

Gran Torino's Boys and Men with Guns: Hmong Perspectives

**Louisa Schein
Rutgers University**

and Va-Megn Thoj

Hmong Studies Journal, Volume 10, 52 Pages

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the Clint Eastwood film *Gran Torino* in the context of American popular mis-representations of Hmong and from the perspectives of the film's Hmong actors and viewers. The analysis begins from the images of Hmong as "perpetual warrior," ferocious killers ill-fit for American society, and docile fresh-off-the-boat foreigners needing help and protection by white saviors. The bulk of the article presents an interpretation of the recent box office hit *Gran Torino* radically different from contemporary mainstream response which has centered on Eastwood's character and viewed the film mainly as a vision of multicultural inclusion and understanding. This alternate "ethnotextual" approach, reflecting the conversations of a Hmong studies anthropologist and a Hmong filmmaker/activist, includes the perspectives of Hmong involved in creating the film and considers critical response to the final product within the Hmong community. Despite a script that called on them to portray violent gangbanger and hapless Hmong immigrant stereotypes, Hmong actors encourage us to value their creativity in shaping the film through enacting certain roles, no matter how conventionalized, and to expose the film as a white man's fantasy.

The release of the box office hit, *Gran Torino* (2008), was touted by many Americans as the first time they'd heard of or known anything about the Hmong. Some further praised the film as delivering basic education: "Hmong 101." But, despite the perduring low visibility of Hmong in the American popular imaginary, the mainstream film, with its novel cast populous with Hmong characters, has not emerged out of a vacuum. What is the discursive environment within which *Gran Torino* assumes the power of speech to define Hmong Americans? The field of contested masculinities, we suggest, is highly central, and the roles and plot of the film provide ample opportunity for forms of normative and dysfunctional malehood to come into conflict and be hammered

out in the crucible of class, family and immigrant politics.

This field of representation, as we've said, is far from untrodden. Of special concern is a chain of previous events that have culminated in the attribution of hyperviolence to Hmong *as character*. Sensationalized gang reports, the 2004 Chai Soua Vang murder of six white hunters in Wisconsin, and the 2007 arrest of former CIA General Vang Pao for an alleged plot to bring down the Lao government using \$10 million in weapons are among the instances that have been patterned together in dominant discourse such that Hmong become framed as nothing more than what we dub here "perpetual warriors." An ongoing popular sense of Hmong as unknown and mysterious supports the reduction of all Hmong, for all time, but particularly on American soil, to the demonized characters drawn from these moments of violent hypervisibility. Here we interrogate some of the consequences of this regime of representation, ask how *Gran Torino* interfaces with these other tropes, and then turn to query what difference it makes if we consider the film's Hmong actors to be co-creators of the final product.

What follows emerges from an extended dialogue, begun after the Chai Soua Vang hunting incident, about potential discursive fallouts from the media circus that proliferates around such events. We interact from the respective locations of Hmong American filmmaker/activist with organizing background in Hmong communities and of anthropology/gender studies scholar with decades working with Hmong Americans. The viewpoints presented emerge out of our synergistic play of insights, as well as multiple conversations and discussion forums on *Gran Torino* in which we have been involved.¹ They are driven by a joint concern for the material effects of both hypervisibilities and

their counterpart invisibilities. The first instantiation of this interchange was published in *American Quarterly* as “Occult Racism” – in which we read Thoj’s horror screenplay, about a mass murder of Hmong campers, against the Chai Soua Vang incident in the Wisconsin woods. We constructed this juxtaposition to illuminate the erasure of race in the Vang legal proceedings (Schein and Thoj 2007). We directed our analysis to the specificities of Hmong racialization in “Violence, Hmong American Visibility and the Precariousness of Asian Race” (Schein and Thoj 2008). Our engagement with *Gran Torino*, whose plot is driven by white-Hmong interaction, includes not only a textual interrogation, but also our close involvement with Hmong actors and production assistants, as well as concerned community members, from the moment of casting to the shooting, editing, release and reception of the final product.

The Perpetual Warrior in Popular Discourse

It is arguable that an imaging of Hmong as warriors extends back to an oft-repeated history of conflict with dominant populations beginning in China and carried forward to the ravages of the Secret War in Laos in which Hmong guerilla capabilities have been so retrospectively emphasized. Along with this longstanding profiling of Hmong comes a pernicious distillation of Hmong life to the trope of killerhood, construed as something cultural, even genetic, and therefore foreclosing other modes of life. We saw the attribution of Hmong killerhood intensified when, in June of 2007, Vang Pao, the former General who commanded Hmong troops for the CIA during Viet Nam, was abruptly arrested in California along with ten of his purported henchmen. The accusation was of arranging to purchase arms and of conspiring to overthrow a foreign government - - Laos. The media had a heyday since once again the Hmong could be thumbnailed in

conveniently newsworthy ways. Not only were “The” Hmong now terrorists like any other Bin Laden, they were terrorists who’d been caught red-handed and could be served up to a frightened American populace ever more doubtful about the efficacy of the U.S. search for Osama himself. By contrast, no such spectacularization took place when Vang Pao’s charges were quietly dismissed on September 18, 2009 to little media notice (Walsh 2009, “General Vang Pao Free” 2009).

Regardless of whether the conspirators were guilty of an actual plot to return violently to their homeland (at this writing, all but Vang Pao’s trials are still pending), what concerns us here is the conflation of Vang Pao, and his coterie of those purportedly scheming to go back, with the entire Hmong people. Such a conflation harks back to decades of generalizing the Hmong émigré story as the story of all Hmong, omitting that Hmong remain scattered several million strong across multiple states of China and Southeast Asia as well as in diasporic sites from France to Australia to French Guyana. In both Asia and the West, most Hmong pursuits are far from war-mongering and revolve around simply pursuing survival through agriculture, wage labor or small business.

Nonetheless, a *New York Times Magazine* article broad-stroked the history this way: “Half a century ago, Laos became a cockpit of the cold war. The Hmong, led by a charismatic soldier named Vang Pao, sided with the United States in the fight against Communism in Southeast Asia. They lost everything — their land, their way of life, their country” (Wiener 2008). We ask, who is the “They” invoked so glibly in the journalist’s quest for pathos and grand narrative? As Hmong professor Chia Youyee Vang (2008), in a letter to the *New York Times*, rebutted: “There were Hmong fighting on both sides, supported by both East and West. Many were neutral, struggling just to stay alive in the

most bombed region in world history to date. Hmong expatriates' relationships with Laos are widely varied, and thousands return from abroad annually to visit relatives, establish businesses or even to take up residence." Such plurality of national location, of political alliance, and of livelihood, cannot make it into visibility under the American gaze so durably focused on the utility of Hmong to its war. Aside from the dramatic narrative techniques, what is striking about this kind of passage, which occurs regularly in thumbnail sketches of "Hmong" history whenever Hmong are fleetingly in the public eye, is the way it makes Hmong synonymous with the anti-communist fight and with fighting in general. Vang Pao's pro bono lawyer after a court appearance on May 11, 2009 exemplified this perception: "I am a great admirer of the General and of the Hmong people," said the attorney, who himself had been a Marine. "Just look at the crowd today. The Hmong have such a great fighting spirit which I support. It's an honor for me to be here with the General" (Moua 2009:13).

What is accomplished by genericizing "The" Hmong as guerilla warriors – or as warriors by "spirit" – is that such warriorhood is instilled in them *as character*. Such a discursive move would be necessary, as suggested by Ma Vang (N.d.), to mediate the apparent contradiction in the U.S.-based case of victim-refugees taking up arms as immigrants in American locales. What was a very specific war history, initiated *by non-Hmong*, gets converted into a permanent cultural trait, masculinizing all Hmong as transhistorical figures of peril. Because Hmong are not known as anything else, they can come to be collectively apprehended as *culturally* disposed toward killing and aggression.

The reluctance of many Hmong to participate in the Secret War in the first place can be strategically misremembered in favor of their supreme cultural suitability for the

job. This in turn can be repackaged to explain Hmong gangs – which, of course, are not uncommon among a plethora of urban American ethnic groups (Kontos et al 2003, Padilla 1992) – and even anomalous shooters such as Chai Soua Vang. A pattern is constructed, as epitomized by Court TV anchor Fred Graham who speculates during the Vang trial: “You know: there’s a lot of reasons to regret what the U.S. did in the Viet Nam War but as the years go by we see additions to these reasons. Here you have the Hmongs, who were sought out by the CIA because they were fierce fighters and they could shoot and they *would* shoot and they *didn’t* have perhaps the same regard for human life that our culture has, who knows?” (Fred Graham, *Court TV*, September 10, 2005, emphasis ours).

Where other Asians may be seen as perpetual foreigners among Americans, Hmong, then, have also come to be seen as perpetual warriors, by definition deserving of nothing more than exclusion from the U.S. In this portrait, a figure such as Chai Soua Vang comes to be construed as of a piece with his ferocious ancestors in their callous devaluing of life. In the process, a rogue shooter is recast as emblematic, as a vehicle for truly knowing all Hmong, rather than as an aberrant and troubled soul (who was nonetheless particularly canny about racial threat). Hmong culture takes the fall; racialized terror gets off scot-free.

What might be the consequences of the relentless attribution of hyperviolence to Hmong men, especially youth? Tragic cases of excess of police force make it abundantly clear that the boundary between symbolic and physical violence is readily transgressed. In September 2006, Detroit 18-year-old, Chonburi Xiong, was shot dead in his basement bedroom. Acting on an inchoate suspicion of the young man’s violent tendencies -

purportedly towards his family - police entered the home in the middle of the night and snuck down to the basement. On the claim that he'd pulled a gun on them, they riddled his body with 27 bullets. The police were let off summarily, exonerated on the grounds that they defended themselves when a gun was pulled on them. "The 27 times means nothing," the city attorney demurred, "The only thing the officers needed was the justification to shoot one time" (Svoboda 2007). Meanwhile, in July of that year, Minneapolis youth Fong Lee was chased down and shot nine times in an elementary school playground area. Police claimed he was armed and had drawn his gun, but this fact remained contested as allegations were made that the gun had been planted post facto. The family mounted a civil suit for wrongful death, embittered after the police officer involved was not only acquitted but awarded a Medal of Valor. In May 2009, a jury swiftly deliberated and again found the officer not guilty despite a security video that showed the boy running away apparently with no gun in hand just before the shooting.² What we are suggesting is that if these young men were indeed unarmed, they were instead symbolically armed and made into legitimate targets by the image of Hmong youth as always gun-wielding.

Enter *Gran Torino*

The elaboration of Hmong American masculinity in popular discourse takes a somewhat more variegated form in Clint Eastwood's newest feature, *Gran Torino*. The production, rumored to be the last film in which Eastwood would act, broke ground in several ways. In search of Hmong actors for ten leads and supporting roles, Warner Brothers worked through Hmong community organizations in Fresno, St. Paul and Detroit to hold open casting calls. Hundreds turned out – 700 in Minnesota alone (Moua

2008). Amazingly, all but one of those eventually chosen were first-time actors. Euphoric at their role in this history-making venture, they threw themselves into creating believable characters, given ample license to improvise lines on camera. In phone conversations with Schein from the set, they praised Eastwood for his flexibility, his willingness to let them speak through creating bits of the dialogue and inserting Hmong language.³ With Eastwood's directorial style of no rehearsals and almost no coaching or direction, they stepped up to fashioning their characters largely on their own. Their hope was to imbue their roles with credibility, but did they stand a chance of overriding the straitjacket of the plot?

Gran Torino's story predictably centers on Eastwood's character, Walt Kowalski, a grumpy Korean war veteran of Polish Catholic descent estranged from his own family after his wife's death. The action is propelled by the agonism between a hapless Hmong new immigrant family and a predatory Hmong street gang who struggle over the soul of a teenage boy, Thao Vang Lor. Eastwood's character gets drawn into this neighboring Hmong family after Thao tries to steal Walt's vintage *Gran Torino* automobile on a dare from the gang. Walt eventually becomes a paternal figure towards the boy when he receives yardwork from Thao as payback for the attempted theft. Not only does he tutor Thao in masculine forms of work, but he presumes to "man up" the boy, liberating him from the effeminacy apparently imposed on him by his domineering mother and sister. Eventually, Walt becomes more and more of a white savior striving to intervene to keep the boy from the gang. But the gang keeps coming, renewing its menace by not only recruiting Thao, but beating him and later raping his sister in retaliation for her brother's reluctance – or perhaps for Walt's interventions.

In our discussion here we approach *Gran Torino* not as critics per se, but *ethnotextually* (Schein 2004: 436), pursuing a close reading of the film from the perspective of the Hmong American context in which its production takes place and to which it speaks in a particular voice. Our reading does not purport to represent any authoritative “Hmong point of view” but it is, nonetheless, inseparable from multiple Hmong perspectives.⁴ Aside from numerous informal conversations, Schein and/or Thoj have participated in nine discussion forums, with Hmong and non-Hmong participants, and some with *Gran Torino* Hmong actors present. By foregrounding such perspectives here, we aim to expose some of the elisions created by the mainstream unidimensional reading of the text as a tale of an individual white man’s transformation. We argue for an approach that reads the film more in terms of sociopolitical engagements rather than individuated subjectivity, and that takes account of the production process not only the final result.⁵

Genericizing Hmong as Asians

Replete with a panoply of the types that have had a stranglehold on mainstream representation since the Hmong arrival in the U.S., *Gran Torino* features not only the gun-toting youth gang, but also a clueless nerdy boy and ritualistic elders who speak no English, including a mystical shaman. This line-up does double duty, confirming Hmong in their putatively culturebound, maladapted, new-immigrant status and coming full circle to the longstanding peril of the generic Asian in the form of the gang that combines lawless violence with sexual violation.⁶ That Hmong in *Gran Torino* stand in for timeless aliens was unwittingly affirmed by Eastwood in an interview with David Letterman, held immediately after *Gran Torino* opened at number one in the box offices. Note that the

interchange skirts mention of even the word “Hmong”:

Letterman (prompting Eastwood): “[Walt] doesn’t like *foreigners* living in his country.”

Eastwood: “Yeah, *foreigners* move into his neighborhood where his friends had lived and passed on, so he has a rough time adjusting and he does find out that he actually has more in common with *these people...*” (emphasis ours).⁷

Not only are Hmong not identified as Hmong, but that they are immigrant *Americans* as opposed to aliens is also insidiously effaced. The resounding notes of prevailing U.S. anti-immigrant discourse are struck again and again, and often inadvertently, simply by recoding the neighbors as foreign interlopers.

It is difficult to settle on a singular reading of *Gran Torino* in terms either of contemporary American race and immigrant relations or, alternately, of the legacy of the Asian wars that propel its story. Indeed, perhaps one of its effects is to show that so many present interactions are inevitably and enduringly shaped by war memory. From several key moments in the film, from grandsons finding Walt’s silver star, to Walt recounting to the priest his war trauma, to his final speech to Thao before going to meet his fate with the Hmong gang, it is clear that the veteran’s identity still clings to Walt, constituting his motivation for many acts. Always ambivalent, Walt is both revulsed by his own war history - particularly the cold-blooded killing of a young Korean boy who was just trying to surrender - and yet still living that history as a soldier. He keeps his M1 rifle - salvaged from Korea - at his side, and brandishes it several times during the film. He chastises others for lacking a soldier’s ethic. After a local conflict, when the priest confronts him for not calling in the police, he defends himself by averring that one has to act quickly, that “when we were in Korea and a thousand screaming gooks came across our line, we

didn't call the police; we reacted.”

There is much to indicate that the neighborhood's transformation into a Hmong enclave is misrecognized by Walt as “a thousand screaming gooks” crossing the line once again. Much of the structure of the plot suggests that one Asian enemy can be substituted for another in the wartorn psyche of this aging veteran. He expects to hate all of them, indeed all Asians, initially exclaiming “What the hell do all these Chinese have to move into this neighborhood for?” He polices his turf, dramatically driving them off his tiny patch of lawn at riflepoint after a scuffle among them causes them to breach the boundary and break his ceramic garden gnome. But even as he carries the war forward, he longs to end it, to set up the Hmong as stand-ins so that he can make his peace with the erstwhile Korean counterparts that haunt him day and night. While, at the level of the dialogue, he ostensibly learns in great depth that the Hmong are *not* Koreans - and is even lectured by Sue about Hmong having come to the U.S. because they fought on the “American's side” - at the level of the plot, his redemption for Korea relies upon his acts with this latter Asian counterpart embodied by Hmong.

Walt as Archetypal Savior?

While critics have relentlessly emphasized Walt's *personal* redemption, a focus on the script's intergroup relations brings *saving* to the fore instead. If read as an allegory for the wounds of Viet Nam, the film allows the central figure of the white American to complete the project of saving Asians from each other that was so humiliatingly aborted in Southeast Asia. More specifically, it sets up good Asians and bad Asians, coded in predictably gendered ways. To enable Walt's heroic narrative, perpetual warriors beget their counterparts on American soil. Not exactly model minorities, those worthy of being

saved are feminine, vulnerable, unable to defend themselves on their own turf, and ultimately, raped. Meanwhile, the hyperviolent bad Asians are bumblingly macho, ruthless, and most importantly, uncivilized, as marked by the ultimate transgression – violation of the incest taboo when gangbanger Spider is alleged by Eastwood to have raped his own kin.

The quest to complete the unfinished business of Viet Nam and Laos is a provocative way to interpret Walt's sacrifice in terms of guilt. What is articulated as remorse over one enemy (Korean) kid that he killed with his own hands, might allegorize a collective American culpability for having survived additional war losses through a strategy of withdrawal from Southeast Asia. To be sure, there were American deaths, though many more in Viet Nam than in Laos, where Hmong and other Lao fighters took the bulk of the hits. But with no escape from the historical reality that the bloodbath was egregiously disproportionate, Walt takes the tormenting legacy into his own hands, striving to make amends and redress the imbalance through his own death. By this spectacular act, underscored by his landing, bullet-riddled, in the sacrificial posture of Christ on the cross, he would somehow exonerate America, finally making "peace" for Thao, Sue and the other good neighbors, by "putting away" the aggressors. "Peace," not "safety," is the operative term; when he cryptically rationalizes his martyr scheme to the priest, his phrasing is: "Thao and Sue are never gonna find peace in this world as long as that gang's around."...

There is a haunting myopia to this act, though, perhaps the myopia of the proxy warrior. Certain aggressors - the particular Hmong gangbangers to whom Thao is related - are eliminated through probable incarceration, but meanwhile the film has asserted

amply that there are other threats – particularly from Blacks and Latinos who share Hmong turf, and presumably from other Hmong gangs. What then has Walt saved his neighbors from? One answer suggested by the film is that his mission is brought to an end through intervening decisively in their own internecine conflict, perhaps civilizing them through giving those redeemable Hmong the better chance to move forward in comparison to their unrecuperable cousins. Walt makes his heroic exit, like so many shortsighted imperialists, without a thought for the pragmatics of what will follow, and without a conscience about other dangers that await.

In terms of post-war Southeast Asia, such dangers included not only China to the north, but the desires of global capitalism. Like clockwork, and like so much of the rest of the globe, within a couple decades, the war *had* to be forgotten because enmity could no longer be on the program when “communism” had crumbled and economic opportunity was so rife. The U.S. has rushed back to Southeast Asia in its quest for emerging markets and normalized trade relations. It has raced to the bottom, questing to fashion Viet Nam, Laos and Cambodia as outsourcing destinations since Southeast Asian labor has been underselling China. Concomitantly, labor has been retooled for export and tourism, creating a time-honored dependency that harks back to the era of European colonialism.

It would not be surprising, then, that the Asian perpetual warrior has to be discovered outside Asia and neutralized on American turf while the peaceful climate for profit-making is maintained in Asia.⁸ There is a strange continuity here with the impulse to discipline Vang Pao, now American, for initiating his own hyper-militarized subversive crusade for Laos. No longer a client of American advisor/employers, his

putative acts, sited on American soil, were, in the prosecutor's original judgement, no longer the approved acts of a glorious and macho hero, but the wrong-headed flailings of a retrovert who failed to accept that what America wants now in Southeast Asia is a stable politico-economic climate for commerce, and that an implicit condition of exile in the U.S. is a relinquishing of arms in favor of hyperfeminization, docility and gratitude *as refugees* (Vang, N.d.). After the General's arrest, many concerned watchers of the incident asked: Why now? At a meta level, it would seem that what was being policed in the arrest of Vang Pao was, on the one hand, his anachronism, and on the other, his acting recklessly on his own, extending an erstwhile U.S. mission, but out of time, and with the excessive autonomy of an insubordinate. For Hmong, then, the only *legitimate* warriorhood has been in service to an American cause – any other taking up of arms has been construed as intolerably transgressive and illegal.

The Invisible Hmong Man

To read the personal struggle *of Walt* as allegory for American collectivity threatens to reproduce perhaps the most striking omission of *Gran Torino*. The film's main cast of characters skirts around one markedly absent presence – that of the mature, productive Hmong man. The story revolves around an infantilized good boy opposite a demonized set of gangsters, also childish in their ruthlessness and irresponsibility. Viewers see many older men around the edges of the plot, but they are “props” (Ly 2009), virtually silent or speaking only Hmong language and appearing mainly in ritual and leisure contexts with no indication that they work. Thao himself doubts that he could ever be employed, and only reverses his fortunes through accepting Walt's patronage in the form of an old-boy introduction to a construction job that both agree he could have

never gotten by himself.

We suggest that this absence of productive Hmong men, which glares back at Hmong viewers from the self-assurance of the realist screen, accomplishes several things in slotting Hmong into the U.S. ethnoracial order. In our analysis here, we are concerned less with screenwriter Nick Schenk's intentionality than we are with the discursive effects of such imagings in the relative vacuum of representation of Hmong in the popular imaginary. That such imaging is highly freighted in its distortion of contemporary Hmong malehood is strangely confounded by Schenk's account of how the script came about. In an interview in the Hmong-made documentary *Gran Torino: Next Door* (2009), Schenk recounts how he came to the story from working alongside Hmong in an auto factory: "I worked with a lot of Hmong families...you get to know each other real well and so we'd throw questions back and forth like, y'know, you'd ask these guys 'what are you eating?' 'why do you have the same first name as last?.' If we can presume that many of these workers were mature, wage-earning, English-speaking men who bantered with him, it is curious that Schenk would omit such figures from the plot. What, then, is communicated by their absence?

First, that all the main Hmong male characters are young men affirms a kind of newcomer greenness to Hmong Americans in general. Youth can be read as a code for new immigrant status, and even new-kid-on-the-block lack of belonging, which is of course almost a literal premise of the film. The counterpointing of white Walt's advanced age and the Hmong protagonists' youth makes it such that "maturation" amounts to leapfrogging over Hmong masculinity to achieving iconic white masculinity (read Americanization?). This is, of course, Thao's teleology although his ultimate success at

this endeavor is left unclear.

Second, the lack of productive Hmong men works toward creating the profile of refugee helplessness that sets Thao up for saving. It confirms a decades-old, widespread evaluation of Hmong immigrants as ill-matched for U.S. society (Schein 1987), especially in its urban forms, and hence the necessity for them to be dependent on the state, on charities and on individual hosts' generosity to survive. That such lack of productive activity is also associated with wrongdoing and ill-gotten gains on the part of the gangbangers only serves to further the vilification of Hmong in general as illegitimate in their economic roles in U.S. society. This is why portrayals of Hmong masculinity bifurcate upon immigration. Hypermasculine warriorhood is coded as "traditional" and, when manifesting as violence on U.S. soil, is reviled as anachronism and failed assimilation. This in turn renders unimaginable the current service of dozens of Hmong men and women in multiple branches of the U.S. military, some graduates of West Point academy as early as 1992, some having done or now doing tours in Iraq and Afghanistan (Olson 2008), some having given their lives in the line of duty, including one who fell in the Fort Hood shooting on November 5, 2009 (Mohr 2009, Doeun 2009). But while such masculinist occupations stay off the public radar, docility and assimilative desire are what remains legible, encoding Hmong Americans as feminine, vulnerable and in need of rescue in a process that can result in the achievement of appropriate masculinity only through the subtleties of cultural assimilation.

Reifying War, Forgetting Veterans

We maintain, however, that any profilings of the lacunae in Hmong masculinity are only collateral to the main omission – Hmong men as former soldiers. If the plot is

driven forward by the working out of Walt's anguished veteran subjectivity, that plot would only be muddied were the Hmong to also appear as veterans. Indeed, a great deal of discursive erasure has surrounded the veteran status of Hmong Americans. Because of the secrecy around the war in Laos, its illegitimacy on ostensibly neutral soil, it remains chronically underrecognized in the U.S. – and indeed is arguably one reason that after 35 years Hmong are still so little known in mainstream American discourse. Silence around the memory of the Lao war dovetails with discursive denial of the harsh reality that, for large numbers of Hmong in the U.S., their later lives are relentlessly tormented by the same kinds of agonies so painstakingly explored in Walt's psyche. War trauma is lived out daily, and their erstwhile identities as soldiers or others with military involvement are well nigh impossible to shake.

Yet, instead of the dignity and resources they might have expected given their service to the U.S., Hmong military invisibility persists at the level of formal recognition – or lack thereof. As described by Ma Vang (N.d.), any official veterans classification has been confounded in the Hmong case by the subterranean status of their guerilla service. Alongside sexy overstatements such as Sue's discussed below, is the refusal of the U.S. to grant veteran's benefits. Instead, a small headstone recognizing Hmong and Lao military service has been installed in Arlington cemetery, the national military cemetery; it is the only such headstone honoring non-nationals. Monuments have been erected in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, and Fresno, California, with another planned in St. Paul, Minnesota, initiated by grass roots efforts and with a great deal of private support.⁹ These instances can be considered examples of what David Palumbo-Liu called the: "willed amnesia of the state, countered by the persistence of refugee memory" (1999:235).

Nonetheless, despite years of organized demonstrations and lobbying in Washington, these victories of Hmong veterans have fallen far short of winning actual material benefits: The Hmong Veteran's Naturalization Bill, passed in 1997, provided only for Hmong veterans, as well as their wives and widows, to take the citizenship test in Hmong rather than English.

Almost unfathomably, then, after a quarter century of seeking dignified recognition in the U.S., Hmong found themselves "on the list" in the post-9/11 era as among the groups identified by the new Patriot and Real ID Acts as former guerillas/terrorists (or those who had provided material support for such activities). This rendered Hmong immigrants ineligible for naturalization, and those still overseas ineligible for entry. Exceptionalized by their military history, broader world events had perniciously conspired to trump the prevailing Hmong *lack* of recognition with – once again - *mis*recognition as enemy. Paradoxically, both their military alliance and their purported enmity had been wrought by the caprice of American imperialism.¹⁰

It is a bizarre co-occurrence that certain popular treatments have so hyperbolized the Hmong war experience at the same time that Hmong men's veteran status remains so tentatively recognized. Whether in the *New York Times* or any number of other news accounts, the sensationalized tidbit remains the guerilla history. It becomes a trope that iconizes Hmong for all time. Note that, in *Gran Torino*, Schenk has sister Sue also telling the story this way: "It's a Viet Nam thing. *We* fought on your side and when the Americans quit, the communists started killing all the Hmong. So *we* came over here" (emphasis ours). Once again, all Hmong are portrayed as fighters, who subsequently fled political persecution in Laos.

There are two problems with this characterization. First, it lends itself to the elision of the variegated forms of Hmong life and struggle over history, in favor of a portrait of Hmong as always already battling others for their very existence. Only one component of Hmong history is replayed in this retelling. Those Hmong who migrated from China into Southeast Asia have indeed been no strangers to interethnic strife, but the actual violent conflicts that erupted over the centuries were *ruptures* in their agrarian lives, not ways of life. Nor is it the practice that that conflictual history is handed down in the form of lore aimed at cultivating descendants to be warriors. To be sure, some Hmong in Laos *were* involved in the Viet Nam war, recruited by the C.I.A. for a secret effort to control indigenous Lao and incursive Vietnamese communist activities in the North. Many older men do have U.S. military histories, but, as we've noted, there are also men in Laos who fought on the Pathet Lao side, and there are men who never fought. There are men who struggled in myriad other ways living out lives in Viet Nam, Thailand and Burma, to say nothing of the millions remaining in China.

Second, Sue's phrasing reproduces a subtle assumption – the agentive “we” as the subject of the key sentences combined with active verbs allows for Hmong to be misconstrued as voluntary fighters and voluntary migrants, despite the political exigencies that hemmed them in during the war. The stakes can be high in this kind of portrayal. As we've seen, the practical fallout of any attribution of opportunistic guerillahood was, aside from the ongoing life of such stereotypes, a setting up of seekers of visas and green cards for unwarranted exclusion under the Patriot Act.¹¹

The irony is not only that the discourses sketching Hmong perpetual warriorhood are so ubiquitous, but that their formal identity as U.S. ally does not prevent a perennial

misrecognition of Hmong and other Asians as the ever-enemy lurking in so many indistinguishable Asian wars. “I was in Viet Nam in 1968 and 69...It’s a strange feeling: Just about ten years ago I was out there shootin’ the people and now I’m working with them “ remarked one factory worker in 1980 in reference to his Hmong coworker (*The Best Place to Live*, 1981). Harking back to the misrecognition of Chinese American Vincent Chin a quarter century ago as a Japanese who could somehow be perversely blamed and bludgeoned to death for the dislocations that the Japanese auto industry had effected for American workers, so Hmong who had fought in the employ of the C.I.A. came to be elided, through popular amnesia, with that paradigmatic Vietnamese enemy they had been conscripted to war against.¹² Fast forward to Chai Soua Vang: Hmong court observers recall that during his trial a white man paced outside the courthouse in camouflage fatigues flaunting a placard sneering: “Killer Vang Send Back to *Vietnam*” (emphasis ours).

Likewise, as we’ve seen, Walt continues the tradition of slippage, by using his amicable relationship with his Hmong neighbors to redeem himself from his wrongdoings in his military career, exchanging one Asian enemy for another and making amends with the latter. Before the relations grow amicable, of course, he makes it very clear that he refuses to distinguish his Hmong neighbors from the Koreans he fought, indeed that his racial attitudes were forged in war. When he drives them off his lawn at gunpoint after the nighttime scuffle, gangbanger Smokie attempts to talk back: “You better watch yo back.” Walt retorts from behind the long barrel of his rifle: “We used to stack fucks like you five feet high in Korea and use you for sandbags.”¹³

Who's Sending the Boys to Jail?

Taken together, another pattern begins to emerge in the portrayal of Hmong violence. While that which was legitimate as part of a larger geopolitical war effort is persistently submerged, that which is problematic or illegal – from renegade guerillas to enemies to hunter-shooters to gangs – comes in for hypervisibility. Seen through this lens, it is not surprising that Hmong American youth are so often discursively reduced to gangs. In one of the most controversial lines of the film, Sue gives voice to a gender bifurcation that has purportedly developed since the diaspora to the West. “It’s really common. Hmong girls over here fit in better. The girls go to college. The boys go to jail.” This statement has angered many viewers, especially Hmong, who feel it is a hyperbolic slur that irrevocably distorts Hmong American gendered life. Cedric Lee, production assistant on the set of *Gran Torino* and, needless to say, a highly productive Hmong male himself, recounts that of all the slurs and cultural inaccuracies in the script, this was the one that most concerned him, and that he tried hardest to change with his insider status (Schein 2009a:17). Needless to say, he did not succeed, and the film went forward to international release with the image of lawless, uneducated Hmong males intact.

Even in formal settings, the attribution of “killerhood” to Hmong continues to be reproduced. In February of 2007, a University of Wisconsin Madison law professor made international news when he allegedly told his law class, among other things, that Hmong men’s “only roles are as warriors and killers” (Twohey, March 6, 2007), that they have “no talent other than to kill” (Twohey, March 2, 2007) and that “all second generation Hmong end up in gangs or other criminal activity” (Twohey, March 2, 2007). The professor subsequently denied making the statements, or maintained they were taken out

of context. Students were outraged and filed a formal complaint.¹⁴ But meanwhile, amidst the furor, in which the professor was both denounced and defended, someone quietly posted the following sarcastic slur on the *Chronicle of Higher Education Newsblog* in response to the story: “The Madison police blotter speaks volumes about the ‘peace-loving’ Hmong.” So offensive was this comment judged to be, that it was left up on the website for only 24 hours. But that the *Chronicle* deemed it a slur did little to de-authorize the prevailing image of Hmong as miscreant warriors. Reiterated with impunity in an array of venues, these moments of speech slurs become acts – of epistemic and material violence. And the acts are complemented by silencings – silencings of the hate such statements nurture and of concomitant attempts to make it visible. The *Chronicle of Higher Education*, for instance, which reported several times on the Madison law story, declined to publish a commentary on it from a group of Hmong academics.¹⁵

Infuriating as this has been, there are nonetheless those in the Hmong American community who defend Sue’s words and the line-up of dysfunctional male characters on the grounds that they allude to a serious issue in the Hmong diaspora – that is the severe deficit of male “role models” in the migrant population. This is without doubt a social (not cultural) circumstance with far-reaching implications. Not only has there been an actual demographic paucity of men in the older generations due to their loss in America’s war, but those who have immigrated here as grown men have had ongoing challenges with language and employability, in turn undercutting their authority with younger generations.

Yet to explore this phenomenon in the context of a mainstream film already replete with stereotypes is to walk a narrow tightrope. At what point does the potential for

a sober cinematic consideration of a social actuality spill over into a demonization of Hmong malehood itself as flawed at best and lawlessly hyperviolent at worst? We emphasize that, in comparison to other American ethnic groups, the terms are different for groups such as the Hmong due to the prevailing knowledge vacuum within which they struggle to be recognized and so often fall short. This means that images that might appear neutral can have far-reaching negative consequences since there is no representational counterweight circulating in popular culture.

Not-so-Pan Asianism

The case of MANAA (Media Action Network for Asian Americans) makes this point in droves. The southern California-based organization defines its mission as: “Dedicating [sic] to monitoring the media and advocating balanced, sensitive, and positive coverage and portrayals of Asian Americans.” On its web page, under “Movie Reviews,” appears an assessment of *Gran Torino*.¹⁶ It is a meaty five-paragraph review presented without a specific author’s name, presumably to convey that it is the official statement of this watchdog organization about a major Asian American media text of the past year. Indeed, the piece is the second entry under “Articles/Movie Reviews” after “Oscar Night!” designating its importance to the American media scene.

The review for the most part is positive, describing the film as “compelling and earnest.” Oblivious to most of the issues raised here, it was clearly penned by an author who knew little about Hmong American society, and apparently had not solicited Hmong responses to the film, raising the thorny issue of Asian American pan-ethnicity as a strategy of voice in the U.S. popular domain. To its credit, it does flag issues such as “that veterans of Pacific wars still categorize all Asians as the enemy.” It critiques the

fact that Walt steps in to rescue a family that is presented as totally helpless, quipping: “It would have been nice to have seen a modicum of self-sufficiency, or a hint of the systemic factors that have lead to these troubles.” But it also celebrates “priceless” “moments of intercultural overlap” such as “Walt being out-spit and out-grumpied by the Hmong grandmother” apparently without awareness that the vision of the betel-nut chewing grandma practically vomiting out a huge mouthful of fluid is not only demeaning and unappealing, but a complete fabrication since Hmong have never chewed betel nut.

Most objectionably, the review praises *Gran Torino* for taking “its *educational responsibility* seriously, offering up cultural tidbits on how to survive a Hmong BBQ, historical reasons for why the nomadic hill tribes ended up in the Midwest, and even details about their *current sociocultural difficulties* (‘the girls go to college and the boys go to jail’)” (emphasis ours). All the while, the reviewer takes what s/he considers to be “expository details” at face value, patronizingly assessing the Hmong neighbors to be “an endearing, charming lot” and never considering that, for those portrayed, such details – whether jailbound boys or betel-chewing elderly - are injurious precisely *because* they are so inaccurate. Only in a circumstance of extreme invisibility would it be possible for an ostensibly solidary Asian, speaking on behalf of *all* Asian Americans, including Hmong, to replay such distortions with impunity, effectively contributing further to their reification as sociocultural fact.

Months later, the unexamined power to silence was again deployed by MANAA when they received a request from the Critical Hmong Studies Collective, co-signed by actor Bee Vang, to remove the review from their website and replace it with one less apt

to consolidate just the harms their project is dedicated to protesting. Initially intrigued, MANAA at first pled ignorance and asked to be educated on the issues, intimating exhilaration at the revelation that the star himself was protesting the film. When Bee Vang wrote back, explaining that he was not protesting the film, but rather MANAA's dubiously laudatory stances in the review, the organization went strangely silent. In the absence of a sensational story about a Hollywood star mounting a public protest, they retreated to an intractable stance. Despite their receipt of a careful Collective letter describing the many damaging effects of MANAA rubber-stamping *Gran Torino's* representational excesses and imploring them toward political solidarity, they instead drew a line in the Asian American sand. Overlooking the fact that the film includes at least eight out of sixteen of their website's itemized "restrictive portrayals of Asians" (gloss: negative stereotypes), MANAA replied that they would persist in exercising their asymmetrical discursive authority in defiance of the Hmong Collective request. They would leave the review standing, unmodified. Praising the film for starring Asian Americans and claiming to have consulted other Hmong who purportedly stated the film was "accurate," MANAA smugly refused to entertain any of the Collective concerns, deftly producing its own minoritizing discourse in the process of protecting the integrity of their own speech. Through this type of glib response, the boys – Hmong boys - are yet again sent – discursively - to jail, while the voice of Hmong intellectuals - men included - is locked away in the proverbial cellar.

Deconstructing Sue's Strength

The maligning of Hmong masculinity brings us full circle to the question of what is being accomplished by the apparent strength of Sue's character. In defiance of Asian

women's typified hyperfemininity, Sue is outspoken, virtually fearless, gregarious, and fiercely protective of her brother. In a rare moment for American ethnic representation, she (and Walt) even make her *white* boyfriend look effeminate by standing up to menacing men of color on the street and calling them on their Asian slurs. Where Walt uses his gun, Sue brandishes her words in retorts such as: "Oh great, another asshole who has a fetish for Asian girls. God that gets *so* old," or "My name? 'Take your crude overly obvious come on to every woman who wants to pass and cram it.' *That's* my name," or "Of course, right to the stereotype thesaurus. Call me a whore *and* a bitch in the same sentence." And these are not just any retorts. While of dubious credibility as actual lines, they indicate what might be coded as an anti-racist, proto-feminist consciousness fused with a street savvy that is undaunted by taunts and threats. Even Walt recognizes her strengths, calling her smart at one point, and even affectionately "honoring" her with the Asian slur "Dragon Lady," which would, in typical usage, be reserved for older and more powerful women.

It could be argued, then, that Sue exemplifies a strong Hmong American womanhood, forged through the hardships of immigration in families where fathers are weakened by culture shock or deceased during the war. Language strength is one of the chief hallmarks of such women, and Sue exhibits it in spades, with wit, vocabulary, knowledge, even persuasion skills. *Gran Torino* could be heralded as a celebration of the achievements of Hmong American women who survive by learning how to improve on the most daunting situations.

But there are other more pessimistic readings of Sue that should also be considered. First, it is strange that despite her tremendous verbosity, there is no indication

that Sue attends any kind of school, that she values learning, or that she has future goals for herself. Indeed, when we see her reading, it is only an entertaining magazine or catalogue. By default another lumpen-refugee, her seeking work to help out the family never comes in for consideration despite all the worries about Thao's lack of employment. Indeed, all her strengths seem to exist in the service of her brother. One is left wondering if she in fact has a character, or if she is simply a foil for her brother's character. As Txhiameng Vu has suggested: "Designed as a character that exists primarily to serve the film's storyline, Sue is unable to develop as a real character with her own motivation and resolution. She is positioned similarly to ethnic damsels in distress in classic Westerns, comparable to the role of the Native American princess who needs rescuing by the sheriff. At other points in the film, she serves as a cultural ambassador, clarifying the Hmong culture and people. Although Sue is portrayed as intelligent and strong, she has no personal motivation to guide her character. She serves as a sort of tour guide who informs Walt and the audience about the Hmong community, and works to get Walt to agree to mentor Thao.... In this way, Sue exists primarily as a continuous plot device to connect Walt to Thao and the Hmong community and to drive the story along" (N.d.:3).

Consistent with this line of thinking, it is noteworthy that her strength comes to the fore as a counterpoint to Thao's character when he needs to be emasculated for the plot. For instance, when he is taunted by a gang, Thao, in stark contrast with Sue, merely buries his head in his book and walks on in silence instead of talking back. One of the first Hmong lines of the film is from their Grandma, who puts the siblings in direct relation by denigrating Thao, saying: "He does whatever his sister orders him to do."

However, once he is to begin his (albeit incomplete) transformation in the direction of Walt's form of manhood, Sue's formidable character is summarily sacrificed. It could even be argued that it is precisely her sacrifice that emboldens him, gives him such hypertrophied man characteristics, in the form of a vengeful gun-wielder, that Walt has to reign him in by locking the basement door.

While both her character and lines have exuded strength, then, the plot development rewards Sue for her talents with the utmost violence. A brutal rape at the hands of men she knows well strips her of her dignity and renders her earlier invincibility a mere chimera. In what is for many viewers the most disturbing scene of the film,¹⁷ she is put in her place, coming home to sit among the other Hmong women who hysterically fawn over her in Hmong, no longer able to fight back. Her wit and savvy, celebrated as they are throughout the film, do not triumph in the end. Rather they are forced to submit to the muscle of Hmong gangbangers whose reason for aggressing against her, instead of Walt himself, is never really explicated in the script. She is, in the end, reduced to a voiceless vehicle for struggles between men. Her only lines after the rape, despite appearing in multiple scenes, are "Hello?" and "What's going on?" as she frees her brother from the basement at Walt's request. With Sue neutralized, the arrogant force of the violent Hmong males ultimately brings Walt out, making him the only man who can retaliate and save Sue and Thao from the gang's reign of vicious tyranny.

Meanwhile, for certain Hmong viewers, Sue's conquest and submission presents a difficult moment in the script. It is not only the senselessness of the rape, but its *implausibility*, that confounds these audiences. In his penultimate lines before his martyr-like sacrifice, Walt accuses the gang of engaging in incest, since Spider has been

identified as Thao's and Sue's cousin. When Smokie pulls his gun for the final showdown, Walt, calling him a "shrimp dick midget," taunts: "Yeah, yeah, go ahead, but watch out for your boyfriend [Spider] because it was either he or you or someone who raped one of your own family, your own blood for Christ's sake." This assumption of incest gives many Hmong audiences pause, as – they argue – they cannot envision even gangbangers violating the stringent incest taboo, which in Hmong customs would be more strictly applied between distant cousins than for most white Americans.

This conundrum, of whether it is conceivable that incestual rape could have taken place among Hmong young people, is compounded by another inconsistency. After Walt passes away, Thao, Sue and mother are seen leaving their homes, the young people wearing full Hmong festival costume. This image has provoked both chuckles and outrage, as Hmong-savvy viewers lay eyes on the absurd cultural transgression of such dress being worn for funerals. Many see this costuming decision as a callous inaccuracy, while others see it as a cheap gimmick to put the beauty of Hmong dress on display regardless of the propriety of the occasion. But one critical viewer, a young Hmong woman, expressed another interpretation, to which others have assented. She recounted that she had assumed, when the young people emerged from their home in full costume, that Sue was being forced to marry the gangbanger who had taken her virginity, and that the dress was part of the wedding ritual. Such a reading of the scene, colored unavoidably by Hmong cultural presumptions, illustrates the salience of viewer perspectives in pursuing any critique, making the case again for ethnotextual methods that resist privileging any singular critical reading as definitive.

Perpetually Subordinate?

In a public comment, actor Bee Vang suggested: “This movie isn’t about all that political correctness and Hmong culture correctness. It’s just a film that resonates with the times, with President Obama being elected.” With eerie synchronicity, *Gran Torino's* release spanned the changeover from the administration of the Bush patriarch to the first presidential administration of color, that of Barack Hussein Obama.¹⁸ With American popular attention focused on the passing of the white-monopolized mantle to a newcomer of color, it is provocative to unpack the collective sentiment that might be echoed in *Gran Torino's* own drama of ethnic succession. Is the “manned up” Thao of the finale, now armed with the emboldening accoutrements of Walt’s bigoted mouth, his tools and his car, but still pointedly donning his own ethnic garb to attend Walt’s funeral, a vision – albeit ambivalent - of the future?

Gran Torino offers several teasers in its denouement, hints of a vision of multicultural inclusion. The assertion that there are no mature, productive Hmong men in *Gran Torino* is belied at the very end by the appearance of a bilingual Hmong policeman. It is intriguing that the overdue appearance of a respectable figure of Hmong masculinity would be as a uniformed cop. His presence is a performance of doubleness, first in his use of two languages, but also because he initially is aggressive towards Thao and Sue, seeking to control their unruliness but, after Thao addresses him in Hmong, he shifts his demeanor. He speaks to them softly with sympathy, explaining the murder in some detail. It is also intriguing that, when such a figure of Hmong bicultural malehood finally emerges, he too is gun-carrying, but now uniformed and wielding the authority of the state.

It is a provocative reversal that at this key moment – of Clint Eastwood relinquishing his weapons (his career-long cherished props) and allowing himself to be killed on screen for the first time, and of Walt permitting his brand of vigilante justice to be summarily extinguished – there is, in parallel, an assumption by a Hmong man of the legitimate means of violence. Such images of multicultural attainment are buttressed by striking visuals. The church, which bookends the film, is no longer all white in its congregation as at the opening funeral of Walt's wife. Now Hmong sit, presumably proud in their difference, across the aisle from the disgruntled blood family. The reading of the will at the lawyer's office likewise reveals a Hmong presence among the white next of kin.

How, then, to read the inheritance of the *Gran Torino* vehicle by Thao? In the driver's seat of Walt's car, with Walt's dog beside him, Thao drives away from the camera in the closing shots of the film noticeably no longer in the old neighborhood, but now along the placid shores of the lake. Walt has ceded his most beloved treasures to Thao, not to his own family, making it clear that the patriarch is somehow passing on his legacy to this other boy. In the tradition of the classic *bildungsroman*, the father figure must be eliminated in order for the younger to accede to his manhood. Certainly, the plot has all these twists, as Thao gradually acquires pieces of Walt - from languages, to tools, to knowledges – while Walt's intactness gradually corrodes up to his ultimate demise.

But has Thao become a man who stands on his own, or does he remain a spiritual client of Walt, as perhaps signified by his final encasement within Walt's identity – the vintage car? Will his manhood be necessarily derivative, ever unimaginable as a successor, or as a parallel to that of Walt, the definitive white man? Moreover, Walt is

not only the definitive white man; according to teen character Sue, he is the newer and better father, thanks to his nationality. Midway through the film, Sue sits on the porch with Walt, thanking him for becoming a paternal figure for Thao: "I wish our father had been more like you....He was really hard on us, really traditional, and *really* old school." "I'm old school," is Walt's retort. "Yeah, but you're an *American*." In the immigrant version of the bildungsroman, a passage from tradition to modernity is entailed in tandem with the paradigmatic coming of age of the subject (Manalansan 2003:21). Sue's comment suggests that her perception of Walt's superiority as a father figure derives from his assisting Thao in his transformation to modern/American.

If the form of the bildungsroman includes, then, not only maturation, but, for immigrants and minorities, assimilation and identification with dominant national values (Nguyen 2002: 92), then Walt is the one for the job of transforming Thao. Yet, as Nguyen (2002: 92-3) points out, in the always-differentiated American ethnoracial order, full maturation is necessarily foreclosed for minorities as they must also still figure as the hyphenated others of those dominant values. An ominous reminder of this obstacle is delivered to Thao by the gang of his own kin when they beat and burn him on his way home from work, pointedly destroying the tools that represent his access to Walt's world.¹⁹ Meanwhile the main text of the story keeps the Walt character at center with his own personal transformation; ultimately he excludes Thao from the climactic confrontation with the gang by depriving him of firing a gun and, instead, effectively infantilizing him behind the bars of his basement door.

Here it is compelling to read critically the response by mainstream viewers and critics in the initial weeks of the trailer circulation and early release. To those of us

concerned with Hmong American community, the phenomenon of *Gran Torino* has been historic not only for its showcasing of Hmong within the story, but also for the visibility it potentially produces for Hmong actors as talents and as high profile professionals making an impact on the U.S. public sphere. These dimensions have, however, been consistently consigned to the shadows, the backstory, the sideshow. The first trailer to be released was edited so as to not only eliminate any references to Hmong, but to include the early line in which Walt misrecognizes his neighbors as Chinese, leaving potential viewers to assume that the film indeed concerned Chinese rather than Hmong immigrants.

Critic write-ups buzzed *ad nauseum* about Eastwood as actor, director, creator, even songwriter. They talked about his previous work. They talked about *Gran Torino* as his acting swan song. Most said nothing about the Hmong performances, or dashed them off in a phrase. The National Board of Review conferred two high awards, for best actor and best screenplay, both of which emphasized solely the achievements of the white creators, not the ensemble and the multi-ethnic storyline. At the end of the first week of general release, Schein talked to people who, while highly aware of the film, hadn't seen it yet; some proclaimed not to have ever even heard of the Hmong, oblivious to the central driving role that Hmong played in the plot.

While none of these points are surprising as *de rigueur* Hollywood modes of operation, they bespeak the complicity of these entertainment media in the perpetuation of Hmong marginality. Such regimes of representation intimate an uncanny continuity with the collective forgetting to which Hmong have been subject since their arrival in the U.S., an amnesia that, as we've seen, had its inception in the official secrecy around the

war in Laos. Moreover, they reinforce the temporal suspension of Hmong in that early moment of resettlement in the U.S. They are of a piece with *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (Fadiman 1998), the booklength journalistic study of a clueless, non-English-speaking, “non-compliant” Hmong family of new arrivals and their conflict with Western doctors over medical care for their acutely ill child with epilepsy. That a good proportion of the Hmong lines in *Gran Torino* were left unsubtitled, conspires to mute Hmong speech and dovetails with Eastwood’s slurs of “screaming” and “jabbering” gooks. The cumulative effect of these imagings – from the new/unsuccessful immigrant trope to the sidelining of Hmong actors in the creation of *Gran Torino* – may be the unthinkability of Hmong as productive, proactive players in American society. Instead, it leaves them consigned to what Karen Shimakawa (2002::2) calls “national abjection” – a role in the constitution of the American polity that is by necessity circumscribed and radically differentiated, that “although deemed repulsively *other* is, paradoxically, at some fundamental level, an undifferentiable part of the whole.” As Shimakawa describes it, this is the perennial lot of Asian Americans – that the nation establishes itself precisely by “abjecting Asian Americanness, by making it other, foreign, abnormal, *not-American*” (2002:17).

“I shot Clint! Yeah, woohoo!”

Elvis Thao, a hip hop artist who plays the bald gangbanger, speaks volumes in his internet letter, “A Message to the Hmong Community and City of Milwaukee,” when he celebrates partaking in the coldblooded and fatal riddling of Walt with bullet holes on set. Elvis resets the terms of the discussion, reminding us that from the perspective of the Hmong involved in the production there is something else going on that displaces

concerns about the nature of Hmong representation *in the text*. That something has to do with the fact of Elvis Thao, a regular guy from Milwaukee with no acting background,²⁰ “slaying” the legendary Clint Eastwood in a high profile production. The agonism of masculinities is almost palpable – a younger man of color standing armed opposite a senior and unarmed white man of stature and narratively prevailing.

What Elvis and the other actors want us to attend to as we view *Gran Torino*, then, is not so much the oft-noted, typified and distorted Hmongness on screen, but rather the careful artifice of the actors’ creative process. They want us to see that *Gran Torino* is fashioned, and done so in part by the hands of artisans. His invoking of Eastwood’s celebrity status encodes a message of elite belonging, however ephemeral, achieved through participation in the making of *Gran Torino*, and more specifically by being put on par with the patriarch by standing off with and then eventually slaying him. For Elvis and much of the Hmong community, this belonging has significance far beyond the elite circles of Hollywood.²¹ In a certain way, Elvis is intimating a kind of Hmong coming of age in the world of high prestige media, one that has been longed for and painfully out of reach until this moment. Before *Gran Torino*, perhaps the biggest Hmong claim to fame in Hollywood was actor Wa Yang’s fleeting appearance in Eastwood’s *Letters from Iwo Jima* as a soon-to-be-killed Japanese soldier.²² In an interview with the *Hmong Today* newspaper, Yang bespoke the trepidations about exclusion that buzzed fervently on the internet around this moment of cultural possibility: “When I first heard that Clint Eastwood was shooting a movie about the Hmong people, my first fear was that Hmong people wouldn’t get cast for the Hmong parts. But when I heard that they were going to cast only Hmong people...I was really happy to know that was the direction they were

taking” (*Hmong Today*, January 16, 2009, p. 11).

This ‘direction’ of casting Hmong, however, is dubious in light of the spin later given to the amateur actors on set and in widespread reception of the film. As drama specialist Josephine Lee puts it, Eastwood’s directorial techniques of no rehearsals, no coaching and minimal direction, “lauded as giving an unmediated, realistic portrayal of Hmong character *also* subtly authorize the rampant typecasting of the film. Details of surface “authenticity” casting and language persuade audience members that these Hmong are not in fact actors in a fabricated Clint Eastwood movie, but were filmed as ‘naturals,’ documentary-style.”²³ This persuasion was, it turns out, highly effective. Viewers of the film often took the characters at face value, apparently confusing the roles with the persons playing them. In forums with the actors as well as in private conversations, such interlocutors routinely posed questions about the characters using the second person “you,” suggesting that they expected the actors to actually have life experiences paralleling their roles.

This is why it was so important for Elvis Thao to champion his dramatic achievement in the form of mowing down the Hollywood patriarch. Indeed, as literary studies scholar Ly Chong Thong Jalao suggests, “For many of the Hmong who saw *Gran Torino*, the most believable part of the film occurs when the gang members kill Walt at the end. Believable not because the film’s portrayal of Hmong youths as violent and predatory gang members depicts an essential reality, but because the gang members are the only characters in the film who exhibit the kind of agency that approximates the real possibilities and precariousness of life in a Hmong American community. That is to say, despicable as they appear on screen, the Hmong gang members defy the very disciplining

the film's plot imposes on Thao" (Ly N.d.:5).

Troubling as it may seem, then, to celebrate the staging of victorious Hmong hyperviolence, Elvis' glee resonates with the argument made by Celine Parrenas Shimizu (2007) about the need to attend to the *authorship* of actors playing conventionally Asian roles. Interrogating a widespread and orthodox critique of Asian women's subordination as enforced through their acting out of hypersexualized Asian femininity in theater, narrative film and porn, Shimizu cautions that we risk diminishing the artists themselves through our reflex of erotophobic revulsion: "To understand acting as simply representation of corresponding phenotypes and national identities is to say that actors and actresses play roles as non-creating beings" (2007:46). Instead, she suggests: "The act of creation is stunning because it illuminates the fact that actresses are actually working within the constraints of their craft, roles, and jobs... While the act may simply reaffirm the role... some kind of limited authorship occurs" (2007:41).

Moreover, as Judith Butler's (1990) treatment of performativity has maintained, it is not only the fact of authorship, but the effect of its recognition that deserves attention. For instance, instead of seeing static, reified Asian gangbangers in *Gran Torino*, we might perceive these roles as elaborated on camera by engaged Hmong men who are concerned to both do a convincing job and be acknowledged for that effort. This is their aspiration: they hope that their skill will reveal itself, de-authenticating the Hmong gang in favor of a construction - what Butler (1993) called a "citation" - of a Hmong gang. In this process, they have the potential to denaturalize, even to subvert, the hold of that trope *as definitive Hmong character*, showing it to be contingent, and always in production.

This was apparently the inadvertent impulse in an event held at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California, where Southeast Asian gangs have been a major concern of the municipal authorities and of the families of Southeast Asian youth. In an intentional mingling of art and social life, student organizations along with public officials such as a state senator, Stockton's mayor, representatives of the police and school district, and many Southeast Asian American organizations convened and invited Bee Vang to deliver a keynote at an event in October of 2009 entitled "The Real Gran Torino Story: Stockton's Secret War on the Streets: Identifying and Implementing Best Practices for Mitigating Gang Initiation, Activities and Violence". According to the promotional flyer, the expressed purpose of the event was to "leverage the film 'Gran Torino' and it's [sic] Star Bee Vang...as the beginning point for bringing awareness to and addressing the key challenges faced by the Southeast Asian American community....Specifically, the issues of gang violence and identifying and implementing best practices to address it." Why, one might ask, would the celebrity of Bee Vang and/or the nerdy, passive character he created in the film, constitute "leverage" in an anti-gang agenda? At first glance, the initiative seemed misguided. What expertise could be offered by speaker Bee Vang, who had not experienced any gang menace in his own youth, especially given that the character he created was – well – just a character? He himself had not had gangs to resist in the course of his coming of age. But that turned out to be just the point. In press interviews and in his own speech to a crowd of several hundred, he underscored his own minimal exposure to Hmong gang activity: "My knowledge of it was kindled by 'Gran Torino,'" he demurred (Torres 2009). Such a statement, while ostensibly unremarkable stands to have a dramatic denaturalizing effect. The fact of Bee

Vang, a gang-age young man with no gang involvement other than the script imposed upon him, served to expose the constructedness of that script, to de-essentialize the notion of gang activity as somehow intrinsic to Hmong identity. And perhaps it even goes so far as to suggest that the wider social script that slots Hmong in American society needs to be more contingent so as to become unhinged from the perpetual warrior stereotype and make room not only for nerds like Thao Vang Lor's character, but also for supple, creative and ambitious Hmong actors such as those who came to the fore in *Gran Torino*.

That so many appeared as young male actors volitionally assuming the gangbanger images that their roles portrayed shows the field of Hmong malehood to be open and plural, to contain a range of possibilities, not a deterministic teleology. The stakes remain high, for their work must subvert a script which put demonizing words even in the mouth of the Hmong characters. Recall that it is Sue herself who proclaims to Walt that while the girls go to school, the boys go to jail.

Not *all* the boys, is Elvis' point. It is very telling that he says he shot *Clint* not Walt. He also recounts a story of a friend telling him that he stands to become an object of envy for famous actors the likes of Tom Cruise and Denzel Washington for having had this opportunity to work alongside such a Hollywood legend. It is these assertions of parity with the elite world of Hollywood acting that register the cultural work that is being done in terms of belonging and legitimacy through the making of *Gran Torino*.

Such appearances might also be described as a figurative form of voice. In this move from invisibility to hypervisibility, Hmong actors have been constrained yet again by a script not their own, one that includes Walt more than once referencing "screaming"

and “jabbering” gooks, by scenes that feature women speaking shrilly, sometimes hysterically, in rapid Hmong, and by postproduction decisions that leave much of their speech unsubtitled. It would be easy to calculate all this as a form of muting, but what the actors insist is that voice be construed more capaciously, taking into account the work of their bodies and acts, their presence on set as opposed to other Asian actors, and their ongoing speaking selves in interviews and press appearances long after the moment of shooting.

Conclusion

We have sketched here a prevailing discursive context in which Hmong have been constructed as perpetual warriors; that fighting ‘character’ in turn has been transmuted into various forms of dysfunctional masculinity as U. S. immigrants. This leaves us with the question of whether *Gran Torino* does anything different or whether it merely serves to reinforce these fraught images of Hmong malehood. The *Gran Torino* text, while ostensibly presenting Walt as conferring masculinity on Thao, ends up making that masculinity ever tenuous and derivative, and ultimately only partially realized. In most mainstream responses to the film, the sole focus is on Walt’s redemption, with Thao relegated to serving as the foil for Walt’s self-transformation. Viewers attuned to enduring regimes of Hmong invisibility will perceive the apparent hypervisibility won by Hmong presence in the film as surreptitiously belied by the plot. Being locked in a basement until the world has been made safe by the white hero is a spectacular metaphor for this perennial sidelining.

Under the shadow of these disciplinings of Hmong American masculinities, it is not surprising that Hmong actors and audience have been deeply ambivalent about their

portrayal in *Gran Torino*. But the actors who participated in the *Gran Torino* process from casting, through shooting, to its popular reception have gone through significant transformations in their perspectives on the film. They urge us toward more flexible and variegated outlooks, that take account not only of the text and its contents, but also of the fact of the film as a novel cultural development. They point out that despite egregious malportrayals, *Gran Torino's* focus on Hmong is unprecedented, that it is an opening, with the potential to make formerly untutored audiences curious to learn more about who the Hmong are. Some suggest that stereotyping is something all people engage in, and that this film, far from presuming to be documentary, presents simply what is seen through the eyes of a crochety old white guy. They enjoin us to go back and watch the film again with an eye toward understanding the dramatic reasons for exaggeration of social and cultural practices. They request that we attend to their performances, their craft. “[*Gran Torino*] is not about the Hmong community,” provokes Bee Vang. “We will only let this film define us if we are weak and we let it define us. *We* define who we are.”²⁴

Where are we left then, with a powerful cultural text that is a representational minefield in phenomenal global circulation? Do we concur with Bee Vang’s bravado in pronouncing, after conceding that slurs like “eggroll” and “pusscake” were hard to take on set, that “It’s just a script. It can’t hurt us”? What we can take away from this, with caution, is a sense that while *Gran Torino* threatens a plenitude of ominous discursive effects, it may be just those effects that galvanize Hmong Americans to themselves produce alternate versions, through their own filmmaking, acting or other media. At this writing, Hmong American communities are abuzz with creativity and hope. High school

graduates are applying to film school and young directors and screenwriters are emerging all over the country. What they produce may be dwarfed by the definitive power of an Eastwood/Warner Brothers production, but such works still stand as key moments in the development of countervoice. “The film has shed light on Hmong people,” equivocated 17-year-old Bee Vang during a telephone interview with KBOO FM radio in Oregon.²⁵ Then, acknowledging that the light shed by the film is partial and perhaps distorting, the young actor - who after *Gran Torino*, signed on for five supporting roles in Hmong-directed and independent films and is trying his hand at making his own short - reminded listeners, “Our story will be told again. Maybe by ourselves.”

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to wholeheartedly thank the frontline participants in *Gran Torino* who acted almost as collaborators on developing many of the insights of this article: actors Bee Vang, Doua Moua, Elvis Thao, Ahney Her, Chee Thao, Sonny Vue, Jerry Lee, Brooke Chia Thao, and production assistants Cedric Lee and Mark Lee. We also appreciate the many insightful audiences in forums and prior presentations of this piece, and the venues that invited us to present earlier versions: University of Wisconsin, Madison, University of Minnesota, University of California, Davis, and University of California, Santa Cruz. Edgar Rivera Colon, Josephine Lee and the anonymous reviewers for *Hmong Studies Journal* gave critical feedback on an earlier draft, as did members of the Critical Hmong Studies Collective at a meeting at University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. We are also grateful for the attentive editorship of Mark Pfeifer. Shin Lee, Han Fang and Ernesto Marcel Renda provided background research.

References Cited

- The Best Place to Live: A Personal Story of the Hmong Refugees from Laos*. 1981. VHS Documentary. Peter O'Neill and Ralph Rugoff, directors.
- Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge.
- _____. 1990. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." In *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theater*. Sue-Ellen Case, ed. Pp. 270-282. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Doeun, Amy. 2009. "Pfc. Kham Xiong an Early Victim in the Shooting at Fort Hood." *Hmong Times* November 18, 2009, pp. 1, 8.
- Fadiman, Anne 1998. *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors and the Collision of Two Cultures*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Franklin, H. Bruce. 2000. *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.
- "General Vang Pao Free: All Charges Dropped for Leader." *Hmong Today* October 16, 2009, pp. 10-11.
- Gran Torino*. 2008. DVD. Clint Eastwood, director. Clint Eastwood, Bill Gerber, Robert Lorenz, producers. Warner Brothers Pictures.
- Gran Torino: Next Door*. 2009. Digital documentary. Mark D. Lee, director. Cedric Lee, producer. Warner Brothers Pictures *Gran Torino* blu-ray disc release.
- Hmong Speak Out on Gran Torino: A Discussion with the Hmong Actors at University of Minnesota, February 20, 2009*. Louisa Schein, director and producer. Screened on KBTW Sacramento/Fresno June 7, 14, 2009. Select 6-7-2009 Gran Torino Cast Interview and 6-14-2009 Grand Torino Cast Interview Part II at <http://crossingstv.com/hmong-arc> (accessed December 12, 2009).
- Hughes, Art. 2008. "Fong Lee Supporters Flex Muscle Three Years after Controversial Shooting Death." *Twin Cities Daily Planet*, May 11. <http://www.tcdailyplanet.net/article/2009/05/11/fong-lee-supporters-flex-muscle-three-years-after-controversial-shooting-death.HTML> (accessed July 5, 2009).
- Kontos, Louis, David Brotherton, and Luis Barrios, eds. 2003. *Gangs and Society: Alternative Perspectives*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lee, Robert G. 1999. *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Ly Chong Thong Jalao. N.d. "Looking *Gran Torino* in the Eye: A Review." *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education & Advancement*. Forthcoming

Manalansan, Martin F. IV. 2003. *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Marchetti, Gina. 1993. *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and the Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

Mohr, Elizabeth. 2009. "Slain St. Paul Soldier saw Army as his Legacy, Path to Better Life for his Hmong Family." *TwinCities.com* November 29, 2009. http://www.twincities.com/ci_13886404 (accessed December 11, 2009)

Moua, Wameng. 2009. "Thousands Show to Support Gen. Vang Pao: Federal Judge Rules to Continue Case." *Hmong Today*, June 1, 2009. Pp. 12-13.

_____. 2008. "Hollywood Comes to the Twin Cities." *Hmong Today*. June 1-16. Pp. 12-13.

Olson, Rochelle. "Hmong Veterans are Home Again." *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, November 11, 2007. <http://www.startribune.com/local/stpaul/11826596.html> (Accessed December 11, 2009).

Nguyen, Viet Thanh. 2002. *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Padilla, Felix M. 1992. *The Gang as an American Enterprise*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Palumbo-Liu, David. 1999. *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Schein, Louisa. 2009a. "Making *Gran Torino*: The Hmong Story on Blu-Ray." *Hmong Today* June 1-16, Pp. 16-17.

_____. 2009b. "*Gran Torino* Opens at Number One! Doua Moua's Big Night at New York Premier." *Hmong Today*, January 16, Pp. 10-11.

_____. 2008a. "Eastwood's Next Film Features Hmong American Cast: Exclusive Interviews from the set of '*Gran Torino*'." *AsianWeek* Vol 29, No. 7, October 3, pp. 12, 29. Web version: <http://www.asianweek.com/2008/10/03/eastwoods-next-film-features-hmong-american-cast-exclusive-interviews-from-the-set-of-gran->

[torino/](#) (accessed December 14, 2009).

_____. 2008b. "Hmong Actors Making History Part 2: Meet the Gran Torino Family." *Hmong Today* Sept 1, pp.10-11.

Web version: http://hmongdetroit.org/Vol_2_issue_2.pdf (accessed December 14, 2009).

_____. 2008c. "Hmong Actors Making History Part 1: The Bad Guys of Gran Torino." *Hmong Today* August 16, pp. 12-13.

Web version:

http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=9c74f65fbd40944d_deba5271a1013bd0 (accessed December 14, 2009).

_____. 2007. "A General's Changing Presence: Why Did Vang Pao's Arrest Become a Unifying Event for So Many?" Op ed. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. Tuesday, July 3: 7B

_____. 2004. "Homeland Beauty: Transnational Longing and Hmong American Video." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 63(2):433-463.

_____. 1987. "The Control of Contrast: Lao-Hmong Refugees in American Contexts." In *People in Upheaval*. Elizabeth Colson and Scott Morgan, eds. Pp. 88-107. Staten Island: Center for Migration Studies.

Schein, Louisa and Va-Megn Thoj. 2008. "Violence, Hmong American Visibility and the Precariousness of Asian Race." *PMLA (Publications of the Modern Language Association)*. Correspondents at Large section on "Comparative Racialization." Vol 123:5 (October): 1752-1756.

Schein, Louisa and Va-Megn Thoj. 2007. "Occult Racism: The Masking of Race in the Hmong Hunter Incident: A Dialogue between Anthropologist Louisa Schein and Filmmaker Va-Megn Thoj." *American Quarterly* 59:4 (December): 1051-1095.

Shimakawa, Karen. 2002. *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Svoboda, Sandra. 2007. Shooting Pains: Questions about Hmong Teen's Death Galvanize Tightly Knit Community. *Detroit Metro Times* February 7, 2007.

<http://metrotimes.com/editorial/story.asp?id=10159>

Torres, Jennifer. 2009. "Stockton's Secret War on the Streets' Focus of Forum." ANBM (Asians Not Brainwashed by Media) Source, Thursday, October 29.

<http://anbmsource.com/node/637> (accessed December 11, 2009)

Twohey, Megan. 2007. "UW Professor Details Remarks." *Journal Sentinel Online* <http://www.jsonline.com/news/wisconsin/29254139.html>, March 6, 2007

(accessed June 23, 2009).

Twohey, Megan. 2007. "More Questions Than Answers." *Journal Sentinel Online* <http://www.jsonline.com/news/wisconsin/29249609.html>, March 2, 2007 (accessed June 23, 2009).

Vang, Chia Youyee. 2008. "Letter to the Editor: General Vang Pao's Last War." *The New York Times Magazine*, June 1, 2008, p. 10.

Vang, Ma. 2009. "A 'Living Memory': History and Belonging in the Lao Hmong American War Memorial." Paper presented on the panel "Negotiations Over Belonging: Figuring Hmong American Citizenship Through Cultural Production," *American Studies Association*, Washington, DC, November 7, 2009.

_____. N.d. "The Refugee Soldier in the Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 1997." For *Positions*.

Vu, Txhiameng. N.d. "*Gran Torino*: Mainstream Depictions of Race without History." Unpub. Ms.

Walsh, Denny. 2009. "Feds Drop Charges Against Hmong Leader Vang Pao." *The Sacramento Bee*. September 18, 2009. www.sacbee.com/latest/story/2192606.html (accessed December 11, 2009).

Wendy Wu: Homecoming Warrior: Kickin' Edition. 2006. DVD. John Laing, director. John Schain, Brenda Song, Janine Dickins, producers. Disney Channel Original Movie.

Wiener, Tim. 2008. "General Vang Pao's Last War." *New York Times Magazine*, May 11, 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/11/magazine/11pao-t.html> (accessed December 12, 2009).

Wilbur, Brett. 2009. "A Gratifying Ride: Clint Eastwood's Masterful New Film, 'Gran Torino'." *Carmel Magazine* Winter: 68-72.

Xiong, Bernadette. 2009. "Elvis Elfy Thao on Self-Empowerment: His Gift to Hmong and Diverse Communities Alike" *Community Connections Network Magazine*, December/January 2009/10: 22-25.

Xiong, Tsia. 2008. Bush Signs Law Excluding Hmong From Patriot Act. *Asian Week*, January 9, 2008. <http://www.asianweek.com/2008/01/09/bush-signs-law-excluding-hmong-from-patriot-act/> (accessed December 14, 2009).

Authors' Contact Information

Louisa Schein, Department of Anthropology, Rutgers University,
131 George St. New Brunswick, NJ 08901, schein@rci.rutgers.edu

Va-Megn Thoj, Asian Economic Development Association, 712 University Ave W.
#105, St. Paul, MN 55104, vamegn@gmail.com

About the Authors

Louisa Schein, PhD, teaches Anthropology, Women's and Gender Studies and Asian American Studies at Rutgers New Brunswick. She has worked with Hmong Americans for three decades, has done longterm fieldwork in China on the Miao and is author of *Minority Rules: The Miao and the Feminine in China's Cultural Politics*. Her articles have appeared in *Journal of Asian Studies*, *Cultural Anthropology*, *Social Text*, *Modern China*, and *American Quarterly*. She is co-founder of the scholarly network Critical Hmong Studies Collective and is currently writing a book, *Rewind to Home: Hmong Media and Gendered Diaspora*, and working on two documentary films – one with Peter O'Neill, a sequel about Hmong from Providence, Rhode Island a generation after they were first filmed, and one with Va-Megn Thoj on Hmong health and healing. She also published with Va-Megn Thoj "Occult Racism" on the Hmong hunting murders in Wisconsin. She is a regular contributor of stories on Hmong/Miao in arts and entertainment to the newspaper *Hmong Today* where she has also published on Miao Chinese pop star A You Duo. Dr. Schein followed very closely the production of Eastwood's film *Gran Torino* from the time casting began in Spring of 2008. She was the only person in the U.S. to interview the Hmong actors by phone when they were on set shooting the film in Detroit and has held discussion forums around the country and published several articles in the popular press on the film and the actors' experiences.



Va-Megn Thoj is a filmmaker and community activist in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Born in Laos, he trained in film and literary theory at Indiana University, film production at Third World Newsreel, and public policy and administration at the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota. He has produced and directed short films and documentaries on social issues, including "Slaughtered in Hugo" (2002), "Death in Thailand" (2003), "Goodbye Wat Tham Krabok" (2005), and public affairs programs for Twin Cities Public Television. He is currently directing two feature-length documentaries: "Occult Racism: What Killed the White Hunters?" about the racial dimension of the 2004 murder of six white hunters in Wisconsin by a Hmong hunter, and, with Louisa Schein, "Shamans, Herbs, and MDs," about the diversity of Hmong healing worlds and the role of immigrants in shaping healthcare. A recipient of several peer awards for TV commercials, he has also received the Bush Artist Fellowship, the Bush Leadership Fellowship, the Media Arts Fellowship, and the Jerome Film and Video Grant.



NOTES

¹ For fruitful conversation and analysis of *Gran Torino*, we thank participants in discussion forums at University of Wisconsin, Madison, University of Minnesota, University of California at Santa Cruz, University of California at Davis, Hmong National Development Conference in Appleton, Wisconsin (co-facilitated by Elvis Thao), East Coast Asian American Student Union Conference at Rutgers, and University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee (co-facilitated by Elvis Thao), Museum of the Chinese in America/New York University, and Brown University.

² For more on this case and Hmong activism around it, see “9 Bullets to Kill Boy: ‘Not Excessive’,” *Hmong Today* May 16-June 1, 2009, Pp. 9-11 and Hughes (2009).

³ For more on the actors and their production experiences, see Schein 2009b, 2008a, 2008b, and 2008c.

⁴ Perhaps the most commonly voiced Hmong objections to the film concern its myriad cultural inaccuracies, exaggerations and distortions. While it is not the project of this article to critique the film on those terms, we note here some of the most frequently mentioned errors: the betel-nut chewing and spitting, the professed disapproval of head-patting (even though the shaman pats the baby’s head and Spider pats Thao’s head without consequence), the shaman’s “reading” of personal character (rather than communicating with the spirit world), the chicken sacrifice in the backyard being done by the shaman himself and in dramatic ceremonial fashion rather than perfunctorily by an assistant, the spatial layout of the soul-calling “hu plis” ceremony for the baby, the shaman’s ethnic dress style, the gangster style of clothing and grooming, the obsequious making of offerings on doorsteps, Thao’s doing dishes alone in the kitchen while in a house full of women, inconsistent use of the two Hmong dialects within one family, the wearing of Hmong festival clothes to a funeral, the rape of a clan cousin and the aggression of gangsters toward members of their own clan/surname group.

⁵ Our reading, in other words, resists a widespread analysis of the *Gran Torino* narrative as always and only about Walt’s story, instead questioning the legitimacy and consequences of that type of white/male-centered narrative when set in a multiracial context.

⁶ See Marchetti (1993) for a general exploration of the sexual threat that Asian immigrants posed in American discourse during the centuries of their immigration.

⁷ *The Late Show*, David Letterman, Jan. 14, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfXRuTc-ODs> (accessed February 7, 2009).

⁸ An interesting handmaiden to this theme emerges in the film itself in the references to the faltering American auto industry and the setting in Detroit. For those attentive to Asian American concerns, Walt's ire at the displacement of American auto workers by Japanese competition cannot but evoke that other notorious Detroit incident, that of Vincent Chin beaten to death by two laid off white auto workers whose resentment he had incited through being vaguely aligned with that Japanese economic enemy who had purportedly stolen their livelihoods. In a bizarre historical transmutation, the spectre of Asian communism comes to be replaced by that of Asian capitalism which threatens to bring America to its knees through the machinations of the ever more globalized economy.

⁹ For a close reading of Hmong war monuments, especially the Fresno version, see Vang (2009).

¹⁰ For a description of the Patriot Act, and the later special legislation exempting Hmong from the list of barred groups, see Xiong (2008).

¹¹ Note that in December, 2007, after years of lobbying, new legislation finally exempted Hmong (and Montagnards) from the immigration bar applied to those who had provided material support to terrorists and guerillas, reversing several years of unwarranted exclusion. See "Community Victory: Material Support Legislation Signed into Law." <http://www.searac.org/advocacy.html> (accessed July 4, 2009).

¹² As Robert G. Lee reminds us, during Viet Nam, the invisibility, the lurkingness of the Viet Cong in the dense jungle led to a broader racialization, a genericization of the enemy, in the form of the "'mere gook rule,' whereby any dead Vietnamese could be counted as a dead enemy"(1999:190).

¹³ It is noteworthy that white supremacist viewers we have encountered revel in this and other of Walt's warrior-type slurs in what appears as a kind of nostalgia for a pre-political-correctness genre of machismo constituted out of racial hatred and military

animosity. Indeed, Eastwood himself may share some of this nostalgia. In one interview, he described his character to a reporter as follows: "...he's just a guy – that's just the way he is. He's from his generation – he's not from this current political correct group of people. Actually, he plays probably to people who are bored with that sort of thing...he wasn't afraid to say what was on his mind even if it wasn't particularly appealing. And of course, I felt he had to be that kind of guy because in order to change, and to make changes...he has to come from somewhere far away...Otherwise, if he was pussyfooting around like a normal writer would probably write it, somebody who was conscious of every little insult in the world, he wouldn't have come very far..." (Wilbur 2009:68-7).

¹⁴ The complaint and other relevant documents in this case can be seen on the website mounted by the law students involved in the case: <http://responsibleedu.blogspot.com/> (accessed December 14, 2009).

¹⁵ The article was eventually published as: "Knowledge, Authority and Hmong Invisibility," by Dia Cha, Chia Youyee Vang et al, and can be seen in *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*, March 14, 2008.

http://www.diverseeducation.com/artman/publish/article_10828.shtml (accessed December 14, 2009). See also Critical Hmong Studies Collective. "Persistent Invisibility: Hmong Americans are Silenced." *AsianWeek*, September 12, 2008, p. 5. Web version: <http://www.asianweek.com/2008/09/13/persistent-invisibility-hmong-americans-aresilenced/> (accessed December 14, 2009).

¹⁶ http://www.manaa.org/gran_torino.html (accessed June 24, 2009).

¹⁷ Indeed, so involved in his role as her brother was Bee Vang that he recounts actually weeping when he saw Sue return from her brutal beating and rape.

¹⁸ For reviews that explore *Gran Torino's* relevance to the Obama era, see Foundas, Scott, "Clint Eastwood, America's Director," *LA Weekly*, December 17, 2009, <http://www.laweekly.com/2008-12-18/film-tv/the-searcher> (accessed July 5, 2009), and "Collected Thoughts about Gran Torino," *Greater Detroit*, <http://greaterdetroit.wordpress.com/2009/01/08/collected-thoughts-about-gran-torino/> (accessed December 14, 2009).

¹⁹ We thank Edgar Rivera Colon for suggesting this interpretation.

²⁰ Elvis Thao, of course, is not actually a "regular" guy, though he is for the purposes of

this argument. In fact, he is an eminent Hmong rapper, long affiliated with R.A.R.E, one of the founding groups of Hmong hip hop, whose song “Hmong Ntuag Npis” can be heard in the basement youth scene during the Hmong party in *Gran Torino*. See cover story by Xiong (2009).

²¹ Indeed, Hollywood belonging, despite the key roles of Hmong in *Gran Torino*, their indispensability to driving forward the plot, has been tenuous at best. Out of ten Hmong actors with leading and supporting roles in the film, only the two main leads were invited to attend the premier in Los Angeles. The credits are likewise skewed, listing most of the white supporting actors but only a couple of the Hmong until the very end.

²² Also highly visible is Disney teen comedy actress Brenda Song, who is a regular on the television serial *The Suite Life of Zach and Cody* and starred in her own Disney TV movie, *Wendy Wu: Homecoming Warrior* (2006) as a martial arts prom queen. However, although she is half-Hmong and has identified as such publicly, she typically plays Chinese or generic Asian roles. She did, however, do a promotional spot before the release of *Wendy Wu* in which she identified as “part Hmong” from Laos. The 1:45 minute spot is interesting because it continues to obfuscate Song’s identity by intercutting her “real life” Hmong heritage with her diegetic search for Chinese heritage. See

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FzukNhsvGIQ&feature=related>

(accessed December 12, 2009).

²³ Email comments sent November 9, 2009, in response to presentation of Schein and Thoj’s “Playing the Perpetual Warrior: The Performativity of Hyperviolence in *Gran Torino*.” *American Studies Association*, Washington, DC, November 7, 2009.

²⁴ See *Hmong Speak Out* (2009), Part 2, for this quote and video footage of the entire forum at University of Minnesota during which Bee Vang made this statement.

²⁵ Archived audio interview, KBOO Radio, APA Compass Collective : *Gran Torino* - critical discussion and interview with star Bee Vang <http://kboo.fm/node/12214>

(accessed December 12, 2009).