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Gran Torino Dir. Clint Eastwood (review)

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drive *At Any Price* in a way that rings false for the region. It seems Dean is the byproduct of his father's own corrupt seed (they even share a mistress), but like a new Godfather of the four county area, Dean comes out on top ready to secure the legacy of Whipple and Sons for the foreseeable future.

Susan Kerns

COLUMBIA COLLEGE

Chicago

Gran Torino. Dir. Clint Eastwood. Warner Bros., 2008.

Detroit's Hmong immigrant community plays a prominent role in Clint Eastwood's film *Gran Torino*. Clint Eastwood directs and stars as Walt Kowalski, a receding man in a longtime receding city that is now peopled with faces from "far away" lands. As a veteran and retired autoworker facing the end of his life, Walt eventually finds purpose in a friendship with a teenage Hmong neighbor who was caught while attempting to steal Walt's prized *Gran Torino*. Walt initially is shown to be ill at ease in his crime-ridden, increasingly nonwhite neighborhood. As the narrative unfolds, Walt confronts his racist demons and mentors a young man, Thao (Bee Vang), in the supposed virtues of white working class masculinity while Walt also comes to terms with his personal failings, which are partially rooted in the same racial and gendered paradigm.

The relationship between Walt and Thao creates a compelling, poignant, and rich viewing experience but one that does not serve real engagement with the Hmong American community. Eastwood's celebrated direction and Nick Schenk's award winning script actually flatten the Hmong characters, as the fulfillment of the white midwestern protagonist's last hurrah in life remains the film's focus. Perpetually in warrior mode, Walt responds to neighborhood crises by grabbing his gun and slinging racial epithets in all directions.

Potential violence and crime abound in Walt's racially diverse neighborhood within the urban Midwest. He rescues Sue (Ahney Her), Thao's sister, from probable assault at the hands of some black teenagers—the only African Americans to appear in this Detroit-based film. A local Hmong gang pushes Thao into a doomed initial ritual that involves stealing Walt's *Gran Torino* and that results in Thao's narrow escape from Walt and his rifle. Despite being angry with Thao after the attempted robbery, Walt grudge-

ingly helps his impressionable neighbor forge a new “can do” identity. The two men bond as Walt teaches Thao to be handy at fixing things and benevolently pushes the loner Asian kid into acting more manly. In line with *Gran Torino*’s emphasis on physical labor as a defining element of midwestern masculinity, Thao’s newfound manliness is most profoundly affirmed by his getting a job in construction. Walt thus evolves from a gun-toting cowboy to a masculine mentor—mature Hmong men are noticeably absent from the film—who helps Thao find a sense of his own goals and identity.

Aside from Walt’s constantly barbed comments, racism is not portrayed as a significant force in the Hmong family’s life. Thao’s problems consistently come from within his own community as the gang’s activities escalate. The film does not include any scenes of him working at construction sites, where he might encounter white coworkers who may view him with suspicion or, perhaps more realistically, other people of color who would see him as competition.

Only Walt’s generation, or that of the slightly younger Martin (John Carroll Lynch), a local barber, represents the white working class. During a scene at Martin’s barbershop, the joke is supposed to be on these aging white men as they try to school Thao in the subtleties of ethnic slur-laden small talk; they believe they’re giving him a crucial social skill. The scene illustrates how out of touch both older men truly are, but it also leaves a rather rose colored view of racist speech. Walt and Martin are merely harmless old white men speaking in their ridiculous tongues. As Thao repeats arbitrary bits and pieces of the old men’s banter following their direction, the young man ends up saying “Boy, does my ass hurt from all the guys at my construction job.” The joke turns on Thao and reinforces the stereotype of the sexually naïve Asian man.

Bee Vang, the actor who portrayed Thao, takes issue with these lines, among other pieces of dialogue and issues of cultural representation in the film. Vang says, “The humor comes from the fact that Thao doesn’t know what he’s saying. . . . Only the white guys get the homophobic joke.”¹ Vang argues that this scene is a lost opportunity for character development and that it could have been stronger if Thao got the chance to use his own wits with the older men, rather than just being the butt of a joke that is supposedly beyond his comprehension.

During filming, Vang took pains to bring complexity to his performance while working within the parameters of Nick Schenk’s script, which Eastwood shot almost word for word.² Vang explains, “The plan was for us

to be so-called ‘natural actors,’ just stepping out of our lives and in the frames. . . . I found myself resisting the character more and more. . . . I wanted him to have depth and complexity. I had to make that up myself . . . to the extent that it was possible within the script.”³

But despite Vang’s efforts, *Gran Torino* is ultimately Walt’s story and Walt’s heroic narrative. Thao isn’t meant to have complexity; he is a foil defined by racial difference who provokes and inspires Walt to action. Thao is a symbol of otherness, forcing Walt to contend with his wartime past. The veteran even pins the Purple Heart he won for killing Koreans on the young man’s shirt. Ultimately, Walt is elevated to white savior status through his climactic self-sacrifice. This scene reverberates across the decades of Eastwood’s career built upon culminating shootouts of this kind where he always won. However, Walt’s martyrdom is a bittersweet consolation prize, especially for the Hmong friends he made and for the still-fractured midwestern neighborhood left behind.

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NOTES

1. Louisa Schein, “Gran Torino’s Hmong Lead Bee Vang on Film, Race, and Masculinity: Conversations with Louisa Schein,” *Hmong Studies Journal* 11, no. 6 (Spring 2010).
2. Colin Covert, “A Twin Cities writer’s ‘Gran’ slam,” *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis, Minn.), Jan. 8, 2009.
3. Schein, “Gran Torino’s Hmong Lead Bee Vang on Film, Race, and Masculinity.”

Jesus Camp. Dirs. Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady. Magnolia Pictures, 2006.

Jesus Camp documents the story of an evangelical woman, Becky Fischer, as she prepares a summer camp for midwestern Christian youth. The camp, named Kids on Fire School of Ministry, uses radical and controversial methods to teach children to not only believe in, but also to fight for, God. The documentary provides up close and personal details of how Fischer designs her summer camp activities to have the strongest impact on impressionable children. She uses fear as a tactic to motivate children to believe in God and to be fearful of the consequences if they don’t. The mission of Kids on Fire is not to provide comfort, peace, and reflection in the presence of God. Instead, the camp’s mission is to “reclaim America for Christ,” a goal that involves teaching children to reject modern scientific