PART IV. Read the passage taken from Honeybee Democracy, the information from Jane Hamilton-Merritt’s Website, and then selected listeners’ reactions to the RadioLab broadcast (below). Then, answer the questions that appear at the end of the reading. (Full comments to the RadioLab episode are available at http://www.radiolab.org/blogs/radiolab-blog/2012/sep/30/robert-krulwich-yellow-rain/)

Honeybee Democracy Excerpt

The following excerpt comes from the book Honeybee Democracy1 by Thomas D. Seeley. Seeley is a professor of biology at Cornell University and a beekeeper. His previous books include The Wisdom of the Hive and Honeybee Ecology. He has conducted research on bees for almost 50 years.

Beekeepers, incidentally, face their hives to the south to help their bees fly out in cool weather. This southern orientation is particularly important in the winter months, when bees go outside on sunny days to make their critical “cleansing flights,” that is, to defecate.

With support from the National Geographic Society, my wife Robin and I undertook a 10-month study of the colony defense strategies of the three Asian honeybee species living in Thailand. We set up camp in the pristine mountain forests of the vast Khao Ya National Park in northeast Thailand. Gradually we assembled a picture of each honeybee species’ fascinatingly complex array of colony defenses against such enemies as giant hornets, weaver ants, honey buzzards, tree shrews, rhesus monkeys, and honey bears.

A few years later, however, and to my amazement, the knowledge that we’d gained about the Asian honeybees proved important to a large international audience. In 1981, the secretary of state in the Reagan administration, Alexander M. Haig, alleged the Soviet Union was waging or abetting chemical warfare against opponents of the communist governments in two countries bordering Thailand: Laos and Kampuchea. If true, this was a violation of two international arms-control treaties, the 1925 Geneva Protocol and the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention. The main evidence cited by Haig was a material called “yellow rain,” that is, yellow spots less than 6 millimeters (one-quarter inch) in diameter that were found on vegetation at alleged attack sites and that supposedly contained fungal toxins. I realized, however, that the yellow spots that U.S. officials called yellow rain were indistinguishable from the yellow spots I called honeybee feces. They were identical in size, shape, and color. Further work revealed that both contained bee hairs and were laden with pollen grains from which the protein had been digested [indicating the pollen had gone through a bee’s digestive track and been metabolized before being eliminated from the body.] Eventually, I was able to help

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Matthew Meselson, a professor of molecular genetics at Harvard and an expert on chemical and biological weapons, show conclusively that yellow rain was indeed honeybee feces, not chemical warfare. . . . Shortly after yellow rain was proven to be bee poop, in 1984, officials of the U.S. State Department, without fanfare, ceased accusing the Soviets of violating the two arms-control treaties on chemical and biological weapons.

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Information from Jane Hamilton-Merrit’s Website

Chemical - Biological Warfare Victims

After Laos fell to the communists in 1975, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) resorted to the use of chemical-biological-toxin warfare, known in the media as "Yellow Rain," to wipe out the Hmong who were the backbone of the U.S. military effort in Laos. These acts were nothing short of genocide, targeting men, women and children: dispersing the chemical indiscriminately among the many Hmong villages killing thousands of people. Today, the genocide remains unrecognized by the international community. (Click on the following link to see photographs Hamilton-Merritt claims document the effects of chemical/biological warfare on the Hmong in Laos. Warning, some of the photographs are disturbing, so view them at your own discretion: [http://www.tragicmountains.org/id145.html](http://www.tragicmountains.org/id145.html))

About Dr. Jane Hamilton-Merritt, Ph.D.

I went to war with my generation, but instead of a rifle I took a typewriter and a camera. Then I joined the battlefields of Southeast Asia.” - Dr. Jane Hamilton-Merritt

Dr. Jane Hamilton-Merritt, journalist, photographer, war-correspondent, historian, human rights advocate, expert on Southeast Asia, was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 1998 and again in 2000 for her work on behalf of the Hmong tribal people of Laos.

Her most recent book *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, The Americans, and The Secret Wars for Laos 1942-1992* (Indiana University Press) was published to acclaim and selected as a finalist for the

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Los Angeles Times Book Award in History. It is now in available in paperback.

In 1999, she was elected to the Connecticut Women’s Hall of Fame and inducted into the Explorer’s Club. She has testified numerous times before the U.S. Congress on chemical-biological warfare, genocide, refugee issues, and human rights violations by Asian governments. During the early 1980s, she worked as an Expert Consultant on Highland Lao Refugees to the U.S. State Department.

As an expert on Southeast Asia, Dr. Hamilton-Merritt has lectured extensively in secondary schools and universities throughout the country on Asian peoples and their cultures and on the Vietnam War Era. At a Connecticut university, she created and taught a course of the Vietnam War Era for both undergraduates and graduates.

In 1969, she was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for her coverage of the Vietnam War and the winner of the Inland Daily Press Associations Grand Prize Trophy for her frontline combat photography in Vietnam.


Other honors include: Yale-Mellon Visiting Faculty Fellow at Yale University, Outstanding Woman of Connecticut given by the U.N., Faculty Scholar Award at Southern Connecticut State University, Outstanding Alumnae at Ball State University, and numerous honors and awards given to her by the Hmong and Lao refugee communities in the U.S.

Currently she is at work on her next book and is co-editor of the Vietnam War Era Classics Series at Indiana University Press. The first three books in this series are The Stones Cry Out (Cambodia), In the Jaws of History (Vietnam), and To Bear Any Burden (interviews with Vietnam War participants from all sides and all points of view.)

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The following comments are from people who listened to the RadioLab yellow rain podcast. These and other comments are available at [http://www.radiolab.org/story/239549-yellow-rain/](http://www.radiolab.org/story/239549-yellow-rain/), but you are only required to read the ones that appear below.

COMMENT #1: Jay from California, May. 03 2013 08:44 PM
Having just heard the podcast, and just read Kao Kalia Yang's response from "Hyphen", crossposted to racialicious.com (where comments seem to have been heavily moderated and then disabled), I have to weigh in.

The angry response aimed at Robert Krulwich and Radiolab is both unnecessarily vindictive, and entirely misplaced. It seems like listeners have entirely missed the point of the interview, while at the same time seeking to crucify the journalists who are trying to remain objective in a complex and emotional story.

The stated topic of the podcast was the examination of facts; how do we find them, and what happens when they seem to conflict? The subject of yellow rain is a perfect example of clashing perspectives surrounding an elusive fact: Through ongoing investigation, science has found that the "yellow rain" phenomenon is the result of bee droppings, and not chemical weapons. Eng Yeng's perspective is that he witnessed villagers and animals suffering and dying, which he attributes to the yellow rain corresponding with these events.

Krulwich challenges Yang's position on the basis of the scientific findings. He DOES NOT challenge Yeng's sincerity or invalidate his suffering or that of the Hmong people. Their experience is valid outside of the question of yellow rain, and there is no need to censor questions or facts about the issue to fully respect their history.

Should Krulwich have been more sensitive and cautious in his approach? Yes, in hindsight, which he apologizes for in detail (after a viscous backlash and internet witch-hunt). Is he a racist "imperialist" white man for pointing out a basic contradiction of facts? Absolutely not. Asking critical questions which illuminate a controversy is his job. It's called journalism.

Some of the vindictive blaming and bullying which followed the interview:

Racialicious.com:
"...its [radiolab's] relentless badgering of Hmong refugee Eng Yang and his niece, award-winning author and activist Kao Kalia Yang, provoked an outcry among its listeners, and its ongoing callous, RACIST handling of the issue..."

Kao Kalia Yang:

- "The interview became an interrogation."
- "They chose to end the show with hushed laughter". (it was actually ended with an apology and clarification)
- "Only an IMPERIALIST WHITE MAN can say that to a woman of color and call it objectivity or science. I am not lost on the fact that I am the only female voice in that story, and in the end, that it is my uncle and I who cry … as you all laugh on"
- "He [Krulwich] did not mention the RACISM at work, the privileging of Western education over indigenous knowledge, or the fact that he is a white man in power calling from the safety of Time, his class, and popular position"
- "Robert's apologies — which completely failed to acknowledge the dismissal of our voices and the RACISM that transpired/s — Radiolab had simply re-contextualized their position"
I'm sorry Robert, but you're convincing me at all with your explanation.

First, it's rather strange to title your podcast as the "Truth of the Matter". How are you an authority on this subject exactly to be able to make as strong a statement as "Truth of the Matter". I know you'll probably attempt to suggest that the title is synonymous with searching for the truth, but it actually conveys that you somehow know what the truth is. Journalism/sensationalism at its best?

Secondly, if your research is objectively neutral and exploratory, you wouldn't need to bring that type of tone to your questions. Science is about staying neutral and you don't sound neutral at all. Explaining away your lack of objectivity and offensive questioning by saying that "I forcefully questioned Mr. Yang to find out if he had actually seen the source of the "yellow rain" because I was trying to understand if the scientists had considered all the evidence" simply doesn't make sense and there isn't any logical connection between the two. If you wanted to understand if the scientists had considered all the evidence you'd bring your line of questioning to the scientists and not with Kao and her uncle.

Secondly, you don't address the concerns of Kao Kaila Yang's suggestion about leaving pertinent information out, editing your podcast to bring your tone into a better light, and ignoring other research by other scientists provided by Kaila. You need to address these concerns. The fact that you haven't is troubling.

Thirdly, the fact that you describe Kaila simply as "the niece" and Uncle Eng as the "Hmong guy" clearly shows your lack of respect for who these people are. You still haven't indicated that she is an award winning writer, nor do you acknowledge that Uncle Eng was an official radio man and documenter to the Thai government. If you're going to give credit, especially to all the other people involved, do it consistently and properly.

Fourthly, if you're not trying to deliver a comprehensive story and only wanted to let Kaila and her uncle's voice and perspective be heard, then why not just record what they have to say and leave it at that? In my mind you'd just let them talk about their experience instead of interrogating them as you did in your interview. That to me suggests that you had a motive or preconceived notion about what the "truth" was.

Oh, and I forgot to comment earlier about the "monopolize" comment you made about Kao's crying. Classy Robert, very classy. Anybody who has an emotional response to the questionable behaviour of another is obviously trying to monopolize the situation. Right...
Sorry to be another late-comer to the discussion. I missed the podcast and the controversy last fall.

To me, the biggest problem with the story is not Mr. Krulwich's treatment of the Yangs (which I agree was unnecessarily abrasive,) nor was it racial bias which, if it was present, was certainly unconscious/unintentional. I do have to wonder, though. If, as a journalist, you already "know" the outcome before you start the interview, then what are you really trying to accomplish -- the revelation of real truth or your truth?

To me, the biggest problem with this story, though, was the apparent scientific bias. Radiolab presented one theory of the origin of yellow rain as fact while neglecting to mention that there are other theories, that there are classified documents involved and that no official conclusion has yet been reached. To my mind, the existence of yellow pollen-filled bee excrement does not disprove the existence and/or use of chemical weapons. As someone mentioned several pages ago, use of observation is a part of scientific inquiry. Is it 100% reliable? No. Is it possible that, when everything is resolved, we really are just talking bee poop? Yes. But we won't know for sure until release of the classified documents on which Reagan and Haig's allegations were based. In any case, I find it reprehensible to have eyewitness accounts dismissed out of hand. I think it is possible for both the bee pollen and the chemical weapon hypotheses to be "true," whatever true means.

All that said, Radiolab is a quality show that I have long enjoyed. I consider this episode an anomaly.

COMMENT #4: D, Mar. 21 2013 12:46 AM

If the producers of Radiolab are genuinely interested in the truth, they should link Kao Kalia Yang's response to this podcast too. However, their lack of interest in crediting the interviewee, Eng Yang, with expertise and Ms. Yang's background in the podcast continues to support her allegation that Radiolab is promoting bias. Radiolab and WNYC have been silent on this regard and have not responded as to why they did not attribute credentials to the only interviewee and his translator in the story.

This story reminds me of Fox News where they go into a story with a narrative already and they're only looking for sound bites to support their story. When the producers didn't get it their sound bites, they had to discredit the interviewee and translator in their commentary to make their story sound true.

The most horrible unethical act of reporting in this story is how they cut Eng's explanation of his beekeeping expertise in the story but did not cut the English translation. To Hmong-speaking listeners, this is a deliberate attempt to hide the truth about their lazy journalism work.

I've listened to the podcast again after having heard it two months ago. I am still disturbed by the abuse of power in this story.

COMMENT #5 Joe McCarthy from New Haven, Jan. 02 2013 12:20 PM

The harsh reaction to Robert's conduct during the yellow rain segment strikes me as histrionic and sanctimonious. Robert is clearly a thoughtful and respectful man who did
not intend to hurt the Yang's or denigrate their suffering. Radiolab could have easily cut the contentious, embittered part of the interview and avoided all the aspersions being thrown at them, but by including the Yang's outrage at Robert's unflinching questioning, I believe Radiolab clarifies the depth and scope of the tragedy and elevates and ennobles the victims. Miss Yang's response to Robert's questions was poignant and, like the producer, I probably wouldn't have considered the "volume" of horror still endured by the Hmong people to this day had this squabble not ensued.

I appreciate that an opportunity arose in which Miss Yang expressed her indignity at the world's cold shoulder, because without her sorrow and grief, the emotional core of the tragedy would have remained detached or disguised behind the question of chemical weapons. By discarding the original story of yellow rain, a much more important issue emerged, and that wouldn't have been possible if some clashing didn't occur.

As an audience member that greatly appreciates the effort and ingenuity put into all the podcasts by Radiolab's staff, I respect that they would be willing to potentially defame themselves in order to allow Miss Yang a clear channel to express her pain.

This episode, if anything, increased my respect for radiolab. Let's not forget that two other great stories were told in this episode.

**COMMENT #6: Tom from New Jersey, Dec. 19 2012 12:37 AM**

It's been a few months, and I still can't bring myself to listen to RadioLab. It was once a nightly ritual for me to go to bed listening to this podcast. It was how I ended my day. However, after listening to the "Yellow Rain" episode, I couldn't sleep! I was so enraged by the way that Kao Kalia Yang and Eng Yang were used as stooges in order for Krulwish (and presumably RadioLab producers) to score political points. He was so desirous to prove that Reagan was lying about the causes of Yellow Rain, that he was more than willing to humiliate a man who had survived unspeakably horrific experiences.

It's also an example of how emotionally distant and arrogant the scientific community has become. How arrogant to tell a man like Eng Yang that he does not know what he really experienced. Never mind the fact that he was actually there; some scientists in a lab came up with some crazy theory 40 years later, and we're to believe that that's the "real" truth. They came to the "brilliant" conclusion that it was bee poop, so you'd damn well better get on board with than theory or we will make an example out of you. Bee poop?! Seriously?!! By that logic, I guess someone could argue that the Nazi gas chambers were just a function of faulty plumbing. I guess I'm not so surprised anymore that there are so many Holocaust survivors.

What was done to those two people was inexcusable. It was hack journalism at its worst! I'm sad to say it, but I'm done with RadioLab.

*Write out your answers to the following questions. Explain your reasoning for each answer and provide support by referring to this and/or previously assigned readings.*
1. What questions or problems related to yellow rain doesn’t Thomas Seeley address in his explanation of bee feces?

2. What problems or questions related to yellow rain would you like to ask Thomas Seeley if you could?

3. Why do you think the U.S. State Department was more convinced by Seeley’s explanation of yellow rain than by Hmong villagers’ eyewitness accounts?

4. Although Jane Hamilton-Merritt’s pictures show disturbing evidence of starvation, they don’t seem to show clear evidence of injury from yellow rain. Does that affect the credibility of her claims about yellow rain? Why or why not?

5. What problems or questions related to yellow rain would you like to ask Jane Hamilton-Merritt if you could? Or, what questions or problems related to yellow rain doesn’t she address in the information from her website?

6. Both Thomas Seeley and Jane Hamilton-Merritt are experts in their fields. How do you think they could come to such drastically different conclusions about what yellow rain was? Whom do you find more convincing? Why?

7. Which of the RadioLab listeners’ comments most closely matches your reaction to the show after hearing it? Why? Be specific and mention or quote phrases from the comment to support your answer.

8. What do you think the controversy over yellow rain teaches us about truth?

9. What do you think the controversy over yellow rain teaches us about proof?

10. How much proof do you think is required before we can say whether it is “The Truth” that yellow rain was an agent of chemical warfare (or that it was bee feces)?
11. Are different types or amounts of proof required in different situations? Why?

12. What can literature (poetry, fiction, essays, memoir) teach us about proof?

13. What can literature (poetry, fiction, essays, memoir) teach us about truth?