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Pfeifer et al., eds./Diversity in Diaspora

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Introduction

Monica Chiu

Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino* (2008) marks the first time Hmong Americans were featured prominently in a Hollywood film. Over thirty years after the arrival of the first Hmong refugees to the United States, their representation on the silver screen warrants applause as well as critical attention. Asian Americans in mainstream cultural venues like *Gran Torino*—a Hollywood film with a national audience—pose particular challenges to Asian Americans. In their introduction to a collection on Asian Americans in popular culture, editors Shilpa Davé, LeiLani Nishime, and Tasha G. Oren argue that “paradoxically, the current visibility of global ‘Asianness’ renders the cultural presence of Asian Americans in mainstream American culture conceptually problematic: simultaneously hypervisible and out of sight” (2005, 1). The phrase “simultaneously hypervisible and out of sight” accurately describes Hmong Americans, a group of Asian Americans who initially were intensely visible as idiosyncratic refugees unfamiliar with modern American life; currently, however, assimilated second and third generations of Hmong Americans confront a persistent political invisibility, constantly explaining to others who they are, how they arrived, why they are living in the United States, and that “Hmong” is pronounced with an unaspirated “h” (“mong”).¹ As a case in point, midway through *Gran Torino*, Hmong character Sue Lor (Ahney Her) explains to her neighbor Walt Kowalski (Clint Eastwood) the extent of Hmong in diaspora, Hmong culture, shamanism, and Hmong military involvement during the Vietnam War, which the Vietnamese call the “American War.” Sue’s explanations, the film suggests in their inclusion, are appreciated not only by the uninformed Walt—a racist retired autoworker, Korean War veteran, and the film’s eventual hero of his multiracial Detroit neighborhood—but also, I

assume, by the film's general audience, perhaps uninformed of their own Hmong neighbors who are not forever foreigners but rather fellow citizens.² Furthermore, as is typical of many minority characters in Hollywood films and not merely Asian American characters, Hmong serve as a backdrop to highlight Walt's heroism. They educate nonminority peers about their culture, assisting these peers in fulfilling their full potential as American citizens.³ Such a reading critiques not only *Gran Torino* but also the dominant population more broadly, a valuable launching point for this groundbreaking anthology on Hmong Americans that refuses to relegate the history of Hmong Americans as mere background to substantiate a perceived non-Hmong American heroism.

Instead, we must consider that the extensive contributions of unsung Hmong soldiers to U.S. goals in the Vietnam War were incurred at devastating consequences: the loss of one in every ten men (soldiers and civilians combined) and the accidental or collateral deaths of scores of children, including those who died fleeing Laos or those who perished from disease and starvation in refugee camps. Hmong military involvement was precipitated by the CIA's Secret War, "secret" because it was unpublicized to the general U.S. population. The CIA recruited Hmong men to rescue downed American pilots in the Lao jungles. They slipped in and out of the dense forestation, undetected by the Pathet Lao, who came to power as the nation's Communist post-Vietnam War ruling party. Once the war ended, those Hmong and their families who had been affiliated with U.S. military intervention became targets of the Pathet Lao's brutal reeducation campaigns. They were forced to flee Laos or face torture, perhaps death. Because Hmong military assistance to American forces remained under wraps postcombat in the United States, the incorporation of reluctant Hmong refugees—those many constituents of the first generation who would have preferred to remain in Laos if possible—was stymied by an uninformed and disgruntled American population that regarded them as government freeloaders rather than as necessary accomplices to the nation's war efforts or veterans who had earned political asylum.

In this war narrative, the Hmong initially were valued for their military deviancy, undetectable heroes nimbly trekking through the jungle. But they became unacceptably deviant to the American society as strong Asian Americans surviving U.S. racism and overcoming their neighbors' ignorance about the war as well as constant misunderstanding. Contributing to this image was their reluctance to unquestionably accept official recommendations dictating where they should live and how they should conduct their lives. Thus those American refugee management officials wedded

to notions of the docile, acquiescent Asian American model minority regarded them as merely stubborn, “difficult” refugees. Yet in *Gran Torino*, Hmong American distinction, exemplified through their military heroism and subsequent cultural and psychological adjustment to an American culture wholly alien from and often inimical to their own, does not garner the same praise as that accorded to American war heroes. Walt and Hmong are equally tenacious and resilient, but the film grants the former a privileged intransigence while denying the latter a history of useful obstinacy in their fight against the Pathet Lao, their stubborn ability to endure in hostile environments, and their blatant refusal to heed U.S. refugee management officials to lead a self-officiated refugee existence.⁴ At film’s end, *Gran Torino*’s Lor family must narrate their own history as verbal ammunition against Walt’s obdurate notions about Asians.⁵ The film certainly promotes Hmong Americans’ inclusion into national identity, albeit a belated one, but it does so through a continuous and seemingly necessary iteration of an invisible Hmong history that stands in for Hmong rights to American respect, citizenship, and military accolades.

If ethnicizing or racializing Hmong delineates the parameters of past Hmong scholarship, this flies against the face of “the contemporary moment in Asian American studies,” as argued by Eric Hayot. The field is greatly influenced by the poststructuralist turn in which “uncertainty and undecidability,” Hayot states, become “the necessary costume of any defensible position in the humanities, and ‘crisis’ the reified possibility of field-justifying discourse” (2009, 907). This contemporary focus on crisis is especially relevant to the field’s internationalization. Scholars must rethink accepted definitions of ethnicity, nationality, and the duality between “American” and “Asian,” Hayot argues, strongly advocating a comparative scholarship that might examine what he names the “Black Pacific,” studies focusing on relationships between African America and Asia, between Asian America and Africa.⁶ Long before the denationalizing debates in Asian American studies, from the U.S.–centric focus advocated by Sau-ling Wong (1995) to the diasporic ones argued by Susan Koshy (1996) to the flexible citizenry of transnational subjects named by Aihwa Ong (1999), Hmong have represented the quintessentially denationalized, transnational subjects that Asian American studies now revere. As diasporic subjects, they have been displaced from China, relegated to the Lao highlands, persecuted across the Mekong into Thailand, and repatriated to nations such as the United States, Canada, France, and Australia, remaining in contact with friends and relatives still in Thai camps and those remaining in Laos, often for business-related reasons concerning the distribution of embroidered *paj*

ntaub, an important economic source and cultural practice. As refugees in the United States, they moved away from governmentally imposed locations that spread them thinly to avoid overburdening any one American city with expensive social and medical refugee services. By participating in these secondary migrations to more densely populated Hmong communities, Hmong practiced what refugee management attempted to avoid, becoming, in many ways, the very deviant subjects over which Asian American scholarship would be enamored in the 1990s.⁷ In the social sciences, scholars such as Ong traced Cambodian Americans' manipulation of the medical system, a strategy used by Hmong Americans and outlined in Anne Fadiman's National Book Award-winning *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures* (1997).⁸ As another example, in Asian American literary criticism, characters that once were regarded as victims of American racism recently have been re-viewed positively as oppositional subjects through their irony, subversion, and impersonation.⁹ Hmong American subjects uncannily anticipated this new direction in the field at moments of historical crisis (war, status as fugitives, repatriation, and assimilation) at the same time that Hmong American subjects continue to remain marginalized as social, political, and cultural citizens.

As diasporic and transnational subjects, Hmong Americans are incontrovertibly progressive against some of the regressive images featured in *Gran Torino*. Yet they still are marginalized in both the American fold, as foreign neighbors, and in the field of Asian American studies. Authors in this collection note that few scholars present papers or organize panels on Hmong American issues at the annual conference of the Association for Asian American Studies; such presentations are confined to regional seminars in areas of dense Hmong American populations, suggesting the limited value of such work to the larger field. Scant fiction, poetry, plays, and art by and about Hmong Americans restrict the quantity and scope of literary criticism. One explanation for this limited literary production resides in the fact that Hmong refugees had no written language until Jesuit priests visiting Laos in the 1950s translated Hmong phonemes into roman syllables, a prose more useful to missionizing priests than to the agrarian Hmong, who relied on oral narration to transmit their history and culture. The inability of much of the first-generation Hmong in America to read and write in either Hmong or English stymied Hmong American literary production. Notably, my essay in this collection is its only literary critique, while Jeremy Hein's sociological essay on Hmong folklore traces its continued cultural value to Hmong diasporic subjects. A correlation exists between literary

and artistic production in which the lack of one influences the limited production of the other. This said, little Hmong art is produced beyond the oft-discussed Hmong embroidery called *paj ntaub*—meticulous handiwork currently designed by Hmong men and crafted by Hmong women, which Dia Cha considers both an “essentialist cultural symbol... [and] a commodified cultural artifact” in her essay, “Women in the Hmong Diaspora.”¹⁰ Due in part to the emergent status of Hmong American studies, the majority of the essays collected here are predominantly sociological, not literary, typical of the field of Hmong American studies.¹¹

Hmong Americans as subjects of U.S. academic scholarship have been held hostage to a refugee representation. Not surprisingly, this obstructs Hmong American studies’ full incorporation into the larger field of Asian American studies, traditionally focused on more established national groups such as Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, and Korean Americans. At the same time, argues Erika Lee, “For communities in exile like the Hmong, identifying as ‘American’ or ‘Asian American,’ rather than ‘Hmong,’ may be personally difficult and politically undesirable” (2009, 263–264). Asian American studies itself is no stranger to academic identity politics. In the late 1990s, a collection edited by Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth positioned South Asian American subjects as both “a part, yet apart” of Asian America (1998). Meanwhile, academics invested in Pacific Islanders’ immigrant and transnational relationships to the United States lamented their exclusion from the field of Asian American studies. Some rallied for inclusion, while a larger contingent argued for a separate designation—Asian Pacific American studies or Asian Pacific Islander American studies—in order to distinguish the very different immigrant histories and acculturation processes from those of dominant Asian American groups.¹² Furthermore, because subjects of Asian ancestry living across North America are a large component of Asian American studies, many scholars would prefer the use of Asian *North* American studies as a linguistically formal incorporation of Asian Canadians.¹³ But the organization’s official title remains the “Association for Asian American Studies.” Additionally, the subfield of Southeast Asian American studies demonstrates increasing academic, literary, and cultural interest in Vietnamese Americans, Cambodian Americans, and Thai Americans, but interest in Hmong American studies within this academic subfield has been less robust. After 9/11, scholars turned their gaze to the Middle East, wherein subjects of the so-called exotic Orient were once defined by Western expectations and desires about the Middle East, as argued by Edward Said in his seminal text, *Orientalism* (1979). According to Jasbir K. Puar, this emerging focus

on what is increasingly called “West Asian formations” joins Arab American and Muslim American studies with South Asian American and Asian American studies (2007, xvi).

This anthology wrestles with Hmong Americans’ inclusion into and contributions to Asian American studies, as well as to American history, culture, and refugee, immigrant, and diasporic trajectories. It negotiates both Hmong American political and cultural citizenship, meticulously rewriting the established view of the Hmong as “new” Asian neighbors, an approach articulated, Hollywood style, in *Gran Torino*. This collection boldly moves Hmong American studies away from its usual groove of refugee recapitulation that entrenches Hmong Americans in points-of-origin and acculturation studies rather than propelling the field into other exciting academic avenues. While a historical overview will retain a firm foothold in the scholarship here, the essays push beyond this well-trammeled ground to ask the following questions: What is the state of contemporary Hmong America? What is the current state of research on Hmong Americans? What are the current demographics of the Hmong American population in 2011 compared to three decades ago? What are the salient issues in the cultural, social, educational, and economic lives of Hmong Americans?

Part I in this collection begins with Kou Yang’s comprehensive historical review of thirty-four years of Hmong American experience, categorized into what Yang names as three distinct periods of Hmong acculturation. In the refugee years (1975–1991), he argues, Hmong difficulties adjusting to American culture, combined with their lack of linguistic and technical skills, promoted both a dependence on the welfare system and a rise in Hmong mutual assistance associations. During the turning point or transitional period (1992–1999), political participation advocating for community welfare became vital for these new U.S. citizens. In the current phase, the Hmong American Period (2000 and ongoing), bilingual members of the second and third generation identify as American but intend to honor and preserve Hmong culture; they invest in education, advocate for political leadership, produce cultural artifacts, and defend their rights as legal citizens. Yang concludes by profiling several Hmong Americans, outlining challenges facing the Hmong American community.

In an essay about social and political adaptation in the United States, Mark Pfeifer provides a demographic overview that includes statistical information about Hmong American divorce rates, educational attainment, family size, home ownership, occupational distribution, and socioeconomic status. This sets the stage for Yang Sao Xiong’s piece, which investigates the causes of and solutions to socioeconomic immobility in the Hmong

American community. Xiong assesses the key factors that make poverty an enduring problem for Hmong in two central California counties by collecting their own views about poverty and economic well-being and strategies for counteracting economic hardship. One small step toward combating poverty, he finds, emerges through political advocacy that assists Hmong American communities. Carolyn Wong's essay surveys political and civic activism, examining how Hmong politicians and communities mobilize Hmong American engagement in politics, including an investigation of references to a Hmong cultural reverence for those in governmental positions. Stephen Doherty's piece aptly concludes part I, documenting electoral behavior—do Hmong Americans vote for “their own”?—and the impact of Hmong American electoral participation on policies affecting their community constituents.

Part II takes up issues of identity, especially concerning gender and age. Observing that many past studies address how Hmong culture negatively affects young women's academic success, Bic Ngo and Pa Nhia Lor investigate instead the impact of Hmong culture on young men: their heavy domestic responsibilities, including care of younger siblings; their expectations to participate in frequent Hmong ceremonies; and their participation in after-school jobs to contribute to the family income. As a complement, Cha's study, mentioned earlier, examines Hmong women's changing roles by examining their experiences in refugee camps and diasporic communities. She includes profiles of five well-educated female Hmong leaders and discusses the challenges they face as women, as raced women, and as subjects within the patriarchal culture of the Hmong American community. Linda Gerdner's ethnographic project interviews aging Hmong Americans who express concern over their dependency upon others in their old age, social isolation, sedentary living, and the lack of financial autonomy, all challenges extant in American life but virtually nonexistent in Laos, where small agrarian villages provide a practical, collective means of caring for the elderly.

In part III, on Hmong arts and literature, Jeremy Hein emphasizes the continuing relevance of oral tradition to Hmong Americans' successful navigation in the diaspora. In an ethnographic project, he records contemporary Hmong subjects' collective memory of diaspora through folklore and its continued ability to shape Hmong American ideology in the twenty-first century. Nick Poss investigates how two Hmong artists musically vocalize those experiences shared by other minorities: as refugees, as persecuted subjects in the diaspora, as targets of racism, and as ethnic groups with similar forms of linguistic and musical oral traditions, from African

griots to jazz and poetry slams. The essay concludes by finding similarities between rap and Hmong *kuv txhiaj*—unrehearsed, sung poetry. In my essay on Kao Kalia Yang's memoir, *The Latehomecomer* (2008), I argue that while refugees' constant mobility suggests impermanence, Yang ironically builds a solid familial and literary foundation on impermanence itself, the ethereal and the abstract: shamanism and animism, the cultural influence of folk stories, and a collective (orally transmitted) family memory.

In the final chapter, Pfeifer addresses the lay of the scholarly land in Hmong American studies, constituting a comprehensive literature review. Readers interested in mapping the trajectory of this field will note in which categories the preponderance of its scholarship lies, emerging areas of interest, and resources.

The entire collection is a cultural compass in its own right. As expected of such a seminal collection, it invites cogitation over directions for future scholarship. For example, what new, nonrefugee experiences will affect the second and third generations? While some scholars discuss gender challenges, who will address issues of sexual orientation in the Hmong American community? How do gay or transgendered Hmong Americans come out and to what reception? Where do we find instances of Hmong Americans marrying outside their ethnic community; how are these marriages viewed by both Hmong and non-Hmong; what are the identity challenges their mixed-race children face? How will scholars address Hayot's call for studies concerning the Black Pacific? What intersections exist between Hmong Americans and Latinos, Native Americans, or other Asian Americans? How can Hmong American literary output be encouraged? Who are the rising Hmong American artists, writers, playwrights, and poets; what inspires them to create; who sponsors them, and what implications might exist in that sponsorship? How can we concentrate less on what is missing from the canon on art—which offers a very narrow venue for what might be considered art—and more closely on what Hmong artists are producing as evidence of innovative artistry? Where are Hmong American comedians, photographers, graphic novelists, fashion designers, company executives, reporters, actors, and movie producers?

The wide circulation of *Gran Torino*'s filmic representation of Hmong Americans is ensured by its six award nominations (including nomination for a Golden Globe for best original song) and its receipt of a National Board of Review–USA award for best actor and screenplay.¹⁴ But will this potential high profile change Hmong Americans' image in the American popular imaginary, assisting its transcendence from notions of the refugee, of the unassimilated “primitive,” to an accepted, visible Asian American

presence? There exist no statistics to prove that underrepresented groups such as Hmong Americans gain cultural currency through popular culture, which often serves as non-Asian Americans' introduction to their struggles and cultural and political gains. However, Mimi Thi Nguyen and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu ask not what is popular culture but how "Asian Americans 'get' to participate in it and how might their participation shape its contours" (2007, 7). The new directions offered in this anthology showcase this desire to shape new contours of Hmong American studies as Hmong American scholars themselves address new issues. The essays provide an important counterpoint to the representation of Hmong Americans in supporting roles to Walt Kowalski, legitimatizing them as Americans. This anthology is an essential step in carving out space for Hmong Americans as primary actors in their own right and in placing Hmong American studies within the purview of Asian American studies.

Notes

1. In their essay, "*Gran Torino's* Boys and Men with Guns: Hmong Perspectives," Louisa Schein and Va-Megn Thoj state that they wrote the piece out of "a joint concern for the material effects of both hypervisibilities and their counterpart invisibilities" (2009, 2–3). Also see their "Violence, Hmong American Visibility, and the Precariousness of Asian Race" (2008).

2. Mia Tuan, in her *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites?* (1999), discusses the physical unassimilability that marks Asian Americans as alien; they compete for visibility and agency at the same time that agency is consistently denied them.

3. See films such as *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989) and *The Secret Life of Bees* (2008).

4. I thank my student Nathaniel Coghlan for this comparison of stubbornness (October 13, 2009). While Walt's ever-present anger is accepted as a mild form of posttraumatic stress disorder in the new battlefield of the inner city (here Detroit), Hmong Americans, angry at repatriation and American racial subordination that promotes gang behavior, are seemingly depthless neighbors to Walt. They are "gooks," a sea of Asian faces vaguely representative of a past Asian enemy. At the film's conclusion, Walt performs a selfless task for the neighbors he originally despises. He sacrifices himself to the Hmong gang persecuting Thao, whom Walt takes under his wing. Thao is now able to live peacefully, helping his sister in the kitchen, gardening, and studying, tasks that emasculate him against Walt's noble violence, but which contribute to an implicitly approved form of Asian American identity framed against the

hypermasculinized Hmong gang members—belligerent and violent—who are effectively diffused through incarceration.

5. *Gran Torino* viewers, even those who are not veterans of any wars, are asked to implicitly acknowledge the psychological trauma Walt lives as a veteran: a man who has experienced war in all of its horrors, who has performed war acts that are heinous criminal acts in civilian life. But the absence of common knowledge about Hmong veterancy as military actors in the Secret War in Laos impedes Walt's initial recognition that his neighbors might be more like himself than his own family. The film sympathizes with Walt's private battles: the ravages of war and his critical stance against the selfish behaviors of his sons and their families. Against that recognition, the film seems to invite interpretations of ongoing racial confrontations—public battles over turf—in his neighborhood as mere interethnic violence, or Hmong-on-Hmong violence. This portrayal exacerbates the notion that ethnic gang violence is entirely unrelated to the nation's unequal socioeconomic stratification. Again, see Schein and Thoj, "Gran Torino's Boys and Men with Guns" (2009), for arguments that dismantle Hmong as "perpetual warriors"; and Schein, "Eastwood's Next Film Features Hmong American Cast" (2008), for Hmong American commentary on the film.

6. See Daniel Kim, *Writing Manhood in Black and Yellow* (2005); Vijay Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting* (2001); and Heike Raphael-Hernandez and Shannon Steen, eds., *AfroAsian Encounters* (2006).

7. For a fascinating argument about Asian America's "bad subjects," those who allow "for the opposition to the hegemony of pluralism and capitalism at the cost of an inability to meaningfully recognize ideologically contradictory Asian Americans," see Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Race and Resistance*, 150.

8. While non-Cambodian nurses preached birth control at prenatal courses to seemingly compliant refugee and pregnant Cambodian women on welfare, for example, the latter would return to the clinic, a year later, pregnant and solemnly attentive in yet another required prenatal seminar.

9. See scholarly debates over Jade Snow Wong's 1945 autobiographical *Fifth Chinese Daughter*. Elaine Kim critiques Wong for cultural ambassadorship in her *Asian American Literature* (1982); Frank Chin denounces Wong as a "fake" Asian in his edited collection, *The Big Aiiiiieee!* (1995). Also see Leslie Bow, "The Illusion of the Middle Way" (1993).

10. One might ask if *paj ntaub*'s status as folk art is currently under erasure because it is mass produced: patterns are computerized and stitched by machine onto fabric in China and shipped to Thailand and Western nations for use in Hmong-made garments, as Cha elaborates.

11. This is a phenomenon that raises interesting questions about why ethnic-based scholarship traditionally begins with sociological, ethnographic, and anthropological studies before moving to approaches in literary criticism or cultural studies.

12. The University of Michigan hosts an Asian/Pacific Islander American Studies program. New York University also uses slashes in its program title:

Asian/Pacific/American Studies. These many titular incarnations visually announce the difficulty of finding unity among the discrete terms “Asian,” “Pacific,” “Pacific Islander” and “American” at the same time that they are forced into a unifying conglomeration.

13. For example, Eleanor Ty, *The Politics of the Visible in Asian North American Narratives* (2004); Ty and Donald Goellnicht, *Asian North American Identities* (2004); and Rocío G. Davis, *Begin Here* (2007).

14. From the Internet Movie Database, accessed October 3, 2009.

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