring partners. Those administrators who match tutors and students

might consider what parts of each person's identity (from race and class to gender and sexuality) might expose inequities or allow for exploration into systematic privilege. Rather than matching tutor and student because of similarities or differences, a more complicated notion of common ground, status, and identification can inform matches, as well as tutor education. If tutors understand that commonalties as well as disconnects and inequalities are inevitable and productive, then issues of power and privilege can be explored openly and honestly. Discussions of difference and especially of power need not be avoided, but explicitly recognized and highlighted as a site of literacy learning. The hope, then, is that these explorations (and attention to oppression more generally) will continue beyond tutorial sessions and into our everyday practices and interactions in the world.

As with any form of action research, my project ends by looking ahead to continued inquiries and interactions with Mai Zong. I become better able to rethink which texts to bring, which questions to ask, and which stories to tell as I become more critical of my role within tutorials. Further, I am able to share with others this case study that illustrates the importance of examining issues of power and privilege—and ultimately, of resisting altruism—in tutoring. As tutor research in the extracurriculum, my collaboration with Mai Zong highlights language learning as it occurs outside academic settings and presents a model that university tutors might adapt when questioning their own practices. I close, therefore, by extending a call for other researchers to take on projects of tutor research and to question how systematic privilege shapes individual relationships in tutorials. Just as my relationship with Mai Zong continues to grow through conflicts and connections, so do our abilities to construct social change from research.

Notes

[1] This study received IRB approval and presents an example of tutor research that benefits participants through reciprocity, allows for fair representation through member checks, and meets the CCCC "Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Research in Composition Studies." Many thanks to readers who provided substantial feedback on earlier drafts of this essay: Deborah Brandt, Stacey Lee, Rasha Diab, Kate Vieira, Mary Fiorenza, Beth Schewe, Jonathan D'Andries, and two anonymous reviewers. I especially thank Mai Zong for her involvement in this project and her ongoing friendship.

[2] Community literacy programs frequently ask people with some leisure time or educational status to volunteer. Recognizing the privilege that tutors experience is *not* to say that they do not also face oppression. Rather, tutors may benefit from systematic privilege (e.g., white privilege) at the same time as facing oppression (e.g., sexism).

[3] The first year of my tutoring was supported by the Hmong Literacy, Language, and Jobs Project (HLLJP) of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Since summer 2006, my tutoring has occurred under the umbrella

of Madison's Literacy Network (formerly the Madison Literacy Council), which provided support when the HLLJP lost funding.

[4] For more on the history and economic situation for the Hmong people, see *The Hmong: An Introduction to Their History and Culture* by John Duffy, Roger Harmon, Donald A. Ranard, Bo Thao, and Kou Yang, published by the Center for Applied Linguistics, Cultural Orientation Resource Center.

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