

***BETTER PLACES: The Hmong of Rhode Island a Generation Later, 2011, 51 minutes***  
**Directed by Peter O'Neill and Louisa Schein**

Further information about the documentary is at the following links:

<http://www.embeestudio.com/store.php>

<http://www.embeestudio.com/hmongresettlement/>

**Reviewed by Chia Youyee Vang, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee**

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**Abstract**

This article provides a review of *Better Places*: a documentary that follows up with Hmong families who were originally part of a film produced in the early 1980s about the resettlement experiences of Hmong refugees in Providence, Rhode Island.

**Keywords:** Hmong Americans, Refugee Resettlement, Immigrant Adaptation

How did Hmong people from Laos end up living in the United States? What has happened to these refugees? Have they remained in the communities that helped to resettle them or have they rebuilt their lives in other locations? The dynamic changes depicted in the lives of the former refugees in *Better Places: The Hmong of Rhode Island a Generation Later* successfully captured the various ways in which Hmong refugees have transformed their lives in America. *Better Places* is a sequel to a film the directors produced in the early 1980s about Hmong refugees who were settled in poor neighborhoods on the south side of Providence, Rhode Island. It provides the viewer with a brief background of why the Hmong are in the U.S. The remainder of the film explores what has become of the families. Providing flashbacks to the earlier film, this documentary examines the changes in the lives of four couples, most of whom have scattered to other parts of the country and are engaging in a variety of activities.

The film opens with the funeral of one of the couples' father in Michigan that is attended by others from around the country. In recounting the life experiences of the deceased, viewers learn of the complex relationship that people of Hmong ethnicity had with U.S. military

personnel in Laos during the Vietnam War era, which enabled thousands to seek refuge in the U.S. following American disengagement from Southeast Asia.

The four couples arrived in Rhode Island during the late 1970s. One couple has remained in the state, but economic mobility has enabled the couple to move to the suburbs. The other couples have moved to other states to pursue different interests. While they may have found different means to support themselves, a thread that ties their lives together is their entrepreneurial spirit. They are involved in numerous businesses, including restaurants, real estate, textile, and farming. While they have clearly focused on building a life for themselves in the U.S., some have maintained transnational ties with relatives in Laos and Thailand.

Although the film will be a great resource for anyone interested in recent Hmong American history, the viewer is left with wanting to know more about the children of the families. In numerous instances, the older couples talk about their children all grown up and that they have good jobs. With the exception of those working in restaurants, the viewer does not learn about the other adult children. What are they doing? Are they involved in similar types of work as their parents? Given that the film is about a generation since their initial arrival in the U.S., including a snapshot of the children's lives would have helped viewers to better understand the generational changes.

Similar to other films produced about Hmong migration to the U.S., such as *Becoming American: The Odyssey of a Refugee* (Ken Levine and Ivory Watherworth Levine, New Day Films, 1982) and *The Split Horn: Life of a Hmong Shaman in America* (Taggart Siegel and Jim McSilver, 2001), *Better Places*' focuses on how these former refugees have continued to search for a place to call home. Although the film does an excellent job of showing the diverse places throughout the U.S. that have become home to the families, it dedicates a significant length of

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time to the families' transnational travels, and in the end, concludes that for the Hmong, "finding the best place to live is an ongoing pursuit". From this lens, the film contains an undercurrent that perpetuates the stereotype of Hmong people as nomads continually in search of new places to settle. Viewed from a different lens, their experiences of suburbanization and entrepreneurial pursuits are but a part of U.S. immigration history.

**Author Bio:**

Chia Youyee Vang is an associate professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee where she also serves as coordinator of the Hmong Diaspora Studies Program. Her research focuses on American involvement in Southeast Asia in the post-WWII era and the large flow of refugees in the aftermath of the American war in Vietnam, with an emphasis on U.S. refugee resettlement policies and practices in Western nations. She is author of the book *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora*, which was published by the University of Illinois Press in 2010.

