UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Displaced Histories:
Refugee Critique and the Politics of Hmong American Remembering

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

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in

Ethnic Studies

by

Ma Vang

Committee in charge:

Professor Yen Le Espiritu, Chair
Professor John D. Blanco
Professor Ross H. Frank
Professor Adria L. Imada
Professor Denise Ferreira da Silva
Professor Shelley S. Streeby

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2012

DEDICATION

For Mom and Dad. Kuv yuav ncu ntsoov meb tug txaj ntswg kws lug ntawm txuj kiv hlub hab kiv khwv. Txhua yam kuv muaj yog lug ntawm meb.

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VITA

2005	B.S., Ethnic Studies & General Science, University of Oregon
2007	M.A., Ethnic Studies, University of California, San Diego
2007-2009	Teaching Assistant, Department of Ethnic Studies, University of California, San Diego
2009-2010	Lecturer, Department of Ethnic Studies, University of California, San Diego
2010-2011	Teaching Assistant, Muir College Writing Program, University of California, San Diego
2011-2012	Ford Dissertation Fellow
2012	Ph.D., Ethnic Studies, University of California, San Diego

PUBLICATIONS

"The Refugee Soldier: A Critique of Recognition and Citizenship in the Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 1997," in "Southeast Asian/American Studies," *positions: east asia cultures critique*: *Southeast Asian/American Studies* 20, no. 3 (2012): 685-712.

FIELDS OF STUDY

History; critical refugee studies; Southeast Asian and Asian American histories and cultures; war and US imperialism; history and memory; Ethnic Studies

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Displaced Histories:
Refugee Critique and the Politics of Hmong American Remembering

by

Ma Vang

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Professor Yen Le Espiritu, Chair

Displaced histories name Hmong racial subjection as a project of displacing them from both the nation and history through war and knowledge production. This racial formation is constitutive of the United States so-called "secret war" in Laos (1961-1975) that was quietly and publicly known yet not made much of. Laos has been viewed as a Cold War "pawn" to the superpowers of the US and Soviet Union, and it constituted a crucial yet marginal position in relation to the Vietnam War. This dissertation investigates how the war as a historical period is also a project of knowledge production.

Thus the war's secrecy not only hid US violence against Hmong and Laos but also produced racial knowledge to configure Hmong as gendered racial subjects who are primitive and exist outside of historical time. Furthermore, secrecy is a gendered racial configuration because it involved the twin projects of militarism and rescue. Secrecy's production of Hmong outside of history is how they have been configured as racial subjects because historical absence is a product of racial formation. Therefore, Hmong racial subjection highlights how history is a nation-state project and a signifier of one's emergence in modernity.

This dissertation excavates history as it relates to nation and belonging because the war was not a secret for Hmong who were recruited by the CIA to fight as proxy US soldiers and bore the brunt of the violence. I argue that Hmong refugees/Americans contend with the forgetting of their history as part of a process to formulate histories and belonging in displacement. Hmong maintain that they saved US American lives in Laos yet their experiences in the US do not reflect the sacrifices they made to the US government. An estimated 35,000 Hmong died in battle while disease and starvation caused the death of almost one-third of Hmong in Laos when forced to flee from their homes. The soldiers, their families, and Hmong civilians fleeing from this invisible war in 1975 and years afterwards were targets of political persecution due to their collaboration with the US. Thus I foreground the refugee figure as a site to unravel the structure of secrecy as a fundamental function of state-making, particularly US democracy since World War II. It also opens up the questions about nation, race, US empire, belonging, and knowledge production. Yet the Hmong refugee also constitutes an embodied category that activates nuanced responses to US historical amnesia and

convoluted treatment. My analysis employs the "refugee archive" to emphasize Hmong *displaced histories* as a perspective to doing historical analysis that understands the past in relation to the present.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of refugees has increasingly become a significant global question because it highlights the tensions between state and international policies and the tenuousness of citizenship. I see my dissertation project as contributing to an understanding of this broader political dilemma and critique, even if that refugee has been "properly rescued" and can become a citizen, because the unresolved conditions of displacement continue to re-emerge to unsettle that rescue. In an age of terrorism in which the enemy is considered to be everywhere and nation-states have tightened their borders, it is crucial to explore how the ill-fitting groups who were displaced through state formation become the target of state violence; yet they also expose the state's strategies of power in its search to neutralize threats to national security. Situated at the intersections of Ethnic Studies, American and Asian American Studies, and Postcolonial Studies, this dissertation examines how the United States "secret war" (1961-1975) in Laos that was not publicly fought or contested, and which public and scholarly discourse tended to gloss over, actually reveals the overlapping and synchronized processes of US imperialism. This project traces the Hmong refugee as a figure of US imperialism and Laotian decolonization. My research employs a critical refugee study as a theoretical framework to examine secrets and to conceptually rethink the refugee as an idea that advances a critique of the nation-state's role in producing violence and displacement.[1] A critical refugee study investigates state violence as the context for displacement through forced expulsion, rupturing the perceived impermanence of refugee status. This approach

[1] Yen Le Espiritu, "Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in U.S. Scholarship," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, no. 1-2 (2006): 410-433.

foregrounds the continuing significance of the war's violence on the refugees and their ongoing contentions with its invisibility in order to keep open secrecy's paradox of colonial violence and postwar rescue.

Through an examination of the struggles with history-making within the Hmong refugee/American community, my research highlights the significance of the Hmong refugee figure whose condition of statelessness repudiates the US as a site of refuge. Furthermore, I propose that this refugee figure's displaced status coupled with its condition of statelessness can foreground topics in immigration, US imperialism and war, citizenship, and belonging in Asian American, American, and Ethnic Studies that exceed their disciplinary inquiries, specifically about groups whose histories do not fit with conventional studies of history, culture, and the postcolonial. The Hmong condition of being displaced due to the absence of geographic boundaries and as refugees of war clarifies my research question about how to study the history of a people who do not fit within a national paradigm. I employ the refugee figure as a critical site of analysis and an embodied category that activates complex responses to US war in order to examine the secrets embedded in policies and the archive that reveal the contradictions of US benevolence as well as the formation of nation-based historical knowledge.

This project investigates how the United States "secret war" in Laos as a historical period is also a project of knowledge production. My central claims about the war's secrecy posit that: secrecy not only hides US violence against "racialized peoples and terrains" but also produces racial knowledge to configure Hmong as gendered racial

subjects who are primitive and exist outside of historical time.[2] In other words, systemic government secrets perpetuate the historical absence of Hmong Americans, threatening to erase Hmong histories of war and displacement. In researching US covert policies in Laos and the Hmong role in the "secret war," I encountered the very problem that my study grapples with. When I examined the state archives of diplomatic/military activities and records of refugee resettlement to look for evidence of *Hmong*-US relations in Southeast Asia, the declassified diplomatic collections reveal very little, if anything, about Hmong during the war or their refugee experiences. Because these documents are categorized by nation-state, I eventually learned to ask the archivists for *Laos*-US relations materials or was directed to these collections when I inquired about Hmong history. At the archives on refugees, on the other hand, the collections focused on Hmong and other Southeast Asian refugee integration into US society, with minimal attention to the conflicts that produced Hmong displacement in the first place. This absence of historical accounts reveals the methodological dilemma of narrating Hmong histories: How do you study a history that has been systematically kept secret? And, what does it entail to do research on the history of a people whose existence is not traceable in the archive, a site of knowledge retrieval? My dissertation, therefore, examines the question of historiography as a "tool of and against the state" by paying attention to how history is narrated rather than recuperating what is missing.[3]

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[2] Jody Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 16. Kim's excavation of the Cold War as an "epistemology and production of knowledge" because it "exceeds and outlives its historical eventness" helps me pinpoint the "secret war" as a historical event and knowledge production project.

[3] Carol McGranahan, *Arrested Histories: Tibet, the CIA, and Memories of a Forgotten War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 22.

I maintain that the war's secrecy discursively produced Hmong as gendered racial subjects who are displaced from the nation-state and its history. Hmong commonly refer to themselves as a countryless people with populations in China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Burma. Thus Hmong along with other peoples who have not been "fully incorporated into nation-states" supposedly maintains an "ungoverned" status. In a recent anarchist historical account about these groups, James C. Scott submits that they have been subjected to different forms of state violence including slavery, taxes, and warfare, yet upholds their stateless status as "those who got away" or "voluntarily going over to the barbarians" in order to critique state-making.[4] The condition of "not being governed," then, is a strategy to evade state power. Although I see the value of statelessness as a strategy, it leaves unexamined the state's role in producing that status through war and discursively through archival knowledge. For example, the knowledge formulated about Hmong suggests that they are primitive and without history because they do not have a nation along with its elements of written language, government, sovereignty, and nationalism. Thus the issue with historical knowledge is a problem of the nation-state and US imperialism because knowledge is produced and categorized within a nation-based framework, making US imperialist intervention in Laos with Hmong collaboration difficult to locate in the record and public discourse. Even when information is available, it constructs Hmong as synonymous with the landscape and nature and "natural warriors" for warfare. When national histories are cast as modern histories and vice versa, Hmong

[4] James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009): ix-xi.

history is engendered as neither national nor modern because it is a people's history and not that of the state.[5]

Hmong gendered racial formation hinges on the idea that Hmong are not incorporated into the nation-state because they have not yet arrived in modernity. They are perpetually suspended in what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) calls the "waiting room of history."[6] My central claim about history-making and race establishes that the production of Hmong outside of history is how they have been configured as racial subjects because historical absence (and presence) is a product of racial formation. Therefore, Hmong racial subjection through historical absence highlights how history is a nation-state project and a signifier of one's emergence in modernity. Overall, I find the term *displaced,* from Hmong displacement as refugees of war, useful to name Hmong racial subjection as a project of displacing them from both the nation and history through war and knowledge production. Hmong histories and subject formation become displaced as lagging in time and "arrested", delayed perhaps for a future time.

It is this concern with history as it relates to nation and belonging that I wish to excavate in this dissertation. The conflict in Laos was a "public secret," a term Carol McGranahan borrowed from anthropologist Michael Taussig to characterize the histories of resistance in Tibet in which such events were quietly and publicly known to some yet invisible to most.[7] This secrecy displaced Hmong histories of war and exile from the archive and national memory, and disavowed as not integral to the Vietnam War historiography in order to deny the US illicit role in Laos. The accounts about the

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[5] McGranahan, *Arrested Histories*, 22.
[6] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
[7] McGranahan, *Arrested Histories*, 11.

conditions of Hmong involvement with the US discursively lag in historical time, not only because they are yet to be told or written but also because they have been displaced as not belonging to national narratives. Such displaced histories are unclaimed. Claiming these deferred histories constitutes an important process to imagine belonging and subjectivity as displaced peoples. To be sure, the war was not secret for Hmong refugees/veterans who lived it or for their children who continue to bear witness to a past they did not live yet must remember because the war was not publicly fought. Yet, the Hmong refugee figure produced from this context unravels the structure of secrets, critiquing US empire and foregrounding Hmong articulations of history and cultural representations as sites of knowledge in the absence of historical records.

I argue that Hmong refugees/Americans contend with the forgetting of their history as part of a process to formulate histories and belonging in displacement. Contesting historical secrecy is a social and political process because history and its absence organize the present and work to secure certain futures in relation to the past.[8] My analysis employs the "refugee archive," where the refugee figure is the trace of the collision of the archives about and by refugees, to emphasize Hmong *displaced histories* as a perspective to doing historical analysis that understands the past in relation to the present. This approach to historical work involves using media and literary analysis as crucial to tracing knowledge transmission outside of the official record. The *refugee archive* allows me to methodologically link two main concepts in my dissertation: the war's secrecy as a problem of knowledge and the refugee figure's composition as a displaced subject. My goals in this introduction are: 1) Explore how Hmong refugees are

[8] Ibid., 3.

constituted by state secrecy so that the US can intervene into Laos' process of decolonization to stop communism and establish "democracy and freedom." I will elaborate in chapter one on this argument to show how the "archive of secrets" produces knowledge about Hmong and Laos as racialized people and terrain for US militarism and rescue. 2) I foreground the Hmong refugee figure as an intervention in the critique of race and US imperialism due to its displacement from the nation and history. 3) I will discuss my methodology on how to narrate histories that have been displaced from the record through processes of remembering.

State Secrets, the CIA, and Laos

As one of the United States' largest covert operations, the "secret war" involved the CIA's recruitment and training of more than thirty thousand soldiers, mostly Hmong along with Mien and Khmu. The war's necessary secrecy was intended to circumvent the 1954 Geneva Conventions declaring Laotian neutrality and forbidding any foreign military intervention. Led by the Royal Lao Army and Hmong leader General Vang Pao, Hmong soldiers provided intelligence, armed combat, air support, rescue of US American pilots, and various other military duties. But this war that was fought in the "shadow of Vietnam"[9] meant the *replacement* of Hmong lives for US American ones because the Hmong "secret army" served and died in place of US soldiers. An estimated 35,000 Hmong died in battle, while disease and starvation caused the death of almost one-third of Hmong in Laos when forced to flee from their homes.[10] The soldiers, their families, and Hmong civilians fleeing from this invisible war in 1975 and years afterwards were

[9] I borrow the phrase the "shadow of Vietnam" from Timothy N. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam: U.S. Military Aid to the Royal Lao Government, 1955-1975* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
[10] Keith Quincy, *Harvesting Pa Chay's Wheat: The Hmong & America's Secret War in Laos* (Spokane, WA: Eastern Washington University Press, 2000), 5.

targets of political persecution because of their collaboration with the US. Hmong reference the end of the war as US betrayal and abandonment of its ally, leaving them to bear the burden of violence and displacement. More than 130,000 Hmong came to the US as refugees since 1975 to the 1980s,[11] and according to the 2010 US census, there are 260,076 Hmong in the US.[12] As refugees fleeing a war that the US supposedly did not fight, Hmong in the US have been subject to sociological scholarly interests in which they are indexed as a problem of integration into US society. Hmong migration history is rarely linked to the broader projects of French colonialism and US imperialism in Southeast Asia and it is instead perceived as a natural consequence of the Cold War's triangulation in the region.

The Hmong case makes apparent US imperialism's synchronized and overlapping projects of militarism and rescue. I argue that the US secret project involved intervening in Laos' decolonization and it racialized Hmong as a people without a nation or history in order to pursue that interception. Hmong racial difference served as an instrument of communist containment and imperialist expansion because the Hmong question was integral to Laotian nation-building in the postcolonial period. I will unpack this claim in the following discussion to show how Laos' formative independence movement invoked US intervention through a strategy of secrecy. In her critique of US Cold War involvement in Asia and the record of US imperial violence, Jody Kim reconceptualizes the Cold War as not solely a historical event but also a knowledge production or epistemology in which it continues to generate and 'teach' new knowledge in making

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[11] Chia Youyee Vang, *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 1.
[12] "2010 Census Hmong Populations by State," Hmong National Development, accessed on April 3, 2012. http://www.hndinc.org/page17614222.aspx.

sense of the world.[13] She advances a formulation of the Cold War as a project of American gendered racial formation and empire.[14] Similarly, I situate the "secret war" within this racial gendered project of US imperialism during the Cold War, and as part of the War's ongoing circulation of knowledge. But my dissertation investigates how secrecy uniquely signifies a gendered configuration of the government/state archive to record, classify, and deny sensitive information. Moreover, I show how secrecy organizes a racial gendered logic of US imperialism that operates under the radar in covert tactics and deflected through other entities and peoples. Secrets, in other words, disguised US military aggression in the postcolonial struggles as nation-building. Thus, the war was secret not only because the US was intervening into a neutral country, but precisely for intercepting Laos' process of decolonization. In contrast to the US claim to support decolonization globally, the war in Laos exposes the US efforts as imperialist endeavors to make a world "safe for democracy."[15]

Hmong and Laos are linked through the gendered racial project of state secrets which configured both as conducive to US military strategies. By casting state secrecy as a gendered racial project, I mean the way in which the US has worked to hide its militarism—illicit forms of violence—and produce it as benevolent by employing the logic of rescue to deny that violence. In other words, secrecy's gender racial project functions on the twinned processes of militarism and rescue. This perspective helps illuminate how the "secret war" is constitutive of Hmong global racial formation because secrecy's rescue logic was aimed at civilizing and saving Hmong from their primitive

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[13] Kim, *Ends of Empire*, 8.
[14] Ibid., 9.
[15] Barry Rubin, *Secrets of State: The State Department and the Struggle Over U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 5.

condition outside of the nation. Rather than rescuing Hmong refugees after the war, the project of state secrecy purported to save them by bringing Hmong into war as soldiers. Submitting Hmong to the nation-state's power regimes would instate them as legible modern, but racial, subjects. This analysis of the "secret war" challenges the Vietnam War historiography that locates the war in Vietnam and on behalf of Vietnamese because the conflict in Laos helped sustain US military actions in Southeast Asia. Thus one aim of this project seeks to complicate Vietnam War history by excavating how Laos was integral to US imperialism in Southeast Asia through the case of Hmong.[16]

Laos was among many formerly colonized countries in Asia, Africa and South America who declared and sought their independence at the end of World War II. The rapidly decolonizing postwar moment signaled nationalist imagination of a postcolonial future. Like many formerly colonized countries in Asia, Africa and South America, Laos' declaration of its independence in 1945 came with strong resistance movements to expel the colonizer from its territory. And like the French Indochinese nations of Vietnam and Cambodia, Laos' independence from France instituted the slow encroachment from the US into the region in the latter nation's postwar global development of military and moral authority. But unlike these decolonizing nations, Laos seemed to hold no political or military promise as a small, landlocked nation with a purportedly weak anticolonial movement, small central government, and a multitude of "unincorporated" groups who

[16] Karthaya Um observes that the Vietnam War is popularly imagined as "being *in, about* and *for* Vietnam," locating its dilemma politically and geographically in a specific country.[16] Laos and Cambodia are configured as "critical and marginal" to that war; whereby their singular significance was to further the objectives in Vietnam (152). Given its highly contested place in US history as the "war with the difficult memory," popular understanding about "Vietnam" has yet to contend with the histories and human legacies of Laos and Cambodia. It enhances our critiques about the Vietnam War by foregrounding how the conflict unfolded differently in Laos with Hmong collaboration. See Karthaya Um, "The 'Vietnam War': What's in a Name?" *Amerasia: Thirty Years AfterWARd: Vietnamese Americans and U.S. Empire* 31, no. 2 (2005): 151-155.

pose a dilemma for Lao national unity. The mandate of neutrality for Laos, and Cambodia, in the Geneva Agreement of 1954 created a uniquely situated newly independent nation because it forbade foreign intervention into the country in order to "restore peace to Indochina." In declaring Laos', along with Cambodia and Vietnam, independence from France, the Accords stipulated that it must remain a neutral country from external military aid or intervention. Nonetheless, Laos' regional arrangement between a developing socialist nation (Vietnam) and democratic-leaning nation (Thailand) made it an ideal site for protecting the global security of Western democracies.

Laos' sovereignty and its ability to govern have been at the forefront of its emergence as a French colony to an independent nation-state in the post-World War II period. I contend that the US employed the formative moment of independence to create an entry into Laos to maintain its peace and neutrality. Laotian nationalists also engaged in the neutrality, peace, and independence discourse of the Geneva Agreements to imagine a future of their state. Oftentimes, these nationalist leaders are narrated as the ruling class rather than anticolonial revolutionaries to further create their distance from the interests of the people.[17] Indeed, some historians believe Laos began consolidating as

[17] The literature and historical record defined three key ideological divisions embodied in the prominent Lao national leaders. Prince Souphanouvong was the principle leader of the armed struggle group of the Left, allying itself with the North Vietnamese. This Communist movement in Laos, the Pathet Lao, constituted the nemesis of the US government in its campaign to control the spread of communism and build a unified Laotian nation-state. In spite of the aim for democracy, US officials via diplomatic cables admired Souphanouvong for his charisma and discipline in his communist campaign in Northeastern Laos. On the other hand, Prince Souvanna Phouma, Souphanouvong's half-brother, emerged as a neutralist who, in his role as Prime Minister, sought diplomatic means to create an independent and neutral Laos. Despite his neutralist position, the US government distrusted his agenda to create policies for the best interest of Laos, not necessarily a US-style democracy. Furthermore, it adopted the peace and neutrality stance of Souvanna Phouma to advance its program in Laos. US diplomacy and military intervention in Laos favored the Right who were pro-Western aid. Hence the US government welcomed the coup in August 1960 which overthrew the Souvanna government. It supported the anti-Communist government of Prince Boun Oum with General Phoumi Nosavan because it saw this entity as the only alternative to a Communist takeover.[17] These figures represent the rifts among the ruling elites' efforts to imagine a postcolonial future for Laos.

a nation only in the post-WWII period with the beginnings of a "concept of a Laotian nation" by the end of World War I.[18] During the period of French colonialism, Laos was figured as a scattered territory with three kingdoms and numerous non-Lao groups not governed by any political system. This enabled the French direct access to these groups, including Hmong, and the multi-directional forms of colonialism. Although these historical narratives about the emergence of nationalism and communism in Laos offer insight into its capitulation as a Cold War player, they often do not address the question of the ethnic minorities as one in which all nations involved sought to capitalize upon.

US pursuit of imperialist intervention in Laos, however, required secret economic and military strategies in order to hide its violations of the 1954 Geneva Accords. According to a Neo Lao Haksat (the political party of the Communist Pathet Lao) publication, the 1954 and 1962 Geneva Agreements constituted "great victories for the people of Laos" because they confirmed the country's "sovereignty, independence, neutrality, unity and territorial integrity." The international Agreements promised the development of an independent and democratic Laos.[19] However, the US began to pursue a "neo-colonialist policy of intervention and aggression" since the first Agreement through its military and economic aid to pro-American factions in Laos.[20] Neo Lao Haksat revealed that US aid to Laos from 1955-1965 totaled $830 million, making the Laotian economy dependent upon the US because its aid made up 90 to 95 percent of the

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See "Chronology of Events in Laos," undated, John F. Kennedy National Security Files on Asia and the Pacific: 1961-1963, The Vietnam Center and Archive (Lubbock, Texas).

[18] Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hemery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954*, trans. Ly Lan Dill-Klein with Eric Jennings, Nora Taylor, and Noemi Tousignant (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 283.

[19] *Twelve Years of U.S. Imperialist Intervention and Aggression in Laos* (Neo Lao Haksat Publications, 1966), 23.

[20] Ibid., 24 & 25.

yearly foreign aid to Laos.[21] Economic aid coupled with military advisers constituted the US administrative regime in Laos which was first called the Programs Evaluation Office (PEO) and in charge of the military aid program to distribute arms and supervise their use. This organization of military advisers changed to the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in 1961 to continue the military tasks involving training and air force among other things. The MAAG later consolidated with other organizations to form the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in 1962, which operated the war in Laos by posting disguised officers in the central government, rural areas, and "refugee centers" to carry out US objectives, including General Vang Pao's military base in Long Cheng.[22] Often characterized as a "pawn of war," Laos' place in the postcolonial struggle has been foreclosed, in particular its self-determination as a communist state.[23] Thus, Laos is the site for which to understand how diplomacy was a secret code for imperialist interests of militarism, rescue, and nation-building.

This covert advancement of US foreign policies involved the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), linking the agency to secrecy rather than the legislative and executive branches of government. I contend that the CIA and its secret operations are a fundamental aspect of democracy since WWII, which makes secrecy integral to the state. While US foreign policy occurs through the diplomatic channel with the State Department, the CIA carried them out covertly. Together, these two entities construct US relations internationally. US covert operations abroad have been attributed to the CIA and its intelligence network which saw fit to intervene in political conflicts for the best

[21] Ibid., 25 & 27.
[22] Ibid., 34-6.
[23] Arnold R. Isaacs et al., *Pawns of War: Cambodia and Laos* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1987).

interest of the US government. Furthermore, employing an agency whose duties already entail foreign intelligence gathering for illicit US military interventions is the practice of hiding information. This practice of classifying information about CIA activities was aimed protecting US national security as well as the Agency's interests. Here, secrecy is a gendered racial project of imperialist intervention to undermine and restructure a nation and people's sovereignty.

Democracy thrives on its ability to keep secrets. Classifying foreign intelligence information, therefore, constitutes the practice of the US government in order to safeguard democracy. State Department and CIA documents, in particular, undergo classification to keep its records from the public and to assure national security. Secrecy functions as the rule rather than the exception, rooted in the endurance of democracy and freedom as well as the very function of the CIA as a centralized intelligence organization. Scholars have analyzed the relationship between democracy and the CIA to elucidate the state's systematic production of secrets in maintaining its power. Yet, these authors illustrate points of contention between democracy and the CIA primarily to contend that the agency has become the scapegoat for US foreign blunders. I underscore how they actually work together to purportedly protect freedom.[24]

[24] See Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *The CIA and American Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) and David M. Barret, *The CIA & Congress: The Untold Story from Truman to Kennedy* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2005). Congress established the Central Intelligence Agency in 1947 through the passage of the National Security Act to centralize intelligence obtained by diverse bureaucracies in order to "craft the best possible analyses and estimates for the president and his advisers." This act which created the CIA, National Security Council, the Department of Defense and other agencies was in response to legislators' beliefs in the late 1940s that the dispersion of intelligence in "scattered military/diplomatic bureaucracies" in 1941 about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor caused a lack of knowledge about the forces intent on destroy American democracy. In addition, it sought to gather information on the impending US and Soviet Union competition for nuclear and political power (Barrett 9).

The CIA's assessment of its role in the Cold War strategy reveal how it is an integral aspect of US foreign relations diplomacy, thus, its state-making project. Such secrets are often expressed, especially by the CIA and its personnel, as a discord between bureaucracy and work in the field. This sentiment of discord between the State Department/Washington/Ambassador and CIA agents seems to reveal the discrepancies in the goals and actions among the various US government entities involved in Laos. Although the Agency would argue that the misalignments between those in the field and US bureaucracy contributed to competing ideas and troubles in Laos, I show that together they form integral components of US imperialism based on secrecy. While Laos functioned as the buffer between communism and democracy, Hmong served as the anchor of diplomacy and militarism, always on hold to be used as an asset when their military service is needed. Together, they inform the larger project of US imperialist intervention in Laos as the nation sought to imagine its postcolonial future. According to the CIA, its "secret" operations fit at the juncture of diplomacy and militarism. The CIA's core beliefs reveal a clear link between secrecy and US imperialism "not only in Southeast Asia but generally in the postcolonial world." CIA historian Thomas L. Ahern, Jr. conveys in his account of the US role in Laos, *Undercover Armies*, that the Agency approaches a "threatened anticommunist government" to,

> establish its [the government's] benevolent—even paternalistic—concern for the welfare of a predominantly rural population. The military aspect focused on small, mobile units designed to operate in enemy-held territory, challenging communist control and organizing civilian resistance. The two might be combined, using military resources in rural

> civic action programs designed to popularize the government and its army.[25]

This statement captures the CIA and US logic to mobilize the rural population toward military action in order to popularize the government and its army. The practice of mobilizing militarism "featured a search for a charismatic leader" who could use his resources to "defeat the communists."[26] General Vang Pao and his Hmong army represented this rural military resource to challenge communist encroachment for the CIA and US in northeastern Laos. Indeed, CIA covert activities aimed to "enlighten" the tradition elite and build "political modernization" as well as support military resistance against the threat of Communist takeover.[27] These two goals in CIA operations combined with US foreign policy-making constituted the context of the so-called "secret war."

I suggest that secrecy is fundamental to US imperialism and exceptionalism's structure of moral and political authority by hiding acts of violence and moral political crisis. Yet, examining how secrecy is a crucial aspect of the state, particularly in promoting its ideals of democracy and freedom, helps unpack US imperialism. The CIA perceived its role in Laos as a model for understanding the flexibility in economical management and sound tactical judgment in its operations. According to Ahern, the "ultimate failure" there was "an inadequate criterion by which to judge the quality of the effort devoted to a lost cause" rather than its role there in the first place. Indeed, a more remarkable aspect of that record is the Agency's "steady, pragmatic accommodation of cultural sensitivities and of amorphous, competitive command relationships—Laotian,

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[25] Thomas L. Ahern, Jr., *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos, 1961-1973* (Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2006), 5, Source: FOIA, accessed October 1, 2010. http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB284/index.htm.
[26] Ibid., 5.
[27] Ibid., 1.

____ and American." The erased name between Laotian and American constitutes that silence about how Hmong is really the buffer between the two national entities.[28] The Agency recuperates the story of the "secret war" and its failure as a success on the levels of CIA management and judgment, culturally sensitive but competitive command of relationships and professionally adventurous for its personnel.[29] Although the US lost the war, it was ultimately a benevolent civilizing project because the state saved Hmong from their primitive condition. I will show in the next section how the context of war and state secrecy in Laos constituted Hmong racial formation.

The Hmong Refugee Figure

I trace the Hmong refugee figure as a site to begin unraveling structural secrets, and provide a critique of the imperialist context of its displacement. Figuring the refugee as an analytic implicates the nation-state as the agent of violence, and the particular Hmong absence of geographic boundaries makes this apparent because they are instrumental to and an instrument of US covert militarism. This dissertation, thus, seeks to rethink the Hmong refugee figure as a paradigmatic case and critique of nation, race, war, US empire, belonging, and knowledge production. Furthermore, this project underscores how Hmong are also embodied social beings who act, and whose actions are not always outwardly 'critical' of the US projects of empire, in order to illustrate how they contend with history-making as subjects who are situated outside of the nation-state

[28] Furthermore, Ahern assessed the program as "important only to those who were there" because it became for the CIA participants "the adventure of their professional lives" (xvii). This point about the ultimate experience of the CIA elides the experiences of those who were drawn into the war not for professional adventure but for their survival.

[29] The supposed success of the "secret war" was something that the CIA and US government could not achieve in Cuba in the failed Bay of Pigs Invasion, which was an embarrassment for both the Agency and Kennedy Administration.

paradigm. The context in which Hmong do not have a country or geographic boundaries to define their sovereignty complicates the formulation of the refugee beyond its condition of statelessness. In the following section, I analyze how the critical refugee literature has articulated a critique of nation and citizenship from the position of the refugee's liminal, stateless status. Then in extending this critique, I draw from Denise Ferreira da Silva's formulation of the global historical emergence of race and Yen Le Espiritu's critical refugee study to inform my conceptualization of the refugee as a troubling moral political figure and a "critical strategy" emerging from the global historical context of war in Laos. Lastly, I posit the Hmong refugee figure as an intervention into how race and US imperialism specifically produced subjects displaced from nation and history.

The refugee literature has shifted from understanding refugee status as an embodied victim and legal definition to rethinking it as a *figure* or an *idea* that opens up questions about our conceptual imagination of citizenship, nation, and the state. This scholarship from political theorists and refugee scholars trace the genealogy of the refugee to a post-World War II period in the wake of collapsing authoritarian states and the 1951 Convention on refugees, arguing that these critical moments produced the refugee who exists outside of the state and within the international human rights regime. The refugee camps of World War II, in their spatial concentration and ordering of people facilitated disciplinary processes that produced the refugee as a knowable, nameable figure and as an object of social scientific knowledge.[30] Hence these scholars seriously

[30] Lisa H. Malkki, "Refugees and Exile: From 'Refugee Studies' to the National Order of Things," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 498.

engage with the refugee question as a precarious status that is disruptive to the nation-state.[31] I situate my research within these important conversations about rethinking the refugee as a (moral) political concept rather than the prevalent social, humanitarian discussions that reinforce rights and privilege the nation-state. Hannah Arendt posits the refugee as a paradox who inhabits the spaces between the *technicality* and *reality* of being "enemy aliens."[32] This paradox constitutes the condition of the refugee who has lost his/her rights yet shows an uncanny optimism for assimilation—an adjustment to everything and everybody. Addressing the Jewish refugee question, Arendt observes that, "through proving all the time their non-Jewishness, they succeeded in remaining Jews all the same," underscoring the hauntingness of refugees' stateless status.[33]

In response to Arendt's formulations in "We Refugees" and taking it a step further to reconsider the nation-state and its sovereignty, Agamben writes in an essay of the same title that Arendt has proposed the refugee as the "paradigm of a new historical consciousness."[34] Agamben's project deploys the refugee concept to highlight the nation-state's tenuous relationship with the citizen and territory. He argues that the refugee's status is always considered a temporary condition that should be resolved through either naturalization or repatriation because its permanence unhinges the national order. In both "We Refugees" and *Homo Sacer,* Agamben foregrounds the refugee as a *political* figure that brings the fiction of sovereignty into crisis—this fiction is constituted in the link

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[31] It may appear as if I use the terms state and nation-state interchangeably, but I use "state" when paraphrasing the literature in their critiques of the state but my research aims to de-centralize the nation-state.
[32] Hannah Arendt, "We Refugees," in *The Jew as Pariah*, ed. Ron H. Feldman (1943; repr., New York: Grove Press, 1978), 57.
[33] Ibid., 64.
[34] Giorgio Agamben, "We Refugees," trans. Michel Rocke, *Symposium* 49, no. 2 (1995): 114-19 (paragraph 1), The European Graduate School, www.egs.edu/faculty/agamben/agamben-we- refugees.html.

between birth and nation, the rights of man and citizen.[35] In this discussion, I am most interested in how the categories of the nation-state—according to Agamben as the links between birth and nation, man and citizen—sustain the ambiguous and violent spaces the refugee inhabits. This perspective on the refugee gestures toward the concept of statelessness, the condition that the refugee inhabits, to understand how the refugee critiques the nation-state.

The concept of sovereign power formulated on the production of a biopolitical body opens an engagement with the state and its structure of the state of exception. Agamben asserts that in our contemporary context in which the emergency has become the rule, it is crucial to "place the problem of the originary structure and limits of the form of the State in a new perspective."[36] The state of exception, the zone of indistinction between inside and outside, exclusion and inclusion, becomes the structure of sovereignty in which the exception functions in relation to the rule. Thus, the state of exception results precisely from the suspension of order or the rule, where the rule applies to the exception in no longer applying.[37] Sovereign power's production of bare life, the life of homo sacer, constitutes the political activity of sovereignty. Homo sacer is a person set outside of human law without being brought into the realm of the divine, hence, one who

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[35] Agamben contends in *Homo Sacer* that, "In order to understand the 'national' and biopolitical development and vocation of the modern state in the 19th and 20th centuries, one must remember that "man's bare life, the simple birth that as such is, in the passage from subject to citizen, invested with the principle of sovereignty. The fiction implicit here is that birth immediately becomes nation such that there can be no interval of separation [scarto] between the two terms. Rights are attributed to man (or originate in him) solely to the extent that man is the immediately vanishing ground of the citizen" (128). He further states that, "If refugees represent such a disquieting element in the order of the modern nation-state, this is above all because by breaking the continuity between man and citizen, nativity and nationality, they put the originary fiction of modern sovereignty in crisis" (131). See *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
[36] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 12.
[37] Ibid., 18.

inhabits bare life, a life that can be killed with impunity yet not sacrificed.[38] From here, Agamben rethinks the refugee as a limit concept that calls into question the categories of the nation-state, the birth-nation link and the rights of man and citizen relation, that maintain the production of bare life. The refugee as a limit concept reveals how bare life is no longer an exception or separation either in the state order or human rights.[39] Agamben, therefore, foregrounds the camp, wherein "the state of exception is realized *normally*," as the fundamental political paradigm of the West.[40] My project deploys and contributes to this framework in its foregrounding of the refugee figure to reconceptualize a "new perspective" of the state where the exception has become the rule. The project's deployment of the Hmong refugee as displaced from the nation-state shows how the state as a place of refuge simultaneously constitutes a site of violence. This particular configuration illustrates how the exception of state violence has become its practice to purportedly incorporate those outside its boundaries. But what happens when the refugee figure does not have a nation-state to begin with, and has not only been "set outside of human law" but prior to it? In making sense of the process of Hmong racial subjection, how can we understand the colonial racial project in which Hmong were relegated to outside the sovereign as subjects "who can be killed" by serving as soldiers in a "secret army" in order to save them through refugee rescue? As I mentioned in the introduction, perhaps we should consider statelessness as a form of racial subjugation rather than a strategy or status in order to interrogate modern state-making.

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[38] Ibid., 82 & 8.
[39] Ibid., 134.
[40] Ibid., 170.

Refugee studies scholars theorize the refugee figure to destabilize the citizen, nation, and state hierarchy, specifically exposing the citizen concept, which maintains the displaced person's precarious status. Because the discourse on refugees and their conditions of statelessness partake in statecraft and get deployed as the articulation and empowerment of the state,[41] the figure constitutes a crucial entity to de-centralize such state crafting. This scholarship offers a different analytical lens to excavate the bounded nation that questions the regulatory power of the state. Robyn Lui contends that the problem of refugees is their status "outside" the "state-citizen order," which simultaneously means their threat to this order.[42] It is precisely the citizens' acceptance of the nation-state and the perception of their secure status that upholds the regulatory order and sanctions its violence against non-citizens. These critical works trouble citizenship and the idea of living within the borders as safe by showing that state violence is pervasive. If the nation-state can enact violence on refugees perceived to be stateless and "out of order," then it is capable of implementing violence on its citizens. Existing within the order of "state-citizen" *is* living in the violence. [43] Again, my project engages with these politically challenging conversations to conceptualize the Hmong refugee who is "twice stateless/displaced" as a troubling figure that haunts the nation-state and citizen.

The refugee figure's condition of *statelessness* has been one lens to complicate the categories of the nation-state. I analyze how the modern nation-state emerged in relation to statelessness, and consequently, this configuration is always already a violent

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[41] Nevzat Soguk, *States and Strangers: Refugees and Displacements of Statecraft* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 256-7.
[42] Robyn Lui, "Governing Refugees 1919-1945," *borderlands e-journal* 1, no. 1 (2002), accessed November 16, 2005. http://www.borderlandsejournal.adelaide.edu.au/vol1no1_2002/lui_governing.html.
[43] See Joseph Pugliese, "Penal Asylum: Refugees, Ethics, Hospitality," *borderlands e-journal* 1, no. 1 (2002), accessed November 16, 2005. http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol1no1_2002/pugliese.html.

process in its disavowal of the non-nationalized subject who inhabits a condition of statelessness. A central dilemma in the work on statelessness is its (in)distinction from the refugee and the importance of determining their relationship to each other. The Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons was drafted at about the same time as the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) but was not established until 1954. It instituted a standard of treatment for stateless peoples similar to that of refugees as a way to provide protection for those who do not "enjoy" the benefits of citizenship in order to reduce future stateless populations.[44] While the Convention on stateless peoples' significance lies in its existence, its attempt to legally define this category within an international human rights regime paradoxically privileges nation-states to provide protection for those who pose a threat to the national order.

Arendt asserts that stateless peoples are produced through the liquidation of nation-states after World War I and are not necessarily refugees. Additionally, refugees are not necessarily stateless because they can be repatriated and accepted by their country of origin, thus, statelessness is not the essential quality of a refugee.[45] The dilemma of stateless peoples, for Arendt, is their "undeportability" in which neither the country of origin nor any other would agree to accept these groups.[46] At the same time, she contends that the core of statelessness is identical with the refugee question, and yet statelessness

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[44] In a comparing the two Conventions, Paul Weis observes their distinctions of more favorable and less favorable treatment of refugees and stateless persons, respectively (259). The Convention stipulated three standards of treatment: national treatment, the treatment accorded to nationals of the country of residence, and treatment as favorable as possible, and not less favorable than to aliens in the same circumstances (247-8). See Paul Weis, "The Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons," *The International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (1961): 255-264.

[45] Jane Perry Clark Carey, "Some Aspects of Statelessness since World War I," *The American Political Science Review* 40, no. 1 (1946): 113.

[46] Hannah Arendt, "The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man," *The Origins of Totalitarianism, ed. Hannah Arendt* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1951), 163.

has been largely ignored.[47] This formulation invokes the question: how do you separate the refugee from the stateless or are these subjects interchangeable? A project that pays attention to how these two concepts inform each other is productive in calling into question the legitimacy of the nation-state and citizenship.

Addressing specifically stateless status, however, Arendt underscores its relation to the idea of the "inalienable rights of man" that has become alienable to non-citizens. Statelessness captures a condition of rightlessness wherein the "Rights of Man," defined as "inalienable rights" independent of governments, function only as citizens' rights.[48] Stateless status signifies the "criminal" and the "enemy alien" in times of war so that this figure, which remains undefinable but always already configured as a threat from within, has the potential to incite an ontological rupture.[49] This signification as a threat cannot be "renormalized" as non-threatening.[50] Statelessness merely remains dormant until the "right" time for its re-emergence as threat once again. Hence, one can read General Vang Pao's arrest to contain his terrorist threat, in chapter three, as a configuration of the stateless refugee who is an ally and US citizen, but he can also transform into a criminal and "enemy alien." Perhaps the threat of his condition of statelessness is always already present, even when he becomes a US citizen, because he cannot claim a history from

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[47] Ibid., 159. Arendt contends that the intersection between stateless and displaced persons is a precarious one because the dilemma of statelessness gets ignored through the creation of legal distinctions, de facto and de jure categories.

[48] Hannah Arendt, "Statelessness" (lecture on April 22, 1955), 3, in The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress: Speeches and Writings File, 1923-1975, memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mharendt&fileName=05/052290/052290page.db&recNum=0&itemLink=/ammem/arendthtml/mharendtFolderP05.html&linkText=7.

[49] Ibid., 2.

[50] David Theo Goldberg (2002) suggests that the nation-state's conception as inevitable and permanent narrates statelessness as "irrational" and stateless groups as having neither face nor identity and constitutes a threat to the state (40). See David Theo Goldberg, *The Racial State* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002).

which he has been displaced through secrecy's erasure of historical knowledge. Although helpful for politicizing the refugee figure, the consideration of statelessness within a European context of consolidating nation-states does not interrogate the colonial context that produced racialized others who are displaced as outside of morality, the political, and modernity.[51] This displacement constitutes a gender racial naming of the other as "uncivilized" and a threat to the state.

Linda Kerber, borrowing from Arendt, historicizes statelessness within US context and conceptualizes it as a changing practice, not just for refugees but also for those who are denaturalized through various factors including race, gender, economic status, and so forth. Rather than trace defined ethnic groups who have been made stateless, Kerber examines the conditions under which groups become vulnerable to statelessness and inhabit the ambiguous spaces between "the domestic and the foreign, between the national and the international, between sovereignty and subjugation."[52] While statelessness has been most usefully understood as a status or condition, Kerber additionally considers it as a practice which it is produced as the citizen's other through (the lack of) documentation, court decisions, border and prison guards[53] along the lines of state security, race and ethnicity, ideal workers, and gender.[54] Kerber's analysis, however, is hopeful for an expansive concept of citizenship that does not leave room to account for how a denaturalized status destabilizes the nation-state. My project adds to

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[51] Because formulations about statelessness has been European centric with the work of Arendt, theorizing European stateless peoples such as Jews, Russians and Armenians, my project aims to offer a different perspective that examines how people in other regions of the world have been made stateless and might inhabit this condition differently. This new perspective asks: how have racialized stateless peoples emerged as a threat to empire?
[52] Linda Kerber, "History of the Statelessness," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2005): 735.
[53] Ibid., 745.
[54] Ibid., 744.

but departs from this understanding by conceptualizing how statelessness haunts citizenship and the nation-state. The question about the particular process of Hmong racial formation as a people produced outside of history through the state's erasure of historical knowledge remains difficult to explicate within a stateless framework. I hesitate to definitively name what I am describing here as Hmong statelessness because the term still centers the nation-state. Thus, configuring Hmong along with other groups as state*less* negates them as subjects who lack history and nation, which has justified the very projects of US militarism and rescue to incorporate them.[55]

Rather than situating Hmong refugees as legal historical subjects who are inevitably folded into the nation-state, I argue that the emergence and existence of the refugee figure is best described as a racial global/historical configuration. Denise Ferreira da Silva, in her critique of modern representation's privileging of the socio-historical as an analytical descriptor deployed to understand the subjectivity and "exclusion" of racial others, formulates the global/historical as an "other" ontological context and as a more accurate analytical descriptor that pays critical attention to the way subjects always already emerge violently in modern representation as relational/oppositional *racial* subjects. The socio-historical logic of exclusion, even when used by critical race and ethnic studies projects, privileges a narrative of progression toward legibility or transparency and reproduces racial violence because it assumes the existence of a

[55] My analysis in the first two chapters explores the tensions in naming a formulation of Hmong racial formation through their representations in the archive. In chapter one, I excavate the "archive of secrets" consisting of secret state documents to show how US state knowledge formation produces the "unincorporated" Hmong figure as synonymous with the landscape and natural warriors in order to further the US intervention project in Laos. My discussion of state recognition in chapter two, on the other hand, discusses how Hmong must be deemed stateless and primitive in order for the US to include them as citizens.

"pristine" subject behind the historical "veil" who emerged unmarked until constructed by society.[56] Silva, however, argues that this marked, racial subject and the universal subject constitute the products of modern strategies of power, thus, they emerge in relation to each other rather than conceptualizing the racial subject as coming into being. She formulates the global/historical context, then, as a conjoining of globality and historicity, spatiality and temporality, exteriority and interiority, the political and symbolic. Thus, she introduces a "critical strategy of social analysis that privileges the political-symbolic moment of modern social configurations" in order to read the writing of national subjects as political (historical) texts that include signifiers of historicity and globality.[57] I situate the refugee figure here, as a "critical strategy of analysis" that conjoins the global and historical to open up the discursive terrain to critically engage the refugee and those who inhabit the condition of statelessness as a moral political dilemma for the nation-state. Furthermore, my analysis of the figure proposes to destabilize set boundaries and call for different ways of becoming that do not reproduce the regions of transparency and affectability that compose the contemporary global configurations.[58]

A second formulation that informs my framing of the refugee comes from the important work of Yen Le Espiritu who calls for a "critical refugee study" that imbues the refugee figure with various meanings and insists on engaging with the context of war as a site for the discursive production of the refugee. The refugee figure must be imbued with social and political critiques in order to open up larger questions about citizenship, the nation-state, and US imperialism. Following this opening, my project proposes to

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[56] Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 8.
[57] Ibid., 196.
[58] Ibid., 33.

show that if we pay attention to the context of "war, race, and violence, then and now," which produces the refugee and continues to spill into the contemporary moment—radically re-conceptualizing our understanding of temporality and spatiality (war and political conflict as something that happens "over there" and "in the past")—then, we are able to question the nation-state as a site of violence rather than a place of refuge.[59] At the crux of my project is the emergence of the Hmong subject through the refugee soldier figure. The positioning of Hmong as "refugees" simply marks a particular ahistorical subjectivity, whereas their feature as "soldiers" pre-dominantly references the historical marker of war. Therefore, their conjoining into the *refugee soldier* contributes to the intelligibility of Hmong presence in the US national imagination as a legal subject—citizen. More importantly, the refugee soldier points to the particular racial gender formation of Hmong as subjugated to US masculinist rescue and agents involved in their own liberation. This formulation underscores the nuanced responses from Hmong refugees/Americans who critique US violence yet also claim that a close relationship with the government that helped bring Hmong to the US.

As Southeast Asian refugees, Hmong along with Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian trouble the rescue and liberation narrative by implicating the US in producing their displacement. Espiritu argues that turning South Vietnamese into objects of rescue—along with the production of the "good refugee" narrative—enabled the US to narrate a victory even when it lost the war.[60] Although Hmong were also allies of the US,

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[59] Espiritu asks us to engage critically the war and re-think the term "refugee" in order to "imbue it with social and political critiques that critically call into question the relationship between war, race, and violence, then and now." See Espiritu, *Critical Refugee Study*, 2.

[60] Yen Le Espiritu, "The 'We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose' Syndrome: U.S. Press Coverage of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the 'Fall of Saigon,'" *American Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2006): 329-352. Ayako Sahara,

their relationship with it and the Laotian state produced a convoluted status: as "guerrilla soldiers" or "secret army" who fought for the US cause under the CIA yet linked to the Royal Laotian Army.[61] Hence contrary to popular and even critical understanding, the rescue narrative for Hmong did not emerge from the aftermath of the war with the US withdrawal from Laos and Vietnam, but *before* it in the recruitment of Hmong as soldiers. In this context, soldiering constitutes a civilizing tool to "save" Hmong from their lack of geopolitical borders, a written language, and history because they carry cultural excesses such as tribalism and desire for money/resources.[62] The promise of sacrifice through soldiering, therefore, is attaining state- and subject-hood, yet the reality is that this "promise" constitutes a patronizing gesture of the nation-state to "save" and bring one into modernity.[63] Takashi Fujitani's contention that the conscription of Koreans and Japanese Americans as soldiers in Japan and the US during WWII, respectively, constitutes a positive and productive work of sovereign power to "make live" yet reserving the "right to kill" offers insight into the Hmong, Laos, and US relationship because it is the promise of inclusion and enhancement of life that marks the very act of soldiering. But, anxieties about the threat of political ruptures pervade the act of inclusion

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in her master's thesis work to examine the US evacuation policy in the aftermath of the war, shows how the transition of South Vietnamese from allies to "refugees" produced the refugee crisis, which is congruous with Espiritu's assertion that the US claims its superior moral political entity through the rescue narrative. See Ayako Sahara, "Operations New Life/Arrivals U.S. National Project to Forget the Vietnam War" (Master's Thesis, University of California, San Diego, 2009).

[61] The relationship between Hmong, Laos, and the US is something that I will explore in depth in the dissertation project in order to understand the context under which the "secret war" occurred and Hmong produced as soldiers/refugees.

[62] This desire for resources comes from the popular characterization of Hmong soldiers as "mercenary soldiers" who have no political commitments and constitute "soldiers for hire."

[63] According to Sucheng Chan (1994), the US made a promise to take care of Hmong if they fought for the US. See Sucheng Chan *Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos and America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

because it is based on one's cultural difference.[64] It was after the US defeat in Vietnam that it felt obliged to "rescue" Hmong *as refugees* (rather than merely their primitiveness) due to their large exodus into Thailand. The narrative of displacement and rescue initially through the context of soldiering is integral to the violence of racial and gender subjection. Whereas the US purported to rescue South Vietnamese, and currently Iraqis, from a deviant political state to realize freedom, Hmong were saved from having no political participation or moral attributes.[65]

My project's emphasis on Hmong refugee formation from the context of war in Laos contributes to the critique of US empire. More recent studies on empire distinguish current strategies of power from the traditional forms of imperialism and the expansion of the sovereignty of nation-states to other global regions. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri assert that empire is a "decentered and deterritorizing apparatus" that is no longer contingent on the nation-state but rather becomes more attuned to the transnational flows of capital, people, and goods.[66] But I draw from the work of Amy Kaplan who offers an important intervention about the cultural processes and practices of US empire to illustrate how the Hmong case explores overlapping forms of empire: French and the US in the forms of colonialism, militarism, and rescue. The denial of US empire within American historiography, shaping the field of American Studies, still persists through its demarcation of the US from the Old World of Europe. Kaplan names this an American

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[64] Takashi Fujitani, "Right to Kill, Right to Make Live: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans during WWII," *Representations* 99 (2007): 18, 19 & 34.

[65] There is also the case of Iraqis recruited as translators for the US invasion in Iraq who are now pursuing refugee status due to persecution.

[66] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), xii. Chalmers Johnson, on the other hand, understands empire within a militarism framework that explicates how overseas military bases sustain US military imperialism by operating as "micro-colonies" all over the world. See Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

historiographic paradigm in its simultaneous formation and disavowal of US imperialism.[67] She suggests centering culture within studies of US empire and imperialism within studies of American culture in order to underscore their inseparability: the multiple ways in which empire becomes a way of life and how cultures assist in the subjugation of others or foster their resistance.[68] Kaplan's point foregrounds the inseparability of imperial processes abroad to its practices at home, linking the foreign and domestic to critique US empire.[69] My project aims to make such linkages of US empire as military violence and postwar rescue in order to articulate Hmong historical displacements.

Methodology and Chapter Outline

As a people without a country, Hmong emerge suspended in historical time and always in danger of not existing in national accounts. Thus Hmong in the diaspora are often associated with a pre-modern society where their experiences of exile get interpreted within a nationalist paradigm of tradition versus modernity. French postcolonial scholar Panivong Norindr, in an essay that aims to critically reflect on the

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[67] Amy Kaplan, "'Left Alone with America': The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture," *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 5. She critiques American historiographic works that define American exceptionalism as inherently anti-imperialist (12). Hence, Kaplan identifies three main absences that contribute to the ongoing denial of American imperialism: "the absence of culture from the history of U.S. imperialism; the absence of empire from the study of American culture; and the absence of the United States from the postcolonial study of imperialism" (11).

[68] Ibid., 14.

[69] Kaplan (1993) states that, "imperialism as a political or economic process abroad is inseparable from the social relations and cultural discourses of race, gender, ethnicity, and class at home" (16). In another essay, Kaplan asserts that the critical post-9/11 moment of reinvigorated militarism and imperialism demands that we name US empire in order to expose its redefinition in the ongoing war on terror. Hence, naming the US as an empire reveals the distinction it makes between time and space allowing it to neatly close the chapter on the Cold War. She insists on naming empire to conjoin its practices then to now, over there to here in order to make the contours of US power more visible, and thus subject to criticism" (2). See Amy Kaplan, "Violent Belongings and the Question of Empire Today: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, October 17, 2003," *American Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2004): 1-18.

history of Laos under French colonialism and US imperialism, uses family and official photographs as points of entry into a "complex and contested 'official' history." Although critical of employing photographs as indisputable testimonials, Norindr contends that photographs "are a pseudo-presence that reveals an absence that can also heighten our sense of loss." In doing so, photographs can help us remember, illuminate the dark corners, give meaning to a life, and fill out the lacunae of our knowledge.[70] Norindr's critical reflections on how to tell a history of Laos during French occupation and US intervention through photographs brings into sharp relief the methodological dilemma of pursuing a history that was not supposed to exist in the "imperial archive."[71] These photographs, however, constitute their own archive of knowledge to shed light on histories that have been displaced from the official record. In addition, claiming refugee histories would disrupt the US claim that it was never there in Laos, which helps to explain why Hmong histories during the war have been displaced from the archive on refugees.

Hmong histories are deferred and disavowed through textual knowledge and language's inability to comprehend, even when they do emerge through media and cultural representations such as the grandmother in the film *Gran Torino*, which I discuss in chapter four. These displaced histories complicate knowledge production as rooted in text and nation-based. Such histories trouble the national memory because they do not make sense within the framework of US benevolence. In her instrumental work on the production of history and the politics of knowledge and community of Tibetan refugees,

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[70] Panivong Norindr, "On Photography, History, and Affect: Re-Narrating the Political Life of a Laotian Subject," *Historical Reflections* 34, no. 1 (2008): 90.
[71] Kim, *Ends of Empire*, 30.

McGranahan explains that Tibetan histories of resistance are "arrested" and postponed "for future use" because they clash with "official ways of explaining nation, community, and identity."[72] Her description of the process of "historical arrest" to delay people's histories for future release is productive for my goal to understand Hmong processes of history-making in the context of their historical displacement outside of the national paradigm. I show that displaced histories also constitute ways for Hmong refugees/Americans to envision futures as displaced peoples that hinge on embodied knowledge, memory, and attachments to each other.

Each chapter does a balancing act that contends with the dilemma of how to narrate history as it also attempts to engage with an emerging Hmong story in each text I engage with. I analyze archive documents, the law, media, film, and literary representations as texts in order to interrogate how each contends with history to re-imagine belonging, nation, and Hmong futures. Each text also belongs to a genre of storytelling, which helps me to formulate a different process of Hmong history-making. The chapters reckon with the question of how to engage with the politics of our lack of knowledge about history and the production of such knowledge. Lisa Yoneyama contends that, "memory is understood as deeply embedded in and hopelessly complicitous with history in fashioning an official and authoritative account of the past."[73] Employing the concept of memory means that our investigations into the past must have an awareness that historical reality can only be made available to us through

[72] McGranahan, *Arrested Histories*, 25 & 24.
[73] Lisa Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces: Time, Space, and the Dialectics of Memory*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 27.

mediations of given categories.[74] Critical projects that engage in how acts of remembering can fill the void of knowledge must deal with the question of, "how can memories, once recuperated, remain self-critically unsettling?"[75] Yoneyama foregrounds the assertion that, "the fleeting and fragmentary moments of sympathy for the dead produce coalitional social and cultural practices," suggesting that we remain open to engage in such moments to illuminate critical alliances.[76] My analysis of form and content, the archive and its text, remains vigilant of the things that become knowable and look for the not-yet there possibilities.

This dissertation is divided into two parts. First, the dissertation traces the *archiving of secrets* about Hmong refugees through the state and law's recording of historical erasure. In chapter one, "The Missing Baggage," my analysis will show how secrets are embedded in processes of state-making that are contingent on containing national violence by unpacking how they produce historical gaps for which the refugee figure becomes a problem of knowledge. I foreground the Hmong refugee as a figure of war in Laos that destabilizes archival and legal knowledge formation as well as Hmong racialization within US multicultural society. In addition, I critique archival memory's textual knowledge as maintaining a nation-based framework and upholding the nation-state. Chapter two, "The Refugee Soldier," examines the Hmong refugee as a historical-legal dilemma and explores secrecy's knowledge production within the law. It

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[74] Ibid., 27.
[75] Ibid., 5.
[76] Ibid., 147. I also include in this discussion of the politics of knowledge Lowe's (2006) formulation of the "intimacies of four continents" analytical category to illuminate the transatlantic histories of colonialism, labor, race, gender, and sexuality to trace a genealogy about Asian American pasts. Rather than recuperate what has been lost, Lowe urges "a productive attention to the scene of loss" (208). See Lisa Lowe, "The Intimacies of Four Continents," in *Haunted By Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, edited by Ann Laura Stoler (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006): 191-212.

interrogates the US project of recognizing Hmong military service by rewarding citizenship to the veterans and their spouses. The chapter formulates the refugee soldier figure from this dilemma to critique state recognition as a continuation of US imperialism and violence. Thus, the US offer of citizenship recuperates the refugee soldier as an ally and incorporates this "primitive" group into modernity and nationhood rather than being entirely about the "right to have rights."

Second, the dissertation foregrounds Hmong refugees/Americans experiences in the US to formulate the *refugee archive*[77] of embodied knowledge through cultural agency. I integrate the refugee figure with archive building, formulating a "refugee archive" (rather than an archive on refugees) as an alternative space to engage with the ephemeral, embodied knowledge of stories and performances that exist in the collective repertoire of the Hmong diasporic community. While most research about Hmong refugees/Americans study Hmong culture as a problem hindering their "assimilation" into US society, I emphasize how Hmong culture is a site of counter-history and memory-making that illuminates how the US created the dilemma of Hmong displacement and marginalization in the first place. Using Diana Taylor's formulation of performance as a way of knowing which transmits knowledge through embodied action and cultural agency, I show how the repertoire (of history) through activism and cultural productions offers Hmong refugees/Americans a site to communicate new knowledge that mediates an understanding of the past for present and future purposes. Contending with the archive's power in textual knowledge's transmissibility across time and space, Taylor

[77] Long Bui also conceptualizes this refugee archive in his dissertation. See Long Bui, "Suspended Futures: The Vietnamization of South Vietnamese History and Memory," PhD diss., University of California, San Diego, 2011. ProQuest (Publication No. 3458456).

points to the repertoire of embodied practice/knowledge that gathers "ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge." The repertoire requires presence and allows for alternative perspectives on historical processes, exceeding the archive's ability to capture embodied memory.[78] The *refugee archive* enables Hmong self-representation that contends with yet is embedded in convoluted US discourse and representation about them.

In this context, the last two chapters engage with processes of history-making and remembering. While chapter two suggests that the refugee soldier figure has been recuperated as a loyal US ally who can become a citizen, chapter three, "Dragging Histories," explores how it can also transform into a terrorist through the arrest of General Vang Pao. The chapter shows how the refugee soldier is a "compositional subject" who reveals Hmong "compositional struggles" to contest the erasure of their histories and to "blast" the past into the present. It argues that this narration of history in relation to the past involves a dragging process to foreground a Hmong active presence. The chapter is a transitional process to thinking about Hmong production of history and the politics of knowledge and remembering. Chapter four, "The Attachments of History," focuses on the process of attaching Hmong histories that have been silenced in the archive, embodied in the non-English speaking Hmong woman, through family narratives conveyed between grandmother and granddaughter. This chapter anchors the refugee archive and argues that the everyday, embodied knowledge transmitted by the grandmother sutures Hmong displaced histories and memories in order to imagine belonging and histories beyond the national paradigm. Thus, the grandmother is not

[78] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 20.

silenced but her memories are late in coming to contest masculinist war histories and to attach Hmong Americans to each other.

CHAPTER ONE
The Missing Baggage: Looking for the Hmong Refugee in Secret Documents

Hmong refugees are often associated with the United States government and its covert policies in Laos during the Cold War. Any discussion about Hmong refugees/Americans necessarily incorporates a brief description about their military relationship with the CIA/US forged in Laos, as if to explain their presence in the US and to justify the nation-state's concern for them since 1975. Indeed, it is this closer relationship to the US than any "Indochinese group" that affords Hmong an "undeniable claim to refugee status."[79] This paired narrative of Hmong military alliance that contributed to a relatively smooth refugee rescue operation bolsters the powerful myth about the US as a place of refuge for displaced peoples around the world but especially those who worked directly or indirectly with the US government. While this story reads as a conventional narrative that reinforces the rescue and liberation logic, it is a narrative tied to US illicit policies during the Cold War and mired in archival secrets. The limited scholarship about Hmong refugees understands this group as fundamentally shaped by war and still grappling with life in the US; it lacks any interrogation of how the war's context of secrecy produced Hmong displacement and racial formation.[80] In addition, the standard scholarship's de-linking of Hmong refugee experiences from the war actually reinforces secrecy's production of a particular historical knowledge to textually hide how US militarism is central to nation-building. This literature has yet to investigate how the

[79] Thomas P. Conroy, "Highland Lao Refugees: Repatriation and Resettlement Preferences in Ban Vinai Camp, Thailand" (Report) 13, in the Bridgette Marshall Collection at the Southeast Asian Archive, University of California, Irvine.
[80] See Lillian Faderman, *I Begin My Life all Over: The Hmong and the American Immigrant Experience* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998); Sue Murphy Mote, *Hmong and American: Stories of Transition to a Strange Land* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2004).

Hmong refugee, configured by the US project of secrecy, represents a political problem for the nation-state and epistemology because it serves as a trace of state secrecy's twinned processes of militarism *and* rescue.

This chapter challenges the uncritical narration of the militarized relationship between Hmong and the US by exposing the power strategies bound in the paper trails left by Hmong refugees. In turn, it complicates the story of the "secret war" as being about a politics of denial of US military activities but also a staging of its expansionist policy in Southeast/Asia by intervening in Laos' process of decolonization. But how do you formulate a coherent narrative about these two stories? In her articulation of a story for an Afro-Cherokee family in the contexts of colonialism, slavery, and nation-building, historian Tiya Miles contends that she would have to capture the interrelated stories of the black slave woman and her Cherokee master and husband: "I would have to tell at least two stories—sketch two histories, enter two worlds, enlist two purposes, and sound two calls for justice—at once."[81] This chapter takes Miles' approach to contend with the "historical silence" that surrounds the intertwined stories about Hmong and Laos in the contexts of US imperialism, decolonization, race, and nation-building by interrogating the racial knowledge constitutive of the archive's silences that produced Laos as a territory open for intervention and Hmong as the "natural warriors" for that project.[82] It has two purposes to understand the ideas about Hmong and Laos. Therefore, I specifically bring together two archives focused on state policy/diplomacy and refugee

[81] Tiya Miles, *Ties That Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) 5.
[82] Ibid., xiv.

rescue in order to read how the paper trails collude to erase what happened in Laos, but I also use them to map the remains of a war that is not over.

I argue that the archiving of Hmong refugees embedded in the archive of secrets underscores Hmong racial formation as constitutive of US violence and its epistemological ruptures. I advance a critical methodological intervention for reading documents where things are missing to foreground the US interests in Laos as they intersect with the rescue of Hmong from their displacement outside of the nation-state. In doing so, I excavate the redacted de/classified documents and Cold War cartographies as fundamental methods of state-making. Reading the maps of Laos along with the redacted documents enhances an understanding of state secrets to reveal the historical and methodological dilemma embedded in knowledge formation about the Hmong refugee. Furthermore, analyzing how Laos was mapped as geopolitically important for US interests foregrounds the policies and practices that neutralized the country and its peoples as marginal but essential to the Cold War struggles. It underscores the intricacies of Communist presence, roads and support facilities for combat air operations over Laos and North Vietnam, alluding to how the US imagined Laos as a gateway to the Southeast/Asian frontier. These cartographies, in their very standardized protocols, are "transferable" forms of knowledge that construct simultaneous competing and continuous stories about Laos' de/colonization.[83] In addition, as evidence for US intervention and of its military actions, they give an unintended account of US imperialism and exceptionalism at the juncture of postcoloniality. These geo/political cartographies offer a

[83] Martin Dodge, Rob Kitchin and Chris Perkins, "Introductory Essay: Power and the Politics of Mapping," *The Map Reader: Theories of Mapping Practice and Cartographic Representation* (UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2011), 388, accessed on November 1, 2011. http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/book/10.1002/9780470979587.

different kind of evidentiary narrative—Laos' unique spatial positioning that is integral to the future of the region. Thus in making intelligible Hmong racial formation, the maps and texts point to how Laos is missing in the "imperial archive"—official US Cold War government documents—as a site of US imperialism.

My analysis will be divided into three parts. First, I perform a spatial analysis of the refugee paper trails and secret documents to explore the textual nation-based knowledge formation that colludes to expose US Cold War logics of imperialist expansion. This discussion anchors the chapter's analysis by critiquing archival knowledge's production of absences about US imperialism through the metaphor of the missing bag. Second, I trace the production of secrets and the emergence of the refugee figure through an analysis of de/classified government materials including the maps, primarily President John F. Kennedy's National Security Council Files from 1961-1963 prepared by the John F. Kennedy President Library & Museum and Thomas L. Ahern's *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos 1961-1973* published by the CIA. These two collections now circulate as part of an archive about the war in Laos that was kept—the "archive of secrets" that produce knowledge about Hmong and Laos as racialized people and terrain that are primitive and exist outside of the national paradigm. I will analyze how the maps and texts produce the idea of the "unincorporated" (ungoverned) in the narratives that liken Hmong to nature and treat Laos as an empty space in order to operate US militarism and rescue because the nation could not govern its peoples, and thus, did not have sovereignty over its territory.[84] Third, I return to a

[84] In his analysis of the set of Insular Cases from 1901-1922 and their effects on the legal construction of US colonialism in Puerto Rico, Rivera Ramos explains that the American Constitutional doctrine defines an "unincorporated territory" as a country that "belongs to, but is not a part of," the US (236). The difference

discussion of the refugee figure in the archiving of refugees that remaps the US logics of Laotian emptiness and displaced Hmong to foreground a Hmong presence. This active presence points to alternative sites outside of the archive where different forms of documentation and Hmong histories might emerge.

The Baggage of Missing Things

During my research for this project, I visited the University of Minnesota Immigration History and Research Center to search through its collection from the Refugee Studies Center and the boxes of individual case files of Hmong families who have resettled through the agency International Institute, Minnesota. These files record each Hmong family's application for resettlement along with a range of documents from legal records to casual post-it notes: application forms, letters, sponsorship affidavits, agency memorandums, student progress evaluations for English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, and rent receipts among other miscellaneous items.[85] While looking through the files for evidence of a Hmong-US relationship that might elucidate the context for Hmong displacement, I found a half-sheet document tucked in one family's file as a paper trail of their arrival in the US. But, the document I saw was a loss baggage claim form filled out by or on behalf of a Hmong family after their arrival in St.

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between an incorporated and unincorporated territory lies in the determination of Congress, representing the 'people,' to consider if the inhabitants have been granted US citizenship. Puerto Rico, therefore, has been legally constructed as a subordinated nation to the US because the civil rights of Puerto Ricans had been left open by the Treaty of Paris. Thus legal incorporation of a nation is about the status of its people and their ability or capability to become citizens (racialized subjects) of the new state. Within this context of legal incorporation, Hmong status as not geographically bounded contributes to a Laotian "unincorporated" status that is ready for US intervention. See Rivera Ramos, The Legal Construction of American Colonialism: The Insular Cases (1901-1922)," *Revista Juridica Universidad de Puerto Rico* 65 (1996): 225-328.

[85] The resettlement files belong to the International Institute of Minnesota, an organization which helped resettle Hmong families in the 1980s and early 1990s in the state, and are stored at the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota.

Paul/Minneapolis in January 1980. The document reported the loss of one checked bag and its contents en route from Bangkok, Thailand to Okinawa to San Francisco and finally the twin cities. Due to the archive's permanent restrictions against duplication of these private family records, to protect the families' identities,[86] I recorded the form's contents to give shape to its narrative about loss and exile.

Western Airlines Statement of Loss
1. This claim is filed covering loss of:
Checked baggage (including contents)
2. Details of loss:
Trip began at Bangkok, Thailand (Trans Inter Airline) to Okinawa
then to San Francisco, California
then to St. Paul & Minneapolis
When and where last seen: Jan. 28, 1980 Bangkok, Thailand.
When and where loss first reported: Jan. 29, 1980, St. Paul & Minneapolis
Does claim check show property was checked to final destination? Yes
Do you carry insurance against this loss? No
3. Baggage Information
Number of pieces of baggage checked: 3

Description of articles	**When purchased**	**Where Purchased**	**Original Cost**
1) 4 Blue Hmong dresses (skirt)	Self made	Thailand	1,000.00
2) 1 chain gold jewelry	1979	Thailand	500.00
3) 2 silver bars	1972	Laos	500.00
4) 1 Necklace jewelry (silver)	1979	Thailand	500.00
5) 1 Headdress	1978	Thailand	25.00
6) 1 Suit men custom dress	1976	Thailand	50.00
7) 1 Baby sling	1980	Thailand	15.00
8) 1 Hat	1980	Thailand	10.00

Figure 1: Missing Baggage Claim

[86] This permanent restriction is based on the fact that these files contain personal information about Hmong families and their descendants still living in Minnesota and other US states. Therefore, the records will continue to hold sensitive information.

Losing luggage is undoubtedly a nuisance; yet it is also a normal occurrence in travel and this form shows the effort to recover it. But the estimated $3000 worth of clothing and jewelry, acquired between 1972 and1980 in Laos and Thailand and lost on their way to the US tell a story about the losses of personal belongings and of one's country through displacement. The questions about where the item originated, where it was supposed to end up, and where it was last seen reveals how the missing baggage symbolizes that which remains unknowable except through the trace of its having once been there. This ephemeral form's tracing of an urgency, which has since faded, to locate a lost item animates this chapter's concept of the missingness in the archive. The lost baggage claim exposes the dilemma of looking to the archives to find some historical evidence of Hmong lives in a "secret war." Thus, it raises a different set of questions about the paper trails one is left grappling with. Under what conditions did Hmong families make this journey in the late 1970s through the early 1990s? What about the families that never got to make such a journey? Although the details of loss are clearly written here, the claim form makes legible Hmong refugees' absence and disappearance in the records where stories about how they survived and what contents they carried do not fit within a narrative about nation-building and US expansion.

Baggage functions in two ways in my analysis of how Hmong refugees have been documented in relation to the nation-state in state archives. The first function highlights the mundane processing of a missing bag of personal possessions while the second idea emphasizes the burden of said baggage; which represents the excess of "stories that could

not be told," hence, which will perpetually be lost.[87] Together, these two ideas of the mundane and excess reflect the archive's mechanism of producing elisions in historical knowledge so that there are inherently missing things no matter how much we may know about a subject. Following scholars who have unpacked how the archives are "constructed, policed, experienced, and manipulated,"[88] this chapter foregrounds what *is* missing in the archive. These scholars critique archival stories and evidence as incomplete, exposing its Truth narrative as subjective and figured in political, social, and economic contexts.[89] Therefore, secrets, elisions and distortions are integral to the archives' procedural production of knowledge. Engaging with these excavations of the power of the archive, I explore what it means to dwell in its gaps and erasures in order to read "along the archival grain." Ann Stoler contends that this reading elucidates the archive's regularities, logic of recall, densities and distributions, and its "consistencies of misinformation, omission, and mistake."[90] This analysis, which Stoler further distinguishes from a reading "against the grain," makes visible the "power in the production of the archive itself."[91]

Therefore, I examine state and refugee records in both their *form* and *content* to investigate how archival documents are fundamental to statecraft. It performs a "state-ethnography" where documents and maps comprise the "stories that states tell

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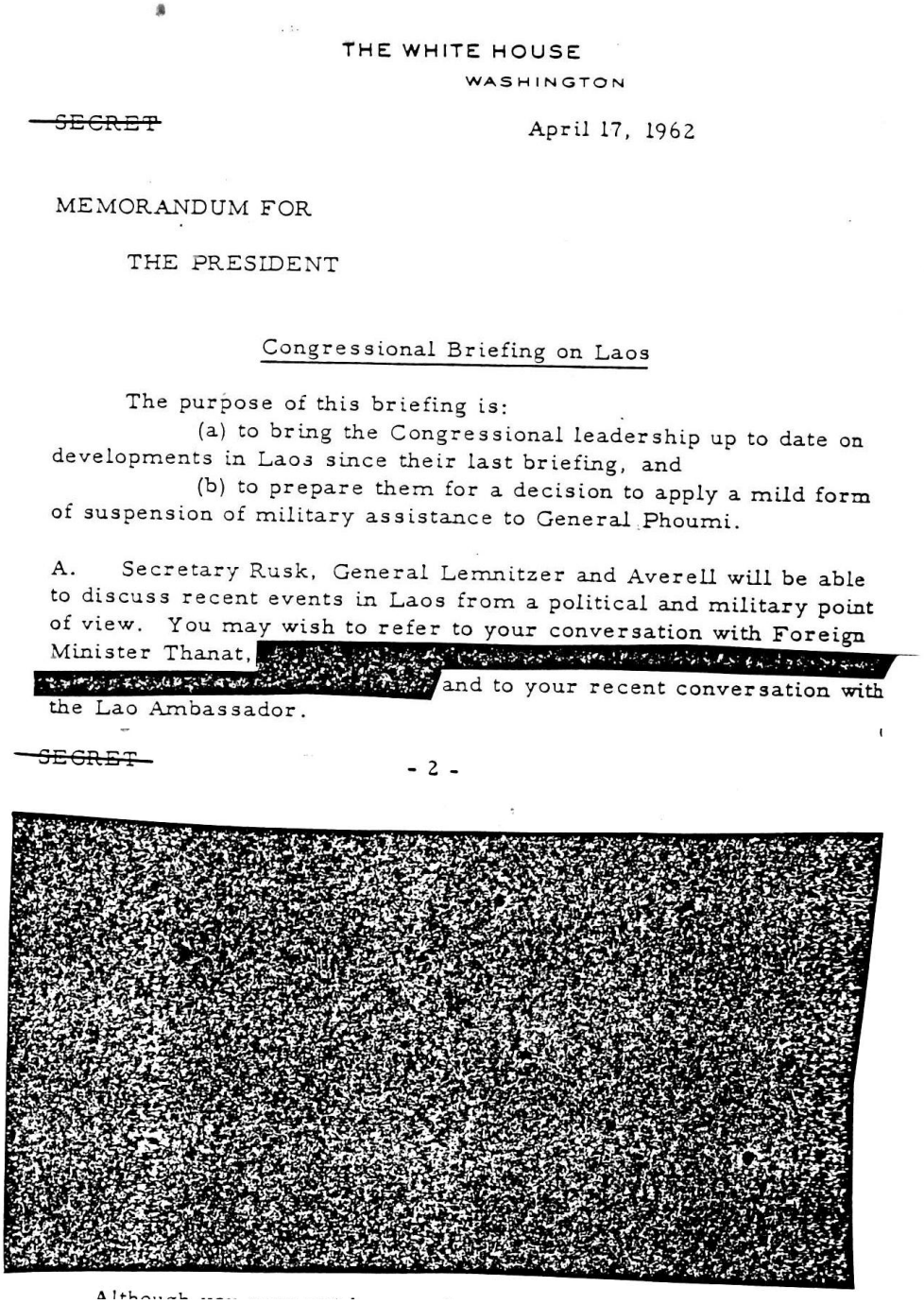
[87] Ann Laura Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," *Archival Science* 2 (2002) 91.
[88] Antoinette Burton, "Introduction: Archive Fever, Archive Stories," *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) 7.
[89] See Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory," *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 1-19.
[90] Stoler, "Colonial Archives," 100.
[91] Ibid., 101.

themselves" about their colonial policies.[92] In the context of excavating SECRET documents hiding "official secrets," such "codes of concealment" as TOP SECRET or CONFIDENTIAL are bureaucratic inventions of descriptive categories for US Cold War policies.[93] Indeed, the de/classified ~~SECRET~~ document exposes redactions as routine in processing historical information for release. I use the intervening slash in de/classification suggesting the ambiguity between the classified and declassified materials precisely to articulate the work of redactions to withhold sensitive information because the process of declassification never really completely opens up state secrets. Furthermore, not all documents about Laos have been declassified and made accessible to the public or all requests approved. Their declassified status, marked by a secondary crossing out of ~~SECRET~~ and redacting the content, no longer elucidate the politically charged history of illicit warfare and instead represent the routine exchange of messages between US officials in Washington, D.C. and those on the field in Southeast Asia.

~~SECRET~~ Documents: Conventions of the Archive. The de/classified documents comprise part of the problem of knowledge about Laos and Hmong, particularly because they perpetuate silences through their lack of information. My encounter with de/classified materials necessitates a reading practice between the texts, literally in the blank spaces that have replaced the texts' removal in order to accentuate their disappearance. Oftentimes, the de/classified records show redactions of words, phrases, sentences or entire paragraphs to conceal still sensitive information. The Kennedy administration files are particularly revealing of statecraft in Cold War policies

[92] Ibid., 103.
[93] Ibid., 107-8.

and archiving. The following memorandum to President John F. Kennedy about a "Congressional Briefing on Laos" with sentences and a paragraph blocked out, serves as an example of content removal that leaves a shape of the missing in its place. This heavily erased material makes it difficult to decipher the memoranda, cables and brief reports in the state archives.



THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

~~SECRET~~ April 17, 1962

MEMORANDUM FOR

THE PRESIDENT

Congressional Briefing on Laos

The purpose of this briefing is:

(a) to bring the Congressional leadership up to date on developments in Laos since their last briefing, and

(b) to prepare them for a decision to apply a mild form of suspension of military assistance to General Phoumi.

A. Secretary Rusk, General Lemnitzer and Averell will be able to discuss recent events in Laos from a political and military point of view. You may wish to refer to your conversation with Foreign Minister Thanat, [redacted] and to your recent conversation with the Lao Ambassador.

~~SECRET~~ - 2 -

[redacted]

Although

Figure 2: Redacted Memorandum

Mapped onto these records to supposedly preserve history then are empty spaces—blacked or blocked out—surrounded by text. The textual narrative, on the one hand, can be viewed as offering a fragmented and incomplete historical account, which is

precisely the work of the archive. On the other hand, however, the empty spaces of omission offer their own story of absence. Surrounded by the text left behind, they glare back, beckoning the reader to explore what the remains might say about this void. The omissions guide an understanding of the narrative fissures found between the lines and foreground a spatial analysis of US Cold War strategies toward Laos. A spatial analysis is necessary to articulate how Laos has been mapped as integral to US imperialist expansion through the document's cartography of erasures. Therefore, the erasures in secret documents reflect the state's attempts to make sense of its officials' disparate assessments of "what the problems were."[94] As testaments about the past, nonetheless, they survive not unscathed but with parts erased as if the text has been covered over or scraped off. Missing text is a function of the archive to normalize history. The edges of these erasures are markings of knowledge and power essential for constructing national memory.[95]

Mapping a Political Strategy. In addition to the secret documents' reflection of statecraft, I examine how US Cold War maps and map-making underscore the cartographic power in nation building and imperialist expansion. Maps are "ideologically loaded" as tools of power to define and control territory from a distance.[96] Like the documents' smoothing over of historical disparities, maps symbolize "governmental processes of regimentation" where "places, individual homes and complex lives are rendered as mere dots."[97] A cartographic analysis of Cold War mapping praxis reveals US interests in Laos' emerging independence. Specifically, the making of Laos as an empty space and the mapping of its "unincorporated" peoples onto the land, rather than

[94] Stoler, "Colonial Archives," 108.
[95] Schwartz and Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power," 5.
[96] Dodge et. al., "Introductory Essay," 390.
[97] Ibid., 390.

erasing them from it, rationalize US neutralization of Laos' decolonization in the post-WWII period. It is this imagination of Hmong as "natural" objects of the landscape that produces their historical absence.

Indeed, a series of CIA maps from 1961-1963 illustrates the clarity of its stark contrast to the outlined but missing text, blocked-out, of the surrounding states. Laos' geopolitical and symbolically land-locked/blocked-in territory is an empty space that is remote yet accessible as a gateway to the other states. For the countries to the west, bordering Laos means bumping up against the dangerous possibilities it poses of a communist threat. The CIA maps reveal how the US perceived Laos' political terrain written into its geographic topography as the site for assessing global Cold War political struggles. These cartographies map political ideology (communism) using area marked as Communist-controlled. The second image in Figure 2 titled "Communist Rebel Areas" and dated March 22, 1961 exhibits two different kinds of shading in northeastern Laos, bordering North Vietnam, which Communist forces controlled. A comparison of both images shows the progression of communism westward since December 1960, threatening the Laotian capitals of Luang Prabang and Vientiane, and ultimately posing a danger to Thailand. These maps accompanied President Kennedy's press files then, and now circulate as part of his presidential records at the Vietnam Archive. They were used in the early 1960s to justify US efforts to "turn Laos into a buffer," rather than using direct intervention, in order to confine the "communists to the mountains of the north while a friendly government controlled the Mekong Valley borders with Thailand and

Cambodia."[98] This challenges the long-standing characterization of Laos as simply a Cold War "pawn" and peripheral to the superpower struggles between the US and Soviet Union. Instead, the maps suggest a purposeful US covert strategy to create a safeguard in accessing the Southeast Asian region. Such a strategy aims to turn Laos into a "new-pattern colony and military base" to further the US policy of military aggression in Southeast Asia.[99] In the following two sections, I analyze how the concept of "unincorporated" constructed Hmong as a people who were already displaced and did not belong in the nation-state enabled the US to treat Laos like an empty space.[100] Secrecy, I contend, comprises the US project to intercept Laotian independence for its imperialist expansion, beyond the operation of covert military strategies.

[98] Thomas L. Ahern Jr., *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos 1961-1973* (Washington, DC: The Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2006) 4. This major military effort "took the form of a military assistance and advisory program," called the Program Evaluation Office (PEO), to circumvent the provisions of the Geneva Accords which prohibited foreign military presence except for a "residual French mission." Part of the economic aid program, the PEO "equipped and trained regular units of the Forces Armees Royals," the Royal Lao Army.

[99] *Twelve Years of U.S. Imperialist Intervention and Aggression in Laos* (Laos: Neo Lao Haksat Publications, 1966): 11.

[100] This point comes from my conversation with Adria Imada.



Figure 3: Communist Expansion

Neutralizing Laotian Sovereignty

Systemic secrets are spatially produced because it is at the seams and edges of where Laos ends and Communists encroach where the story of US intervention emerges. The outline of Laos in relation to other Southeast Asian states and the shaded areas of Communist control served as justification for US interception. Thus if we examine how Laos was mapped to illustrate Asian communism then we can understand its geopolitical significance as a buffer and corridor in Southeast/Asia for US interests. Laos' dual position as geopolitically surrounded and spatially available structures a gendered racial understanding about US interests. Laos stands out based on the number of countries it shares borders with: North Vietnam and China to the north and east; South Vietnam and Cambodia to the east and south; Thailand to the west; and Burma in the northwest (better known as the Golden Triangle). This feature serves as its instrumental quality for anchoring the rest of Southeast Asia and, at the same time, is an obstacle for US foreign policy. Historian Martin Goldstein and others meticulously rule out population, natural resources and economy as reasons for US interest in Laos, citing that while it is not a "barren land," it also does not have an abundance of crucial resources to warrant US intervention on a massive scale.[101] Indeed, the availability of Laos' timber resources and mineral deposits including zinc, limestone, copper, lead, gold, salt, tungsten and phosphates is evidence of the elemental but insufficient natural resources that would make it a desirable site of territorial competition or takeover by the US. This incredulity at possible US interest in Laos based on its resources reveals that it is not what is in the

[101] Martin E. Goldstein, *American Policy Toward Laos* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1973) 24.

country that matters but rather what surrounds it that makes it significant. Laos stands out as a colonial site, not for its economy or natural resources, but for its territorial ambivalence as a decolonizing country.

Laotian spatial availability constitutes a gendered racial rationale for penetration from both the Communists and Americans. Therefore, Laos was not meant to serve as the site of expansion, but rather a means to an end, to stop Communist takeover and maintain US military bases in South Vietnam and Thailand. Goldstein observes that although the country is "poor, remote, and lightly populated," Laos' multiply shared borders make it a "salient thrusting down between South Vietnam and Thailand." This geopolitical position makes clear Laos' "strategic location" as a gendered racial buffer for US policy-makers and for the US to "prevent the communists from penetrating Southeast Asia."[102] Yet the language used to describe Laos as a "thrusting down" marks it as mysterious but penetratable by communism and democracy. Laos holds at bay as it lies between two ideologies yet its thrust of availability makes the country the middle partner between communism and democracy. The corridor of Communist expansion, specifically the north-south route running through Laos,[103] underscores its very landscape as a crucial "geographic frontier"[104] in the struggle for the "free world." The paradox of a remote yet strategic location illuminates the US central dilemma about maintaining a presence in the country—a hesitation to build a bastion with inadequate "native resources" and a difficult terrain combined with a reluctance to abandon its positioning within the Southeast/Asian struggle. A US answer to this quandary would involve finding a "solution that would

[102] This and the previous quotations are from Goldstein 32.
[103] Ibid., 35-6.
[104] Shiri Pasternak, paper presented at the "Critical Ethnic Studies" conference, March 10-12, 2011.

keep Laos from being wholly Communist, yet not go so far as to make it a Western ally."[105]

US interests, therefore, centered on Asian national independence during the Cold War, particularly the former French Indochinese countries of Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia. To protect US interests in the region and contribute to the struggles for national independence, the government pursued an alternative to total warfare through a combination of military, political and economic tasks.[106] For instance, rather than intervening through overt military aggression, the US began to provide economic aid for Laos' infrastructural developments in order to publicly promote the Geneva Conventions stipulation of a peaceful progress toward sovereignty and independence. Hence the US supplied $310 million in aid to Laos between 1955 and early 1961, raising questions among the American public about the small country's significance to US foreign interests. In a series of press conferences between January and March of 1961, President Kennedy explained US interests in Laos' independence in the following way:

> My fellow Americans, Laos is far away from America, but the world is small. Its two million people live in a country three times the size of Austria. The security of all Southeast Asia will be endangered if Laos loses its neutral independence. Its own safety runs with the safety of us all, in real neutrality observed by all.[107]

Kennedy makes the connection here between the fates of Laos, Southeast Asia and the US if the "small" nation were to lose its "neutral independence." This statement clarifies Laos' independence as important for both Communist and US maneuvers. Evident

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[105] "The Story of Laos: The Problem for a U.S. Foreign Policy," no date, in John F. Kennedy National Security Files on Asia and the Pacific: 1961-1963, The Vietnam Center and Archive (Lubbock, Texas).
[106] Walt W. Rostow with Richard W. Hatch, *An American Policy in Asia* (NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1955) vii.
[107] Press conference, March 23, 1961, in John F. Kennedy National Security Files on Asia and the Pacific: 1961-1963, The Vietnam Center and Archive (Lubbock, Texas).

through these press conferences is the fact that Americans and the international community had knowledge of US investments in Laos through the former's military and civil aid, but they were unclear about the strategy of such investments. A meeting between out-going President Eisenhower and President-elect Kennedy in 1961 is often cited as a key turning point in US policy change toward Southeast Asia.[108] This moment in the changing guard of the nation-state explained the ambiguous strategy of the US toward the country, which elided any overt US investments in its development. The politics of US intervention thus centered on a politics of neutrality which sought to address the concerns of Laotian national unity and independence.

The Kennedy administration used regional maps to chart a neutralization course for Laos as a tool to seek a political, not military, solution to maintain a US presence in Southeast Asia. This neutralization policy seemed to align with US understanding of the neutrality clause in the 1954 Geneva Accords restricting foreign military aid to Laos. The Accords accepted Viet Minh control of North Vietnam and neutralized Laos under a

[108] President Kennedy emphasized his "inheritance" of the Laos problem from President Eisenhower when the two discussed the out-going President's views on the Laos situation in order to set a course consistent with that administration's strategies thus far. He explains taking on the matter from the Eisenhower administration and its immediacy as a problem: "In my last conversation with General Eisenhower, the day before the Inauguration, on January 19, we spent more time on this hard matter than on any other thing; and since then it has been steadily before the Administration as the most immediate of the problems that we found upon taking office" (Press conference, March 23, 1961). While the President-elect sought to understand a situation he "inherited," President Eisenhower stressed the importance of maintaining a neutral Laos and intervening through SEATO rather than committing military actions unilaterally. Ahern attributes US military aggression in Southeast Asia by committing troops, air support and money to this meeting and the differing convictions each administration walked away with. Furthermore, historians Fred I. Greenstein and Richard H. Immerman's investigation into this exchange highlights the debate about Eisenhower's commitment of military actions in South Vietnam and Laos as a confusion that led to transforming the role of US intervention in the region. They explain how Laos "appeared to be most threatened with an imminent Communist takeover" and urgent for American intervention" (571). Eisenhower's successors reasoned that even if he had not made formal commitments, he viewed the defense of the Indochinese states about to succumb to the Communists as within US national interests. See Fred I. Greenstein and Richard H. Immerman, "What did Eisenhower Tell Kennedy about Indochina? The Politics of Misperception," *The Journal of American History* (1992): 568-587.

regime to be monitored by an International Control Commission (ICC).[109] The US viewed the "chaotic situation" in Southeast Asia created by the Agreements as a dangerous context for strengthening Communist forces in which it feared that a "united, well-led, albeit small Pathet Lao group, supported and directed by North Viet Nam" would be in a position to take control of the country.[110] As a non-signatory to the Final Declaration of the Conference, the US made its intervention in Laos in the form of diplomatic negotiations and aid based on this perceived threat, which put it in a position to "observe and to help punish anyone who did not" follow the Agreement.[111] In doing so, the US government undertook preemptive actions after the Accords' signing to strengthen the Lao government and build unity among the anti-communist leadership to heighten its understanding of the "Communist menace."[112]

The aim to stop Communist expansion is about producing favorable conditions for US expansion into Southeast/Asia. The policy of neutralization served as a US expansion policy, a formula to "preserve a noncommunist Laos while leaving the ground combat to indigenous forces."[113] By extension, it "preserves a Laotian buffer state" while avoiding the "intention to challenge Beijing's territorial integrity."[114] US Cold War spatialization thus linked Laos to its broader interests in Southeast/Asia. In addition, the neutralization policy sought to test Soviet reactions to US maneuvers. It placed the Laotian crisis into a larger Cold War framework as a site to begin the termination of

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[109] Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 3.
[110] TOP SECRET *The Story of Laos: The Problem for a U.S. Foreign Policy*, no date, in Kennedy National Security Files, 1961-1963, Laos (no date) in John F. Kennedy National Security Files on Asia and the Pacific: 1961-1963, The Vietnam Center and Archive (Lubbock, Texas).
[111] Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 3.
[112] TOP SECRET *The Story of Laos: The Problem for a U.S. Foreign Policy*.
[113] Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 74.
[114] Ibid., 50.

hostilities with a joint United States-Soviet undertaking.[115] Laos was a test case "to determine whether the cold war protagonists could accept solutions that were less than completely satisfactory in relation to areas or problems where they had only marginal interests" in order to avoid superpower confrontations.[116] This strategy examined "hypotheses about Soviet behavior"[117] in which President Kennedy and his advisers assumed that the Russian leaders' rapport with the Pathet Lao would influence control over its strategy and communist military actions. Laos' independence as a small and "militarily dwarfed" nation provided strong justification for use as a US "laboratory," not necessarily for controlling communism, but for thwarting the socialist superpower.

But, Laos can only be neutral if it is politically empty. The neutralization policy necessarily constructed the newly independent nation as not yet a nation-state in order to intervene in its sovereignty. In a letter on the seriousness of the Laotian situation, MIT Professor Lucian Pye described US problems in subduing Laos as the policy-makers' failure to recognize that it is "not a nation-state." Therefore, Kennedy and his advisers mistakenly applied to Laos policies appropriate in "relations among nation-states." Consequently, they have at best been made to look foolish and at worst may have permitted a "domestic Laotian controversy to become a genuine international crisis." This logic undermined Laotian sovereignty to rationalize increased covert military aggression for building national unity. Because Laos is not really a state or a nation, Pye explained, he and others have "expected it to do things which only a viable, integrated system can

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[115] Kenneth L. Hill, "President Kennedy and the Neutralization of Laos," *The Review of Politics* 31, no. 3 (1969): 354.
[116] Ibid., 357.
[117] Lucian W. Pye, letter to Walt W. Rostow, March 20, 1961, in Kennedy National Security Files, 1961-1963, Laos (no date) in John F. Kennedy National Security Files on Asia and the Pacific: 1961-1963, The Vietnam Center and Archive (Lubbock, Texas).

do." The failure of US previous aid policies is evidence that a neutralization policy cannot be achieved. The "real problem of Laos," he declared, is not US intervention but rather its troubles in forming a "viable political system." He suggested that this requires more effort and assistance to "concentrate on the fundamentals of nation building," to develop Laos within the "Western tradition of the nation-state system."[118] But the problem with Laos is more than its lack of national unity. The idea of Laos as an empty space utilized US colonial concepts of the "unincorporated" territory, a term from the set of Insular Cases in the early 1900s to define US colonial territories. Laos was not a nation-state because it could not govern its people.

Laos' suspended status as a nation-state, according to the US, meant that the US government was unwilling to commit enough military efforts to launch a conventional war in the country. Although it considered Laos crucial to holding South Vietnam and Thailand, the US cannot fully invest in a military campaign. In a "Memorandum of Conversation" detailing the private meeting among State Department officials and several military generals on April 29, 1961 concerning the subject of military action in Laos, it was clear that the US considered Thailand and South Vietnam the best places to "stand and fight" in Southeast Asia; but "the major question was whether we would stand up and fight" in Laos. Even in 1961, when the CIA already began arming Hmong "volunteers," US officials had not made up their minds about whether to stand up and fight in Laos. Hence Laos was critical but targeting US military operations there was questionable. Those in attendance at this meeting conveyed the possibility of holding parts of Laos,

[118] The discussion in this paragraph comes from the Lucian W. Pye, letter to Walt W. Rostow March 20, 1961.

mainly the Mekong Valley area along with the capital of Vientiane, but allowing the "enemy" to have "all of the countryside" and trying to stop both the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese by air power. General Geo. H. Decker pointed out that "we cannot win a conventional war in Southeast Asia [because] all the advantage we have in heavy equipment would be lost in the difficult terrain of Laos where we would be at the mercy of the guerrillas." The "difficult terrain of Laos" highlights the landscape itself as an obstacle for US expansion precisely when that space serves as the critical site to begin such a project. Discussions in the classified documents make known the "magnitude of the problem" and state officials' negotiations around it, yet they skirt around the subject of the crisis.

Nonetheless, the question remained about the consequences for US militarism/imperialism in Southeast Asia if Laos "went down the drain." Could South Vietnam and Thailand be held if Laos was lost? Deputy Assistant Secretary Steeves reminded those at the meeting that the US had declared it would not give up Laos because "if this problem is unsolvable then the problem of Viet-Nam would be unsolvable." He implored further that "if we decided that this was untenable then we were writing the first chapter in the defeat of Southeast Asia." Admiral Arleigh Burke further emphasized that each time ground is given up it is harder to stand the next time:

> If we give up Laos we would have to put US forces into Viet-Nam and Thailand. We would have to throw enough in to win ____...[we should] "make clear that we were not going to be pushed out of Southeast Asia. We were fighting for the rest of Asia.

If the larger goal is to gain access to or create successful foreign policies in Asia, then it was symbolically important to take a stand in Laos. The small country figured as a

launching pad for US imperialist expansion. The expense the US was unwilling to take was to put "greater effort" to hold the bordering countries without Laos as the critical anchor and buffer. Specifically, Thailand would have to be defended from the "other bank," its own side, of the Mekong River rather than the Laotian bank.[119] This was the dilemma Laos presented for the US as it sought to move into Southeast Asia without holding the country at center stage to the region and all of Asia.

In the meantime, the US resorted to strategies of covert political, military and economic activities to foster nationalism among the "unincorporated" peoples in Laos. By the time of this debate about maintaining a presence in Laos without committing military forces, "guerrilla bases" covered most exits from the Plain of Jars[120] and a small Hmong force emerged as "the main barrier to communist encroachment from the northeast."[121] The US reluctance to operate a conventional war, nonetheless, envisioned an operation with "no Americans on the ground" and the CIA playing a "purely supportive role."[122] The main objective of US interest in Laos was to preserve its noncommunist status and "save" it from domination by the Pathet Lao, Hanoi's supposed surrogate. Specifically, the US saw its "main point of contention" as "North Vietnam's failure to withdraw any significant forces from Laos, while US-supported military programs there sought to resist Hanoi's encroachments."[123] In turn, Hmong recruits were employed as US "surrogates" to defend their territory in the mountains of northeastern

[119] The quotes in this and the previous paragraph came from "Memorandum of Conversation," April 29, 1961, in the Kennedy Files.
[120] Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 66-7.
[121] Ibid., 56.
[122] Ibid., 41.
[123] Ibid., xv.

Laos and divert substantial North Vietnamese forces from South Vietnam.[124] Additionally, the US installed American-operated facilities called Lima Sites, made shift military bases, supported by crude airstrips. These Sites allow US personnel to be in Laos collecting intelligence, monitoring Communist movements, and providing radar operations for air strikes in North Vietnam and northeastern Laos.[125] By the late 1960s, historians realized Laos was an unfortunate test case in Cold War diplomacy.[126]

The discussion in this section foregrounds how Laos was imagined as an empty space for the pursuit of a gendered racial US project of secrecy to interrupt the country's independence struggles. The texts of CIA history and Kennedy files perpetuate those missing stories about Laos and its struggle for self-determination. Laos has been missing from discussions of US imperialism even when it played a central role in US Cold War strategies in the region, precisely because it is figured as that vacant space. Laos was treated as an empty territory in parallel to Hmong as an "unincorporated" people who lack geographic boundaries; both were necessary constructions to produce a US program of secrecy. The next section will interrogate the narrative of Hmong as a part of nature and the Laotian landscape as well as outside of modernity to reveal how Hmong constitute the problem in nation-building, for Laos and the US.

"Fasteners" for a "Foam-rubber Frontier": The Making of an "Unofficial" Alliance

[124] Ibid., xv.
[125] Timothy N. Castle, *One Day Too Long: Top Secret Site 85 and the Bombing of North Vietnam* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1999) 2.
[126] Hill, "President Kennedy," 364.

The problem with Laos' sovereignty that was troubling for US policies stemmed from the country's scattered and ungoverned "unincorporated groups."[127] Despite divisions among the Lao leadership, a purported lack of nationalism among the multitude of peoples who had different relationships to the central government contributed to the issue of Laotian governance.[128] Efforts to circumvent conventional war necessitated a different US commitment with a "radically" new approach. A report on this "new look at Laos" from K.T. Young offered an eight-point program to change the situation for the US involving the implementation of a Village Promotion Program to promote national unity. The report's most compelling assessment of the crux of the Lao problem finds that the issue is neither military nor diplomatic but rather a matter of "internal social and political re-assembly [requiring] some putty around the 'plate glass' and some fasteners in this 'foam-rubber frontier.'"[129] Young's descriptor of Laos as a "foam-rubber frontier" represents Kennedy's "New Frontier" of world power and industrial development into Southeast/Asia. Tracing the historical development of a *national* myth, Richard Slotkin articulates the "New Frontier" as a symbol to "summon the nation as a whole to

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[127] American foreign policy makers perceived Laos' problem as rooted in its miniscule national unity: "Laos has never been a national entity governed by sure and united authority. Its people lack a sense of national loyalty and identity and they continue to be divided by traditional ethnic, regional, and family antagonisms. A gulf has always existed between the central government in Vientiane and the people in the countryside, and those who have governed Laos have never established effective authority or won the respect of all the various peoples who make up the Lao nation. *The non-Communist political factions have never achieved unity or cohesion and have tended to view one another with as much suspicion as they do the Communist left*. As a result, no strong, effective non-Communist leadership has emerged since Laos achieved independence. The Communist Pathet Lao, supported by North Viet-Nam, Communist China, and the USSR, have taken advantage of these fundamental weaknesses in the political and social fabric of Laos bringing the country into a state of chaos and near civil war" (emphasis original) in "Chronology of Events in Laos," undated from Kennedy Files. The charge that Laos "never achieved [political] unity or cohesion" justified the US case to build coercive diplomatic and covert military campaigns toward the very goal of undermining Laotian sovereignty.

[128] In comparison to Vietnam and Cambodia, Laos served as a failed colony due to its centralized government's inability to govern and incorporate the ethnic minorities distant from Vientiane and Luang Prabang, the government and royal centers, respectively.

[129] K.T. Young, "A New Look at Laos," February 3, 1961 in the Kennedy Files.

undertake a heroic engagement in the 'long twilight struggle' against Communism" along with its social and economic injustices.[130] In turn, the Kennedy administration projected this vision onto Laos and imagined its unincorporated peoples as instrumental to this "New Frontier."

Therefore, Laos' ethnic groups are mapped as integral to its topography in serving as a naturalized buffering resistance force. The maps constitute a "patchwork" layout, a term used to describe the country's hodgepodge of minority groups, which constructs its people to the land. A CIA map showing population distribution illustrates this spatial imagining of Laotian peoples onto the terrain in which Lao occupy the land along the Mekong River bordering Thailand to the royal capital of Luang Prabang, considered "the best land." The groups "dispossessed" of political rights inhabit the "higher, and poorer, land." The latter group, therefore, exist as "hill tribes"—a natural feature of the landscape.[131] Parceled into different military regions, Laos' different ethnic groups are pre-disposed as strategic to that area's topography. Although Hmong lived in different parts of northern Laos from the North Vietnamese to Thai borders, their concentration in Xieng Khouang province, where the Plain of Jars is located, makes them ideal for combat in that difficult terrain. Hence, the Hmong "secret army" led by General Vang Pao was interpreted as synonymous with Military Region II's landscape due to their willing inclination to defend their homes, families and livelihoods against Communist threats. The Hmong army's operation of the program as a "resistance movement" with CIA advisers erased US accountability for providing material aid.

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[130] Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992) 3-4.

[131] What I've quoted here is from "The Story of Laos: The Problem for a U.S. Foreign Policy," no date, in Kennedy Files.



Figure 4: Ethnic Group Distribution[132]

[132] The designation "Meo" on this map refers to Hmong. This derogatory naming, which reflects the history of Hmong persecution and displacement, persist in the government and some refugee records so that one has to look for "Meo" in order to find Hmong.

Colonial tropes of the landscape and the native imagined Hmong as a physical barrier for the US frontier and Communist corridor through Laos. The portrayals of Hmong difference as "mountain people" and "tribesmen" are part of the narrative of colonial encounter. CIA historian Ahern describes one of these scenes in his volume about the war in Laos when a Hmong village chief (naiban) rescued Bill Lair and his helicopter pilot after their craft did not clear the trees on their way to visit the Vang Pao: "Serendipity appeared in the person of a Hmong tribesmen, who jogged up the slope in the tireless gait of mountain people, running on the leathery feet and splayed toes of a man who had never worn shoes."[133] This description of a Hmong man coming to the rescue of Lair and his pilot in a "tireless gait" with "leathery feet and splayed toes" likens Hmong to nature. Hmong physical features are figured as inextricably linked to the landscape to mark their belonging to nature, and as an important resource for US imperialist expansion. In addition, descriptions of Hmong fighting later in the conflict were paralleled with the functions of nature, the land, and seasons. Discussing the shift of Laos into a sideshow once the US committed airpower to South Vietnam in 1964 and ground troops in 1965, Ahern characterizes a reversal of the "antagonists' strategic positions" found in Vietnam. Whereas the Viet Cong were more mobile and able to "bedevil Saigon's road-bound heavy infantry, Hmong irregulars flitted over mountain trails or moved by air to occupy key high ground and to harass Hanoi's tanks and artillery." The tactical advantage in Laos followed the monsoon season in which the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) advanced during the dry season, usually early November to late May, and gave ground to Hmong operations when the rains washed out the

[133] Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 35.

"primitive road system."[134] These descriptions proclaimed Hmong capable of scouring the difficult terrain and poised as a clandestine force to divert Communist expansion.

Juxtaposing the previous map of the ethnic groups with another CIA map of the "Ground War 1961-1975" depicting a close up of Military Region II makes clear where the heavy ground war operated and who lived in that area. General Vang Pao[135] and the Hmong population were depicted as the instinctive barrier and resistance force in the Plain of Jars because they were right "under the enemy's nose."[136] This map (see enlargement) outlined the area where Hmong forces operated through the geographic markers of Long Cheng, Sam Thong and Padong. Long Cheng served as the "secret" military base for General Vang Pao and his Hmong army while Sam Thong jointly functioned as the humanitarian base for refugees and wounded soldiers. While reporters could visit Sam Thong to record the US humanitarian aid (USAID) to those internally displaced or wounded by the fighting, they did not have access to Long Cheng and its military operations. Therefore, the refugee is figured as a victim in order to construct the conflict in Laos as a civil war, or at best an extension of the US war in Vietnam rather than being key to its imperialist project. This configuration of the refugee makes the US illicit role in the country absent from discussions of US imperialism. I contend that the formation of the Hmong refugee from the war constitutes the unincorporated trace of US violence and epistemological rupture.

Padong, in relation Long Cheng and Sam Thong, was the site of the first meeting between Vang Pao, CIA paramilitary agent Stu Methven and case officer Bill Lair, the

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[134] Ibid., xv.
[135] I use General Vang Pao in general references to him and instead use Vang Pao when discussing him in historical context.
[136] Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 34.

CIA's chief architecture of the "secret army," as well as the initial recruitment and training of Hmong volunteers in early 1961. Ahern describes the picturesque village linked to nature in order to illustrate its captivation and "eerie attraction" for Americans and the US government:

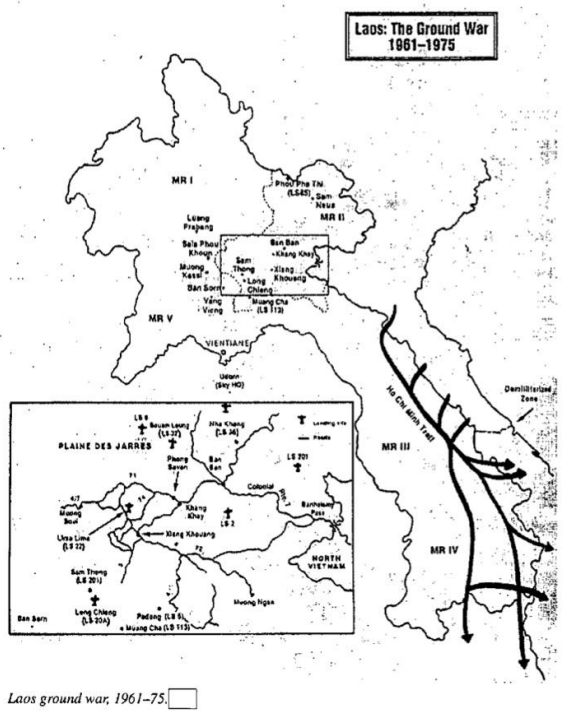
> Ban Pa Dong, 4,500 feet above sea level, epitomized the eerie attraction that Laos—especially upcountry Laos—held for nearly all the Americans who worked there. With neighboring peaks hidden behind towers of cumulus clouds, the village stood in crystalline air on a ridgeline that sloped, first gradually and then precipitously, until it disappeared in the stratus clouds that concealed the valley below. The dying swish of the helicopter's main rotor only emphasized the stillness of a perfectly calm day.[137]

This portrayal of a Hmong village high in the mountains and disappearing into the clouds conveyed the US obsession to conquer the land as well as the potential effectiveness of a Hmong force. This region functioned as the "most secret place on earth" because it signified the absent presence of an imagined US frontier, and continues to symbolize the memories of Hmong veterans and refugees that are silenced and do not have a place. Because the places of Hmong fighting are missing from the map, Hmong memories cannot have a place in the historical record.

[137] Ibid., 36.

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Laos ground war, 1961–75.

Washington and Vientiane to end Laotian neutrality. This would have abrogated the 1962 Geneva Agreements, which prohibited all foreign powers but the French from maintaining a military presence in Laos. Overtly committing US combat forces or even military advisers would imperil the basis for a negotiated peace, something the Kennedy administration shrank from doing. The upshot was that, in addition to deploying its own paramilitary resources, CIA often found itself mediating between the Vientiane embassy and MACV in Saigon. In this capacity, it worked to preserve the ambassador's authority

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Figure 5: The Ground War

Vang Pao's military and cultural credentials made him an asset for instituting a covert military operation that would enable access to Hmong forces but also ensure that they did not revolt against the Lao government. He fought with the French against Japanese occupation of Laos during WWII at the age of thirteen, and later with the

French Expeditionary Force against the Viet Minh in 1953-4, which made him a valuable resource for pursuing US interests. When the CIA contacted him in 1955, he was a major commander of Forces Armees Royale's (FAR), Royal Lao Army, Xieng Khouang district and the highest-ranking Hmong in the army. In addition, his rapport with the Hmong population made him the ideal "man we've [CIA] been looking for."[138] In the aftermath of Captain Kong Le's coup in August 1960 to rid Laos of external Western influence and his retreat to the Plain of Jars with Soviet materials support, the US (through the Program Evaluation Office in Laos and the Pentagon) armed Hmong for resistance in the northeast with "2,000 light weapons" to protect their villages from Pathet Lao or neutralist pressure."[139] Methven and Lair[140] met again with Vang Pao on January 10, 1961 to begin exploring "the Hmong tribe's potential for irregular warfare" as a Right Wing resistance force against neutralist Kong Le and Communist Pathet Lao. Lair's first question to Vang Pao was: "With the communists and neutralists installed on the Plain of Jars, what exactly did the Hmong people want to do?" In answer, he suggested that Hmong had two alternatives, either flee to the west or stay and fight, and "he and his people wanted to stay."[141] Two weeks after Lair's first meeting with Vang Pao, the US armed "the first 300

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[138] Ibid., 31.
[139] Ibid., 27. Because the Military Assistance Program lacked the flexibility to "exploit the Hmong potential," the US Mission in Vientiane took it upon itself to ask the Pentagon for World War II-vintage B-26 aircraft to fly armed to execute photographic missions over Laos and North Vietnam (28).
[140] Bill Lair had been in Thailand since the early 1950s to organize and train the elite Thai Police group called the Police Air Reconnaissance Unit (PARU). From Richard L. Holm, "Recollections of a Case Officer in Laos, 1962-1964: No Drums, No Bugles" CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol47no1/article01.html retrieved on April 10, 2011.
[141] Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 31.

Hmong volunteers" in Padong on January 1961 with "three C-46 cargo planes cross[ing] the Mekong into Laos carrying weapons and equipment."[142]

The depiction of Hmong as subjects closely linked to nature also portrayed them as behind in reason and discipline. Thus Hmong are figured as pre-modern subjects who have not yet caught up with modern reason. Their skills at operating weaponry or traversing the jungle terrain are inherent to their primitive status. Hmong may be adept at guerrilla fighting with their abilities to navigate the terrain but "an American presence in Hmong country" was required to enforce effective training and advising.[143] Indeed, Hmong were characterized as "Iron Age Guerrillas"—the "Little Guys" or "Meo irregulars"[144]—who possessed innate fighting skills but lacked the discipline to afford them status as a conventional force. Recounting the initial training of Hmong volunteers at Padong, Ahern described them as "Iron Age tribesmen" who were the "best natural riflemen that Lair ___ ___ had ever seen" because they knew how to clean and maintain their rifles and carbines within minutes.[145] The quickness of their learning makes them "natural" fighters because they only needed a few hours at the improvised firing range before moving on to combat organization and tactics.[146] However, they lacked "fire discipline" and exhausted their ammunition supply in the first encounter with advancing Pathet Lao forces two weeks after the first weapons were dropped.[147] The seemingly

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[142] Ibid., 41.
[143] Ibid., 58.
[144] Richard Secord with Jay Wurts, Honored and Betrayed: Irangate, Covert Affairs, and the Secret War in Laos (NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1992), 75.
[145] Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 43.
[146] Ibid., 44. Secord reiterates the naturalized Hmong guerrilla fighting where soldiers usually escaping unscathed because nobody expected them to 'stand fast' under the pressure of heavy infantry and artillery, that is not how guerrillas fight. In doing so, they broke up into squads and "melted into the jungle" only to "reappear magically" at a different site (87).
[147] Ibid., 44.

unreliable Hmong army comprised a temporary "surrogate for a surrogate" to prevent "the enemy" from consolidating its control while the United States and the Royal Lao Government "struggled to make the regular army a fighting force."[148] Thus the US reliance on a group that is knowledgeable about the region manipulated Hmong desires for political autonomy for US purposes of "expelling neutralist and communist forces." Broadly speaking, supplying materials support for "native" ground combat forces—arming Hmong to fight in defense of their way of life for the US—reveals the logic of US Cold War strategies to intercept Southeast/Asian decolonization and independence struggles. The Hmong "guerrilla resistance" force was conceived as Hmong fighting for themselves and, in turn, for the US, which comprised an ideal supplementary entity to a regular Lao army.

As "unincorporated surrogates" Hmong were perceived as having no allegiance or self-determination for sovereignty, ideal "fasteners" of national unity and expansion. To imagine Hmong as "fasteners" involved a strategy of, what Ahern characterizes as, allowing "a people to defend itself for as long as it wished to do so."[149] Applying this principle of being there without participating in the fight entailed maintaining the "integrity of the Hmong leadership structure" where "Hmong leaders must command Hmong fighters."[150] Such a strategy consolidates a singular narrative about Hmong involvement as desiring to fight for the nation while erasing US accountability. In doing so, Hmong political desires and objectives were composed as family-oriented and not nationally-conceived; therefore, Hmong are necessarily incapable of serving as "regular

[148] Ibid., 36.
[149] Ibid., 43-4.
[150] Ibid., 43-4.

infantry." Hmong soldiers' deftly display of guerrilla fighting skills, described as their "astonishing speed and endurance as they traversed mountain ridges carrying weapons and ammunition" aligns with their lack of discipline and "indifference to any goal broader than securing their families and their way of life."[151] Indeed, they are motivated "almost exclusively by the urge to protect their families"[152] rather than for a broader goal of self-determination and sovereignty. It perpetuates the perception that Hmong belong in the mountains and will without question stay to fight.

Ultimately, the "Hmong guerrilla resistance" movement was an assimilation project to bolster Laotian nationalism and further US expansionism. But arming Hmong to fight came with anxieties about their resistance against the Lao government. Lair and Vang Pao, had agreed to "avoid the appearance of supporting Hmong autonomy" and to instead "encourage and promote the tribe's assimilation into the Laotian nation"[153] using the national language in the Hmong radio network. At the juncture between nation-states, Hmong and other so-called "hill tribes" therefore presented a potential solution to national unity but also a threat to the very formation of the nation-state.

The making of an "unofficial" alliance between Hmong and the US had a colonial legacy, one that Hmong had experienced before with France. Vang Pao linked French and US military projects in Laos with Hmong soldiers by confronting Methven about US abandonment, like the French had done in 1954, asking: "Would the United States stay the course, if it began helping the Hmong, or did he risk having aid cut off and his people left to the mercy of the North Vietnamese?" To this, Methven vaguely assured him that

[151] Ibid., 59.
[152] Ibid., 51.
[153] Ibid., 46-7.

"any American commitment would be honored as long as it was needed."[154] This ominous beginning foreshadowed US abandonment after its defeat in Vietnam in 1975, when an "American commitment" was no longer "needed." By 1975, the US did withdraw its support of the Hmong "secret army" that had grown to more than 30,000 strong with 11-year old boys joining the fighting because more men were needed. With Communist troops closing in on the Long Cheng military base, General Vang Pao and his family along with several high-ranking military officers' families were evacuated from Laos to Thailand and then to the US, generating the exodus of Hmong soldiers and civilians toward Thailand's borders.[155] Hmong as "fasteners" for Laos' "foam-rubber frontier" constructed Hmong "unincorporated" status as outside the nation-state and modernity. It is this status at the intersections of US imperialism and Laotian postcolonial struggles that configures the Hmong refugee figure as the trace of secrecy, and a racialized subject.

The "Unofficial" List: Mapping Hmong Presence

In Thailand's refugee camps, refugee documents track the governance of Hmong lives as legally displaced subjects shaped by fragmentary details about a historical Hmong-US relationship. If the classified document that serves as a mechanism of statecraft is hardly a secret, then the resettlement application in seeking refuge constitutes a mundane apparatus that benignly lists Hmong applicants' previous militarized occupations. But I also suggest that this seemingly benign process of resettlement comprises state management of the refugee into a proper immigrant subject. Inquiries

[154] The quotes here are from Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 30.
[155] For a discussion of General Vang Pao's decision to leave and the evacuation from Long Cheng, see Gayle Morrison, *Sky is Falling: An Oral History of the CIA's Evacuation of the Hmong from Laos* (NC: McFarland, 2007).

such as “what was your occupation?” comprise procedural refugee processing. Yet, Hmong refugees’ long responses show up in the written record merely as a list of occupations such as military, soldier, student, farmer, and embroiderer. Like the missing baggage’s simultaneous embodiment of the mundane and excessive, these occupational categories make up the un/familiar things that are out of place and time within a standard application. This documentation of Hmong refugees’ professional backgrounds imagined them as potential immigrants who would contribute to rather than burden the US. But Hmong training and skills in the context of US militarism represents the very encumbrance to liberation and refuge because their occupations become obsolete in the US as well as serve as reminders of the nation-state’s production of violence and displacement.

The archive’s restrictions against duplication demanded a different approach to sifting through Hmong refugees’ case files. Because I could not record any identifying information about the applicants, I documented a list of the occupations and skills, work history, and education. Compiled together, the inventory becomes an unofficial list of military enrollment as evidence of America’s “secret army.” The word soldier appears most on this list and is often paired with student and farmer. Each new line in the list represents a different family and their application, which illustrates either pairings of just the head of household’s profession or both the husband and wife’s occupations together. Seeing “military” and “soldier” written into the record about Hmong refugees strangely neutralizes US militarism as a benign part of Hmong lives in Laos; yet it symbolizes a haunting in the archive’s structure.

Occupation & skills (VOLAG BIO)
Farmer, embroidery, seamstress for three female adults (2 daughters) in the family
Gardening
Hand-sewing, seamstress
Basket maker
Student
Farmer
Soldier, farmer
Teacher (general), Rice farmer ("no special skills" listed on the same form under other information and interviewer's comments)
Domestic help
Embroidery, farmer
Military ("blind right eye" listed under Health for this individual)
Student, farmer
Military, farmer
Embroidery, farmer
Student, military
Farmer, student
Embroiderer, farmer
Student/Machine sewing
Military/farmer
Medic, pharmacist
Seamstress
Army, mapping, intelligence – typing (Eng & Lao)
Farmer, embroidery
Fabrcatng: Jewlr [sic]

Figure 6: List of Occupation & Skills

This list projects a mish mash ranging from the highly skilled profession of military intelligence and medic/pharmacist to "unskilled" rice farmer. Hmong women's occupations are primarily listed as farming, domestic work, embroidery, seamstress, and sometimes student. But the different pairings show how Hmong soldiers were both students and farmers, either before or after their military duties. They foreground the residual reminders of lives lived in war, and the embodied violence that is described in the "blind right eye" note accompanying the military occupation.

Unlike the classified documents, these applications are private records with restricted access and duplication in the archive. They are neither hidden nor erased. But the applications represent state management of refugee resettlement and Hmong histories through their fragmentary recording of Hmong lives onto compartmentalized ways of knowing on the page. They contain family secrets in which each line traces a specific family story detailing generations of soldiers and students living under different imperialist regimes. For example, the fathers of Hmong men who joined the fighting at age sixteen for the US worked as porters for the French during the 1930s and early 1940s or were soldiers for the French occupation army after WWII. Some soldiers were not particularly eager to fight on the frontlines but felt an obligation to help the Hmong leader, General Vang Pao, "because the country was at war."[156] Hmong students returned from their studies to join the fighting or continued to become teachers of Lao history, geography and English. Often, families were displaced from village to village to escape the war's violence while their husbands and sons fought on the frontline. Several young Hmong women trained as nurses to care for the wounded soldiers beyond farming and embroidery, but all lived an existence shaped by leaving. The methods of recording education and work history on the applications allow glimpses of these stories.

Read together, education and work history provides more context for the general list above by offering dates to situate active military duty during the war. The dates reveal that these individuals fought in the later years toward the end of the war but details about training in "combat tactics" for two and half months and seven years of education allude to the conditions confronting Hmong during the war. Perhaps most striking are the dates

[156] Conroy, "Highland Lao Refugees," 46-60.

and rankings listed under work history that specify their status as 1st Lieutenant or Sergeant. A note about a wounded right knee but "NOW NO problems" illuminates the irony of the wound as proof of military service, yet something which does not disable one's eligibility for resettlement. In other words, these descriptions reveal the suppressed violence of war in making the refugee. Moreover, specialized training and skills explained in the following list bring to the fore Hmong participation in activities beyond the soldier role, challenging the cartography of the Hmong guerrilla fighter. Yet, the soldier occupation has become the most salient symbol of Hmong racial difference, and a claim for Hmong legal entry into the US as refugees.

Education:
"Trained in Laos in combat tactics total 2.5 months" (listed under Special training, diplomas, certificates)
Hmong (illiterate); Lao (fair) speaking only
Studying sewing at camp sewing center
Reads and writes English, good listening comprehension
Public health training in camp hospital
7 years education

Work history:
Housewife
1970-72: Taxi-Driver
1972-75: Soldier, second lieutenant
1970-1975: military – Highest Rank: LT., was a platoon leader of 19 or 20 persons, wounded in right knee (superficially), NOW NO problems. Also kept company accounts & records for a year
HW/Farmer
1972-1975: soldier, Rank: 1st/Lieutenant
Housewife
Sewing in camp
Military 71-75
1969-1975 Soldier, Rank: 1st/sgt.
Farmer
S.G.U. Soldier (1969-75)

Figure 7: List of Hmong Refugees' Education & Working History

Ultimately, I intend to use these lists to remap the complexities of Hmong lives in Laos beyond the categories of student, farmer, teacher, military personnel/soldier, seamstress/embroiderer, medic/pharmacist, and domestic work. Reading these lists offer a Hmong presence in contrast to the CIA and larger mapping of the war and violence that primarily represents them as "natural" barriers to the enemy and communism, and absent from historical knowledge. This remapping insists on rendering a Hmong presence in the spaces where things are missing. Their presence in the refugee records challenge the US Cold War spatializing of Hmong as natural "fasteners" for the nation and foreground the "continuous, ongoing storytelling" that refuses the historical cover up inherent in the valorization of an "unofficial" Hmong-US alliance.[157] Native feminist scholar Mishuana Goeman contends that re-creating spatial communities that have been defined by colonial notions of spatial belonging involves promoting forms of "spatiality and sovereignty found in tribal memories and stories."[158] Looking at the above fragmented list, I imagine a different documentation that rearranges and gathers together the incomplete narratives. Strung together, the occupations remap Hmong assertions of presence in space and time rather than absent from the archive and outside of historical time. Indeed, the mundane activities of filling out an application or attending a family gathering are already loaded with these stories that "could not be told" elsewhere.

In another scene in the backyard of a family gathering, an uncle pulls out his wallet to show a card identifying him as a Hmong veteran of the CIA and US "secret war" in Laos. He raises his hand to identify himself to the camera, filmmaker, and

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[157] Mishuana Goeman, "(Re)Mapping Indigenous Presence on the Land in Native Women's Literature," *American Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (2008) 300.
[158] Ibid., 301.

audience, declaring in Hmong: "CIA, Hmong. Hmong, CIA."[159] Flashing the card from his wallet, the uncle further states that, "we have CIA cards" to prove our claims. This scene from the recent documentary on Hmong American break dancers in California's Central Valley, *Among B-Boys*, brings into sharp relief this ongoing storytelling. The film's feature on two crews of Hmong youth looking for "life's breaks on and off the dance floor" briefly captures this uncle of one of the artists as the camera pans the gathering. Hmong Americans with whom I watched the film identified the uncle as their father, grandfather or uncle who always tells his story about the war to whomever would listen. Their reactions suggest a familiarity that they and I have become accustomed to, the stories that we were not supposed to forget. Such moments captured on film and interpellated by Hmong American viewers serve as reminder that statements like this uncle's are often unwritten and mundane because they surface surrounded by the things that are familiar. Yet, the statement commands a listening that pays attention to these fleeting notes that are always threatened to be erased.

In addition to how Hmong storytelling undermines the imperial mapping that displaces Hmong from history, the uncle's CIA ID card is a counter-use of the documents that sought to interpellate and define him as "refugee" and "loyal soldier."[160] The CIA ID card was produced by a veterans' organization, Lao Veterans, Inc., to identify Hmong veterans for services and benefits such as the Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act, which I will discuss in chapter two. This veterans' organization drew upon the emphasis on the textual record as proper identification to promote Hmong veterans' visibility and

[159] *Among B-Boys*, Dir. Christopher Woon, CRS1UN Productions, 2011.
[160] This point comes from my conversation with Adria Imada.

subjectivity as participants and collaborators in the war. The veteran ID card appropriates conventional recording to generate a list of army recruits that does not exist in the state or military records. This record, however, is carried around by the veteran, housed not in the archive, but on the body so that he constitutes the archive of secrets and its embeddedness in the Hmong refugee.

Conclusion

This chapter covers the often separated topics of Hmong refugees, US neutralization policy toward Laos and its expansionist agenda in Southeast/Asia along with declassified state documents and refugee records. Tracing these paper trails and their omissions, I foreground a reading of things that are missing to expose their enduring absences and narrate a story that encircles the gaps embedded in the archiving of Hmong refugees—an archive of missing things. These erasures make intelligible the secret documents' making sense of disparate narratives about US Cold War strategies as a spatializing endeavor, through the intervention into Laos, to imagine Laos along with Hmong as buffers for the Southeast/Asian frontier. In addition, I showed that such a reading makes visible secrets as a fundamental process of historical knowledge formation and retrieval procedures. I have tried to unpack records that seemingly make sense (mundane listing of previous occupations and routine de/classification procedures) as well as imbue meaning to those that evidence justification for US intervention and refugee resettlement. Ultimately, I seek to challenge the nation-based knowledge paradigm concerning Hmong refugees/Americans and global formations during the Cold War. In forging the methodological and historical relationships around "secrets," I have conceptualized Hmong refugees as a paradigm to expose the systemic policies of a

transnational state-making project. This excavation explains the pervasiveness of secrecy in producing historical absence about Hmong displacement from Laos. Indeed, the official end of the Cold War in 1989, release of classified documents in the early 1990s, and the resettlement of hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asian refugees did not mean that the wars were over. The formation of historical knowledge and negotiations for state recognition or remembering persists well beyond the time period and outside of the CIA into the law, cultural productions, and community politics. This chapter conceptualizes the relationship between secrecy and the Hmong refugee figure as a historical and methodological dilemma. It has laid out several key points that the following three chapters will engage with in deeper analysis such as the figure of the refugee soldier for making claims to legal belonging and articulating Hmong histories in the present. In addition, the fourth chapter will explore the refugee archive of Hmong-produced knowledge through family narratives to deconstruct the archive of state secrets.

CHAPTER TWO
The Refugee Soldier: A Critique of Recognition and Citizenship in the Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 1997

US refugee and citizenship discourses conventionally signify the rescue and inclusion of displaced subjects into the nation-state without a critical engagement with the historical contexts constitutive of their conditions.[161] While these unresolved pasts are erased or recuperated to reaffirm US moral and political benevolence for rescuing the stateless other, they also have the potential to unsettle the rescue and inclusion narrative and, in turn, expose the contradictory work of US empire in debates about state recognition. The emergence of Hmong in a complex configuration as rescued yet unassimilated refugees, "natural" soldiers/warriors, and recently terrorists, along with the US convoluted response, demands an interrogation that centers the US "secret war" in Laos. This chapter picks up from where the previous chapter left off to examine how the law tries to elide Hmong refugee's historical methodological dilemma by resolving him/her into a US citizen. As such, the law also produces a particular representation of the refugee figure that deserves citizenship, which reveals secrecy's project of militarism and rescue. This chapter examines the site of state recognition and citizenship as a limited arena in which to address the "secrets" of war, violence, and displacement. Furthermore, it underscores how recognition productively exposes the contradictions of empire. Thus this chapter asks: How does the US government deal with keeping the war "secret" in the national record and memory while addressing the integral role of Hmong in it? How does citizenship discourse as the promise of political inclusion construct Hmong racial

[161] Lisa Lowe and Elaine Kim contend that an engagement with the racialization of Asians in the United States must be attentive to the context in Asia. Elaine H. Kim and Lisa Lowe, "Guest Editors' Introduction," in "New Formations, New Questions: Asian American Studies," special issue, *positions* 5, no. 2 (1997): v–xiv.

difference? The Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 1997 as a supposed "moment of inclusion" or "eligibility to citizenship" illuminates the *refugee soldier figure* that emerged as an ally through US global interventions but was displaced as a refugee precisely because of its military service for the United States. I argue that the state employs the refugee soldier figure, the purported "new friend" of freedom and democracy, as a worthy subject of state recognition and citizenship, but this figure critiques US empire and the nation-state as contradictory in producing violence as rescue.

Through an analysis of the unique case about the Hmong veterans' legislation, I show how state recognition draws on two central narratives of alliance and racial primitivity to reinforce the project of rescue and inclusion. For instance, shifting formulations of Hmong as a willing soldier, an "incidental" refugee, and a "primitive" stateless people throughout the congressional hearing foregrounds the misrecognitions and construction of racial difference constitutive of recognition.[162] Citizenship discourse, more than a form of legal inclusion, ideologically recuperates the "secret war" into a usable past in order to justify the war's benevolence as a civilizing project. I formulate the refugee soldier figure, then, as an expression of the humanitarian (rescue and civilize) and militarism projects of empire but also as a critique of these imperialist designs. This figure and its racial difference disrupt the narratives of rescue and assimilation central to refugee and citizenship discourses through their collisions with each other. Although

[162] As I mention in the introduction, I hesitate to name the formation of Hmong racial difference as subjects who do not have geographic borders as stateless because it negates them as lacking nation, history, and belonging. However, my discussion in this chapter will draw on the term stateless as a useful analytic to analyze the process of state recognition, which deems Hmong as stateless and primitive in order for the US to include them as citizens.

specific as a formulation of the Hmong-US relationship, my discussion of the figure points to the broader global processes of racialization, citizenship, and "secret" wars.[163]

This chapter is organized into three sections. First, I chart the "global historical" emergence of the refugee soldier figure as a problem of history and the law through a discussion of the context of war and the legislation's attempts to keep the refugee and soldier separate. Second, building on critical analysis of the "politics of recognition," I show how the debate about citizenship as an "equal exchange" for Hmong refugees/veterans' "sacrifices" reproduces the structure of inequality and violence, and how alliance thus highlights the refugee soldier's ambiguity. Finally, this essay demonstrates how citizenship signifies the possession of nationhood, yet the refugee soldier's condition of statelessness haunts and troubles this resolution. Thus I contend that the offer of citizenship, in this case, is about the United States and its recuperation of a political relationship with the "new friend"—signifying the incorporation of a "primitive" stateless people into modernity and nationhood—rather than being entirely about the "right to have rights." I read the statements in the congressional hearing "against the grain," paying close attention to the gaps and fissures of the record, to illustrate how Hmong's indefinable status haunt this offer of citizenship as a resolution of the war.

The Refugee Soldier Figure: The Contradictions of Empire, Recognition, and Citizenship

In examining the Hmong veterans' legislation, my analysis complicates the redressability of the "secrets" or problems of US empire and history in underscoring the

[163] Oftentimes the usage of racialization misses the fact that modern subjects emerge as either racial "I" or racial "other." Nonetheless, I employ the term here because of its usefulness in describing the constant ideological work necessary to maintain racial difference.

limits of recognition to atone for the past and, in turn, the myth of citizenship as a marker of assimilation into the nation-state. This chapter challenges the idea that citizenship necessarily resolves the refugee's condition of statelessness, deconstructing the legislative efforts to recognize the soldier and rescue the refugee, a crucial combination to "embolden the perpetuation of US militarism."[164] But, my analysis elucidates that the refugee and soldier *together* do not have a place in the law or national memory. In doing so, I pay critical attention to the "global/historical" context of the US war abroad that produced the Hmong refugee soldier as a subject of US freedom and democracy.

The refugee soldier figure emerged from the paradox of the US "secret" involvement in Laos—the recruitment of Hmong as "guerrilla" soldiers and their abandonment as refugees.[165] This strategic coupling of the refugee and soldier figures exposes the US's rescue aims as it waged a "secret war" with Hmong labor against the North Vietnamese Army and Pathet Lao. I draw from Denise Ferreira da Silva's conceptualization of the "new friend," who is indistinguishable from the enemy because it lacks self- determination and the ability for self-regulation and self-development, to imbue the figure with a critique of US militarism's rendering of certain bodies as crucial yet expendable subjects of empire.[166] This overlap with the enemy posits the "new friend" as always already behind and undeveloped, which justifies US military violence. Thus this "new friend of freedom"—a "subject in becoming"—requires military

[164] Espiritu, "The 'We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose' Syndrome," 330.
[165] The war's paradox constitutes the dual production of soldier and refugee, signifying the US imperialist project of using the local population as valorized figures and subjecting them to political persecution.
[166] Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Tale of Two Cities: Saigon, Fallujah, and the Ethical Boundaries of Empire," *Amerasia: Thirty Years AfterWARd: Vietnamese Americans and U.S. Empire* 31, no. 2 (2005): 140.

intervention to help it sustain and develop self-determination.[167] This "new friend" logic renders the violence of war as necessary and just, because it simultaneously functions as a rescue of the racial other, who can never be self-determined. The conjoining of military and humanitarian projects, then, produced an extralegal figure whose troubling moral political status undermines the legitimacy through which a nation-state engages in war.[168] Hence the mid-1990s congressional hearing's preoccupation with questions about "documentation" and "verification" of military service, in order to keep the categories soldier and refugee separate, reveals the state's dual goals to foreclose unwanted legacies of a war—one that was not supposed to exist—and to establish itself as benevolent through its rescue.

The *refugee soldier figure* as a category of analysis, then, highlights the global/historical emergence of Hmong racial subjects that conjoins the national and transnational in order to foreground the global as crucial to understanding how subjects emerge always already through violence and in relation to each other. It constitutes a strategic pairing of the hyper-feminized and hyper-masculinized constructions of the refugee who lives "at home" and the soldier who fought abroad. The category links conventional ideas about the "liberator"/ "rescuer" as soldier figure with the "victim"/ "rescued" as refugee figure to underscore the nexus of violence abroad and "violent belongings" at home within the US imperialist and nation-building logic. This relationship embodies, borrowing from Amy Kaplan, the nexus of how empire takes place both abroad and at home—exerting its power at the junction between the domestic

[167] Ibid., 141.
[168] I employ the term *moral political* as an analytical descriptor of the simultaneous military and humanitarian projects in US wars that produced the "new friend."

and foreign.[169] At the same time, the figure disrupts the distance of time and space, reconfiguring temporality to enmesh what is considered "then" into "now," and "there" into "here." It provides a crucial understanding of the US state's ideologically convoluted work to incorporate *and* reject the refugee soldier figure as constitutive of but subversive to its construction. Employing this figure as a category of analysis illuminates how empire works generally to re-signify US militarism as a freedom project, violence as rescue, and how US imperialism is depicted specifically as the simultaneity of the refugee and soldier in the Laos context. Furthermore, the figure contributes to a more nuanced conceptualization of the refugee as a *figure* or an *idea* that advances a critique of the nation-state as a site of violence rather than a place of refuge.[170]

While the war's conditions produced this figure**,** the Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 1997 as redress signifies a reemergence of its dilemma.[171] The legislation proposed to "expedite the naturalization of aliens who served with special guerrilla units in Laos," intending to acknowledge those who served with the United States through English language and US history exemptions in the naturalization test.[172] Additionally, the legislation intended to assist Hmong and Laotian veterans of the "secret

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[169] Kaplan, "Violent Belongings and the Question of Empire Today," 1–18.
[170] Espiritu, "Toward a Critical Refugee Study," 410–33.
[171] The Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 1997—sponsored by US Representative Bruce Vento (D-Minn.)—was introduced to the Immigration and Claims subcommittee on June 26 of the 105th Congress, but it was not signed into Public Law 106–207 until May 26, 2000, designating citizenship to forty-five thousand eligible refugees. In its passage, the legislation benefited hundreds of Hmong veterans and their families who would otherwise experience a more difficult process in naturalizing. My analysis, although attentive to this reality, examines what this legislation actually does or opens up for those of us investigating a history that was not supposed to exist and with state departments' ensuring that it is forgotten. I am less interested in the ethics of state recognition through the legislation than in excavating the power strategies of the state.
[172] *Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 1997; and Canadian Border Boat Landing Permit Requirements: Hearing on H.R. 371 Before the Subcomm. on Immigration and Claims*, 105th Cong. (June 26, 1997) (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), 3.

war," along with their spouses and widows, through the naturalization process owing to their difficulty in "becoming Americans" or attaining US citizenship. As declared by several congressional members, this legislation would enable Hmong to express their allegiance to the United States and reunite with families overseas[173] as well as ease their "assimilation" into the nation.[174] As its title indicates, the bill attempts to link the Hmong "alien" with the US "noncitizen alien," assimilating the international soldier into that of the national figure. In other words, the bill's valorization of the soldier figure consisted of the reworking of the refugee figure as an immigrant figure, which conflates the two categories and leaves unexamined the context of production of the refugee.[175] To confer citizenship to alien or noncitizen soldiers who served the nation,[176] the legislation centralizes and sidesteps the questions of language and history as markers of eligibility.[177] The bill proposed to bypass the naturalization policies already in place that allow individuals over fifty-five years of age with at least fifteen years of residence, or over fifty years of age with at least twenty years of residence, to naturalize without the English-language requirement. Hence the crucial questions within the debate were the

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[173] Ibid., 2.
[174] Ibid., 15.
[175] Here, I do not suggest an apolitical singularity to the immigrant figure but rather contend that its context of contact with the United States is different from that of the refugee figure. Thus a conflation between the two situates both in an assimilationist paradigm that is not attentive to their different circumstances.
[176] The title of section 3 of the bill calls attention to the veterans' "service in a special guerrilla unit" as their eligibility for naturalization, again, citing the Immigration and Nationality Act's specifications for "naturalization through active-duty service in the armed forces" while "an alien or a noncitizen national of the United States" (US Congress, *Hearing*, 5). See Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 1997, H.R. 371, 105th Cong. (1997).
[177] In doing so, the title of section 2 of the bill proposes to waive the "English language requirement" for these "alien" soldiers (US Congress, *Hearing*, 4) under the stipulations of the Immigration and Nationality Act that requires an understanding of English, knowledge and understanding of the "fundamentals of the history, and of the principles and form of government, of the United States" (US Code 2006 ed. Title 42 Sec. 1423. 2006. Online. Lexus Nexus Academic. February 12, 2007**).** I use the term *alien soldier* to refer to those living outside the United States and recruited to fight for US causes as in the case of the Hmong soldiers.

following: Why should the US government give special consideration to Hmong and Laotian veterans through this legislation, especially when it might open the door for other groups to make similar claims? And how would the state reconcile the dilemma of recognizing some refugees as soldiers in order for its agencies to determine eligibility in the bill's implementation, when there is no state record of a "secret army" or its enrollments? Drawing from critiques of the "politics of recognition," that the recognition-based models of liberal pluralism with state agencies constitute failed projects because they reiterate colonial relationships and mark racial difference, I consider how citizenship reproduces the unequal Hmong-US relationship (as a "debt" owed) that the naturalization legislation seeks to address.[178]

Legal Historical Dilemma

My examination of the naturalization bill's subcommittee hearing seeks to contextualize the above questions and illustrate how the refugee soldier figure as a legal historical dilemma in its excess of the law and archive critiques the logic of state recognition. In his discussion of the legal subjectivity of the "gay Pakistani immigrant" within the neoliberal restructuring of state power and the family, Chandan Reddy

[178] I borrow the phrase "politics of recognition" from the works of Glen S. Coulthard and Patchen Markell to indicate the legislative process's inability to acknowledge or address the central issues of war, violence, and displacement through this naturalization bill. The "politics of recognition," Coulthard contends, refers to the expansive range of recognition-based models of liberal pluralism with state agencies as key mediators that reproduce unequal relations of power, and for indigenous communities it reproduces colonial power. Furthermore, relations of recognition are constitutive of subjectivity, which requires the "self-determining" agent to be recognized by another self-conscious subject (440). Patchen Markell renames recognition as "misrecognition" because it fails to "acknowledge" the fundamental conditions of one's own situation. He argues that the "politics of recognition" inevitably constitutes a failed project because it compounds relations of subordination, the desire for sovereignty, and its reliance on temporality, the separation of what was in the past from the present. He proposes a "politics of acknowledgment" to rethink an emancipatory project that is attentive to the underlying structures of desire. See Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003) and Glen S. Coulthard, "Subjects of Empire: Indigenous Peoples and the 'Politics of Recognition' in Canada," *Contemporary Political Theory* 6 (2007): 437–60.

suggests that the law is an "active archive" or a mode of record keeping that documents the "confrontation of social groups with the universality of 'community' and the 'state'" to produce social differences. The law subjugates "historical and social differences" as a precondition of the emergence in the national record.[179] If what emerges in the national record is already mediated and shaped by relations of power as difference, then the refugee soldier is the limit of the archive who remains uncategorizable, undefinable, and outside of national boundaries. The archive of the law becomes a site in which the issues of government secrecy and the US illicit role in Laos are brought forth but disavowed in order to represent Hmong as deserving subjects of US citizenship. As a consequence of historical absence, the Hmong refugee is put on stage for examination to negotiate the terms of citizenship in relation to the past.

The question of "proof" interrogates not only Hmong refugees/soldiers' Hmongness but also their veteran status. It would be difficult for the United States Immigration and Citizenship Service (USICS), formerly Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), to prove veteran status because the soldiers who fought in "guerrilla units" relocated to the United States as "refugees." Therefore, the question of proof renders the refugee as a ghostly figure, only hinted at through its "incidental" categorization and the legislation's "technical" concerns, but always already haunting configurations of the soldier figure. US Representative Bruce Vento (D-Minn.) vehemently contends that despite the problems with numbers and identification, proof is embodied in the "war wounds" of the veterans: "We have to have proof of the fact that they're Hmong . . . so

[179] Chandan Reddy, Asian Diasporas, Neoliberalism, and Family: Reviewing the Case for Homosexual Asylum in the Context of Family Rights," *Social Text* 84-5 (2005): 103 & 115.

they lifted up their shirts and showed me the war wounds."[180] Wounds etched in the same body of the soldier and refugee, however, mark its authenticity and paradoxical production—the recruitment as soldiers and displacement as refugees. Representative Vento's gesture toward the body as evidence to resolve the gap in the archive suggests it as an alternative site for information rather than a place of embodied difference. Elaine Scarry, formulating the relationship between the body and nation-state, asserts, "What is remembered in the body is well remembered." In times of war, she further contends, what is first visible is the "literalness with which the nation inscribes itself in the body; or the literalness with which the human body opens itself and allows 'the nation' to be registered there in the wound."[181] Although Scarry mainly refers to the relationship between the nation and its citizen-soldier, this formulation can be extrapolated to rethink the assertion that "proof" of war lies in the "wounds" on the bodies of Hmong veterans. If what is "remembered in the body [about the "secret war"] is well remembered," then the wound, in fact, registers the nation's role in Laos. Thus the Hmong soldier's scarred flesh embodies not only the US cause in Laos and Southeast Asia but, more importantly, the inscription of violence and trauma engendered by the US nation. The "record of war survives in the body" of the refugee soldier as the unknowable costs of war—the "people who were hurt there," the people who inflicted the hurt, and the people who still hurt here in the United States.[182]

The congressional hearing's recasting of the war wounds into an alternative form of information highlights the problems in the textual transmission of knowledge, which

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[180] US Congress, Hearing, (statement of Bruce Vento), 12.
[181] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 112.
[182] Ibid., 113.

elides the wounds' implication in US military violence and the messiness between soldier and refugee. Textual knowledge formation assumes that the soldier's identification can be determined through documents in the national archive. Archival memory's transmission of knowledge through the "fixed" mediums of texts, documents, maps, letters, videos, and so forth, "sustains power" and "exceeds the live" because it "works across distance, over time and space."[183] The fixity of text and writing "over time and space" makes them reliable and verifiable. An exchange between Representatives Lamar Smith (R-Tex.) and Vento, however, reveals the record's inability to capture the tensions between the refugee and soldier figures. They assert,

> **Mr. Smith**: How is it that we can determine who fought and who would, therefore, be due some special consideration by Congress?
> **Mr. Vento**: Mr. Chairman, on page 3, I indicate the matter of proof that would be necessary, in other words, the review of refugee processing documents given; a high commissioner on refugees has the information with regards to camps; *they've kept some records* (emphasis added).[184]

Representative Smith's question highlights the importance of determining "who fought" and should be "due some [congressional] consideration." In this inquiry, the phrase "who fought" *appears* to reference the soldier—the person (who) engaged in war/military service (fought). Representative Vento's response directs the enquirer to the "refugee processing documents" and the records kept by the "high commissioner on refugees," suggesting that the person "who fought" in the war is documented there. This begs the question: to whom does the "who" in "who fought" refer—the soldier or the refugee? Although the "who" appears to indicate the soldier, the "secret" conditions of the war's production also suggest the refugee question. Conventional knowledge situates the

[183] Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire*, 19.
[184] US Congress, *Hearing*, 20.

soldier figure as consenting to engage in war for the nation-state; whereas the refugee figure represents the unconsenting victim of war. In other words, the difference between the soldier and the refugee figures lies within their roles as liberator and liberated. The exchange cited above, however, shows an ambiguous relationship between the two, positing the refugee soldier at the border between consent and coercion. In doing so, it renders the *archive on refugees* an incoherent project of refugee regulation.[185] It is where the soldier figure bumps up against the refugee figure.

The refugee soldier figure as a problem of the archive illuminates its *(im)possibility* to the law, exposing the fallibility of the archive on refugees to validate guerrilla service. Louis D. Crocetti Jr., associate commissioner for examinations for USICS, explains the law's inability to adequately determine soldier status because it must rely on the confirmation as a refugee:

> In essence, a naturalization applicant under this provision of law would simply have to *present documents claiming to have served* in a special guerrilla unit. Current statutory requirements for other *former or active duty military require certification of service* by the Department of Defense, *short of military records, the only confirmation for the Service would be if the applicant was admitted to the United States as a refugee* from Southeast Asia, and would have been old enough to perform military service during the Vietnam conflict. It is the experience of the Service in implementing programs which rely on affidavits such as the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 that fraud may be prevalent (emphasis added).[186]

Crocetti asserts that the verification process for naturalizing under military service provisions requires attainment of "certification of service by the Department of Defense."

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[185] I introduce the term *archive on refugees* to refer to the process in which Representative Vento discusses "refugee processing," camps, and so on. Refugee processing through the management and documentation of refugee health and livelihood to applications for resettlement constitutes an inadequate archiving of the refugee condition of statelessness.

[186] US Congress, Hearing (statement of Louis D. Crocetti Jr.), 22.

This presumes that the Department of Defense kept enrollment records of its "secret army" and considers "guerrilla units" a part of its military force. Crocetti, however, contends that "short of military records, the only confirmation for the Service would be if the applicant was admitted to the United States as a refugee," implying that only the refugee record can offer insight into this issue. Because the "refugee files are dubious at best as means of verification," the USCIS would not be able to rely on "any of that data" as evidence of military service. Representative Smith's vehement questions, "Is there any way to determine how many Hmong actually fought? Is there any way to *determine or verify a person's participation*?" underscores the law and state's inability to address this tension between the refugee and soldier.[187] The absence from military records and a reliance on the unreliable refugee archive, again, reveals the site of war as the production of racialization of Hmong as extralegal subjects. The refugee record also illuminates the missing figure of the Hmong woman who would also have been admitted as a refugee, whose eligibility for citizenship is only through their domestic labor as the spouses and widows of the veterans. Each figure, refugee and soldier, haunts the other as an unresolved and incomplete configuration; and both unsettle the discourse of citizenship through their condition of statelessness.

The refugee soldier as a category of analysis foregrounds the changing and troubling status of the refugee. It reveals the omission of critical discussions about the "secret war" and the United States' illicit role in constructing and managing not only US secrets, but more importantly, secrets concerning Hmong soldiers' status as part of the "secret army," the atrocities Hmong encountered, their refugee status due to the act of

[187] Ibid. (statement of Lamar Smith), 35.

soldiering, and the US abandonment after the war. These absent accounts about Hmong refugees/soldiers prompt Colonel Wangyee Vang, former soldier and president of the Lao Veterans, Inc., to insist on Hmong as "political refugees" rather than "economic migrants" in order to force a deeper examination of the war and underscore US responsibility when congressional members attempted a quick resolution. His statement illustrates the nexus between soldier abroad and the refugee at home: "The Hmong soldiers did not come to America as economic migrants; they came to America as political refugees because they were veterans of the US Special Guerrilla Units and other special units in the United States' Secret Army in Laos. The United States has a special obligation to them."[188]

The refugee soldier highlights the refugee as a troubling moral political figure who inhabits a condition of statelessness—the precarious spaces between the *technicality* (legal definition) and *reality* (lived experience) of being "enemy aliens."[189] Employing the former figure interrogates citizenship's claim to resolve the refugee's supposed temporary condition of statelessness precisely because the permanence of stateless status unhinges the national order.[190] Furthermore, statelessness haunts the refugee and citizen because it captures a condition of rightlessness wherein the "Rights of Man," defined as "inalienable rights" independent of governments, function only as citizens' rights.[191]

"Their Contribution Plus Our Role": Hmong as an Ally

[188] Ibid., 17. This excerpt comes from Colonel Wangyee Vang's submitted statement to the congressional committee that became a part of the hearing's printed record.
[189] Arendt, "We Refugees," 57.
[190] Agamben, "We Refugees," 1995.
[191] Arendt, "Statelessness," 3.

The refugee soldier analytic highlights the anxieties of Hmong political status as an ally to the United States and the limitations of contractual citizenship—a relationship based on an "equal" exchange. Hence I show how "eligibility to citizenship" recuperates Hmong status as willing soldiers as well as makes apparent the conditions of difference in the political relationship between Hmong and the United States. Repeated characterizations of Hmong veterans as "wartime allies,"[192] "former allies,"[193] and "valuable allies"[194] to the United States' cause, fighting "alongside Americans when many Americans were unwilling to do that,"[195] construct a singular narrative about Hmong refugees/veterans. This US-centric perspective leaves unexamined the desires, stakes, and tensions imbued in Hmong's guerrilla service. I argue that it is precisely the naming of the Hmong veterans as the "new friend"—one racialized as always already behind—that allows the United States to justify its involvement in Laos and recuperate Hmong veterans as deserving of US citizenship. It enables the nation-state's representatives to project the Hmong-US relationship as part of the US global project of identifying its allies to dismantle communism or the "evil doers" in order to achieve world leadership. Representative Vento's statement illustrates this move to incorporate Hmong into its global project: "Although it wasn't apparent then, the Hmong contribution and actions had a major impact on achieving today's global order and the preeminent role of self-determination around the globe."[196] This alliance not only affects the national context of belonging for Hmong veterans thirty years after the war, but it also

[192] US Congress, *Hearing*, 20.
[193] Ibid., 31.
[194] Ibid., 69.
[195] Ibid., 9.
[196] Ibid. (statement by Bruce Vento), 11.

enacts onto the global stage the United States' primary role in defining self-determination: a belonging contingent on a willingness to sacrifice.[197] Alliance helps to define US hegemony.

The coupling of friendship with sacrifice naturalizes willingness with guerrilla service. Representative Vento declares that it was the ally's willingness to fight that saved US soldiers' lives and upheld its military power: "It's these extreme sacrifices made by the United States and the role that we played there, the Hmong in the jungles and highlands, whether in uniform or whether in peasant clothing; thousands of soldiers, of course, US soldiers and airmen lives were spared in this conflict because of the contributions made."[198]

The "sacrifices" and "contributions" of Hmong veterans, then, is the replacement of their lives for those of US soldiers. US Representative Patrick J. Kennedy (D-R.I.) affirms the relationship between the act of death for the nation and its prerogative to "make live,"[199] now through citizenship, in the following statement: "The Lao and Hmong Veterans have fought and died in the name of American democracy—now it is our turn to honor and repay them for their service to our great nation."[200] The willingness to die "deserves" "payment" because it establishes the sovereign and contributes to its power to determine who lives or dies. Their deaths in the "name of American democracy" represent a sacred sacrifice that must be honored. Yet another statement from US Representative Klug (D-Wisc.) reiterates this narrative of honor and

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[197] The US government's "promise" of safe haven to Hmong soldiers and their families is an often-cited "deal" between the United States and Hmong during the war (Ibid., 18).
[198] Ibid. (statement of Hon. Ron Kind), 11.
[199] Fujitani, "Right to Kill, Right to Make Live," 13–39.
[200] US Congress, Hearing (statement of Patrick J. Kennedy), 68.

recognition: "The Hmong sacrificed for our country during the Vietnam War and they deserve our respect and gratitude."[201] Deploying the narrative of sacrifice to *make sense* of the dead and still living as the "new friend" of freedom and democracy forecloses the multiple and fragmented memories into a single story about dying for the nation. The US state's naming of the alien soldier as one who *can be sacrificed* and, if he lives, a potential citizen, in order for the United States to simultaneously recognize sacrifice but deny its involvement in the production of the refugee, elides the refugee as a threat to citizenship and the nation-state.[202] The refugee soldier figure, then, reflects and foregrounds broader global strategies of power that mark certain bodies as expendable because they exist outside the law.

Citizenship as recognition and payment for the soldier's sacrifice reflects its contractual status. Social contract theory focuses on the idea of man's relinquishment of his rights in order to enter into government, thus making the distinction between the state of nature and state of law. This idea of citizenship centralizes the subject based on self-preservation of the individual.[203] In these accounts, only the rational being can become subject because only he can enter into a social contract to be protected by the law. In the case of Hmong, the narrative of deserving US citizenship in exchange for one's life might represent a delayed and perverted version of the social contract theory, but citizenship constitutes a myth because it inheres only in those deemed capable of material, social,

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[201] Ibid. (statement from Klug), 71.
[202] In both "We Refugees" and *Homo Sacer*, Agamben foregrounds the refugee as a *political* figure that brings the fiction of sovereignty into crisis—this fiction is constituted in the link between birth and nation, the rights of man and citizen. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben states, "If refugees represent such a disquieting element in the order of the modern nation-state, this is above all because by breaking the continuity between man and citizen, nativity and nationality, they put the originary fiction of modern sovereignty in crisis." See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 131 and Agamben, "We Refugees," 114-19.
[203] Anna Yeatman, "The Subject of Citizenship," *Citizenship Studies* 11, no. 1 (2007): 105–15.

and intellectual independence.[204] US Representative Sonny Bono's (R- Calif.) statement attests to the fairness of social contracts, but contrarily demonstrates who is in a position to give and give up life:

> If giving them a pittance for dying for us or getting blown up for us or getting killed for us is out of the question, it is not fair in exchange. I think humanity survives on exchange; if you buy something, you get something; if you ask somebody to do something for you, you pay them; if you ask people to die for them, and they say, 'What for?' 'Just do it.'—I don't think that's a good exchange.[205]

He declares that the United States should make a "fair exchange" with Hmong; US citizenship for "getting blown up for us or getting killed for us," suggesting that citizenship, emergence as legal/political subject, constitutes the ultimate form of payment for human sacrifice. Representative Bono's assertion of the reciprocity of "humanity" signifies that exchange constitutes the nurturing of life for risking death in which "you ask people to die" and "you pay them." The exchange of membership to a nation-state for one's life is, in fact, not a *payment* of honor but rather a *reward* for the "other," which reconfigures the United States as a patron to rescue Hmong refugees not only from their status of noncitizen soldier but also from their condition of statelessness.

The sacrifice narrative's potency, in its conjoining of one's willingness to fight for the US cause with citizenship status, nonetheless enables a transnational inquiry of the boundaries of citizenship. Citizenship as an exchange for death and as a marker of a prior political relationship further constructs Hmong as *already* "Americans." Thus it necessitates the claim that Hmong veterans were fait accompli US citizens fighting "for the United States" in Laos. Commissioner Susan Haigh, Ramsey County, MN, in her

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[204] Michael Ignatieff, "The Myth of Citizenship," in *Theorizing Citizenship*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 57.
[205] US Congress, *Hearing*, 38.

support of the bill, declares that conferring citizenship would represent an "official" government acknowledgment of Hmong veterans, who were already "American patriots" forged in a transnational context. She states, "It [the act] will be a clear statement by our Government and by all of us that we acknowledge the Hmong as true American patriots; that we are honored to count them as our fellow citizens."[206] Commissioner Haigh's characterization of Hmong as "American patriots" bestows the labels *American* and *patriot* to those who fought for the United States elsewhere. The transnational permeates the national production of historical knowledge in claims that the United States has a responsibility to incorporate Hmong veterans into its national polity as a result of their recruitment and services overseas. Legal national inclusion represents the "welcome home" of already-citizens who gave their lives to the state. Representative Vento asserts that Hmong "were tested by risking their lives. Now it is time for Congress and the President to recognize that test of sacrifice and to give the Hmong the honor, dignity, and recognition they deserve by accepting them as our fellow citizens. Only then will we finally be able to say that the Hmong are home in America."[207]

The assertion that Hmong soldiers were already transformed into an image of "true Americans" through "risking their lives for the values and beliefs that we revere as Americans and saving American lives,"[208] however, becomes a symbolic gesture because the naturalization legislation would not offer them veterans' status or benefits. For example, the congressional discussion simultaneously establishes an unnecessary bestowal of veterans' benefits to Hmong veterans because legal citizenship constitutes

[206] Ibid. (statement of Susan Haigh), 26.
[207] Ibid. (statement of Bruce Vento), 14.
[208] Ibid., 12.

the final gesture: "So I think that one more gesture here—this doesn't deal incidentally with veteran's benefits . . . . Nor would the legislation give Hmong people who served in the Special Guerrilla Forces veteran's status or make them eligible for veteran's benefits."[209] These stipulations against veteran's status and benefits simultaneously foreclose and illuminate the refugee soldier as the limit figure to this welcoming narrative. US responsibility stops with the conferral of juridical inclusion to "integrate" Hmong refugees/veterans and make it easier for their US-born children to adjust to US life.[210] Furthermore, the bill facilitates the naturalization process with a waiver of the English test, it does not connote an immediate citizenship. Citizenship, then, becomes a symbolic gesture to *formally* include Hmong veterans in order to resolve the paradox of the United States' reliance on alien soldiers to fight its cause, yet proclaiming that they were already US citizens through their "sacrifice" or death for the nation.

The recognition of Hmong veterans for their "contributions" reproduces the violence of US militarism through its recuperation of the nation-state as moral and benevolent for addressing the soldiers' sacrifices. Citizenship constitutes a reward for the veterans that privileges the United States and its preeminent role as a moral leader who fulfills its commitments and promises, rather than contending with the war and the Hmong role. Instead, the United States' lack of commitment is constructed as "only" its inability to "rescue" Hmong soldiers, its allies, having abandoned them to political persecution after the war and delayed in acknowledging their efforts.[211]The National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium's statement to Congress highlights the US

[209] Ibid., 12 & 14.
[210] Ibid., 1.
[211] Ibid., 17 & 19.

betrayal in not "fulfilling" its promise of citizenship: "Many of them [Hmong veterans] believed they would gain American citizenship. Now, many soldiers and their families feel betrayed and forgotten."[212] The terms *betrayal* and *forgotten* illuminate how the nation is forged on forgetting the "deeds of violence that have taken place."[213] One Congress member proclaimed a US moral responsibility to aid those who "need our help," because abandoning them is not what a "global leader" does: "The Hmong people need our help. It is wrong to abandon these men and women who served as valuable allies to us during the Southeastern Asian conflict."[214] Indeed, the bill doubly benefits Hmong and the United States: "This legislation not only benefits the Hmong who served, but also America as a whole through the deserved recognition and justice granted to our allies. It is time to recognize and reward their contribution by passing the Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act."[215] These statements deploy a narrative of political alliance, one based on difference, to conceal and justify the US illicit role in Laos and its *delayed* recognition of Hmong sacrifices.

"Special Category of Native-Language-Having-No-Written-Form": Hmong as (Illiterate) Stateless

While the previous discussion illustrates how the refugee soldier as the "new friend" unhinges the construction of an equal political alliance for naturalization, this section further demonstrates that this differentiated citizenship relies upon the coupling of alliance with (il)literacy. I show how the pairing of alliance and (il)literacy marks Hmong's status as "primitive" and stateless, always already in excess of the nation-state

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[212] Ibid., 18.
[213] Ernest Renan, "What Is a Nation?" in *Nations and Identities: Classic Readings*, ed. Vincent P. Pecora (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 166.
[214] US Congress, *Hearing* (statement of Hon. Ron Kind), 69.
[215] Ibid. (statement of Hon. Gary A. Condit), 70.

and modernity, as well as how this excess opens up a critical engagement with the war and the concept of citizenship. The lack of language/English skills thus constructs a "special category" of "native-language-having-no-written-form," highlighting the unique case of Hmong as the refugee soldier and the "new friend" who requires help under the law. This "special category" of "individuals who are prevented from learning English by the unique circumstance of their native language having no written form" signifies "Hmongness" as simultaneously an *eligibility* and *limitation* to the law, pointing to the difficult issue of the bill and marking Hmong racial (temporal) difference. The *lack* of language in its "written form" does not suggest an insufficient skill that can be learned, but rather an irreducible difference of the racialized subject who is considered to be out(side) time. Such a characterization suggests that the lack in *language* is precisely the lack of *history*. Diana Taylor's challenge of the centrality of the "writing = memory/knowledge equation" in Western epistemology, and the sustaining of power through archival memory, are important to my analysis here.[216] As she argues, "the very 'lives they [indigenous and marginalized groups] lived' fade into 'absence' when writing alone functions as archival evidence, as proof of presence."[217] Her insistence on an engagement with "embodied knowledge" to look toward the repertoire of memory rather than archival memory as the transmission of cultural memory/knowledge clarifies my point that the memory of war survives in the body. Hence the congressional discussion's privileging of language as having a history through the categorization of Hmong language as lacking a written form enables the United States to relegate Hmong as

[216] Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire*, 24.
[217] Ibid., 34.

outside the linear trajectory of history. Illiteracy connotes a lack of not only language but also history and nationhood, which are embodied in the concept of differentiated citizenship because "their command of the English language is insufficient to successfully complete the naturalization process."[218] This concept signifies a right to nationalism that those deemed stateless do not have.[219] The concept of lack is integral to the project of secrecy's rescue narrative, deployed to justify one's worthiness as an object of rescue. Affirmations of the bill's good intentions and Hmong veterans' "sacrifices" and "contributions" then simultaneously foreground Hmong lack of "self-development and self-determination."[220]

The predicament of the Hmong language-having-no-written-form relies on two competing narratives: the recent development of a written language and the wartime disruption of learning. Representative Vento asserts, "This [waiving the English language test and residency requirement] is necessary because learning English has been the greatest obstacle for the Hmong patriots, as written characters for the Hmong language have only been introduced recently, and whatever chances most Hmong who served may have had to learn a written language were greatly disrupted by the time spent fighting alongside US forces."[221]

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[218] US Congress, Hearing, (statement of Hon. Calvin M. Dooley), 15.
[219] This discussion on language offers a critique of formulations of nation and nationalism that privilege the written language. See Benedict Andersen, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; repr., New York: Verso, 1991). In line with my points about the expendability of Hmong bodies to perpetuate US militarism and the refugee soldier figure who does not have a place in the law and nation, Hmong language, rendered "preliterate," does not have a place in the national culture. This predicament sheds light on the lack of Hmong language courses offered as a national, foreign language for those interested in Southeast Asia area studies but more so as "Hmong language" heritage classes or for non-Hmong who wish to work with Hmong communities.
[220] Silva, "Tale of Two Cities," 137–41.
[221] US Congress, Hearing (statement of Bruce Vento), 13.

This statement marks their linguistic insufficiency as a difference inherent in their "primitive" culture because the "written characters . . . have only been introduced recently." Yet, it also explains that learning was disrupted by fighting in the war, which further emphasizes illiteracy as a cost of war and constitutive of statecraft rather than an inherent inability.[222] The English language—symbolic of modernity and civilization—represents the code of entry for Hmong and other racialized groups. However, the sympathetic rhetoric toward Hmong—that they cannot help not knowing English—pervades throughout benevolent utterings such as "the English language [is] a significant barrier for the Hmong who are a distinct ethnic group who lived in the isolated mountain regions of Vietnam and Laos."[223] Their isolation and primitivism in the "mountain regions" cannot be blamed, and it is the "responsibility" of the United States to "civilize" and "assimilate" this group through citizenship. In this context, Hmong are "rewritten" into US history based on their marked difference. Commissioner Haigh points to the daunting barrier: "The vast majority of the Hmong generation who grew up fighting in this war for America never became literate in their own language, let alone in the English language, and the illiteracy is a daunting barrier for the many older Hmong who want to become citizens."[224] This assertion suggests the infancy of the Hmong written language as others have explained as a sign of premodernity. It exposes again another cost of war—the youth of Hmong soldiers whose generation "grew up fighting in [the] war for America." The National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium, although sympathetic, reiterates these two key factors in the "high illiteracy" refrain: "First,

[222] The issue of Hmong linguistic insufficiency as racial difference elides the fact that a segment of Hmong soldiers were students who studied Lao and French prior to enlisting in the "secret army."
[223] Ibid. (statement of Louis D. Crocetti, Jr.), 21.
[224] Ibid. (statement of Susan Haigh), 25.

Hmong was not a written language until about 40 years ago, leaving many within the community who were never taught to read or write in their own language. Second, the war interrupted formal education, further contributing to the high illiteracy rate."[225] The signifiers of culture and violence for the case of Hmong language-having-no-written-form present the language question as an indicator of Hmong's "new friend" status, as undeveloped and outside modernity.

It was the war, however, that compounded the abject living conditions and the problems with learning. Colonel Wangyee Vang's submitted statement underscores the conditions produced by the war: "The intense and protracted clandestine war in Laos and the exodus of the Hmong and Lao veterans into squalid refugee camps, or internment in reeducation camps, did not permit the veterans the opportunity to go to school . . . the fact that a written Hmong language was not used in much of Laos until late in its history have compounded the problems of literacy for the Hmong and taking the US citizenship test in English."[226]

More importantly, descriptions of the conflict as an "intense and protracted clandestine war" and its aftermath of "squalid refugee camps," or "internment in reeducation camps," contextualize the inability to learn language as a consequence of the abject conditions of war and expose the contingency of modern subjectivity based on the possession of language and writing. The late development of a written Hmong language refers to the Romanized Popular Alphabet system of writing developed by missionaries and linguistic anthropologists. Language and writing, then, continue to signify civilizing

[225] Ibid. (statement of National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium), 18. This echoing of the reasons already espoused from a pan-Asian advocacy group illustrates how organizations such as this one must adopt the language of difference in advocating for Hmong.
[226] Ibid. (statement of General Vang Pao), 17.

projects to bring the "primitive" or "native" whose "integration . . . has been hampered by vast differences of culture and level of development" into history.[227] These fleeting moments of possibility for critical engagement with the war are contained within the repetition of "Hmong don't have language" and are not allowed to be a part of the congressional debate because they only appear in the published congressional record as submitted statements. Hence it is precisely the "new friend" status that produced problems of linguistic insufficiency.

Instead, the construction of illiteracy as a cultural pathology supersedes but references the damaging impact of US foreign policies. This pathology casts Hmong culture as a hindrance and disability to possessing language and history—rendered a medicalized cultural disorder—in order to conceal the trauma involved in imposing the English/language on Hmong in the first place. The use of medicalized language in the congressional hearing replicates the prevailing discourses about refugees as "pathetic," "depressed," and having multiple psychological issues, most prominently post- traumatic stress disorder. The Consortium continues with an assertion of psychological and physical disabilities, citing that "many [Hmong veterans] also came in with mental and physical disabilities acquired as a result of the war, making it extremely difficult for them to learn a new language."[228] Finally, the debilitating effects of a recent acquisition of written language prevent Hmong from learning any language, including their own: "While the Hmong have their own language, their language has no written form until recently. This makes the English language requirement as it relates to possessing the

[227] Ibid. (statement of Hon. Lamar Smith), 1.
[228] Ibid. (statement of National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium), 18. There are discrepancies in which the pan-Asian group advocated for Hmong, first, using the language of difference, and then, addressing the abject conditions of war that contribute to their difficulties in learning English.

ability to read and write ordinary words in English particularly prohibitive."[229] Despite the existence of a written Hmong language now, the war's damaging impact is so severe that they are still struggling to learn their *own language*, which makes writing "ordinary words in English particularly prohibitive" or difficult. This dominant construction about Hmong having neither written language nor skills contradicts the fact that Hmong soldiers performed the crucial role of military intelligence gathering, among other responsibilities, for the CIA during the war. The Hmong "irreducible (moral and mental) difference"[230]—through the repetitions about Hmong native- language-having-no-written-form and the disruption of Hmong veterans' learning owing to the war—marks the Hmong refugee soldier as the "new friend" who is crucial yet incapable and requires help or "special consideration" under the law, rather than the "true friend of freedom." This characterization of the Hmong soldier as a "subject- in-becoming"[231] exposes the illusion held by US congressional members and the state about Hmong soldiers who "fought and died alongside Americans" as equal allies. The language/English lack racially marks the "new friend" as a primitive who, rather than attains citizenship as *payment*, is *bestowed* citizenship as a *reward*.

This irreducible racial (cultural) difference presents an anxiety for the US state because it challenges the institution of US citizenship and race-neutral policies. The refugee soldier as a simultaneously eligible and limit figure threatens the meaning of citizenship and state sovereignty, which naturalizes birth and nation,[232] and the very

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[229] Ibid. (statement of Louis D. Crocetti, Jr.), 21.
[230] Silva, "Tale of Two Cities," 139.
[231] Ibid., 141.
[232] I borrow this point from Agamben, who contends that the fiction of sovereignty is that "*birth* immediately becomes *nation*." (emphasis original). Therefore, centering the refugee figure (a marginal

fabric of the institution that grants that ideal. The "domestic" issues of belonging are explicitly highlighted in Center for Immigration Studies' Mark Krikorian's reminder of the national principle of "racially and ethnically neutral immigration policy" that prohibits special considerations: "National origins quotas were rightly eliminated from the immigration law in 1965. The principle of a racially and ethnically neutral immigration policy in the national interest, however, cannot be upheld if the immigration law is shaped by the special pleading of the myriad ethnic groups that make up our population."[233] This argument suggests a color-blind policy implying that formal equality in immigration policies leads to equality in practice. At stake is the concern that allowing for these special considerations would enable the principles of US citizenship to be shaped by "myriad ethnic groups" rather than the state. Immigration law is, in fact, shaped by the "differential inclusion" of different racialized groups and works precisely on the basis of inequality in practice.[234]

Furthermore, Krikorian calls the Hmong veterans' bill an "affirmative action citizenship," through which others—he mentions Mexicans—are made to wait and follow the naturalization process while Hmong veterans seek special consideration: "What's more, the inequity of such legislation could inflame ethnic grievances and conflict. Mexicans, after all, are the largest national origin group seeking naturalization, and they are expected to meet all the normal requirements, while other groups, perhaps viewed as

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figure) as the figure of political history throws into crisis the original fiction of sovereignty. See Agamben, "We Refugees" (passage 4). My discussion of the Hmong refugee soldier figure brings into crisis questions of citizenship, sovereignty, and war/imperialism.

[233] US Congress, *Hearing* (statement of Mark Krikorian), 33.

[234] Yen Le Espiritu, *Home Bound: Filipino American Lives across Cultures, Communities, and Countries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 67.

more sympathetic by some, would be admitted without meeting many requirements—affirmative action citizenship, if you will."[235]

Here, Krikorian refers to US racial politics' articulating the possibility of "ethnic grievances and conflict." A comparison with Mexican immigrants underscores the distinct differences and similarities between these two groups in terms of immigration and relationship to the United States. However, I am most interested in this particular linking of Mexicans and Hmong veterans' relationships to citizenship and the nation for what it reveals about the strategies of power. The argument to withhold citizenship concerns the context in which Mexicans, constituting the largest group seeking naturalization, must meet all the requirements while Hmong veterans, representing a small number, have access to "affirmative action citizenship." "Affirmative" and "sympathetic" actions enacted by the state produce a convergence between military work abroad in the Hmong soldier figure and a transformation of the Hmong refugee at home into the US "immigrant," both racialized and coupled with illiteracy. Thus, the issue here is not about fairness and equality in the practice of the law for Hmong and Mexicans, but rather concerns how the unequal practice of policy is precisely at the forefront of nation and citizenship making. I contend that the particular context of the "secret war," its absence from popular and academic discourse, and its lingering secrets illuminate an understanding of the work of nation building to extend "life" to those who can die for the nation precisely because they lack language as a necessary marker of modernity.[236] This

[235] US Congress, *Hearing* (statement of Mark Krikorian), 32.
[236] This assertion does not negate the struggles of Mexican Americans and immigrants and their colonial relationship with the United States but highlights how the work of soldiering and sacrifice become an organizing principle for citizenship. Indeed, the logic of cultural difference characterizes Mexican immigrants as "unwilling" to attain citizenship, whereas Hmong refugees are "unable" to do so.

opens up the discussion about the flexibility of US citizenship not in its benefits but rather in its implementation. Citizenship remains an ambiguous category of the nation-state and vulnerable to "special interest" ploys that would "cheapen" and "debase" the "meaning of Americanism" that requires congressional vigilance in order to "safeguard" its "integrity."[237]

Conclusion

I conclude this chapter by highlighting the four components of my argument and gesturing toward the possibilities of the refugee soldier figure. First, I examined the law, the Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 1997, through the congressional record as a site for the emergence and negotiation of the tensions regarding a Hmong place within US history and their presence in the nation-state. Second, I examine the figure of the refugee as posing that very threat to the law's role in instituting recognition and resolution, precisely because its condition of statelessness refuses documentation. Third, the essay illustrates the ambiguity and (im)possibility of citizenship in relation to questions of refugee and territoriality. The legislation's coupling of alliance with lack of literacy signifies the anxieties of granting citizenship to the refugee soldier, the "new friend" whose statelessness remains a haunting presence of US imperialism. And finally, this chapter foregrounds the elision of Hmong/refugee/war from the historical record through the refugee soldier figure, which exposes the record's inability to capture this shifting status. The law as a record shifts and refashions the meanings of citizenship.

The Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 1997 and its passage in 2000 constitute but a moment or episode in the domestic and global events more than thirty

[237] US Congress, *Hearing*, 32–33.

years after the "secret war." I analyze state recognition as a productive but incomplete site to explore questions of empire, citizenship, "secret" wars, and racial difference. Other events within the last decade (after the legislation)— the events of 9/11, normalized trade relations between Laos and the United States in 2004, Hmong American community activism, Hmong's emergence as terrorists through the "materials support" bar,[238] the Real ID Act's passage as a provision of the USA Patriot Act, and the arrest of General Vang Pao on June 4, 2007[239]—foreground the urgency to contend with the war and the refugee soldier figure produced from it. First- and second-generation Hmong Americans' continued insistence on remembering the lingering "secrets" through cultural activities attempt to make the past live in its incomplete and fragmented forms. Nonetheless, tracing this figure through the concepts of refugee and statelessness illuminates questions concerning Hmong, citizenship, terrorism, and the nation-state. The refugee soldier figure as a new category of analysis constitutes an important lens to understand the global implications of the US wars in Southeast Asia.

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[238] Under the Real ID Act of 2005, a provision of the USA Patriot Act of 2001, anyone providing "material support" to "terrorist" organizations is named a terrorist. Hmong fall under this category, ironically, for helping the United States during the war by bearing arms against their government, Laos. Those seeking refugee or asylee status are vulnerable to this law because it prevents them from resettling in the United States.

[239] General Vang Pao was arrested along with ten other Hmong community leaders and a former US National Guard lieutenant for the intent to purchase $9.8 million in illegal weapons and for their plot to overthrow the communist Laotian government. The eighteen–page blueprint with details of the plot titled "Operation Popcorn" (Political Opposition Party's Coup Operation to Rescue the Nation) confiscated and filed in court outlined "exactly how Laos could be transformed into an *American-style democracy* with free elections, freedom of speech, a new constitution and judiciary, and a congress including the Hmong and other ethnic minorities" (emphasis added). Mass community mobilizations in California and other large Hmong communities across the United States protested General Vang's arrest, citing it as a second act of betrayal by the federal government. The first betrayal, still an unresolved issue, was US abandonment of Hmong after the "fall of Saigon."

Chapter 2, in full, is a reprint of the material as it appears in "The Refugee Soldier: A Critique of Recognition and Citizenship in the Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 1997," in "Southeast Asian/American Studies," special issue, *positions: east asia cultures critique* 20, no. 3 (2012): 685-712.

CHAPTER THREE
Dragging Histories: Ally, Terrorist, and Hmong Mobilization

On June 4, 2007 General Vang Pao, a Hmong leader and former United States ally during the "secret war," was arrested by federal agents on a warrant issued by US federal courts along with nine other Hmong community leaders (a 10th defendant was arrested in mid-June) and a former US national guard lieutenant for the intent to purchase $9.8 million in illegal weapons and their plot to overthrow the communist Laotian government. The 10 defendants in addition to the General include: Lo Cha Thao, Lo Thao, Youa True Vang, Hue Vang, Chong Vang Thao, Seng Vue, Chue Lo, Nhia Kao Vang, Dang Yang, and Harrison Ulrich Jack.[240] An affidavit filed by an undercover agent for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives alleged that the group "was on the *verge* of launching a *sophisticated* plan to overthrow Laos' communist regime," citing that General Vang and others had issued orders 'to destroy these government facilities and make them look like the results of the attack upon the World Trade Center' (emphasis added).[241] The 18-page blueprint with details of the plot titled "Operation Popcorn" (Political Opposition Party's Coup Operation to Rescue the Nation) confiscated and filed in court outlined "exactly how Laos could be transformed into an *American*-

[240] Lo Cha Thao (34) a former aide to former Wisconsin state Senator Gary George, D-Milwaukee and resident of Clovis, CA; Lo Thao (53) President of the United Hmong International (AKA: Supreme Council of the Hmong 18 Clans) and lives in Sacramento County, CA; Youa True Vang (60) founder of Hmong International New Year in Fresno; Hue Vang (39) a former Clovis, CA police officer and director of the United Lao Council for Peace, Freedom and Reconstruction; Chong Vang Thao (53) a chiropractor from Fresno; Seng Vue (68) a resident of Fresno and a clan representative in United Hmong International; Chue Lo (59) a resident of Stockton, CA and a clan representative in United Hmong International; Nhia Kao Vang (48) is a resident of Rancho Cordova, CA; Dang Vang (48) is a resident of Fresno, CA; and Harrison Ulrich Jack (60) a resident of Woodland, CA, a former U.S. Army officer and lieutenant colonel with the California National Guard, graduate of West Point in 1968, and served in Southeast Asia. Wameng Moua, "Leader in trouble: 77-year-old General Vang Pao arrested," *Hmong Today*, June 19, 2007, accessed on February 1, 2012. http://www.tcdailyplanet.net/article/2007/06/19/leader-trouble-77-year-old-general-vang-pao-arrested.html.

[241] Rich Connell and Robert J. Lopez, "U.S. accuses 10 of plotting coup in Laos," *Los Angeles Times*, June 5, 2007.

style democracy with free elections, freedom of speech, a new constitution and judiciary, and a congress including Hmong and other ethnic minorities" (emphasis added).[242] The weapons were allegedly going to be smuggled through Thailand to launch the coup against the Communist Laotian government,[243] a plan mimicking the US operation of the war in Laos in which US planes flew from the Udorn air force base in Thailand to bomb northeastern Laos and North Vietnam. With the unveiling of these plans, the group faced charges of violating the US Neutrality Act, which forbids US Americans plotting on US soil to overthrow a foreign government with which the US is at peace.[244]

The US press coverage of the case depicted the alleged plans as a spy novel and likened the plot to major Hollywood films such as Rambo, portraying the defendants, and Hmong along with them, as stuck in the past.[245] Indeed, this tragic rendition of the case as about a people who cannot get out of the past bolsters how the US liberal discourse of freedom and democracy configures the indebted and grateful Hmong refugee figure as a loyal ally. But this rendering of the refugee soldier as a loyal refugee, and as I will show loyal rescuer, misses how this case and the Hmong activism surrounding it foreground a Hmong active presence to engage with global and domestic concerns about their

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[242] Stephen Magagnini, "Hmong coup details unveiled," *The Sacramento Bee*, June 16, 2007, accessed June 22, 2007. http://www.sacbee.com/291/story/225993.html.

[243] Jeffrey Brody, "Terrorist or old friend?: Why did the U.S. turn on Hmong resistance Gen. Vang Pao?" *Los Angeles Times*, June 18, 2007, accessed June 22, 2007. http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-brody18jun18,1,2851826,print.story?ctrack=6&cset=true.

[244] Court documents reveal that retired Lt. Col. Harrison Ulrich Jack and other members of the group met repeatedly with undercover agent for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives to "discuss battle tactics and the logistics of secretly moving mercenaries, as well as machine guns, anti-tank missiles and plastic explosives into Laos." See Robert J. Lopez and Rich Connell, "Alleged coup plotters sought CHP training," *Los Angeles Times*, June 6, 2007, accessed June 7, 2007. http://articles.latimes.com/2007/jun/06/local/me-laos6.

[245] Ashley Powers, "Battle's not over when they come to the U.S." *Los Angeles Times*, June 7, 2007, accessed June 7, 2007. http://articles.latimes.com/2007/jun/07/local/me-overthrow7.

belonging in the US. As I showed in chapter two, the work of the legislation relied upon this very construction of the loyal Hmong refugee soldier who deserves rescue through citizenship. The refugee soldier has served as a compromise for comprehending the Hmong-US relationship, and a position from which to assert Hmong claims to legal and social belonging. The arrests and building of a case against Hmong terrorism[246] signified a "moment of danger" or breakdown in this precarious arrangement because it exposed how this faithful "friend" could also be a "terrorist." The "unreliable new friend" of freedom thus can easily become a "new enemy" who is everywhere throughout the global space, even in the US.[247] This chapter does not examine the concept of terrorism as it is usually understood within the age of terror, but instead as a moment for Hmong to contest the erasure of their history and "blast" the past into the present. I explore how Hmong refugees/Americans displaced by war and the absence of a nation-state articulate their histories in relation to the present.

The arrests sent shockwaves throughout the Hmong community in the US and globally (in the diaspora and in Laos) raising fear about what the US government's next move would be. If a government which General Vang Pao had been closely allied with and loyal to could arrest him, then it meant every Hmong person was vulnerable to accusations of criminal activity, and thus incarceration. News of the arrests spread quickly through mainstream and ethnic press coverage, Hmong radio stations, and community and virtual social networks. Because the General represented a father figure for Hmong in the US, the magnitude of the arrests surpassed another high profile case in

[246] Although there were numerous immediate disavowals about Hmong as terrorists, for the US public and Hmong community to read the General's arrest as an isolated case, I make a rhetorical move to connote the shift in US global politics that required that former allies become enemies or terrorists.
[247] Silva, "Tale of Two Cities," 146.

2004 in which Chai Vang was arrested and later charged with killing six white hunters and wounding two others in northern Wisconsin. Hmong community members quickly organized public demonstrations, the biggest of which was concentrated at the courthouse and Capitol in Sacramento, where the defendants were detained in a nearby jailhouse and would appear for their hearing proceedings.

Protest rallies in Sacramento drew at their peak around 8,000 people.[248] Hundreds of protesters also organized in other cities away from the epicenter of the jailhouse and hearings such as St. Paul/Minneapolis, Detroit and Madison, where large concentrations of Hmong live. These rallies coordinated a clothing color scheme of white top and black bottom, which showcased dramatic scenes of Hmong, young and old, women and men, mostly those who had never participated in such public "dissent," making sure their voices were heard. This color-coding of protesters' dress signifies a Hmong peaceful resistance as obedient citizens of the state to correct a government mistake in arresting their leaders.[249] The uniform color-coding alternatively represents the rallies as performing the march of the General's Hmong army, which the prosecutors alleged as the threat posed by General Vang. Carrying mostly home-made signs that state: "FREE GENERAL VANG PAO;" "Gen. Vang Pao is a Symbol of Peace, Freedom + Democracy;" and "Gen. Vang Pao is Leader of the People" among numerous other slogans, Hmong protesters spent days after the arrests and during the hearings rallying for justice and the immediate release of General Vang. He quickly became the most

[248] Mai Der Vang, "A Bright Hmong Future After Vang Pao," *New America Media*, June 4, 2009, accessed March 15, 2012. http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=f7c3b6284371c6cea63d20b5de3f20ec

[249] Early news media coverage of the protest rallies emphasize the peaceful and clean coordination of Hmong demonstrations because they picked up after themselves (no trash left behind) and did not block traffic or official business at the capital.

prominent figure in the protests, inspiring chants of "FREEDOM!" because he is the most visible and recognizable Hmong refugee soldier whose military leadership during the war and close alliance with the US brought Hmong to this country. In those early days of mobilization, Laotian and Vietnamese refugee leaders also rallied with the South Vietnam flag waving in the crowd, revealing how this moment represented an opportunity for collective remembering among Southeast Asian refugees about their pasts that are not yet over. A *Sacramento Bee* article reports that the demonstrations portrayed a mix of emotions from patriotism for the US and indignation about abuses to Hmong people in Laos to loyalty to longtime Hmong leader General Vang Pao. This article describes an image of a young protester, a little girl who marched carrying a poster of General Vang that stretched from her neck to her knees, epitomizing how the refugee soldier's claim to belonging pervades all segments within the Hmong community.[250]

On September 18, 2009, after more than two years of mobilizing pressure from the Hmong community, all charges against the General were dropped. This unexpected move from the US attorney came as a surprise after Judge Frank Damrell initially denied the defense lawyers' motion on May 11th to dismiss the case. Even the cited explanation for the dropped charges from US attorney Lawrence Brown was perplexing, stating that continued prosecution was no longer warranted based on the totality of the evidence in the case. To add to the confusion, the other 10 defendants remained under indictment.[251] However, all charges against the remaining defendants were dropped on January 11,

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[250] Christina Jewett, "Hmong rally at Capitol," *The Sacramento Bee*, June 18, 2007, accessed June 22, 2007. http://www.sacbee.com/101/story/227906.html.

[251] Mai Der Vang, "Gen. Vang Pao's Release Momentous for Young Hmong Americans," *New America Media*, September 21, 2009, accessed March 4, 2012. http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=7f6cdeb868f27f5b174a062df5d8099d.

2011, less than a week after General Vang Pao's passing on January 6, and marking a favorable resolution to a case that had put the community on edge and questioned their claim as loyal Americans. This chapter will critique and expand upon the notion of the loyal American through the case involving the General and the protests against it by exposing how the loyal ally and terrorist are constitutive of the refugee soldier. The arrests have been read as an isolated yet tragic case about the US convoluted relationship with Hmong, depicting the widespread declarations of Hmong loyalty to the US and General Vang Pao as a revisionist approach to Vietnam War history. Thus, I examine the arrests as a spectacular depiction of how the refugee soldier is betrayed again. This second betrayal by the US government toward its ally, unlike the US abandonment of Hmong in Laos in 1975, is visible as state-engineered.

Built on my research following the news coverage and public demonstrations virtually through comments in online articles and in action on the streets, in the unfolding days and months, this chapter analyzes the mobilization around the case to illuminate the "compositional" claims about Hmong belonging in the US. It is a historical analysis that relies upon new media, online comment forum, to engage with a more ephemeral refugee archive rather than an archive on refugees in state records and the law. I explore specifically online comments from articles and editorials published in *Hmong Today*, a Hmong newspaper based in St. Paul, Minnesota that is available in print form and online. Although the newspaper publishes some articles in Hmong, most of the print news is written in English. *Hmong Today*'s editor, Wameng Moua, wrote several editorial pieces concerning the arrests and the state of Hmong leadership, especially from the perspective of 1.5 and second generation Hmong Americans, which sparked the online comments I

analyze here. These online forums are "less mediated and spontaneous" and can reveal the tensions and contradictions that might not be visible in the original piece or through ethnographic sites. At a time when family and community allegiances were important for displaying unity and strength, the online "comment function" constituted a useful tool for the 1.5 and second generation to critique US imperialism and the General. With the option of anonymity, which all of the respondents chose to use by remaining anonymous or using a pseudonym, commenters were at more liberty to respond to each other and the author. These online comments, on the other hand, are mediated by contributing to "already existing knowledge and discourse" in which their statements are embedded in the larger narrative about Hmong relationship with the US in Laos.[252] Many of the comments provide perceptive linkages between the "secret war" and the US war in Iraq, and narrate a history that drags the past into the present.

I argue that the case opens up an articulation about the "secret war" and Hmong racialized gendered formation through a process of *dragging history* to show how military strategies of alliance and betrayal in Laos are what the US does. Dragging history describes the method in which Hmong refugees/Americans contest the arrests and charges, where their statements drag up and draw together disparate historical events in different times and spaces to blast their history out of its secret encasing. Thu-huong Nguyen-Vo observes that Vietnamese Americans occupy the position of "self-mourners" because "no one else mourns us."[253] I suggest that the dragging up of histories to conjoin

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[252] For a longer discussion on new media online comments, specifically blogs, and their mediated and less mediated form, see Kit Myers, "Love and Violence in Transracial/national Adoption," Master's Thesis, University of California, San Diego, 2009.

[253] Thu-huong Nguyen-Vo, "Forking Paths: How Shall We Mourn the Dead?" *Amerasia Journal: 30 Years AfterWARd: Vietnamese Americans & U.S. Empire* 31, no. 2 (2005): 170.

Laos with Iraq and the ally with terrorist is a process of self-mourning, of bearing the burden in witnessing historical events. Because no one else bore witness to the war's formation of Hmong racialization, these protesters are tasked with a retelling that drags along US imperialist baggage. Drawing together the ally and terrorist figures critically juxtaposes not only the spatiality of history through linking Vietnam and Iraq, but also its temporality in which dragging history connotes a lagging process whereby the past slowly becomes available. In addition, the temporality of dragging history signifies the past's emergence in an untimely fashion as a violent spectacle in the age of terror. While chapter one looks for the baggage, this chapter shows how histories arrive in wreckage once they are revealed, destroyed and parceled out for Hmong refugees/Americans to decipher. The untimely seizure of memory as it "flashes up at a moment of danger" enables Hmong refugees/Americans to "articulate the past historically" in a dragging method.[254] Thus, the terrorist crisis constitutes historical knowledge production in which histories are dragged up to link US empire and to challenge US claims that its wars are over, as well as contend that the war was not a secret for Hmong.[255] Yet, terrorism's portrayal as a spectacle of violence opens up masculinized Hmong claims to a precarious belonging and presence in the US, which must also be closely examined. Dragging histories makes visible the components of militarism and rescue in the US gender racial project of secrecy.

The dragging process of articulating history involves the slow, unearthing of the refugee soldier figure as a "compositional subject" of US empire to underscore Hmong

[254] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 255.
[255] This point comes from my conversation with Yen Le Espiritu.

claims for belonging. This subject is configured as a loyal American, a terrorist, helpless refugee, and US citizen, underscoring the "compositional struggles" through which Hmong contend with the media fixations on their concerns as a nostalgic reliving of the past.[256] Laura Kang explains that engaging in "compositional struggles" necessitates attention to *what* is said along with questions of *why* and *how* this articulation differs from previous "knowledge-claims and representational endeavors" precisely because this is an "embedded production."[257] I borrow from Kang's concept to critically engage with the rallies and virtual protests, i.e. the online comments, as "critical re-memberings of identity and its possible composition" that challenge Hmong racialization within the US imperialist and multicultural contexts.[258] My analysis shows how each compositional figure draws together the disparate facets of US empire in order to narrate history in the present. The chapter concludes by examining how Hmong political mobilization for rights and justice as US citizens and taxpayers in the wake of an uncertain future still attends to the past.

The Refugee Soldier as a Loyal Ally: Hero and Rescuer

I show in this section how the refugee soldier I conceptualized in chapter two as an analytical category of US imperialism, military alliance and refugee legal status, constitutes the condition for Hmong claims to belonging. This figure, most recognizably embodied by General Vang Pao and the Lao Hmong American War Memorial, showcases how US militarism as/and rescue were the conditions for Hmong that affords legal entry into the US and their possibility of attaining citizenship. I examine how these

[256] Laura Hyun Yi Kang, *Compositional Subjects: Enfiguring Asian/American Women* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 215.
[257] Ibid., 217.
[258] Ibid., 217.

two symbols for narrating history mark the Hmong refugee soldier as a rescuer and hero, anchors this chapter's excavation of the figure's compositional emergence as ally, terrorist, and US citizen. The refugee soldier, however, is a gendered concept because it is configured as a means for state intervention in Laos and a compromise for recognition in the US. This figure is specifically gendered as a deviant masculinist formulation through the tensions informing it as a subject of US rescue and liberation, and an agent who activates Hmong rescue.

In December 2005, the Lao Hmong American War Memorial was dedicated in Fresno, California to remember and honor Hmong veterans who were recruited and trained to fight in the "secret war." The memorial was conceived and constructed with the support of then-Fresno Mayor Alan Autry as something he would do for the Hmong community in Fresno for securing the Hmong vote, which took 5 years to materialize from 2000 to 2005. Hmong community organizations held him to that promise and came up with the concept of a memorial, forming a planning committee to fundraise for and design the 16-foot bronze statue and marble base. Although the memorial is not new in its commemorative work of remembering and forgetting, it is different as a device to locate the gaps in our knowledge about the past. As such, the war memorial attempts to bridge a material and symbolic gap of violence by figuring the historical context of Hmong service to the US—rescuing downed American pilots either dead or alive—in order to contextualize the Hmong sacrifices for the nation-state. The memorial's embodiment of a Hmong claim to history and violent belonging upholds the benevolence of US democracy at the same that it indicts the government for producing so many Hmong casualties. This

generated public history was necessary to understand how the US role in Laos relied on the sacrifice of their lives, and, for this chapter, in order for the rallies to make sense.



Figure 8: Lao Hmong American War Memorial[259]

The visual imagery captured in the statue memorializes Hmong military service as "freedom fighters" and the rescuer in which the Hmong claims rest on the soldiers' roles as rescuers of US pilots. In his words, the General describes the three main missions of his Hmong army in operating the "secret war": "first, to stop the flow of the North Vietnamese troops through the Ho Chi Minh Trail into Laos on their way to attack South Vietnam, second, to rescue any American pilots during the Vietnam War, and third, to protect the Americans that navigated the B-52s and the jets to bomb North Vietnam."[260] For the cause of freedom and democracy, they protected Laos and Hmong by protecting

[259] Photograph by Ma Vang on September 8, 2009.
[260] "Letter of Support for the Burial of General Vang Pao at the Arlington National Cemetery," January 20, 2011.

US interests and soldiers. In interviews with five veterans and community leaders involved in creating the memorial, I asked about the significance of the three soldiers figured in the statue. All five interviewees explained that the three figures convey one of the duties of Hmong soldiers to rescue US pilots who were shot down in their bombing and intelligence missions. One of the interviewees, Yer Vang, former soldier and secretary for Lao Veterans Inc., explains the memorial's significance in the following way:

> The design…tells the story of how when we lived in Laos, the Americans came to work in Laos, the CIA came to wage war and the pilots were shot down. If one pilot was shot down, there would be 7, 8, 9, 10 of our soldiers to go rescue, using their lives to replace in order to get the American. It doesn't matter how many of our soldiers got killed as long as the American is rescued then that is the biggest honor (txiaj ntsim) and heaviest price. So that you have more than 10 lives to replace one person, this is the price that they owe us…That's why we decided to make this [the memorial]…that we are all human beings and yet we give up more than 10 people to replace/save 1 person."[261]

Yer's poignant statement reveals how the rescue of US pilots engendered the heavy casualty of Hmong soldiers in a ratio of 10:1. The missions to rescue downed pilots, saving those still alive or retrieving the dead, was to make sure that the US American bodies did not remain in enemy territory, which involved 10 Hmong soldiers to rescue one American life. This duty to rescue the life or bodily remains of the US American regardless of the number of Hmong lives lost remains a central paradox and unresolved cost of the war because this uneven bargain is an irreplaceable loss endured by Hmong.

For Hmong veterans/refugees like Yer, the visual imagery captured in the statue memorializes their "freedom fighter" status as rescuers (of US pilots), and comprises

[261] Interview with Yer Vang on September 8, 2009. Txiaj ntsim is something that Hmong soldiers and civilians have given the US for saving American lives and bodies from the enemy line. Rescue was a gift bestowed upon Americans, which the statue represents an exchange.

their claims to belonging in the US. It fills in the gap of knowledge about a war that was not publicly fought or contested and where the preservation of US American life was a duty. The memorial symbolizes how Hmong are concretely here in the US because they sacrificed their blood for the land so that US Americans could live and Hmong can have a better life. This assertion of Hmong refugees/veterans' contributions establishes a US debt owed to them. The US government should be indebted to this grateful Hmong refugee soldier for defending freedom, a debt that it cannot escape from.[262] Such a claim re-inscribes a masculinist portrayal of the Hmong refugee soldier as loyal rescuer and collaborator in US war. At the same time, the figure is feminized in its subjugation to the state's patriarchal alliance through which US American lives were valued over against Hmong bodies. I show how this configuration of the refugee soldier's deviant masculinity, subjugated to US rescue and agent for rescuing Hmong, becomes more apparent through Hmong glorification of General Vang Pao as a hero who delivered them from war.

Given the public history generated by the memorial and legislation I analyzed in chapter two concerning the significance of Hmong contributions, the arrests came as a shock because the General and others were criminalized for carrying out and continuing the project to defend democracy and freedom in Laos, albeit poorly planned through operation "POPCORN." Older Hmong refugees/Americans were stunned, "not so much at the accusations but at the American prosecutors for turning their backs on a war hero."[263] Thus proclamations of faithfulness to democracy through the rallies allowed

[262] Interview with Yer Vang.
[263] Monica Davey, "Arrest Uncovers Divide in Hmong-Americans," *The New York Times*, June 14, 2007, accessed on June 14, 2007. http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/14/us/14hmong.html?pagewante=2&_r=1.

Hmong protesters to denounce the US government at the same time that they revered General Vang Pao as their leader and hero. I suggest that the protests show how the General, the model refugee soldier, constitutes a central figure for Hmong political mobilization and identity formation in the US. In contesting his configuration as a terrorist, Hmong refugees/Americans generate a public discourse about him as a heroic father figure. As such, Hmong participate in correcting the historical record about their role in protecting freedom rather than questioning its omissions.

To be sure, General Vang Pao's arrest has made possible Hmong mobilizing and potential unity. Xang Vang, one of the General's closest advisors, maintained that throughout thirty years of community involvement "he has never seen the Hmong people so united for anything before, seeing those who have criticized General Vang Pao now fighting at his side."[264] The strong showing of support is encouraging for potential Hmong unity. Although this may be attributed to the singular glorification of the General, it also highlights a shift in Hmong community politics ushered in through his arrest. The belief that he brought Hmong people together at a time when belief in him and in returning to Laos had been waning, specifically when the future of Hmong in the US was in question, represents an important perspective about his alleged actions and the ensuing public demonstrations. The second generation, in particular, makes up a significant proportion of protesters, inspiring faith in the elders that a generation of Hmong who had little prior interest in Hmong history might remember and continue to shoulder their cause for rights, justice, and visibility.

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[264] Moua, "Leader in trouble," June 19, 2007.

Images of Hmong demonstrators kneeling with hands clasped in a worshipful position along with statements declaring the General's generosity and "gift" of rescue circulated in the mainstream and ethnic press coverage of the events. Defending General Vang Pao's innocence (past and present) is a securing of a Hmong present and future by crediting him with bringing Hmong refugees to the US. One anonymous reader contends that, "Whatever GVP did in the past is wrong but he brought us here and protesting for him is the only gift we can ever paid back to him."[265] [sic] This statement ties Hmong history and belonging to the General. It reminds Hmong refugees/Americans that "he brought us here" and the protests in support of him are a "gift" or offering to express our gratitude to him. Hence Hmong legal and social belonging cannot be divorced from the masculinized figure of the General. One Hmong woman, Kay Yang, exclaimed to an *LA Times* reporter two days after the arrest, "I don't care what they say, I'm on his side."[266] Hmong women also deployed the masculinist discourse and showed strong representation in the protest rallies joining their male counterparts to dispute the charges. Their presence and voices add to General Vang's heroic image as both military and Hmong community leader. Otherwise, Hmong women's perceived roles as displaced victims would render their claims illegible for demanding justice for government misconduct. The declarations to ally with General Vang certainly anchored the beginnings of mobilizing around the case.

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[265] "Press Release: Hmong American Ad Hoc Rally on April 22, 2011 in Sacramento, CA," April 21, 2011, accessed on February 1, 2012 (anonymous comment). http://www.shrdo.com/index.php/suabhmong-news/hmong-news/905-press-release-hmong-american-ad-hoc-rally-on-april-21-2011-in-sacramento-ca.
[266] Steve Chawkins, "Arrest greeted by disbelief," *Los Angeles Times*, June 6, 2007, accessed on June 7, 2007. http://articles.latimes.com/2007/jun/06/local/me-hmong6.

Glorifying the General for leading Hmong to the US also involves justifying the war and its means. Several anonymous respondents/commenters take up this point of reasoning the war and the General's alleged actions in the charges. One respondent writes: "think if the secret war never happened. the communist will still make its way into laos and then we still have to fight. now no gun power from the U.S. we will soon be eliminated."[267] [sic] Such claims recuperate the war and violence as necessary for Hmong liberation from their conditions because alliance with the US equipped Hmong with the means to defend their way of life. This respondent reminds everyone that Hmong would have had to fight communism on their own in the face of certain elimination. General Vang's military leadership gave Hmong life in asking them to die for the cause of freedom. Even with the arrests and terrorist charge, Hmong veterans convey pride in their service to the US.[268] The tone of these multiple and multi-sited demonstrations fit into the image of Hmong as loyal, freedom-loving refugees. The appeals to the US government for the General's release and mercy toward those refugees still in Laos align with how Phoung Nguyen describes Vietnamese refugee protesters for US government intervention in the "boat people crisis" as falling "neatly into two visible but unequal categories: the helpless refugee and the anti-communist crusader."[269] In contesting the terrorist allegations, Hmong protesters espouse and embody both the helpless refugee and the "freedom fighter." This liberation narrative imbues the Hmong refugee soldier figure with history and belonging, which were violently negotiated in Laos.

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[267] Wameng Moua, "General Vang Pao, hero," *Hmong Today*, June 18, 2007, accessed February 8, 2012 (anonymous comment). http://www.tcdailyplanet.net/article/2007/06/18/general-vang-pao-hero.html?print=1.
[268] Amanda Perez, "Patriot Act Classifies Hmong as Terrorists," abc30.com, February 18, 2007.
[269] Phoung Tran Nguyen, "The People of the Fall: Refugee Nationalism in Little Saigon, 1975-2005," PhD Diss., University of Southern California, 2009, 119.

Others expand on crediting General Vang Pao with liberation by explaining that he symbolized a Hmong emergence into modernity. Wameng Xiong of Hmong American AD HOC, the organization created to track the case and organize the protest rallies, recuperates his legacy as "leading us to this country":

> We…remember General Vang Pao for bringing our Hmong people out of Laos, fighting in the war to help the American government against the Communists, to remember his legacy of leading us to this country. It makes me think about myself and people of my generation. If we didn't have the General then I would still be a farmer boy working on the land (farming), maybe I wouldn't even be alive. We are grateful (txaj ntswg) for General Vang Pao.[270]

This assertion that Xiong would "still be a farmer" in Laos or not even be alive without the General's leadership in bringing Hmong to the US, and progress, proclaims a certain benevolence in the Hmong leader's close relationship with the US government and his foresight to evacuate from Laos. As someone who has been instrumental in leading organizing efforts to find justice for the General and the other Hmong defendants, Xiong links his education and leadership to the liberation image attached to General Vang. Xiong further reveres the General as a father figure who had "taught us to live a good life in America so that we support and love each other."[271] These statements bolster a version of the US refugee rescue and liberation discourse, which makes the US the site of refuge for Hmong refugees/veterans and elides the state's production of war and their historical displacements. They also make the war inseparable from General Vang Pao's leadership, a coupling that constituted the turning point for Hmong liberation from pre-modernity (read: farming) to modernity (Xiong as leader of a Hmong American justice

[270] "SuabHmong News: Exclusive Interview Wameng Xiong, Hmong American AD HOC Committee" by Richard Wanglue Vang on July 19, 2011, accessed on February 4, 2012. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZ4PyZlaMME.
[271] Ibid., SuabHmong interview with Wameng Xiong.

organization). Xiong's assertion complicates the US militarism and rescue project of secrecy by suggesting the war was beneficial since allying with the US eventually facilitated Hmong resettlement to the US.

"GVP=Hero" Hmong refugees/Americans attribute General Vang Pao's rescue of Hmong by leading them in and out of war to his heroism. Therefore, Xiong's question of, "What's the point to go to trial? The general is a hero,"[272] suggests that General Vang's heroic father figure should prove his innocence and make going to trial a moot legal action. The comment heading "GVP=hero" posted by an anonymous Hmong American commenter in a *Hmong Today* article captures the simple logic to a complicated question about who General Vang is and what he represents. This equating of the General with a hero cuts straight through to disregard all the probabilities that he could be a deviant criminal to, instead, assert the sound logic of his role as protector. Computing what the General stands for, then, introduces the competing variables of masculinity such as deviancy and femininity that are at work in the characterization of his heroism to ally with the US and defend Hmong.

I contend that the refugee soldier's gendered form rests upon the twinned configurations of Hmong deviant masculinity as subject to US paternalistic management and a virile "masculinist logic of protection" concept. In other words, the formulation of the heroic rescuer brings to the fore a Hmong deviant masculinity that operates within a patriarchal structure: subjugated to US American masculinity and an agent in activating a form of masculinist protection for Hmong. Iris Marion Young, in her analysis of the

[272] Eric Bailey, "Hmong want leader freed: Thousands demonstrate against the jailing of a general who aided the U.S. in the Vietnam War," *Los Angeles Times*, June 19, 2007, accessed on October 28, 2007. http://articles.latimes.com/2007/jun/19/local/me-hmong19.

"logic of masculinist protection" of the US security state after the attacks on 9/11, explains how this logic is associated with "the position of male head of household as a protector of the family, and, by extension, with masculine leaders and risk takers as protectors of a population."[273] The patriarchal logic subjects citizens to state power and allegiance, since they are not supposed to do anything that undermines the power of the sovereign. Young observes that this logic relies on a version of masculinity associated with ideas of chivalry in which, "the gallantly masculine man is loving and self-sacrificing, especially in relation to women. The role of this courageous, responsible, and virtuous man is that of a protector."[274] Those subject to this logic must concede to the protector whereby in the face of threat, there cannot be divided wills.[275] General Vang represents both the protector and the one needing protection because his heroism is a product of the US project of militarism and rescue. For instance, in the case of terrorism and Hmong protests, General Vang embodies the feminized subject of the state because he has been caught and must subject himself to the power of the sovereign as both a terrorist and citizen-subject.

Yet, this logic is also fitting to analyze the declarations of the General's heroism from Hmong public demonstrators. In so doing, the feminized subject of Hmong protesters "looks up to him with gratitude for his manliness and admiration for his willingness to face the dangers of the world."[276] Although Young specifically examines the relationship between a state and its citizens in times of threat, Bush in particular as

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[273] Iris Marion Young, "Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29, no. 1 (2003): 3.
[274] Ibid., 4.
[275] Ibid., 4.
[276] Ibid., 5.

employing the "logic of masculinist protection," her points are useful to consider how Hmong attempt to interpret the General's actions in a similar vein in order to pronounce his innocence because he did it to protect and save his people, thus he is not inherently evil. There should be no question as to his stance because a hero whose objective is to save people does not seek to kill, or his killing is justifiable. Statements about how he is merely carrying out Bush's plans in the alleged plot attribute this "logic of masculinist protection" onto the configuration of him as a hero.

Although General Vang's heroism emerged from his wartime leadership, it also came from a deep love for his people. Wameng Moua, *Hmong Today* editor, wrote an opinion piece on June 18, 2007 exploring the question of what the General means for his parents' generation and what his arrest might mean for the second generation. He states that the elder generation perceive the General as a "George Washington or a Martin Luther King" because "he delivered a higher standard of living and a taste of the promised land" through his bravery and heroism. Our parents "honored the man as though he just opened the sky and handed civilization to the Hmong people." Moua reflects that he had not seen the General's "love" until the Hmong leader's arrest because it "sometimes takes sacrifice for a leader to speak loudest." This kind of sacrifice makes his heroic image endure beyond the first generation, compelling Moua to proclaim: "He is my hero. He is the Hmong hero. His legacy is forever intact."[277] Such claims reinforce masculinity in the General as "my hero" whose legacy will stay intact, despite the arrests, because he has made an ultimate sacrifice for his people in order to lead them to a better life. As a collective "Hmong hero," General Vang helps bridge the gap between the first

[277] Moua, "General Vang Pao, hero," June 18, 2007.

and second generations, to strengthen a sense of Hmong identity that is tied to the legacy of a man who will stop at nothing to deliver his people from persecution. For some Hmong Americans, the sacrifice of blood represents heroism and love for his people.

In opening up the opportunity to honor General Vang Pao, the arrests also foreground another form of correcting the historical record to show how this revered leader had not been so righteous by committing violence against other Hmong during the war and swindling money from Hmong refugees to support an exile movement to take back Laos, the very crime he was charged with in 2007. One commenter refers to the General as a "con-artist" who deceived hundreds of Hmong parents and grandparents by collecting "donations" to support a false cause. His arrest, then, exposed the underside of Hmong refugee community politics. This opposing view of the General as a criminal intends to burst the bubble that Hmong have been living in and deceiving themselves about his heroism. It challenges the goodness of General Vang by exposing how he has wronged people's trust and money. Instead of a hero, he is a "VERY GOOD con-artist" who deserves "any and all jail time that he gets."[278] The commenter adds that his/her heroes are their fathers, uncles, and grandfathers, all of whom fought in the war and have "shed blood, guts, and tears." This perspective represents a portion of the Hmong community whose dissenting voices were occasionally heard over the roar of heroism and patriotism attributed to the General. He/she reminds us that the story is not just about General Vang alone, but is really about the soldiers—fathers, uncles, and grandfathers—who made the sacrifices. In disavowing the General, the reader reclaims a different

[278] Moua, "General Vang Pao, hero," June 18, 2007 (comment from danny).

masculinized narrative about the war, that Hmong men were the only ones who fought and "shed blood, guts, and tears" for the country and Hmong freedom.

Nonetheless, the assertions about General Vang Pao ties Hmong loyalty to the nation-state in which the General has been simultaneously named as the "son of Laos" and key US ally.[279] Such assertions about democracy reveal Hmong loyalty as a product of the nation-state and its policies. Hmong faithfulness is expressed to the US government, yet it is also deployed to attain justice and equality. Camacho explains in his study on Chamorro commemoration that loyalty may have been initially used as a form of control by US and Japanese colonial governments to create the "loyal Chamorro subject," but it also became a "mechanism for indigenous adaptation and survival, rather than being perceived as outright subjugation." He further elucidates these mechanisms as petitions for US or Japanese recognition in which some Chamorros viewed loyalty as a means of achieving equality and a "shared sense of 'nationality' with their respective colonial powers."[280] Drawing from Camacho's discussion of loyalty, I contend that Hmong expressed faithfulness to US democracy and freedom represents a condition of the war but also a strategy to continue the unfinished business of its ends. Thus their claims about General Vang draw together the transnational, global context of war, violence, and nation-state domestic and international policies in order to open up the conditions of possibility for a retelling of displaced histories. This case shows how the state looms in the spaces of indistinction between the ally and terrorist, and yet how slippage between both categories signifies an ontological rupture for the nation-state. The

[279] Statements made at his funeral service in Fresno, California on February 4, 2011.
[280] Keith Camacho, *Cultures of Commemoration: The Politics of War, Memory, and History in the Mariana Islands* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), 37.

refugee soldier is vulnerable to changing state policies because he is necessarily revered as a figure who stands for democracy and freedom in his continuing support of the US.

"Tarnished Eagle": Terrorist-Refugee

The spill-over of historical events from the undeclared war which made Hmong vulnerable to current global strategies of power characterizes how US empire reproduces its rules of subjugation. I contend that the overlap of policies configures a terrorist-refugee who is hinged on the portrayal of the fanatical and nostalgic refugee. This perspective constructs the nostalgic refugee as a dormant threat to the state, which makes him a dangerous terrorist. The defense and prosecution lawyers along with the mainstream media drag up histories only to disavow them as belonging to the past. Yet, their assertions produce historical attachments between the terrorist and refugee figures.

The fanatical refugee, therefore, is constitutive of the terrorist threat to contest the historical erasures of the state. In their excavation of how sexuality is central to the creation of a certain knowledge of terrorism, Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai argue that the construct of the terrorist relies on a knowledge of sexual perversity such as failed heterosexuality, western notions of the psyche, and a certain queer monstrosity.[281] Using Foucault's concept of monstrosity to articulate the "terrorist-monster" discourse in the present war on terrorism, they maintain that the "terrorist has become a monster to be quarantined and an individual to be corrected."[282] Their formulation of the "terrorist-monster-fag" figure describes the abnormal psyche of the refugee soldier, a terrorist-refugee configuration, who pines for a long-gone past and plans a coup in a forgotten and

[281] Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai, "Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots," *Social Text* 20, no. 3 (2002): 117.
[282] Ibid., 119-120.

neutralized government and space. His crime lies in the untimely act that no longer holds potency. Thus such historical displacement queers his purported virility because the refugee soldier relies on expired tactics and outdated weapons. This section will show how the paternalistic view of the General and the other defendants depict them as the terrorist-refugee who is a threat paradoxically because of his relationship with the US, and for being inherently disposed to violence.

The "Laotian bin Laden" and State Terrorism Named "Operation Tarnished Eagle," the federal government's arrest of General Vang Pao sought to "neutralize" its former ally and erase remnants of the "shadowy" history in the Vietnam War. The former ally is now a "tarnished eagle" in the post-Cold War and post-9/11 moment because he poses a threat to the nation-state and freedom; whereas he had previously been a symbol of freedom for US interests abroad. In this moment of "reinvigorated militarism," the arrests and case of Hmong terrorism produces a troubling convergence of Cold War remains and the US global war on terrorism by calling into question the project of US democracy.[283] *New York Times* reporter Tim Weiner makes this link in an article almost a year after the arrests titled, "Gen. Vang Pao's Last War," in which he highlights the prosecutors' naming of General Vang as a "Laotian bin Laden":

> Now the war on terror has engulfed Vang Pao in his land of exile, California…His prosecutors painted him as a Laotian bin Laden…Few former friends of American foreign interests have fallen further from favor in Washington's eyes…the old general's defenders contend that the case against him is the consequence of a misguided post-9/11 zeal.[284]

[283] Espiritu, "The We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose Syndrome," 329.
[284] Tim Weiner, "Gen. Vang Pao's Last War," *The New York Times*, May 11, 2008, accessed on May 11, 2008. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/11/magazine/11pao-t.html?pagewanted=all.

Here, Weiner shows how the prosecutors interweave the narrative of a Vietnam War exile with the contemporary story about the search for Osama bin Laden into a composite of "Laotian bin Laden." The "Laotian bin Laden" configuration conjoins General Vang and bin Laden as "tarnished [former American] eagles" who have "fallen" from "favor in Washington's eyes" because they were once useful "new friends" but now pose national security and global threats. Conjoining these two figures shows explicitly the process of dragging histories that link up US production of new friends. In her piece on the Vietnam War and the invasion of Iraq, Denise Ferreira da Silva suggests that in the global war on terrorism and Bush's new foreign policy doctrine of Preemptive War, the primary role is to "strike against the enemies of freedom now found throughout the global space."[285] Rather than naming the "unreliable new friend," the contemporary global context necessitates naming a "new enemy" of freedom. But I suggest that in the case of General Vang Pao and Hmong refugees/Americans, it is precisely the "unreliable new friend" which can turn into a new enemy.

This shifting character of the refugee soldier between the ally and terrorist is not a contradiction in US policies but rather, as most Hmong protesters argue, is very much consistent with the process of US imperialism whereby it relies upon local leaders globally as a means to buffer its expansionist project. In the same *Times* report, Weiner quotes Larry Devlin, a former CIA station chief who worked with the General in Laos, to highlight this very process of how the US trained General Vang to use guerrilla military tactics: "We taught him how to do these things—to fight political warfare, to try to defeat the enemy. We helped Vang Pao learn to do some of the things that he and his troops are

[285] Silva, "A Tale of Two Cities," 146.

now charged with."[286] Devlin's expository account that "we helped" the General learn the militarized violence he is charged with suggests that we, the US, are responsible for the alleged actions leading to a possible coup in Laos. This is the same rhetoric popularly used to describe Osama bin Laden after the attacks on 9/11, revealing that he was a former US ally during Russia's war in Afghanistan, and "we" had trained and armed him to also defeat the enemy. These connections were also echoed in conversations between Hmong Americans who believed the US had to produce evidence for its continuing war on terrorism and this case against Hmong community leaders and General Vang represented that material proof. In some ways, the General was arrested in place of bin Laden whom the US had not been able to capture in 2007, until 2011.

In addition, the "Laotian bin Laden" complex makes intelligible the "unreliable new friend" as a racialized, foreign threat because it differentiates the General and Hmong as belonging to the troubled Laos state and in league with Osama bin Laden. This move elides US support of these military leaders and countries during the Cold War. Furthermore, it foregrounds the refugee soldier as "the possible racial enemy among 'us,'" delineating the racialized, foreign terrorist as undeniably a US ally.[287] John Keker, one of General Vang's defense attorneys, denied such connections between Laos and Al Qaeda. He is quoted in an *LA Times* article contending that, "The notion we're dealing with some sort of Laotian Al Qaeda strikes me as absurd."[288] While juxtaposing the name "Al Qaeda" with "Laotian" was meant to show the absurdity and unfounded allegations in the case, I suggest that it actually makes the link between these two global historical

[286] Weiner, "Gen. Vang Pao's Last War," May 11, 2008.
[287] Nguyen, "The People of the Fall," 8 & 10.
Nguyen, "The People of the Fall," 8 & 10.

contexts—the wars in Southeast Asia with those in Iraq and Afghanistan—in which there is a possibility for Laotian and/or Hmong subversion. This juxtaposition reveals how Hmong who are now US citizen-subjects always already embody the stateless figure who is a terrorist threat to the state. In addition, "Laotian Al Qaeda" and "Laotian bin Laden" together helps to articulate the simultaneity of Laos with Iraq and Afghanistan in the US national imaginary when the public discourse tends to contain the Vietnam War within the past and the space of Vietnam. Mimi Nguyen suggests that the "untimely comparisons" between the wars in Southeast Asia and those in Iraq and Afghanistan mark the narration of a continuous US liberal empire.[289] Hence Hmong claims that General Vang Pao was a "champion of democracy" and Hmong veterans fought for the principles of freedom and democracy attempt to name the US and its power strategies as continuous, simultaneous, and contingent on a foreign racialized ally. The refugee soldier as a "Laotian bin Laden" is a gendered figure emerging from state management through covert US policies.

"Global Odd Couple" The case of Hmong terrorism revisits the Vietnam War as a difficult chapter in US history, especially the US role in Laos. To be sure, this past has not been dealt with publicly, which makes the spectacle of the arrests and protests a moment of exception in the US treatment of Hmong rather than a reflection of the war's conditions in Laos. Even contemporary relations between Laos and the US are still mired in the context of archival secrecy that defined the war. In April 2011, the news organization McClatchy published a report and released several US classified cables it obtained from WikiLeaks regarding the arrests in 2007. Michael Doyle, the report's

[287] Nguyen, "The People of the Fall," 8 & 10.

author, suggests that the memos "shed light on the complicated relationship between the United States and Laos, a global odd couple with a war-torn past and many domestic offspring."[290] This report and the cables showed how General Vang Pao's arrest facilitated state relations between the two countries in areas of their relationship where the US had previously experienced difficulty.[291] One of the cables reveals how the arrests produced "unusually friendly overtures from the Lao government." US officials suspected that those Laotian officials, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Yong Chanthalangsy, who favor closer cooperation with the US, view the arrests as "a good time to press ahead with initiatives that they previously saw as non-starters." Hence the thwarted plot seemed to have beneficial implications for improving US-Laotian relations, and for the global war on terrorism. Carol A. Stabile and Carrie Rentschler write that, "U.S. concerns about the 'security' of other states, and the interventions that have followed from these concerns, have proved to be synonymous with U.S. economic interests in the eyes of much of the world," which highlights the US concern for Laos' national security precisely due to negotiating economic agreements with the nation-state.[292] On the other hand, the favorable response from certain Lao officials shows how these countries are changing their policies as well to become more closely allied with the US. But, Doyle's description of these two countries as a "global

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[290] Mimi T. Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012, forthcoming), ch. 3, p.5.
[290] Michael Doyle, "WikiLeaks cables bare secrets of U.S.-Laotian relations," *McClatchy Newspapers*, April 22, 2011, accessed on February 9, 2012. http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2011/04/22/112679/wikileaks-cables-bare-secrets.html.
[291] These three quotes came from "Cable: Laos welcomes U.S. arrests in coup plot," cable from American Embassy in Vientiane to the Secretary of State and Department of Justice, April 22, 2011. http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2011/04/22/112655/cable-hmong-leader-provides-insights.html#storylink=cpy.
[292] Carol A. Stabile and Carrie Rentschler, "States of Insecurity and the Gendered Politics of Fear," *NWSA Journal* 17, no. 3 (2005): ix.

odd" pairing signifies their unlikely relationship, one that continues to revolve around the dilemma of historical secrecy.

I suggest that the "global odd couple" actually describes the oddity of US secret strategies to intervene in Laotian decolonization and to save Hmong from their condition outside the nation-state. Yet the defense and prosecution version of dragging histories employs the Vietnam War rhetoric to articulate history as something that exists in the past. As such, comparisons that might connect US imperialist expansion in the decolonizing world with current policies in the global war on terrorism instead posit the alleged coup as a remnant of history rather than contention with that past in the present. The historical oddity also rationalizes Hmong alleged terrorist acts as a product of the tragic psyche of the racialized refugee exile. The persistent emphasis on the militarized secrecy of the war pathologizes the General and the defendants as attempting to carry out the same covert military tactics to continue a war that has ended for the US. Indeed, they contribute to the larger idea that US imperialism, if it could even be named as such, ended after the Vietnam War. Hmong protesters remind us that the US treatment of Hmong as terrorist is consistent with its past and current policies. Their compositional struggles constitute the "ideological suppositions and methodological tactics" that make their claims productive in asserting Hmong presence and the ongoing practices of US imperialism.[293]

"Unofficial Blessing" In arguing for the defendants' innocence during arraignment and bail hearings, defense lawyers did not try to deny the charges but instead offered explanations for the alleged actions, which they linked to the unofficial Hmong-

[293] Kang, *Compositional Subjects*, 3.

US alliance during the war. Given the Hmong history of working with the CIA, "the defendants believed they had the government's unofficial blessing."[294] The defense lawyer for Lo Cha Thao declared in court that the undercover agent and others gave the alleged conspirators the impression they were connected to high levels of the US government. In addition, defense lawyer Keker argued that, "the CIA at least tacitly approved of the operation, that the idea to purchase missiles was suggested by the federal agent."[295] Keker contends that the defendants thought the alleged coup would gain support from the CIA and was only meant to help Hmong in Laos avoid persecution. At least two of the defendants who had primary contacts with the undercover agent, Lo Cha Thao and Harrison Jack, were named as having received some encouragement through their military and political connections. For instance, Jack used his military connections to reach out to a defense contractor who notified authorities after he became concerned about the inquiries to purchase 500 machine guns, triggering the 6-month investigation. Similarly, Thao, a former aid to former Wisconsin State Senator Gary George (D-Wis.) had been consulting with a "friend" from the Midwest (whom investigators believed was George) and received warning that they might be dealing with an undercover agent.[296]

In sum, the lawyers maintained that these defendants might have received some encouragement for trying to carry out the alleged coup, which makes the government or at least some of its officials partly to blame for as far as the plan went. But according to the "unofficial blessing" claim, Hmong contentions with history deploy the expired rules

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[294] See Moua, "Leader in trouble," June 19, 2007 and "Thousands protest at Vang Pao hearing," Bangkok Post, June 20, 2007, accessed on February 15, 2012. http://2bangkok.com/forum/showthread.php?2455-Hmong-Still-a-Secret-War!/page2.
[295] Associated Press, "US Judge Releases Alleged Coup Plotter Vang Pao to House Arrest," July 12, 20007.
[296] Moua, "Leader in trouble," June 19, 2007.

of covert military violence to achieve political ends. An *LA Times* article published three days after the arrests characterizes this latest case of "anti-Communist warriors" as part of a familiar story about historical nostalgia among other Southeast Asian refugee leaders. Anti-communism is rendered a refugee problem, narrated as these communities' inability to move on while "most Americans have relegated [the war] to history books." The author, Ashley Powers, explains that Southern California has been the breeding ground for many a "foiled plots" for refugee leaders who continue to wage battles over the homeland:

> When federal agents took an elderly Hmong man who relies on heart medication and a cane into custody this week, Vang Pao became the latest anti-Communist leader in Southern California's suburbs to be accused of trying to rekindle a long-ago war. In recent years, the region has contributed a number of chapters to the annals of conspiracies that read like spy novels—a reflection that for some people in immigrant enclaves such as Orange County's Little Saigon and Long Beach's Little Phnom Penh, the Vietnam War never ended. Amid the foiled plots and bombs that sputtered are a cadre of Hmong, Cambodian and Vietnamese 'freedom fighters' waging battles that most Americans have relegated to history books.[297]

This account of anti-Communist politics and activities makes the Vietnam War an event that has "never ended" for these "warriors." Thus the charges criminalize these refugee men for rekindling a closed chapter in US history and characterize them as trying to relive that past. This portrayal attempts to narrate a linear story about what must safely remain in the past rather than examine how these moments actually blast open the past into the present. These negotiations of not only when the war ends but also what it was about and for whom do the stakes matter most continually dissolve a metahistory about the Vietnam war as contained in one country, about Vietnamese, and from which the US

[297] Powers, "Battles not over when they come to the U.S.," June 7, 2007.

can claim victory for successfully rescuing the refugees. The arrests trouble this historical knowledge production that has relegated the war to the "history books." My point here concerns the question of who can conjure up the past, on what terms, and for what purpose because these refugee leaders dragged up the past usually to make a claim about the present conditions. They insist that the same rules of unofficial alliances built on militarism and rescue still apply because the US continues to use them to subvert nations' sovereignties in the global war on terrorism.

To be sure, the fact that Hmong leaders were arrested illustrated the continuation of US projects of secrecy. In a *Sacramento Bee* report, the authors cite the lead prosecutor Robert Twiss arguing against General Vang Pao's release on $1.5 million bail because he is the "most dangerous of the defendants": "Vang has the power with one phone call to put into operation a coup against the Laotian government or even order a contract on the life of the undercover federal agent whose work led to the charges against the men."[298] This statement depicts Hmong as inherently inclined to perpetuate violence and war because they are still capable of carrying out their alleged coup. The potential modern-day "freedom fighters" who could continue the failed plans are supposedly embodied by the thousands of Hmong protesters. Another *Sacramento Bee* article's account of the rallies describes the Hmong protesters as "warriors" awakened by the General's arrest: "Unlike his musket-lugging Hmong guerrilla fighters, Monday's warriors were armed with American flags, protest signs and their lungs."[299] This portrayal converts the Hmong soldier category into a "permanent cultural trait" in which all

[298] Denny Walsh and Bill Lindelof, "Judge orders Vang Pao released on bail," *The Sacramento Bee*, July 12, 2007, accessed on February 1, 2012. www.sacbee.com/101/story/270148.html.
[299] Stephen Magagnini and Denny Walsh, "Hmong rally for 'The General,'" *The Sacramento Bee*, June 19, 2007, accessed June 22, 2007. http://www.sacbee.com/101/v-print/story/229794.html.

Hmong are "culturally disposed toward killing and aggression." This image reinforces the portrayal of Hmong as perpetual war figures who are "symbolically armed" to fight alongside General Vang.[300] Therefore, a hefty bail totaling $7.5 million for eight of the eleven defendants reflected the seriousness of the charges and the danger this group posed to US and Laotian national security.[301] The dual representation of General Vang Pao as "freedom fighter" and terrorist—a dangerous threat and pathological refugee—imbues his refugee soldier status with the terrorist-refugee who is dangerous for drawing together past and present US military strategies.

Dragging History: Ally and Terrorist as Critiques of US Imperialism

In this section, I show how Hmong Americans drag up histories to unravel the terrorist and ally figures as key products of US imperialist projects. They show how terrorism collapses time and space, allowing for a negotiation of history. I argue that dragging histories is a process of history-making, which is hinged on Hmong refugees who sill face persecution in Laos. Hmong protesters show that the building alliances of with local leaders globally to promote its military and rescue strategies is precisely what the US does. Passing references to Laos in US press coverage of the government's activities in the Middle East after 9/11 and about CIA operations in Afghanistan generated significant interest among Hmong news organizations about this seemingly unlikely coincidence. On December 16, 2001, *Hmong Times* reprinted an article pulled from the Associated Press, "CIA's Paramilitary Force a Cross Between Spies and

[300] Louisa Schein and Va-Megn Thoj, "*Gran Torino*'s Boys and Men with Guns: Hmong Perspectives," *Hmong Studies Journal* 10 (2009): 5 & 7.

[301] The combined properties of their families and friends were used as collateral: 30 homes, an apartment complex, and a family trust.[301] The General was released on bail and under house arrest in his southern California home on July 12, 2007 after significant pressure from Hmong protest rallies.

Soldiers," under its Community section. The article exposed CIA secret spies the US government sent into Afghanistan and the surrounding countries after an officer was killed in the country. These "spies" were sent in to supply weapons, train rebels fighting the Taliban, and gather information on their own, equipped with the authority to interrogate prisoners and defectors. Their presence in these suspected terrorist-breeding countries before sending in military commandos reflect the nature of their work. Specifically, officers from the CIA's Special Activities Division "are called upon when the president wants covertly to advance U.S. foreign policy, influencing government without any signs of U.S. action." The article briefly traced a genealogy of the paramilitary force which has been used in Central America, Angola, and Afghanistan, stating that they ran Air America, the "CIA's covert effort in Laos."[302] Although it made only one brief reference to Laos, the article was worthy news to be reprinted in a Hmong American newspaper. It is important to note that this reprinting suggests an analysis of the parallels between US covert military strategies in Laos and the Middle East, especially its placement under Community rather than Nation or International News. This community newsworthy gesture can only foreshadow the more explicit connections made after the General's arrest. This implicit analysis of US foreign policy-making through the covert activities of the CIA planted the seed for Hmong reporters to interrogate US policies in Laos after the arrests. I read these virtual protests as multiply composed and embedded in US liberal discourse.

[302] John J. Lumpkin, "CIA's paramilitary force a cross between spies and soldiers," *The Associated Press*, December 3, 2001. Repr., in *Hmong Times*, December 16, 2001.

Hmong Americans link these various strategies to interrupt the linear narrative of history by unearthing historical contradictions to complicate the present moment. Chong Jones, contributor to *Hmong Today*, excavates how the charges are consistent with US violations during the war, characterizing the case as a US entrapment of General Vang Pao and the Hmong community in the US. He argues that the Neutrality Act, which the defendants have allegedly violated, was first breached by the US government and the CIA. This expository piece uses declassified State Department memos as evidence to show US violation of its own Neutrality Act "by providing and furnishing money for a military expedition in the sovereign nation of Laos." Jones brings together the US actions in Laos, General Vang Pao's dilemma, and the Bush administration's failures by depicting the arrests as US hypocrisy:

> Vang Pao for forty years has tried to draw the world's attention to the Hmong's plight but to no avail. Most U.S. citizens don't even know where Laos is let alone what happened there forty years ago. The recent U.S. policy shift in terror activities by the Bush administration once again will *commit another betrayal of its former ally*. Ironically, the charges filed against Vang Pao are the same criminal *acts exercised by the U.S. that started this atrocity. Had the U.S. lived up to its promises* then perhaps Vang Pao would not feel obligated to help the helpless. *Vang Pao is the product of U.S. policies.* Now U.S. policies will condemn him for his alleged actions. Only in America does the culprit have the audacity to blame the instrument for a crime…such hypocrisy.[303] (emphasis added)

This statement captures the multiply layered narratives articulated in online comments and protest rallies about the arrests that simultaneously foreground the plight of those still in Laos, embed Hmong alleged actions within the US Preemptive War in Iraq, contest the terrorist label, and contend with their experiences as racialized subjects in the US. Jones

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[303] Chong Jones, "Vang Pao and the U.S. government, marriage and betrayal," *Hmong Today*, July 15, 2007, accessed on April 6, 2008. http://www.tcdailyplanet.net/article/2007/07/15/vang-pao-and-u-s-government-marriage-and-betrayal.html.

suggests that what the US public might have thought of its government's "shadowy" legacy of secret warfare in Laos is actually a common practice of US policy. Specifically, Jones contends that the charges filed against General Vang Pao are the same "criminal acts exercised by the US government." Thus the charges of terrorism against the General and Hmong necessarily indict the US for perpetuating what it criminalizes as racialized terror in the contemporary context. The point here is that the US is the "culprit" responsible for its illicit policies and the General's arrest. The juxtaposition of Hmong and US unlawful activities shows the dragging of histories across time and space. This event exposes the US as that site of violence rather than a place of refuge for the refugee precisely because the violence has never really ended. US violence accumulates and renews itself in order to bolster its tenuous global leadership.

The statement along with the rest of the article also capture the heteronormative rationalizing of Hmong-US relations and General Vang Pao's alleged terrorist actions to save his fellow Hmong people. Jones' observation that General Vang was arrested for trying to carry out "the same criminal acts exercised" by the US attempts to align these two instances and link imperial histories. For example, Jones calls the US-Hmong relationship a marriage that was consummated when the US government began supplying Vang Pao and Hmong with weapons and money. This marriage ended in divorce in 1975 with US abandonment when only two planes evacuated a "handful" of the forty thousand Hmong civilians waiting on the Long Cheng tarmac. Hence Jones foregrounds how the case is ironic because "the union between the U.S. and Vang Pao has finally come full

circle."[304] This heteronormative reading of the Hmong-US relationship as a marriage, with General Vang and Hmong as the submissive partner supplied with weapons and money, re-inscribes normalcy to this unequal and illicit alliance. This dragging up the past also involves its masculinized military couching in order to show the refugee soldier's protection of Hmong as on par with other powerful historical figures. Yet this taking up of the "global odd couple" descriptor misses how Jones' point about US violations could potentially be disruptive of the periodization of history.

Jones' tracking of the case through US policies illuminates how policy-making in the contemporary context still drags up the conditions of an unfinished war, specifically through the Bush administration's successful negotiation of Normal Trade relations with Laos in 2004 and provisions in the USA Patriot Act passed in 2006. His article sought to not only expose the legacy of US violations and secrecy in its relationships with Hmong and Laos, but it also underscored the urgency of those Hmong soldiers and civilians who could not escape and are still in hiding in Laos. US illicit policies and atrocities in Laos produced the plight of Hmong refugees, some of whom have not been able to escape in 1975 and still linger in the jungles of Laos resisting the government's persecution and incorporation. They await the General's return to either continue the fight or rescue them from the conditions in Laos. According to fact finding missions by international human rights agencies and Hmong refugees/Americans, this group endures the Laotian government's violence whereby Laotian troops "hunt" them like animals to exterminate the resistance. Jones reflects on the connection between General Vang Pao's arrest and their struggles in which the Hmong leader feels obligated to "help the helpless" because

[304] Jones, "Vang Pao and the U.S. government, marriage and betrayal," July 15, 2007.

the US had not lived up to its promises. The alleged coup, therefore, is a necessary act of violence to draw attention to this situation and to help his former soldiers and fellow Hmong people. In addition, Hmong protested the Bush administration's move toward normalized relations with Laos, citing these human rights abuses as cause for the US to boycott political economic relations.

Therefore, protests against General Vang Pao's arrest reveal the refugee baggage of war that does not fit the loyal ally construct, which has bolstered US rescue and liberation. This key refugee position emerges as a lagging presence of US empire's project of militarism and rescue. For instance, Hmong claim that the war is not yet over because the US has not completed its task of rescuing a contingent of Hmong soldiers and their descendants. The declarations of allegiance allows for Hmong refugees/Americans to put pressure on the US for moving on to the war on terrorism when the "Vietnam War" is not yet over. Anonymous respondents assert that (written in caps): "The war in Vietnam is not over yet, so I have no idea why the US just got up and left when they knew, they knew that my people were still in the jungles of life suffering and being murdered."[305] [sic] This specific claim that the "war in Vietnam is not over yet" reflects the continuation of US undeclared wars, exposing the undeclared beginnings and ends to any war since the Vietnam War. The charge that the "US just got up and left" when so many Hmong are still in the jungles names the multiple times that the US left Hmong. First, it references US abandonment in 1975 when the government withdrew aid and pulled out of Laos leaving Hmong refugees/soldiers to fend for themselves in the wake of Communist takeover. Second, the US "got up and left" again in continuing to

[305] Moua, "Leader in trouble," June 19, 2007 (anonymous comment).

ignore the plight of those who could not escape to Thailand's refugee camps and still had to endure violence in Laos. The arrest of General Vang Pao and others is a third leaving that compounds the previous US abandonments because it has re-coded these Hmong leaders as terrorists instead of US allies. Unrescued refugees signify unfinished wars, highlighting the global war on terrorism as a continuation of the wars fought in Southeast Asia. Yet the General has also been criticized for actually leaving Hmong refugees in Laos in a state of limbo in order to further his project of continuing the war to oust the Communist government because they serve as evidence of communism's abject treatment.

Bringing up the conditions of Hmong refugees in Laos interprets terrorism as a crisis of history. It shows how history-making is a project of the present, not the past. An anonymous reader of *Hmong Today* expands upon the centrality of Hmong refugees in Laos to the case by insisting on making Hmong history:

> History is all lies wrote by the surviver…Can you see that 'History' is still being make from the war in Laos to these day…I can not stand any Hmong telling other to let 'History' be the way it is. 'History' is now and the future. May all the True Hmong people reunite and write our 'History' from these day forward. Find a way to help the Hmong people in the jungle of Laos, so they can have a 'History' of their own: 'The Hmong History.'[306] [sic]

This statement is directed at those in the Hmong community who might want to "let History be the way it is" to realize that historical knowledge is constructed to forget the violence and remember the survival of the victor. The commenter's assertion that "History is now and the future" poignantly reflects upon the event of the arrests and case as history in the making. Hmong histories, and US memories of the past, have not been

[306] Moua, "General Vang Pao, hero," June 18, 2007 (anonymous comment).

left behind, but are instead critically brought to the fore in this moment of terrorist crisis to be dealt with again. This call for Hmong Americans to "seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger" to interrogate and make history in the present by linking US empire through mobilizing emerged as an important stake in this case. Furthermore, the statement elucidates that if refugee rescue perpetuates linear time whereby Hmong have supposedly emerged as refugees from the US's "secret war," then those who remain unrescued in Laos do not have a place in history. It is their struggles that make intelligible the tenuousness of Hmong belonging in the US and within the linear account of history. Nguyen-Vo suggests that the "empire builders are constructing a new *universalism by historical amnesia*," which is precisely the concern stated here about making history in order to remember.[307]

Hmong refugees/Americans insistence on Laos' perpetuation of violence against Hmong poignantly highlights how history-making collapses time and space because Laos still matters. Therefore, Laos and Iraq make instantaneous US policies and empire by the convergence of violence in figuring the ally-terrorist. A posted comment from Moobywj-pheej in response to Jones' article, and about the case in general, takes the critique of the US's hypocrisy further to suggest that the US has disregarded its "noble ideal of democracy" in its addiction to foreign oil and natural resources. His/her observation about the case merges the history of US involvement in Southeast Asia with those in the Middle East and Central America:

> The American government has always publicize and promote democracy. Vang Pao sacrificed his people for democracy—the very ideal America supposedly embraces. 'POPCORN' clearly demonstrated Vang Pao's

[307] Nguyen-Vo, "Forking Paths," 165.

> intention and his desire for achieving a democratic, representative government in Laos. Now, *America sacrifices Vang Pao and the Hmong to the Pathet Laotian government and intentionally disregarded its noble ideal of democracy* for its addiction for oil and natural resources and precious metal in Laos. After all it is said and done, America's overt goal of containing the big gorilla China—an economic super power, will have only be a ruse! America's hypocrisy is not limited to the Hmong. Did you know that America supported Saddam Hussein and brought him to power? Now look where his is at! America also supported Osama Binladen—fear of the Soviet's occupation over Afghanistan?! Noreiga was also supported by the American government—he was captured by, tried, and convicted by the American government. American hypocrisy?[308] [sic] (emphasis added)

In defending his actions, the commenter exposes US imperialist interests in these countries as economic and resource extraction, and links the oil in Iraq with the precious metals in Laos. Embedded in this multi-layered charge of US neocolonialism is how US interests are always laced with larger aims to create the sacrificial ally. This reader takes up Jones' point that General Vang Pao is a figure of US policy and his alleged actions are consistent with the US government's foreign diplomacy tactics. The comment intends to show how he is among several US former allies who suffered at the hands of its benefactor. Naming Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden and Noriega as former US backed leaders who it sacrificed in the global war on terrorism, this reader asserts that General Vang is not a figure of the past but troublingly present. In giving up democracy, the US "sacrifices" General Vang and Hmong to the Laotian government. Indeed, the General is a sacrificial former ally following the likes of Hussein and Noriega, but is given up in place of bin Laden. Manuel Antonio Noriega Morena, a former Panamanian politician and soldier, was trained in the US but later removed from power, charged with drug crimes, and imprisoned by the US government, serving as an example of what could

[308] Jones, "Vang Pao and the U.S. government," July 15, 2007.

become of the General. This reader declares that 'POPCORN' "clearly demonstrated Vang Pao's intention and his desire for achieving a democratic, representative government in Laos," suggesting that this endeavor actually aims to promote democracy and equal representation compared to the US's economically motivated policies.

Another commenter takes the Hmong duty to democracy yet a step further, claiming that the alleged coup primarily continues the work of democracy to defend freedom and mimics President Bush's war in Iraq. He/she writes (in caps): "Mr. General did the right thing about his plan to get back the Laotian and Viet. in Laos. I guess any leader would try to defend or go to war when his people are being killed. For example: what happened when the two towers in New York being destroy by another country and many of American being killed? What did President Bush do? He went to war!! Mr. General did what he had to do with all his resources and all he had."[309] [sic] This individual applauds General Vang for doing the "right thing" to help protect his people from violence. The purpose of tying the General to Bush reverses the charges of terrorism in which Hmong were not terrorists but instead worked to combat terrorism in Laos. Indeed, the US and Hmong are in the war against terrorism together, but Hmong were merely taking on the Laotian front. They align the alleged coup with the current US agenda, specifically the Bush doctrine, in order to make intelligible their claims about the war and for history. These projected violent means of "getting back" at terrorist regimes script freedom into masculinized claims that reflect the current US policies of invasions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

[309] Moua, "Leader in trouble," June 19, 2007 (anonymous comment).

Some Hmong Americans even take up the "freedom fighter" idea to call for their fellow Hmong to rise up, to support the General's goals. The call entails placing Hmong concerns within current global crises and to integrate and overlap historical events. One commenter declares that the stakes are greater now that the US government wants to silence General Vang Pao's "voice for FREEDOM" when it "cries out in the wilderness—FREE THE HMONG PEOPLE."[310] As such, another commenter, serving in the US military, encouraged everyone to support General Vang Pao by "joining his ranks of freedom fighters."[311] This call for a Hmong army of "freedom fighters," often used to describe Hmong soldiers, among the demonstrators shows their allegiance to him, and not the US. It recuperates the media's descriptions of the protesters of Hmong as willing and able "freedom fighters" for the General who will stand and fight at a moment's notice. This urging contends that the US is conducting the very same war in Iraq as it did in Vietnam, which should empower Hmong Americans to take arms for their current concerns.[312] The respondent adapts the same masculinized claim of fighting for democracy and freedom, yet asks Hmong to use this moment of crisis to call attention to injustices elsewhere. Indeed, these responses that I analyzed show that the stakes are high for this case because it has reinvigorated the issues about US policies and violence toward Hmong. Hmong refugees/Americans need to drag up the past, even in its untimeliness, in order to articulate their history's centrality to the critique of US empire because its project of secrecy has continued to configure their existence outside of history and modernity.

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[310] Anonymous comment in Moua, "General Vang Pao, hero," June 18, 2007.
[311] Ibid., (comment from Adam Xiong Chavez).
[312] Ibid., (anonymous comment).

Future-Oriented Approach to Protest for Justice

Because the terrorist label produced material consequences for Hmong legal status, the protest rallies constituted the Hmong community's "compositional struggles" to defend and help all Hmong. The proclamation that Hmong are Americans too even though they may not be white clarifies that the process of history-making articulates a claim for Hmong racialized membership in US society that is present- and future-oriented concerning their status as Americans. It configures the refugee soldier as a terrorist-ally who *does* belong as a citizen. An anonymous commenter's statement teases out the compositional claims about belonging articulated through the protest to the case:

> Many years ago the Hmong people gave their lives to help americans in promise of a better life. The americans, however did not keep their promise. The americans gave up and the Hmong people came to America, but only to get laugh at. After 9/11, the americans had the Hmong people listed under 'terrorist.' *The Hmong people are americans too. Hmong people may not be white, but not everyone has to be white to be americans.* The Hmong people has been nothing but honest to the americans because of our General Vang Pao. He took us here, and like a parent, he taught us the right way. My point here is that General Vang Pao did no wrong in trying to fight for his people, for their lives. *He is stepping up and taking action, just like the americans are doing in Iraq.* He is doing something good, and that is only to try to save many Hmong lives.[313] (emphasis added)

The statement first establishes the ally as a loyal American through which "Hmong people gave up their lives to help Americans in promise of a better life." This public history had to be generated over and over again in order for the protests to make sense. Second, it moves to illustrate the treatment of Hmong in the US after saving US lives. For instance, Hmong "get laughed at" and experience racial discrimination after coming to the US. Third, the arrests and labeling of Hmong as terrorists in the post-9/11 moment are

[313] Moua, "Leader in trouble," June 19, 2007 (anonymous comment).

injustices to Hmong sacrifices for the US. Finally, the statement declares again that General Vang Pao was merely carrying out similar actions to the US government. This layered insistence poignantly reckons with Hmong negotiations with US racial politics about their membership in the nation-state.

The link between a terrorist "label" and the realities of Hmong legal status is clear. Contending with other online comments that question support for the General, one commenter, Kuvyoghmong! (I am Hmong!) explains how being labeled a terrorist affected his status:

> @Phathmong: You were right about some but not all of it. You're not in the same situation as I am. We rally the protest to defend the entire Hmong population and communities in the United States and elsewhere and to clear our name from the BIG BULLETIN. Dont you think by calling us Terrorist will not affect all of us. It does BIG TIME! *I got my green card delay for that stupid reason*; Not only me but also half of my family including those just arrived here a few years ago. *3 years of suffering the hardship of not being able to do anything like an illegal immigration* and not able to fulfilled the dream I've dream before graduated in Junior. I worked so hard and I have no choice but to tolerated that dream because I stuck in mid air. Thanks to this protest and the helps of many others including the staff at my city college, I was able to obtain and continued the chase for my dream. It was painful![314] [sic]

This statement exposes the links between the Patriot Act and the case against Hmong community leaders as an attack against all Hmong. Although some might argue that this is an isolated case, this individual claims that it is not, at least not for him/her and their family members. Having his green card delayed put this individual in an "impossible" position as an "illegal" immigrant. This "impossible subject," what Mae Ngai describes as a "person who cannot be and a problem that cannot be solved," in which this

[314] SuabHmong News, "Press Release: Hmong American Ad Hoc Rally on April 22, 2011 in Sacramento, CA," (anonymous comment).

commenter must delay his/her pursuit of the American Dream advances an understanding of the terrorist as a disruption of linear time.[315] The Hmong terrorist-ally gathers together the disparate points in history and insists on justice in the now.

While the arrests created strong momentum in the months after to organize and attend rallies, these initial energetic public demonstrations waned in the year after as Hmong who initially put their lives on hold returned to their usual routines. Occasional rallies were held, but the initial moment passed as the General was released on bail, only returning to the courthouse for scheduled hearing dates. The Hmong American AD HOC organization emerged through the initial organizing efforts as an entity to continue the efforts of finding justice for General Vang and Hmong by working with the lawyers and Hmong community. After the initial protest rallies in the months following the arrests where Hmong participants rallied behind the General in naming the simultaneity of US policies in Laos, charges against the Hmong leaders, and Preemptive War in Iraq, the rallies turned toward a future-oriented approach about justice for Hmong as US citizens. The rallies were no longer about General Vang but about Hmong political mobilization to raise their voices for justice.

A rally on October 15, 2010 specifically featured a shift in rhetoric from valorizing the General for leading Hmong to the US to demanding justice for US citizens. The key message was to create noise as Americans for the US government to drop all the cases. A banner carried by a plane flying over the Sacramento courthouse and the gathering crowd reads: "Outrageous Government Conduct, Drop Cases." This indictment

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[315] Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 5.

of "outrageous government conduct" proclaimed that Hmong are US taxpayers who seek justice from *their* government. Dr. Nhia Lue Vang, one of the speakers at this rally, made a poignant statement that underscores a present and future-oriented approach to Hmong organizing for justice:

> Today, we are here to *raise our voices so Americans can hear what we are complaining about the injustice for our 12 men up there* [points to the courthouse behind him] You know, I come to America when I had…nothing with me. But I say that if we put our effort in, we will get an outcome and that is about life in America. So we need to put our effort in today so we will have our outcome tomorrow. You know, we are all taxpayers okay? We pay federal tax, state tax, city tax, even we pay grocery (?) tax…*but our government misused those taxpayers' funds. So ask them why they misused our funds*…I think it's time we demonstrate that we are good citizens in this nation…*today we come to ask justice from our government, US government*.[316] (emphasis added)

This statement highlights the contemporary conditions of Hmong enfranchised with US citizenship to make certain demands of its government. The message here presents Hmong as "good citizens" rather than the loyal US ally. Vang asserts that Hmong are US taxpayers who pay federal, state, and city tax and the federal government's case against the twelve defendants constitutes misconduct and misuse of their taxpayers' money. Therefore, injustice against Hmong in the case is twofold: the arrest and charges against Hmong leaders for alleged terrorism and against Hmong American citizens for misusing their taxpayers' funds. Thus the rally participants carried various sorts of noise-making instruments including buckets, drums, and gongs to "ask justice from our government, US government."

[316] Dr. Nhia Lue Vang Speech at the Hmong American Rally on October 15, 2010, accessed on February 1, 2012. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bue1tlbWTS0&feature=endscreen.

Rather than the singular honor that has been offered to General Vang Pao earlier on in the movement, protesters and speakers now formulate a broader analysis of Hmong efforts during the war and Hmong resettlement in the US. Vang testifies that he is the child of a father who was killed in the war in 1965, honoring Hmong parents and grandparents for sacrifices that brought them to this country. In doing so, he narrates Hmong efforts which saved US American lives in the following way: "*we have been involved in the great task that supported South Vietnam where the US army was* and we had to block the troops that brought supply from the North so they cannot help…*We stopped so much troops and supplies that's why the American casualty was little, only 58,000.* Otherwise, it could have been 300,000 American troops who lost their lives in Vietnam."[317] This re-counting of US American bodies that could have been lost in South Vietnam remembers the Vietnam War as part of a great Hmong task to stop the flow of troops and supplies to the South through the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Instead of the 10:1 ratio in which Hmong died to save US pilots that the memorial in Fresno symbolizes, Vang's statement places the Hmong refugee soldier's duties within the larger context of the Vietnam War and in relation to US troops in South Vietnam. The conflict in Laos sustained the life of US militarism by saving its citizen-soldiers, and ultimately cushioning the US defeat. Vang's retelling of this story on the stage of a Hmong American movement draws Hmong historiography up against US Vietnam War history, which underscores what it means to be coming from a war that the US lost.

Conclusion

[317] Ibid., (statement Dr. Nhia Lue Vang).

This chapter has offered its own reckoning with the "shadowy chapter" of war in Laos and what it means for Hmong claims to history, nationhood, and belonging by interlinking US war in Laos with Iraq and Afghanistan. In analyzing the case of Hmong terrorism through General Vang Pao's arrest, I trace how Hmong construct a claim to belonging in the US at a critical juncture in global politics that is based on an allegiance to the ideals of democracy and freedom, terms under which they had fought for the US in Laos. I specifically show how this claim was hinged on the "compositional subject" of the refugee soldier as ally and terrorist along with their tensions, which involved "compositional struggles" that drag up history into the present. Hmong refugees/Americans string together US violence in order to expose US empire's overlapping strategies of power in different racialized global regions. First, I anchored a discussion of the refugee soldier figure within its most notable configuration as a loyal ally through an analysis of two visible embodiments: the Lao Hmong American War Memorial and General Vang Pao. The figure is gendered as a deviant masculinist figure through its subjugation to US state policies and as an agent activating masculinist protection for Hmong. Second, I excavated how the refugee soldier constitutes the terrorist-refugee who is rooted in the fanatical refugee who drags up the past because he perpetually relives it. The terrorist crisis reveals a problem with knowledge production to publicly comprehend displaced histories. Third, I show how Hmong comments online draw together displaced histories in order to show how the Hmong alleged coup reveals US empire as continuous and untimely, and to make Hmong history. Finally, I contend that mobilization around the case generated a means for Hmong political organizing that involved both the first and second generations to envision a future as Hmong Americans.

This chapter has primarily dealt with the question of how to narrate history by using the method of dragging history to articulate Hmong history in relation to current global formations. The next chapter will discuss what Hmong-produced knowledge through the refugee archive might look like when the refugee grandmother is at the center of that formation.

CHAPTER FOUR
The Attachments of History: The Refugee Grandmother in *Gran Torino* and *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*

In chapter one, I performed a methodological excavation of the archiving of secrets to look for the missing baggage of US imperialism and war in Laos. The Hmong refugee's displacement from the archive represents the detachments of Hmong histories. For instance, the missing bag of the Hmong family means that it has been strewn off-course from its journey and detached from the people it came with, leaving them without or behind in history. This detachment also represents the fragmentation of histories in the national linear narrative. Thus the preceding two chapters discuss the representations of Hmong as a refugee soldier in order to contend with historical erasure to critique Vietnam War historiography, US imperialism, and race. While chapter two conceptualizes the refugee soldier as a configuration of US empire's secrecy yet also to critique empire's strategies of power, chapter three analyzes how this figure who is an ally can also become a terrorist and a US citizen. Hmong drag up US illicit policies in Laos in order to maintain that these compositional figures emerge from imperialist expansion, then and now. Their struggles for rights, justice, and belonging produce a masculinized narration of history in relation to the past for present and future purposes.

This chapter focuses on history-making through Hmong family narratives that are centered on the grandmother in film and literary representations in order to understand how the US project of secrecy produced Hmong racial subjection through militarism and rescue, and historical silencing that persists beyond the war. The domain of familial relations and memories allows me to foreground gender as a crucial analytic of history and memory in order to expose how national masculinist war narratives detach and

silence Hmong histories. If the US represents the masculinist protector and Hmong refugees/veterans have been rendered knowable as a refugee soldier, which this figure has sustained certain legal claims such as resettlement in the US and citizenship, how do Hmong refugee women fit within this narrative of history and belonging? This chapter critiques how the Hmong refugee woman is configured as an unknowable subject within the narrative of war memories, rendering her as a non-English speaking subject who is unable to attain citizenship. Such a portrayal represents Hmong as gendered racialized victims who need to be saved by the heroic white man not only from their abject conditions in US inner-cities but also from themselves. My aim is neither to naturalize women's narratives with the domain of the family nor to posit women as the natural producers of or receptacles for memory. Rather, I think through how silence in the archive and the silencing of Hmong histories is a gendered process that obscures the familial narratives that suture together Hmong histories about war, leaving, and the re-making of shattered lives. In relation to the refugee soldier, I propose the refugee grandmother figure as an embodiment and a category of analysis to challenge the detachments in the archive. She foregrounds refugee attachments by stringing memories everywhere, embedded and embodied in people.

I argue that the refugee grandmother's transmission of everyday, embodied knowledge through her performance and storytelling interrupts and works through the silence to imagine historical attachments that are not contingent on the state and inclusion. This dynamic will illustrate how Hmong contentions with their displaced histories constitute a social and political practice to envision history and belonging as displaced peoples. Similar to how my analysis in chapter one dwells in the gaps and

fissures of the archive of secrets, my discussion here will contend with the silence that the secrets have discursively produced particularly through language. In doing so, I consider how what is said becomes the privileged form of articulating history and the silences come into being as the unsaid or unarticulated. In her analysis of silence in Asian American women writers, King-Kok Cheung argues that silences can also be articulate.[318] Cheung explains that these writers "question the authority of language (especially language that passes for history) and speak to the resources as well as the hazards of silence."[319] My analysis takes up this critique of language to interrogate how silence suppresses history as well as becomes productive for formulating Hmong belonging. Although Hmong family and community secrets and silences also structure how history is narrated and what kinds of stories become legible, I am most interested in exploring systemic forms of silencing and how Hmong women who cannot have a place in the secret military history interrupt them. Yet speaking is a double-bind for Hmong women because its legibility requires English skills as well as the availability and ability of language itself to grasp speech's meaning. Cheung's critique of how language constructs silence works here to discuss Hmong women's illegibility as speaking subjects.

But silences can be articulated through the embodied practices of storytelling in Hmong as orality and performance to transmit historical knowledge. I draw from Taylor's assertion of the archive and the repertoire to show how the grandmother figure symbolizes the *refugee archive* of ephemeral, embodied knowledge formation. She

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[318] King-Kok Cheung, *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993): 4.
[319] Ibid., 3.

represents a repertoire of memories that are interspersed everywhere and embedded in family narratives, but not really lost. Thus the missing suitcase that was detached from the Hmong family upon their arrival in the US exists within the repertoire of memories that have been delayed. The grandmother figure exposes the power strategies of crafting knowledge. The refugee archive is a production of knowledge that anchors Hmong-produced histories and knowledge. Ultimately, this chapter analyzes the silence that is both oppressive and productive in articulating Hmong histories in order to explore the politics and practices of Hmong remembering.

I trace the refugee grandmother's production of knowledge in two texts released in 2008, the film *Gran Torino* and the book *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, to explore how everyday knowledge create historical attachments. In addition, I show how the dynamics of the grandmother-granddaughter relationship is an important site to explore the process of remembering. The film's release and the memoir's publication amidst the contentions about Hmong terrorism underscores the stakes in locating a different analysis concerning what it means to be Hmong in the US. These two texts feature the grandmother as a dynamic figure who is angry and distrustful of the US government, yet protective of her family and grandchildren. The grandmother whose encounters with life in the US foregrounds the everyday dilemmas about belonging contests the masculinized formulation of the refugee soldier figure as the loyal ally who deserves citizenship. The chapter extends upon the analysis in chapter three by using Kang's "compositional struggles" and subjects to frame how Hmong cultural productions through film and memoir demand a "critical reconsideration of how certain knowledge-claims and representational endeavors" take place across different sites of cultural

productions.[320] Thus attempts to fit Hmong into the category of knowledge claims are troubled by the "dynamic body of knowledge-claims by and about" Hmong women.[321]

On Method: *Gran Torino* and *The Latehomecomer*

In this section, I consider the questions of genre and method in my analysis of *Gran Torino* and *The Latehomecomer* in order to ground my argument about how storytelling and performance interrupt and work through the silence to suture and attach Hmong histories that have been dispersed in the archive of secrets. My interest in reading the film and memoir together stems from their productivity as highly visible cultural representations about Hmong in the US. Together, the two texts enable an interpretation of the tensions and possibilities about gender and memory that the archives and online media forums could not elucidate. Their representations of the grandmother uniquely portray a dynamic about this figure, although not on purpose in *Gran Torino*, that is conducive to interrogations about history in relation to language, silence, family, and memory. I also contrast the film and memoir to make apparent how the grandmother figure is competing against the white masculine discourse and the refugee soldier figure as citizen and ally. In this sense, she helps to envision a future in which Hmong can find refuge each other beyond the nation-state and citizenship. In addition, I incorporate texts related to the film and memoir such as interviews and roundtable discussions to enhance my analysis, and to emphasize my point about how everyday knowledge creates historical attachments because the conversations about the two texts' significance and

[320] Kang, *Compositional Subjects*, 217.
[321] Ibid., 218.

Hmong creative expression continue well after the film's release and the book's publication.

At the same time, the film and memoir come from different genres of storytelling that constitutes distinct forms of authorship and representation. In the following discussion, I explore how the intervention of Hmong artistic cultural expressions comprises a productive site for me to engage with the texts together, beginning with the film. *Gran Torino* (2008) starring Clint Eastwood, Bee Vang and Ahney Her plots the reform and redemption of a Korean War veteran, Walt Kowalski, who is haunted by his killing of young Korean soldiers in the war and discontent with the invasion of trouble-making immigrants in his suburban Detroit neighborhood. Walt is a blue-collar widower who worked in the Ford factory for 50 years, putting the steering column in cars like his prized 1972 Gran Torino which the film's plot is built around as a symbol of a rite of passage toward either proper white masculinity or a deviant masculinity of inner-city gang life. In the film, the Gran Torino is a symbol of Walt, in which Walt is the Gran Torino, because he worked in the factory to make them and he is as antique as they are.[322] In addition, Walt is characterized as a disgruntled Korean War veteran clinging onto the America and Detroit neighborhood he knows as a vigilante of change in contrast to the Hmong families trying to re-make their lives around him. This juxtaposition relies on the difference of Hmong culture (and race) to enhance Walt's reform.

Haunted by his service in the war and plagued with a terminal illness, Walt finds redemption for the "things he was not ordered to do" in war through "saving" his

[322] See Gran Torino DVD "Special Features." The DVD's special features emphasize cars as symbolic of "manning the wheel" where both the actors and filmmakers nostalgically recount their first and dream cars. See *Gran Torino*, Dir. Clint Eastwood (2008; Warner Bros., Productions, 2009 dvd).

teenaged Hmong neighbors, Sue and Thao Vang Lor, from the local Hmong gangs in order to find their own peace in the world. Specifically, Thao represents the key to Walt's reform as the elderly man equipped with the tools of life sets out to "man up" and "save" his young Hmong teenage neighbor who possesses neither life skills nor a heteronormative masculinity and to succeed in life. But a deeper look might suggest that it is precisely Sue and the sexual violence against her that emboldens Walt to sacrifice himself in order to save both Hmong teenagers.[323] In doing so, the film recuperates the heroic American figure, which this time is the forgotten Korean War veteran.[324] If *Gran Torino* is a story about healing and resolution for the "old guys" of the war then this narrative is symbolic of the US to close this chapter in its history. The film, therefore, depicts a double foreclosure of US imperialism in Southeast/Asia. The legacy of *Gran Torino* will remain a complicated matter for Hmong Americans in which "all the

[323] Schein & Thoj, "*Gran Torino*'s Boys and Men with Guns," 28. The film, as Ly Chong Thong Jalao describes, recycles the theme of redemption for the benevolent white individual and repackages it for our era of change and racial transition. See Ly Chong Thong Jalao, "Looking *Gran Torino* in the Eye: A Review," *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education & Advancement* 5 (2010): 2.

[324] In fact, screenwriter Nick Schenk got the idea and inspiration for the script through his interactions with veterans in which he describes Eastwood's character as a familiar figure because "everybody knows a guy like Walt." Schenk further explains that, "It's the perfect time for a story like this because everything's changing. These old guys and this mind-set's going away. Walt's problem is not that he's an unrepentant racist; it's that his soul's hurting and he's got to heal that before he meets his maker." See Colin Covert, "A Twin Cities Writer's 'Gran' Slam," StarTribune, January 8, 2009 accessed on July 11, 2011. http://www.startribune.com/lifestyle/36949514.html?page=1&c=y. The article explains that the script had humble roots in "Schenk's friendships with old soldiers he met while clerking at the St. Anthony Village Liquor Warehouse and with his Hmong co-workers on the night shift at a Bloomington factory that packaged videotapes." Reportedly, Schenk received cultural consultation from Hmong individuals concerning the cultural accuracies in the script. Schenk further describes getting his story from veterans: "I had met all these old vets at the liquor store. They came in every day for a pint of their 'medicine,' with stories they couldn't tell their wives and children. I was the outlet. So I'd just roll into Grumpy's [Bar, a northeast Minneapolis dive], where my friend was the bartender, and write the stuff longhand on a pad of paper."

previous tensions and repressed histories have not been worked through on an equal footing by all parties involved."[325]

The buzz around *Gran Torino*'s release centers on the excitement that the Hmong actors and characters are making "Hollywood history" in beginning a Hmong foray into popular culture.[326] The film is not a Hmong American production per se, but instead it constitutes a popular media representation of them. As far as most US media representations about racial groups, the film solicited a mixture of concerns about its Hmong cultural and gang references. I am less interested in detailing the film's cultural misrepresentations than the roles of its Hmong cast and crew in producing a cultural product that they and other Hmong Americans might have a stake in. In this way, I consider *Gran Torino* a moment in Hmong American cultural production, even if in a minor sense, due to the negotiations of the Hmong actors and production assistants in the film's crafting. Louisa Schein and Va-Megn Thoj suggest that Hmong actors' and production assistant's roles and experiences insist upon our (viewers) attentiveness to *Gran Torino* as part of a Hmong craft imbued with the complexities and contradictions of refugee memory and contemporary Hmong American community formation.[327] Indeed,

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[325] Jalao, "Looking *Gran Torino* in the Eye," 4.

[326] Hmong viewers excitedly anticipated a Hmong story to emerge from this Hollywood motion picture, especially in the efforts to cast Hmong actors for the Hmong characters through auditions in heavily Hmong concentrated areas such as Fresno, St. Paul/Minneapolis and Detroit. In social network discussions such as Facebook, Hmong Americans debate whether *Gran Torino* is about Hmong or just another movie about Eastwood and the character he portrays in light of the absence of Hmong in the film's promotion. Such heated conversations, especially about the misrepresentations of Hmong culture, underpin a desire for the film to be about Hmong too. In this sense, Hmong refugees/Americans as well as their history can be represented in a feature Hollywood picture and might find a place in popular discourse, to enter into a conversation, and to be debated about its gross over generalizations.

[327] Schein and Thoj (2009) state that: "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" (8). They note in their analysis of Elvis Thao's (played one of the gang members) celebration that he shot Eastwood that the actors want us to attend to the "careful artifice of the actors' creative process." Hence *Gran Torino* is fashioned in part by the "hands of its artisans" (35).

this perspective shows how the Hmong actors work to denaturalize and subvert the trope of a definitive Hmong character, showing it to be "contingent and always in production."[328] This chapter stems from this desire to read *Gran Torino* as a complicated site for the negotiation of histories and memories because there is something else there haunting the film and our viewing of it. These are the memories that have already entered into our acts of seeing and hearing even if we have yet to comprehend them.

This emphasis on the Hmong American cultural expressions to negotiate history in the film allows me to pair it with a reading of Kao Kalia Yang's *The Latehomecomer*, which is one of the few published works from the emerging field of Hmong American literature. Before Yang's memoir, the Hmong American anthology *Bamboo Among the Oaks* (2002) was a first collection published by Minnesota Historical Society Press including the popular short story, "Ms Pacman Ruined My Gang Life." *The Latehomecomer* is the first full-length book published from a Hmong perspective to deal with the questions of war, refugee experiences, identity, and belonging. Since then, another anthology has been published from the Hmong American Writers' Circle entitled, *How Do I Begin: A Hmong American Literary Anthology* (2011). The Hmong American literary movement faces the challenge of finding a place for creative expression in literature within the context of a strong Hmong oral tradition as well as against the

[328] Schein & Thoj, *Gran Torino*'s Boys and Men with Guns," 37. In a published interview with Hmong media scholar Louisa Schein, Bee Vang recounts his intentions to continue auditioning for the role of Thao to "try to improve on the script and the ways Hmong were portrayed" and make him a more "complex and credible" character. Even when he got the part and had to portray an effeminate and subordinated teenager, "he did it with more attitude." See Louisa Schein and Bee Vang, "*Gran Torino*'s Hmong Lead: Bee Vang on Film, Race and Masculinity," *Hmong Studies Journal* 11 (2010): 1-11.

construct of an absent written Hmong language.[329] Yang struggles with this very bind in her development in the memoir to find creative expression in the silence of history and absence of a written language. As I will show, it is through her grandmother's orality in storytelling that she can negotiate a coming into literacy.[330] Literary creative expression has been one tool in reconsidering the impact of war and Hmong refugee experiences from Hmong American perspectives. I analyze Yang's book both within and beyond its textual representation in order to get at the context for memory's emergence.

Yang's memoir is about her family's experiences escaping from Communist persecution after US abandonment in 1975 to the jungles of Laos, to a life in Thailand's refugee camps as "prisoners of time,"[331] and present day Minnesota. It narrates the story of a Hmong family, seven brothers with their wives and children, and centers on their matriarch mother who is Yang's grandmother. The memoir's narrative trajectory from Laos to Thailand and then the US follows her family's multiple displacements. Yang interweaves her parents' stories along with her recollections through her grandmother's narrative. Indeed, Yang shows that the memories which surface through Grandma's interactions with Walt in the film are stories that she has always known, told to her by her own grandmother and family members. While such memories of the war's secrets remain a subtext in *Gran Torino* and other popular representations so that those who witnessed it continue to bear the burden of its telling, Yang imbues the stories with the lived lives of lost, loneliness and non-belonging experienced by her and other Hmong families. This

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[329] See "Hmong & Writing" on the Hmong American Writers' Circle website, http://www.hmongwriters.org/.
[330] I thank Adria for helping me articulate this point.
[331] Kao Kalia Yang, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2008), 80.

family memoir from the perspective of a 1.5 generation Hmong American woman who was born in a Thai refugee camp reveals how the memories and knowledge of war stem from the stories of their elders. She is part of a generation, as she recounts a story Hmong parents tell their children, of babies who live in the sky who "can see the course of human lives," of babies who choose their lives. Yang narrates that, "the people who we would become we had inside of us from the beginning, and the people whose worlds we share, whose memories we hold strong inside of us, we have always known." A generation of Hmong children who would help their parents and grandparents remember their "existence in America" to leave a trace of their un-written lives when they must return back to the clouds.

Yang opens her book with this short story that Hmong parents and grandparents tell the children of her generation that "we have chosen our lives" in order to reckon with the path of her life as it intertwines with her family members', especially that of Grandma. Yang explains how she wanted the book to speak to the "moment of fleeing and fighting, the moment in between, the moment that a life like mine come from." As such, it became a story of a young writer from the east side of St. Paul "trying to garner a voice in a world where she'd gone silent." She reveals growing up a selective mute for most of her life because she saw how the world did not want to hear her mother and father speak, and had only begun speaking since the publication of her book.[332] In the memoir, Yang interprets her silence alongside the silencing of Hmong history in which the "Hmong inside the little girl fell into silence." The narrative contends with the

[332] Minnesota Original (MN O), "Kao Kalia Yang," & "Hmong author Kao Kalia Yang shares the story of her memoir, *The Latehomecomer*," May 11, 2010, accessed on May 8, 2011. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpzAlwrlrpU and http://mnoriginal.org.

tensions of systemic silencing of history and her family's experiences where she saw how the "world only knew skin-deep the reaches of Hmong" in their footnoting in the history of the world so that Vietnam was only Vietnamese, Laos belonged to the Laotians, and the war was only American.[333] Yang's memoir, therefore, hovers at the juncture of what we know and others do not, of desires bursting at the seams of silence and of Hmong grandmothers who insist on our listening. Its narrative builds upon the trajectory of a voice lost and found pieced together through the love of a grandmother. I argue that the memoir as a form of storytelling—the production of memories over time—attaches these memories for the purposes of holding on, of not forgetting, and for seeking refuge in each other. Thus history-making foregrounds refuge as a process in becoming rather than a site of resolution where things are over and done with. My analysis of the memoir attends to how history and memory work together as "social practices with a politics" to organize knowledge and community.[334] Understanding memory's complicity with history helps me to engage with the family narratives as practices of knowledge for both history- and memory-making.

A memoir, for Yang, is a collection of memories that are more than one's own. It is a story about a life and many other lives shaped by a history that was kept secret that can belong to all of us so we can find it in each other. Conventionally, the genre of memoir privileges the individual story in recounting the trials and triumphs of one's life. The form of memoir writing itself connotes the very production of memories in its recounting of how things were. Although the memoir genre, like the documentary film, is

[333] Yang, *The Latehomecomer*, 4.
[334] McGranahan, *Arrested Histories*, 19.

fraught with questions about its objectivity and truth, it is Yang's play with memory's constructedness that I am most interested in excavating in order to highlight the negotiations of home and belonging beyond citizenship. Yang's use of the genre foregrounds how memories are forged, in this case, from multiple stories. Her family memoir is a memory-work rather than a work of memory because it involves the very production and mediation of Hmong histories and memories about war, leaving, and home making. In reading and discussing her book with "Minnesota Original," Yang explains the possibility of writing the book as a memoir:

> The book begins in 1975 when the last Air America planes leave the country with a declaration of genocide against the Hmong, only the Hmong didn't know it. And I wasn't born yet but it is a memoir. And memoirs are not only the memories we hold but they are the memories passed on to us and they exist within a bigger world of memory. So that's where it begins, lots of research, lots of going back to the stories that were told to me not because I was writing a book but because everybody wanted to explain why my life was the way it was. Why Thanksgiving was Meals on Wheels and why Christmas was Toys for Tots. And so I've heard all these stories and it would be inaccurate of me to allow the story to begin the day I was born.[335]

Yang suggests in this statement that the production of history through stories passed on to the generation born after the war is purposeful to explain the shape of her life—living a second-classed version of the American Dream. She maintains her choice of the genre that "memoirs are not only the memories we hold [because] they exist within a bigger world of memory," delineates how memories are not just one's own but persist threaded through others' recollections. Thus Hmong memories that surface in a "fragmented, halting, and intertextual composition" to emphasize the dilemmas of war, displacement,

[335] Minnesota Original (MN O), "Kao Kalia Yang," "Hmong author Kao Kalia Yang shares the story of her memoir, The Latehomecomer," May 11, 2010.

and belonging are not secret because they are embedded everywhere.[336] Their postponed and late in arrival emergence through the everyday dilemmas of encountering systemic silencing and forgetting, rather than the spectacular displays of violence, troubles the presumption of secrecy's hiddenness. The mundane and routine practices of a grandmother's storytelling, therefore, powerfully convey how memories already circulate, communicated as narratives of a life lived on the edge of belonging in a crisis of US rescue.

The process of remembering involves creating attachments to other histories and to each other so that Hmong latehomecoming historical memories may be articulated. This process is crucial for complicating conventional knowledge since certain memories are still disruptive to the dominant Vietnam War discourse. For instance, Yang describes that the first time literary agents in New York rejected her book, they explained that "Vietnam was a horrible chapter in our history [and] people didn't want to revisit that chapter."[337] Her work unsettles the benevolence and permanence of refuge within the nation-state because the memoir "artistically bears witness to *what we do not yet know of our lived historical relation to events of our times*."[338] Hence, Yang's book would bear witness to a past that the US has not yet dealt with, and whose histories are latehomecoming, to borrow from the memoir's title. These histories are late in arriving and lag in time because they have been deferred through Hmong displacement outside of the nation and history. Latehomecoming symbolizes the gendered formation of history

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[336] Kang, *Compositional Subjects*, 217.
[337] HighBridge, "Giving Voice to The Latehomecomer," April 18, 2011, accessed on May 8, 2011. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xPeLYfD3Nk. In this context, it was important to Yang "that it would be one of the first to be published in America from the Hmong perspective."
[338] Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (NY: Routledge, 1992), xx.

and Hmong remembering because it also signifies how Hmong are disposed as late in emerging into modernity. Such memories are "arrested histories," delayed in the past and present but are yet to come.

Entangled Histories

The film's pairing of the confluence of Asian American popular representations with a "forgotten" Korean War history in US imagination with white masculinity structure an uneasy encounter with Hmong and their incorporation into an Asian American narrative. Exploring how the film's depictions of Hmong characters are "closely aligned with stereotypical representations of Asian Americans" alone or through the lens of masculinity cannot get at the Hmong narrative undergirding the overarching story.[339] I maintain that juxtaposing Asian American stereotypes with heroic white masculinity foregrounds the plot's redemptive work of Americanization and white masculinity through Hmong American youth. In doing so, it reveals the patriarchal framing of Hmong and Asian American women as hypersexualized threat (Sue as the

[339] Adia & Jesse, "'Gran Torino,' White Masculinity & Racism," January 17, 2009, accessed on March 8, 2012. http://www.racismreview.com/blog/2009/01/17/gran-torino-white-masculinity-racism/. Formal and informal academic conversations about the film have been important in rethinking the multiple connections in Asian American historiography that are inextricably linked to US imperialism in Asia through the framework of Hmong refugees/Americans. The Midwest is without its own tangled Asian American history, especially when *Gran Torino* is set in Detroit and the declining auto industry, the site of groundbreaking Asian American struggles for civil rights and justice through the murder of Vincent Chin. Chin's brutal murder in 1982 by two laid-off, disgruntled white autoworkers galvanized a generation of Asian American college-educated/-age and community members to fight for justice (legal and political), at a time when the Asian American movement had enter a period of consolidation and professionalization.[339] At the same time, Asian Americans were becoming solidified in the media as the model minority in conjunction with the rise of Japanese economy and US-Japan auto industry competition. The long duree of Chin's case continues to impact and raise political consciousness among Asian Americans today, particularly a recent consideration of Chin's narrative in Tony Lam's "Vincent Who?" (2009). It is an Asian American story that gets remembered and passed on from its activists to inspire new generations of activists. It continues to circulate as part of Asian American historical and cultural memory. Hence, *Gran Torino* occupies a space in this circuit of Asian American history, memory, activism, and popular representation, and opens up a discussion about Hmong Americans in relation to Asian American racial formation as a global configuration that is fraught with secrets.

"dragon lady") and men as effeminate (Thao as emasculated). More poignantly, this frame infantilizes them as young children who need saving from their debilitating community and culture where there are no Hmong adult men to protect their interests and future. I show how the possibility of a Hmong perspective is embedded within this framework of white masculinity and the "saving" of non-white peoples. Thus my analysis of Grandma and Sue's grafting of memories offers a critique of Walt's heroic white masculinity. Sue and Grandma are represented in tandem with each other in which the granddaughter embodies a younger spunky version of her grandmother. Three generations of Hmong women figured through Sue, her mother, and grandmother make up the matriarchal Lor household within which Walt believes is the root of Thao's emasculation. This sets up the construction of Hmong femininity in contention with Hmong and American masculinity that is at once bothersome and needs saving.

Sue is a complicated character, not in the depth of her representation, but through the multi-layered symbolism imbued in her development. The film first introduces Sue as Thao's older sister who enforces woman's chores of washing dishes and gardening upon her younger sibling. She is initially portrayed as his protector against the Hmong gang's initiation. Second, her friendship with Walt, after he put a stop to the gang's shuffle with Thao on the front lawn, surreptitiously resembles the racial and sexualized encounters between Asia and the West/US. She mediates his entry into the Hmong community where their interactions enhance his heroic white masculinity. At the same time, she thrusts upon Walt the material realities of Hmong experiences in the US stemming from the war. In these instances, Sue entangles her grandmother's memories with Walt's haunting memories as a Korean War veteran. It is at this juncture that I find the character of Sue

most productive because she makes intelligible the attachments of Grandma's memories to their lives in Detroit, disrupting Walt's attempts to unpack his war memories.

Sue's combination of innocent teenager and knowledgeable historian attaches her grandmother's claims about the war that are dispersed throughout the film, and unnerves the film's narrative about Walt. The exchange between Sue and Walt on the topic of where Hmong is located and why they are in the US strings together Grandma's insistence on remembering US betrayal and Hmong lives lost in the war, which are mostly un-subtitled. After Walt comes upon Sue's encounter with three "dangerous" black youth, he rescues her from their clutches and on the ride home asks:

> **Walt**: Where the hell is Humong, I mean Hmong, anyway?
> **Sue**: No, Hmong isn't a place. It's a people.

"Where is Hmong anyway" is a simple question repeated in multiple encounters, in film and everyday life, signifying a sincere curiosity to locate in geographic and historical memory what and where Hmong exists. It is a question about place as a geographic marker, a historiographical indicator (where in history do they belong?), and more poignantly, place as a site of refuge. This exchange between Walt and Sue is the first time that Hmong comes up in *Gran Torino,* an interest from Walt in who his Hmong neighbors are.

The question haunts *Gran Torino*'s narrative because it conjures up the refugee figure to disrupt the film's themes of redemption, white heteronormative masculinity and white "savior" of the foreign other. More than a geographic question, Walt's query illuminates the dilemma of the Hmong refugee figure and the issue of refuge in the US. Therefore, Walt's further inquiries of, "how did you end up in my neighborhood then?

Why didn't you stay there?" cannot be answered without implicating the US wars in Southeast Asia. Sue reminds Walt and the viewer that Hmong helped the US and their undesired presence in this Midwestern neighborhood is intricately connected to US actions in Southeast Asia:

> **Sue**: It's a Vietnam thing. We fought on your side. And when the Americans quit, the Communists started killing all the Hmong. So we came over here.
> **Walt**: Yeah. Well, I don't know how you ended up in the Midwest. There's snow on the ground six months out of the year. Why does a jungle people want to be in the great frozen tundra?
> **Sue**: Hill people. We were hill people. Not a jungle people. Booga-booga-booga…Blame the Lutherans, they brought us over here.

Sue's brief explanation to Walt that it's a "Vietnam thing" and "we fought on your side," although a short hand for reasoning Hmong presence in the US, underscores the plight of Hmong refugees/Americans and insinuates overlapping Korean War and Vietnam/secret War narratives throughout the film. These overlapping stories produce unintended meanings about haunting war memories such as interpreting Walt's guilt about his role in the Korean War to signify the US's guilt concerning its illicit activities in Laos. This turn in the film re-signifies the story of redemption as an incomplete refugee rescue narrative. Consequently, the Hmong presence in his neighborhood makes the Korean War veteran uneasy because it elicits unwanted reminders of his and the US role in Korea. When Father Janovich reassures Walt of the distinction between war and peace in which confessing one's sins leaves behind the burdens of war, he insists that war is chaotic, unplanned and unprincipled so that the things that haunt him are "what he isn't ordered to do." This assertion of Walt's apparent un-peacefulness symbolizes the histories that haunt the US about its wars in Southeast Asia because it was not supposed to be there. Walt's

inner struggles, what makes him appear grumpy to his family and neighbors, is the collision of messy histories and his knowledge that the conditions of war are burdensome, difficult to unload in the absence of adequate language to convey them. Instead, he growls, at his children who cannot understand him and the Hmong neighbors whose presence conjures up too much. Therefore, Walt not only symbolizes the disgruntled figure of the Korean War veteran but rather represents a nation trying to grapple with its past. The story of redemption then is turned on its head so rather than reforming Walt, it redeems the US as that place of refuge where Sue and Thao can find peace. They need and deserve saving from the inner-city life of strife and delinquency into proper US American subjects. These exchanges attach the story of Hmong fighting on the US side onto the overarching dilemma of Walt's guilt about Korea, which shows how historical secrecy is entangled with other war memories. This entanglement symbolizes the im/possibilities of knowledge about the war.

Sue's exclamation of "booga-booga-booga" complete with hand gestures after correcting Walt that Hmong are "hill" not "jungle" people neutralizes this potentially disruptive account of how Hmong fought on the side of the US and were forced to flee Communist persecution after US abandonment. Sue as the teenager re-emerges, or rather, the discomforting end of the scene reverts her back to the teenager/child who makes a playful sound. The gesture infantilizes her as a racialized, gendered youngster from the very hill or jungle against which she protests. At issue here is the concern that any knowledge-claims about Hmong history emerges mediated, postponing an understanding of US war and imperialism. The child-like gesture delays further surfacing of war memories. Nonetheless, Sue's challenges here about American abandonment links what I

will show in the next section as Grandma's dispersed but overlaid accounts of this history.

Encounters: Grandma and Walt

While the overarching narrative is about Walt and his redemption, I find the subplot of his encounters with Sue and Thao's grandmother productive in getting at Hmong memory-making, and expose his benevolence as violence. I argue that Walt and Grandma's encounters show this complicated racial-gendered process of secrecy. To be sure, the performative interplay between actor and character in the configurations of Eastwood/Walt and Chee Thao/Grandma beyond the filmic representation into the public discourse about the movie makes an important impact on my analysis. The encounters between a symbol of the US, Walt, and a refugee grandmother illuminate the contact between the US and Hmong. The story in *Gran Torino* is as much about Walt the character as it is about Eastwood the actor and director. Thus the actress who plays the grandmother is inextricably linked to her character. This kind of link between the actors and their characters symbolizes the intertextuality within the film's narrative about different histories and colliding memories, allowing me to read the film beyond its possibilities, as a moment of Hmong complicated creativity. Grandma helps me do this because her un-subtitled dialogue offers a critical reading and viewing of the film. She expands the concerns about redemption and belonging that is tied to white masculinity beyond its fixedness and says it is about her story, reflects her life story, including the negotiations of life in the US. The fact that she does this work as actor and character makes the text productive for exploring Hmong contentions with popular representation and moves beyond the text and its confining narrative.

Thus Grandma's interactions with Walt also foreground the actress's narrative through her experiences in Laos and the US. In a panel, "Hmong Speak Out on *Gran Torino*: A discussion with the Hmong actors," at the University of Minnesota a few months after the release of *Gran Torino*, Chee Thao, the actress who plays Grandma, was asked to talk about the role she played and explained some of the lines that were in Hmong because she had improvised parts of them. She expressed frustration at the un-subtitled statements because she had hoped to communicate the context for the film's references to the war in the lines she performed. With a single sheet of paper of the notes she had prepared, she stood among the panelists with microphone in hand and says:

> I am going to talk about my life and coming to this country (the US) before I talk about the movie. In 1975, our country (teb chaws) fell (tawg). That's when the Americans came to lie to us, right? So we lost our country and so they (Americans) had to accept us to live (yug peb) in this country. [She hesitates and stutters as she says this next part] My husband and I became Chao Fa (those who fled to the jungles), that's why we got lost. [More hesitation as she looks at her notes] In 1987, I came to Thailand but I immediately came to the US, I didn't stay in Thailand because I wanted to come to the US and we were soldiers so they expedited us through. So we came to this country and I got to be in this movie, it's like the story of (came from or is a reflection of) my life (zoo li los ntawm kuv lub neej xwb nav).[340] [My translation]

While the other panelists spoke from their seats, Thao's standing position centralizes her body in relation to the others. She enacts a telling that invites listening, and portrays a practice of narration that she has done repeatedly, especially through the opener of, "I am going to talk about my life." Thao's presentation performs her embodiment of Grandma and the story of loss of country and family members. Here, Thao's abbreviated story of

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[340] "Hmong Speak Out on *Gran Torino*: A Discussion with the Hmong Actors," producer Louisa Schein, at the University of Minnesota, February 20, 2009, accessed on July 31, 2011. http://www.crossingstv.com/file/wmv/GT.wmv.

war, violence, loss and displacement provides a political historical context for her un-subtitled lines. But more poignantly, she claims that the conditions of war which resulted in the Hmong lost of their "country" shaped *how* she wanted to portray her character, Grandma, because it is also a story that reflects her own. Thao's testimony-like presentation of her story to connect with *Gran Torino*'s narrative simultaneously asserts her credibility as an actor for the role and offers a narrative that is parallel to Walt's. It makes the encounters between her character and Walt constitutive of that between Hmong and the US. Therefore, the specters of Hmong historical memory are all wrapped up in Walt's redemption and the resolution of US historical and contemporary dilemmas. Thao's statement highlights how the everyday dilemmas about history, redemption, and neighborhood violence are strung in the surfacing of memories.

The incomprehensible histories of war shape Walt and Grandma's interactions and their adversarial yet mutually constituted depictions. Because some of Grandma's encounters with Walt are un-subtitled, it seemingly conveys insignificant utterings and gibberish—the illegible soundtrack thickening the plot.[341] Indeed, Walt and Grandma's exchanges portray antagonism but do not offer a social context from which the resentment derives. Thao's performance in improvising her dialogue along with her character's relationship with Walt troubles the film's redemption of white masculinity and foregrounds the possibility for engaging with war memories that do not fit the script and demand our dwelling in the past.[342] Cedric Lee, Hmong Cultural Consultant for the

[341] Schein and Thoj contend that these un-subtitled lines conspire to mute Hmong speech in alignment with the narrative of Walt's slurs of 'screaming' and 'jabbering' gooks. See Schein & Thoj, "*Gran Torino*'s Boys and Men with Guns," 34.

[342] The possibility for a Hmong reading stems from the casting of all Hmong "non-actors," with the exception of Doua Moua (who plays the gang member Spider), which compelled Eastwood to "let them go

film involved in the casting of Hmong extras in Detroit, interpretation on set and post-production translation for subtitles, confirms that there were no Hmong lines in the script so half of the Hmong dialogue was scripted (fed through interpreters) while the other half came from the Hmong actors.[343] He explains further that the Hmong actors improvised many of the "emotional scenes" because "there was no real direction." Within the context and confines of the storyline and Hmong participation in *Gran Torino*'s making, the Hmong actors negotiated "how to tell our story and our side." Lee gives insight into Thao's unscripted and un-subtitled lines as telling our story by explaining that "she was speaking how she felt and wanted to let the world know."[344] I will elaborate on how and why letting the world know about Hmong experiences is significant.

Overlapping and Mediated Histories

The moments of improvisation produce the possibility for memories to surface because they are the spaces of translation. The process of translation and the concept of untranslatability open up a comprehension of the historical narrative unraveling through Grandma's exacting statements. An engagement with the possibilities of untranslatability requires a reading beyond the script and filmic representations, one that combines the dialogue in the film with the Hmong actors' understanding of their roles. Translation offers an interpretation of the script, and opens up the tensions about Hmong-US relations that are often left unexplored. Cathy Caruth's consideration of the question of translation

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with the flow" and he would just capture it, much more improvisation than with trained actors. Author interview with Cedric Lee, "Hmong Cultural Consultant" for *Gran Torino*, in August 1, 2011.

[343] Cedric Lee explains that Gran Torino's producer brought him to Warner Brothers' studio to do translation for the Hmong lines in the film's post-production. Lee and his wife spent a few days translating every Hmong line whether or not they were scripted. However, the producers made the final decision on what to subtitle.

[344] Interview with Cedric Lee.

in her analysis of *Hiroshima mon amour* highlights the untranslatability of French dialogue memorized and recited by the film's Japanese actor because he performs the lines. She asserts, therefore, that this act of recitation does not represent but rather "voices his difference quite literally, and untranslatably."[345] Whereas Caruth privileges the voice as a mode of speaking that does not own or master its meaning but "transmits the difference of its voice" in relation to the Japanese actor's recitations of French, I suggest that it is both the voice and its meaning—the form and its content—that demands historical witnessing in *Gran Torino*. My point here is that Grandma's very unscripted and un-subtitled dialogue as untranslatable in its meaning and entanglements with Walt's lines brings to the fore a central plot of historical contention and significance. While Walt relives his nightmare of Korea, emblematic of Korean War veterans' frustration of the changing world and their forgotten role, Grandma vehemently reminds him and the audience that there is another war with its own veterans whose roles remain unacknowledged and are always at risk of not being remembered. The problem with translation of language and meaning foregrounds the mediated emergence of memories because they must always surface attached to a more legible narrative.

Chee Thao's story and glimpses at the specters of Hmong historical memories emerged, then, through the everyday encounters of Grandma/Thao and Walt/Eastwood. Thus Walt and Grandma's depicted antagonism and eventual "friendship" forged through the improvised acting/dialogue in the unplanned narrative could be re-read as illuminating a convoluted Hmong-US relationship. Grandma serves as Walt's nemesis,

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[345] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 51.

one who can out spit him and also keeps a watchful eye on the neighborhood, especially on Walt. In the scene where they sit on their respective porches sizing each other, she mutters in Hmong (subtitle): "Why does that old white man stay here? All the Americans have moved out of this neighborhood. Why haven't you gone?" Walt knows that she "hates his ass" and she expresses this every time he is around, but always in Hmong. The film suggests that Walt and Grandma have similar enemies in their collective watchful perches over the neighborhood. However, they constitute each other's enemies in Walt's conflation of Hmong for Koreans. Thao/Grandma's reasons for dislike provides historical context for a Hmong story in the film and the narrative traced through Grandma's lines counters and complicates the baggage Walt carries as a Korean War veteran. Walt and Grandma's relationship, therefore, symbolizes what seems like a postcolonial paradigm of contact, interactions, contamination and self-acknowledgement where the narrative framing Walt, Thao, Sue and Grandma function as "a mirror and as an enemy line."[346] But I contend that such a trajectory is fictionalized as a savior narrative in which Walt discovers himself through interactions with his Hmong neighbors in order to save them. Instead, Grandma and his relationship actually encapsulates the unresolved tensions of a postcolonial conflict.

But her anger and fears about Walt along with the US neglect of Hmong do surface through the perpetuation of violence. At the same time that Walt dislikes the changing look of his neighborhood, Grandma questions his presence in the neighborhood and in her house because she fears it will bring trouble to the family. The climax of the movie with the drive-by shooting and Sue's rape makes clear the kind of trouble

[346] Francesca Tognetti, "*Gran Torino*: a foreign neighbourhood," *Other Modernities* 10, no. 2 (2009): 380.

Grandma was concerned about with Walt's presence around the family. In fact, his intervention resulted in the gang members' attack on the family. After the shooting, she runs down the stairs and seeing Thao hurt with Walt in the house cries out (un-translated): "I was afraid that the white American man killed my son." When Sue arrives home bruised and beaten with blood streaming down her legs, Grandma exclaims accusatory: "I told you guys not to allow the white American man to come to our house. I am not happy with him. What is he going to say about this?" Grandma's protests to Walt as mentor/father figure to Thao and Sue were attempts to avoid what she had witnessed during and after the war: the broken promises of democracy and an American Dream. Her implication of the shooting and Sue's rape with Walt's white benevolence denies him redemption.

The film's ending illuminates Grandma's aversion to his presence because violence has descended upon her family through his meddling. Yet Walt's "sacrifice" to "save" Sue and Thao from the Hmong gang by letting the gang shoot him in front of witnesses recuperates his actions as justifiably benevolent. After he has locked Thao in the basement for his own safety, Walt walks his dog Daisy over to Grandma who sits in her usual rocking chair on the porch, keeping an eye out for him and the neighborhood. Again, her dialogue here is un-subtitled as he approaches with Daisy, intending to leave her with Grandma: "These Americans lie to Hmong that they'll take our husbands and sons to go to war and will compensate us. That is a lie…Lied to us so that we no longer have a home and land to live in…You must take care of us (yug peb, make us live)." At the same time, Walt says: "I need you to watch my dog. Yeah, I love you too." Walt's intentions to confront the Hmong gang and "save" Thao and Sue, to give them peace, and

himself peace by assuaging for his actions during the Korean War, converges with Grandma's assertion that he and the US must be accountable for the illicit war and violence that resulted in the deaths of thousands of Hmong men (and women) and Hmong displacement from their homes. Grandma's account of the "unwritten deaths" is attached onto Walt's simultaneous act of disavowal as he busily secures Daisy's leash to her chair. Their overlapping dialogue, the act of speaking to each other yet addressing different concerns, entangles Walt's Christ-like death as "bittersweet": sweet in the salvation and bitter in its foreclosure of the past.

These scenes of Grandma and Walt's overlapping statements suggest that a Hmong perspective is already infused with the overarching narrative of *Gran Torino* and US history about its wars in Southeast/Asia. Indeed, this Hmong perspective "may not have a single accessible language of its own" but the film opens the possibility for Hmong historical memories "within an address to those who speak another language, and who view the story…from the perspective of another past."[347] Therefore, in tracing Walt's prejudice and assertion of white masculinity in relation to Grandma's subtle and un-subtitled memories, *Gran Torino*'s ending and his death are symbolic of that debt the US owes Hmong in order to make them live and survive. *The Gran Torino is a symbol of Walt, where Walt is the Gran Torino, because he worked in the factory to make them and he is as antique as they are*. By extension, the Gran Torino and Walt are a symbol of the US, for they represent the nation's values of masculinity, independence, freedom, innovation and working- to middle-class socioeconomic standing. This symbol of the US dies, this time at the hands of Hmong gang members (the US's making of guerrilla

[347] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 46.

warriors turned violent youth gangs) and among witnesses, recuperating the past so that Sue and Thao are supposed to lead assimilated American lives. We see this in the final scene as Thao inherits the prized Gran Torino, passed on from Walt in order to embrace Hmong Americans as part of the American family.

Grandma's un-subtitled statements highlight the relation between translation and history-making. On the one hand, Grandma's lines, although translated in post production by Lee, are un-subtitled and therefore untranslatable because they cannot fit within the premise of the narrative. The historical context they underscore weighs too heavily for a story about redemption and white masculinity's benevolence to carry and be able to explain. Thus the lines remain un-subtitled to depict flat Hmong characters and reinforce ideas about Hmong backwardness and foreignness. On the other hand, Thao's account of her performance provides a context for which memories can surface beyond the film's narrative into the public discourse about it. Thao recounts her purposeful performance of her lines as a way to make sure that US Americans know about their government's perpetuation of violence globally:

> They told me to say that Americans asked us to go to war and they will take care of the women and children, but our husbands and sons died in war. So I said it like that. *But, our husbands and sons did die in the war yet they (Americans/US) didn't take care of us. I wanted them (director or interpreter) to translate it like that in the movie.* Only Hmong people know, Americans don't know so I wanted Americans to know that their leaders lied to Hmong people which is why they (Hmong/actors) said these things or used this language (los sis cov lus no). So that the story will barely/slightly (nyiam qhuav yog) be a story about us right now. [My translation]

The ambiguous references of "they" as the director, Hmong interpreters or both and "told me" in this passage allows Thao to try to communicate what Hmong people know and

US Americans do not about the US government's illicit role in Laos that produced Hmong displacement. Although she was told to testify to how Hmong husbands and sons fought and died in the war, Thao refuses this narrative's characterizing of Hmong as willing soldiers and ally for the US. Thus she qualified her line with "these Americans lie to Hmong" in order to convey what she says Hmong people know that US Americans must also have knowledge of in regards to the state's production of violence and death. Thao's insistence as Grandma on knowing the context and conditions of US betrayal makes legible the lines of the Hmong actors, so that they do not constitute the unintelligible mumbles marking Hmong foreignness but rather, as she says, narrate a story that might slightly resemble "us right now."

However, Grandma's lines that bring forth a violent Hmong-US relationship cannot be subtitled because they do not *make sense* within the narrative about Walt and/as the US. Lee recounts this final scene between Grandma and Walt as coming from Grandma/Thao: "We're just like, just yell at him. You don't like him, yell at him. A lot of that stuff she just threw out." Thao later asks Lee why these particular lines were not subtitled precisely because her intention was for the audience to know. Lee did not have an answer for her then but explains, in my interview with him, that from a filmmaker's perspective the absence of subtitles functions to make sense of the story:

> Obviously he [Eastwood] did a whole movie with subtitles with the Japanese film. But if it doesn't have to be subtitled, then it shouldn't. *If the story makes sense without you knowing what they said then what's the point of subtitling it*? So there's a lot of things that wasn't subtitled and that was one of them and the grandma asked me: why didn't they subtitle it? I guess she wanted that to be out there and I didn't have an answer for her because I didn't make that decision.[348] [Emphasis added]

[348] Interview with Cedric Lee.

Here, *Gran Torino* makes sense without Grandma's assertions. The stories of the Korean War, liberal individualism, white heteropatriarchy and Americanization/assimilation make in/accessible a historical witnessing of Hmong memories. Yet Lee's point clarifies that subtitles are unnecessary here, whereas they might have been integral in the Japanese film Eastwood previously directed, because the content of the dialogue only comprises part of the performance to convey a Hmong narrative. The other parts of the performance involve Thao's anger, watchful looks, questions, and matching position on the porch in relation to Walt. Curiously, rather than re-scripting the memories as part of the narrative, the decision to leave them in as un-subtitled presents a crisis in the film that compels a closer listening. Such a listening accentuates assertions about the war and the figure of the speaking Hmong woman.

Therefore, I conceptualize how the un-subtitled Hmong dialogue in *Gran Torino* is revealing of the impossibility of displaced histories as translatable into text because subtitles cannot communicate what is already incomprehensible. The un-subtitled dialogue thus makes possible the transmission of knowledge through embodied action and cultural agency. The un-subtitled lines, because they were un-written, illuminate the political crisis of uncontained histories of the role Hmong played in a war that was not supposed to exist. Once again, the Hmong characters are made to play in a narrative not reflective of their experiences and whose terms they did not create. But the actors as characters are determined to give it a different telling, to imbue it with a story that is meaningful to the past in the present. The space or scene of indistinct chatter in film signifies the moment of crisis and violence that threaten to expose the plot and its secrets.

Hence the climax of the film in which the family encounters the violence of a drive-by shooting and Sue's rape underscores the ethical political dilemma of those uncontainable histories. It is always such unscripted and unwritten scenes where "things are not planned that memories and secrets surface."[349] Unlike the final scene where the Hmong police officer conveys to Thao and Sue as the gang members are taken away in handcuffs that "we've got them this time because there were witnesses" to Walt's murder, there continues to be no witnessing of the war and how it haunts Hmong refugees/Americans.

I contend that the absence of subtitles in translation in the critical moments of crisis in the story, nonetheless, signals the unplanned emergence of historical memories. In fact, their absence underscores the condition that subtitles are insufficient in explaining and elucidating silenced histories. They do not make secrets anymore accessible but instead neutralize them. Un-subtitled dialogue as untranslatable histories encircles secrets in the breakdown of English/language to communicate the crisis in the social order or state power. Thus Grandma's voice and address demands a listening that one "cannot fully know but to which [one] nonetheless bears witness."[350] This space of "mute repetition"[351] serves as a site of that very act of witnessing because Grandma's assertions have entered into popular discourse within the circuit of overlapping narratives threaded along nodes of secret histories that can never really be kept. This opens up the possibility of conjoining histories, of "telling another history,"[352] that would be in/accessible otherwise. Such engagements reveal the limitations of Hollywood to contend with a

[349] Thank you Yen Le Espiritu for helping with this phrasing to characterize the exchanges between Grandma and Walt.
[350] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 9.
[351] Ibid., 9.
[352] Ibid., 52.

complicated Hmong history and serve as a "challenge for the Hmong to tell their own story, on their own terms."[353]

The un-subtitled dialogue in most of Grandma and Walt's encounters is not so much about mis/un/translation but rather the way that her dialogue does not make sense with the film's plot when brought into English/language. This move in the film's production is an act of silencing the story about Hmong, as gender racial subjects of secrecy, and links with Yang's silence in school and the harshness of English. Yang's experience helps elucidate both Grandmas' dilemmas with English/language because she shows how it is incomprehensible of meaning. My own translation is also fraught with this incomprehensibility, which is why I include Hmong words in the quotes I translate and analyze.[354]

The 'Latehomecoming' of Histories

In the previous discussion, I show how the im/possibilities of translation, encompassed in the unplanned moments of Grandma's un-subtitled dialogue, suggests the inability of *Gran Torino*'s narrative to comprehend Hmong memories. I examine Yang's memoir as foregrounding the political urgency and implications of those seemingly insignificant dialogue in the film that do not fit its narrative of redemption but which have entered our network of memories with their demand for witnessing. The memoir contends with the sub-plotting of Hmong lives and the unwritten deaths that are

[353] Jalao, "Looking *Gran Torino* in the Eye," 4.
[354] My role as an interpreter of the Hmong statements, the silences, and the two texts needs further analysis as I continue to revise the dissertation in order to conceptualize how I enter into the chapter, especially in my discussion of Yang's book. I will highlight that the film and especially the memoir constitute the embodied knowledge of the refugee archive, which can open up interpretative work about the politics and practices of Hmong American remembering. This setup of the refugee archive allows me to situate myself within the chapter's narrative more decisively.

always in danger of disappearing as the witnesses grow old, precisely because it would seem "as if they had never lived."[355] It tells "our lives in America" as "*our* story" looking toward a future of collective remembering yet to come. For this analysis of *The Latehomecomer*, I extend the formulation of history-making through the refugee archive to suggest that memories surface, not entangled with the redemption of heroic white masculinity, but through the attachments of Hmong stories onto each other. Yang reminds us that the conviction of her generation is rooted in a belief that "we are here together because we belong together."[356] This discussion interrogates that conviction in postwar history-making because you have to attach the memories onto each other when records fail.

The memoir is a gathering of multiple peoples' stories strung along the narratives of a grandmother who keeps them attached together. Indeed, Grandma's stories are dispersed throughout the book and give the story its coherence. Yang describes her grandmother as a woman who has experienced leaving too many times but she "would travel far for those she loved, on a journey that must have been scary, unpredictable, and lonely."[357] She is a woman who only "spoke Hmong" and for "all of her life…signed her name with a shaky X."[358] Her grandmother's positionality as a Hmong-speaking and English challenged elder Hmong woman, like Sue's grandmother, illustrates the precariousness of citizenship and belonging for Hmong in the US. Specifically, it reveals how the framework of legality and loyalty cannot explain the experiences of and protect the refugee grandmother in its offer of inclusion.

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[355] Yang, *The Latehomecomer,* 214.
[356] HighBridge, "Giving Voice to *The Latehomecomer*," April 18, 2011.
[357] Yang, *The Latehomecomer*, 157.
[358] HighBridge, "Giving Voice to *The Latehomecomer*," April 18, 2011.

Yang explains her grandmother's dilemma in attaining US citizenship because she is caught between the inability to convey her loyalty and the requirement to do so for social benefits within the neoliberal context of the welfare state's decline. She writes:

> In 1996, welfare reform was in the news. The program was ending. Families living on welfare had to learn how to work 'within the system'…This meant that my grandma's sons were in danger. What's more, she herself could be at risk. She was not a citizen; there was no way she could pass the citizenship test or speak enough English to prove her loyalty, to pledge, 'I will fight for America if it were ever in danger.'[359]

This passage demonstrates how her grandmother's path to attaining citizenship foregrounds the dilemma of her inability to prove loyalty to the US. In this case, English/language is the obstacle to passing the citizenship test, showing how it symbolizes proof of one's fealty to the nation-state. But, her non-citizen status makes her vulnerable to losing welfare and social security benefits as only a legal resident. This dilemma of proving one's loyalty in order to become legible as a subject who is in need of services and benefits highlights the refugee's precarious status between loyalty and legibility. This encounter with US neoliberal policy, welfare reform in 1996, shows the state management of her life and belonging. It is about the US promise of life for dying for the nation-state. Yang reveals that her grandmother "did not try to be American," underscoring how the refugee grandmother remains a perpetual refugee, which makes uneasy the notions of home and belonging.[360]

In this framework of citizenship that is contingent on rescuing the loyal ally, Yang's grandmother could not prove her allegiance. Not because she did not want to or English/language hindered her, but since she could not be legible as someone who would

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[359] Yang, *The Latehomecomer*, 201
[360] Ibid., 157.

"fight for America if it were in danger." Yet, Yang contends that fighting was what "all the Hmong in America had done with the lives that had fallen to the jungle floor, the spirits that had flown high into the clouds again, that had fled life and refused to return" as well as those who are still living .[361] The paradox about citizenship and the pledge to fight for one's country for Hmong refugees is that they had already fought for the US. As I showed in chapter three, Hmong make a gendered claim to belonging through the refugee soldier in order to render their pursuit of rights and justice through the case of Hmong terrorism legible. This claim to rights re-affirms the US justice system as the adjudicator for Hmong being concretely here in the US. But if loyalty is tied to legality and citizenship, one must be comprehensible as a soldier.

Yet, even the refugee soldier claim is inadequate for understanding the Hmong role in the war because it provides a singular testament of Hmong men's service that they still needed to prove in seeking legal refugee and asylum status. For Hmong refugees, the entrance exams into the US, a resettlement country from the refugee camps was more difficult than for Australia or France because they function as testimonies validating Hmong soldier and refugee statuses. These testimonials involved identifying pictures of white American soldiers and their names as proof of Hmong men's service to the US. In a similar way, the testimonies of Hmong men and women attesting to their aid of US military operations in Laos falls within an apparatus of legal humanitarian discourse that determines which Hmong bodies are worth rescuing and resettling to the US. Such testimonials are, as Yang notes, rehearsed and studied, involving the memorization of certain discursive practices such as image/facial and name recognition. She explains how

[361] Ibid., 201.

Hmong refugee men including her father and uncles had to take tests identifying pictures of white soldiers and their names as well as specify how long and hard Hmong men had fought under the US leadership in order to receive clearance for resettlement:

> My father and my uncles had studied very hard for the American test; they memorized all the facts from the soldiers who had been on the American payroll. There was no acknowledgment in the test to enter America that more Hmong than the thirty thousand who had been paid to fight had fought. We fought during the war and after it, fleeing into the jungle, just to hold on to our family and survive.[362]

In this passage, Yang grapples with the lack of acknowledgment about Hmong roles in the war upon seeing her father and uncles work so hard to remember the white soldiers for the US test for resettlement. Here, government secrets give way to a problem of knowledge and the production of a child's confusion. But as Yoneyama succinctly synthesizes Foucault's work on discourse to help her conceptualize the testimonies of atom bomb survivors, "the speaking subject is thus always doubly constituted as both the agent of speech and as one who is subjected to a discursive paradigm that encourages rather than suppresses utterance."[363] In regards to Hmong testimonies, even as Hmong men study and rehearse the resettlement exams, they are subjected to a narrative that recognizes white American personnel as the legitimate soldiers and casualties of a "secret war" where so many more Hmong lost their lives. Yang's assertion that it is more than the thirty thousand Hmong men who were paid to fight actually fought, fled, and survived underwrites the official legal humanitarian testimonials that afforded them refugee status and rescue after the war.

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[362] Ibid., 101.
[363] Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces*, 93.

The testimonials as legal practices to attain, first, refugee and then, for some, citizenship status elide memories that could not fit the narrative where Hmong lives began "on paper."[364] Testimonies defer an articulation of the past in serving as proof of history's secrets. Reflected in Yang's point that more than thirty thousand Hmong men were paid to fight for the US, are Hmong men who fought on the Pathet Lao side and those who did not take arms but lived the impact of a "secret war."[365] This discursive subjection primarily makes Hmong legible as a soldier/warrior so that Hmong men who might have been too young to join the fighting must claim that status in the war's aftermath. It leaves the responsibility of bearing witness to the devastation of war a Hmong burden to attach the dispersed histories into coherence. In addition, the rehearsed narratives simultaneously erase Hmong women as integral witnesses to the production of secrets. The "service" and loss in the war for women like Sue and Yang's grandmothers continue to persist in excess of history and the law's comprehensibility. These different moments of legalization and documentation simultaneously animate and silence anxieties about the uncounted dead and living who haunt the archive's erasure.

At stake in testimonials as official narrative and legal discourse is the erasure of Hmong's existence "in America's eyes" even when "Hmong were all over America."[366] The threat of erasure occurs in the enfolding of Hmong into US history through their resettlement. Yang's description of the housing her family first lived in after arriving in St. Paul illustrates the ill-fitting of a Hmong place in history:

> The McDonough townhouses had been built after World War II for returning soldiers and their families. The first low-income housing units in

[364] Yang, *The Latehomecomer*, 46.
[365] Schein & Thoj, "*Gran Torino*'s Boys and Men with Guns," 19.
[366] Yang, *The Latehomecomer*, 201-2.

> the state of Minnesota, the buildings were made of concrete. Everything was cold and strong, meant to last a long time. And so they had, and they had waited for us, soldiers from a different war, not returning to families but to remnants of them.[367]

Hmong soldiers and their families are the latehomecoming remnants from a different war "returning" to occupy a place in history not made for them. The complications of place problematize history and refuge as markers of belonging. In addition, these returning soldiers did not fit the bill of the American GI but were supposed to pursue that same American Dream awaiting their arrival. While the low-income housing was meant to build up the life of a returning GI, it became a marker for Hmong refugees' poverty and inability to achieve the American Dream. This racialized class marker underscored how Hmong families moving into housing for returning American GIs are ill-fitting in US history, always remaining on the limits of its trajectory.

Refugee Grandmother

When Yang's parents finally saved up enough money to buy a house, so that perhaps the family could have a home rather than living in a series of concrete low-income housing, apartments, and the haunted Section-8 house, their new house instead grew moldy. The house was in a poor neighborhood of houses that were ready to collapse with wooden planks falling off, the same state of Sue's neighborhood in Detroit, but it looked out of place and time in east St. Paul because it could have belonged to Laura and Mary Ingalls on the prairie, not to Kao Kalia and her sister Dawb. Yet, this storybook house of the family's "first piece of America" that would join the "future with the past"

[367] Ibid., 131.

made her sick with its growing mold.[368] The mold grew wild on their house walls so that no matter how much scrubbing or many painting efforts, it never stopped, representing the encroaching meaning of American living upon an unreconciled Hmong past. Yang's sickness stemmed from the mold but is also a physical manifestation of becoming Hmong American—a literal splitting of the self into two hearts or halves. She questions the contradictions of their moldy, storybook house in relation to a Hmong continuous leaving to assert the unstable forms of belonging: ""I couldn't understand why the Hmong people had to run for their children, how their children had to make lives, again and again, in different soils, to know belonging. Why it was that our house, so cute on the outside, rotted on the inside."[369] The moldy house signifies that striving to become American is filled with the specters of non-belonging because its rotting insides compel the coming of another leaving. For a people without a country, it is in the "unconsciousness of leaving" that bears the impact of history rather than its stability.[370] Yang's struggles to understand the conditions of a Hmong life accentuate her grandmother's presence because it softens the harshness of loss and absence, cushioning her granddaughter's "entry into the world with her strong hands."[371] In other words, the refugee grandmother figure provides a lens to examine the systemic violence persistent in the silencing of history.

The refugee grandmother embodies the trace of running in the absence of markers. Grandma's split earlobe marks her flight and escape from a tiger in the jungle so that she could not wear jewelry all her life. Yang recounts that, "Grandma wore the mark of that flight in the absence of decoration…My grandma had outrun a tiger to live in this

[368] Ibid., 195.
[369] Ibid., 203.
[370] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 22.
[371] Yang, *The Latehomecomer*, 252.

country. I wondered if a person could run forever."[372] The absence of decoration makes poignant the negating story of escape, but it also functions as a reminder of survival in running. Her stories embody a liveness that the children encircle. Grandma symbolizes the concept of knowing how one lived in the urgency of lives lost without meaning or markers. When thousands of Hmong men, women and children have been lost to a war with no name and remain unaccounted for, those who survived its devastation hold on tight to marking their presence, no matter how fleeting it may seem. She functions as the trace of the fallen pieces of a life in a war without a name, always trying to fit their broken edges together and create points of holding on. Her stories comprise traces of the past to produce a possibility for witnessing: "In front of the window with her feet in my lap, she told me the stories of her life in Laos. It was a life that I didn't know but held close, imagined I saw, wanted to cherish."[373] This scene exemplifies how storytelling becomes an everyday familiar/l practice reinvigorating historical memories for Hmong Americans so that what belonged to Grandma belongs to her children and grandchildren. They emphasize a desire to hold close and cherish a life and to imagine otherwise.

Grandma attaches her memories onto her grandchildren. Even when she repeated often the stories she liked, Yang "knew that Grandma had those that she didn't tell often at all" about death and having to grow up too fast.[374] Instead, she "carried everything with her, unable to trust the safety of place," looked to "tie things together" and tried to "fit the jagged edges together, no matter how crudely, so that her life was never

[372] Ibid., 210.
[373] Ibid., 231.
[374] Ibid., 220.

completely empty."[375] The bags she carried as she travels from one son's house to the next drag along history so that the world her grandchildren live in is fastened together, and linked to the image of their Grandma moving around the homes of her seven sons. Thus her stories are fleeting fragments of a Hmong life that exceed the constraint of place, skittish of a rootedness that will produce their silence. She must carry everything with her to tie them to her and her children. Foucault explains that in historical analysis one must take the precaution to disconnect the unquestioned continuities of discourse which is premised on the themes of a "secret origin" and an "already-said" that is "never-said" running beneath the articulated but which it covers and silences.[376] Instead, he admonishes that, "we must be ready to receive every moment of discourse in its sudden irruption; in that punctuality in which it appears, and in that temporal dispersion that enables it to be repeated, known, forgotten, transformed, utterly erased, and hidden, far from all view, in the dust of books. Discourse must not be referred to the distant presence of the origin, but treated as and when it occurs."[377] His point about interrogating the continuities of history and paying attention to the articulate silences in discourse helps to comprehend Grandma's stories as Hmong histories that permeate the larger historical narrative. In this context, Grandma's distrust of place and attempts to fit jagged edges together, like the Grandma from *Gran Torino*'s memories, are irruptions of the "manifest discourse" that depict her as silent and mark her as foreign. Here, the figure of the refugee grandmother creates "different points of holding on"[378] to make possible a

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[375] Ibid., 215, 216 & 225.
[376] Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 25.
[377] Ibid., 25.
[378] Yang, *The Latehomecomer*, 225.

transformative reception of memories that can surface in the absence of an "origin." Grandma's distrust of yet insistence on remembering the "places of her life" through her stories underscore a vexed sense of seeking refuge for Hmong refugees not rooted in place but in each other.

Hmong in the US

What does it mean to carry all these "filtered memories"[379] when no one else knows the knowledge that you have? I show how memories emerged as stories for Hmong Americans in trying to explain a life in the US entangled with loss and loneliness, and grappling to look toward a future happiness. Yang describes how the city lights thrilled her that first night her family arrived in St. Paul from Thailand in 1986 at the age of six. They made her feel like her family had arrived at a "place that was more perfect than we knew how to imagine," and that the "world was open." She believed that by following the lights she would "never get lost in America," a belief which captured the US's promise of freedom and opportunity.[380] But, as Yang explains in an interview, "I got lost in America," even when the city lights were supposed to light her way. She got lost in the paradox of the promise of opportunity (the books she was learning from) and her parents' daily struggles, the long hours they spent studying English and working in the factory trying to be "American enough to get into the system so that they could feed us and our dreams."[381] Yang contends that the gratefulness Hmong refugees were supposed to feel could not explain the sadness of watching the adults struggle to remake their lives. She writes:

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[379] Ibid., 165.
[380] Ibid., 126.
[381] Ibid., 157.

> From the moment we arrived, I knew that my family had survived a great war to bring me to this country. I understood that the conditions in Thailand and the camps were hard for those who knew more than I did. But for me, the hardness in life began in America. We are so lucky to be in this country, the adults all said. Watching them struggle belied this fact. We are so fortunate to be young, new lives opening before us, they believed. And yet the life in school that opened before me made me feel old in a world that was struggling to be young. A silence grew inside of me because I couldn't say that it was sometimes sad to be Hmong, even in America.[382]

Yet this gratefulness to come to the US masks the "hardness in life" here. Refugee gratefulness gets passed on to the children who "are so lucky" to be young with new lives opening before them because they get to take advantage of all that the US has to offer. Yang instead feels old and sad to be Hmong in the US because while it was supposed to be a place for everyone (the children and adults), they were "lonely, lost, and struggling everyday at a life that constantly looked to the future for happiness."[383] It seemed the future held a promise that the children as Americans would grow up to fulfill. This future-oriented outlook imbued in the children so they keep memories of the past, even if they are "filtered memories," intends to help them remember the way back and forward. Yet it was a promise delayed in a world that had already dismissed her parents.[384] Yang grew silent in the context of struggling to be American. Her silence signifies an inability to contradict this image of assimilation and the American Dream. It constituted a burden not only from her parents, but at school where she could not convey the language of success. Thus her silence in school represents the silencing of being Hmong, what Yang describes as not a "name or a gender, but a people."[385]

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[382] Ibid., 151.
[383] Ibid., 144.
[384] Ibid., 4.
[385] Ibid., 4.

The sense of loss and unwantedness that produced Yang's silence also serves as an allegory for the incommunicability of the past. Historical secrets generate a discursive silence about who Hmong are so that what becomes legible must fit into a tragic discourse of fighting for the US. Yang's silence and rustiness at speech symbolizes what it means for Hmong—the experiences of violence and displacement and struggles for survival—to be silent in the absence of historical records. It is not about the inability to speak but the tools and language to speech and voice. Yang discusses how she began to fall into silence at school when she was separated from her older sister Dawb into a different classroom:

> I lost the few English words I had grown comfortable with. English was hard on my tongue…I didn't like the way I stuttered and breathed through the words, so I tried never to speak it unless it was necessary, in which case I started whispering everything that came out of my mouth. I got by with nodding and shaking my head and smiling.[386]

More poignantly, she suggests that speaking English was harder than "knowing the letters that made the words," rather it constitutes the language's incomprehensibility of meaning so that the simple explanation for her silence emerged as "I had no voice in English."[387] This unexplainable silence on the part of Yang, her parents, and teachers became a central focus for her school years. She explained to her parents that, "I had no voice in English. I said sometimes when I wanted to talk, I couldn't find my voice, and then when I did—the person, a kid or a teacher—would already be gone."[388] There are many silences, as Foucault maintains, and they constitute part of the strategies that underlie and

[386] Ibid., 145.
[387] Ibid., 147.
[388] Ibid., 147.

permeate discourses.[389] Here, they accompany the singular narrative about Hmong as soldiers who were paid to fight for the US so that their deaths and the human legacies of war become Hmong burdens to bear. Jenny Edkins' notion of unspeakability illuminates the broader implications of Yang's silence as a failure of language through a crisis in the social order so that "what we *can* say no longer makes sense; what we *want* to say, we can't…[because] there are no words for it."[390] Silences, therefore, constitute Yang's answers to her teacher's questions "without words" and the rust formed all over those words forced into speech.[391] They configure the contours of displaced histories that institute incomprehensibility.

Yang explains that although debilitating at first, the silence became productive and she learned to use it to explore.[392] It gave way to her writing to leave a trace of the lives and deaths that had gone unwritten, like her grandmother's, and to invite refuge in each other. Grandma's stories, in their orality, constitute a form of embodied knowledge that guide Yang's emergence into literacy to work through the silence. Her struggles to understand the complexities of a Hmong life woven together around a beloved grandmother get parceled out toward the book's conclusion when she explores Grandma's passing and the funeral service that helped guide her to the place where she was born as well as the stakes in writing a family memoir wrapped around envisioning a Hmong future. As much as they function as reminders of loss, the stories that recount Grandma's life are preparations for her passing to know the places of her life in order to

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[389] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (1978; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 27.
[390] Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 8.
[391] Yang, *The Latehomecomer*, 166-7.
[392] Ibid., 214.

guide her back at the end of her life: "When Grandma was alive, she had said that we should listen to her stories so that one day, when the time came, we would know the places of her life. I now realized why."[393] Grandma's storytelling is a strategy to negotiate the anxieties about dying in the US without knowing how she lived. The stakes are too high not to conjure up "sympathy for the dead" to offer glimpses into the markers that make Grandma's loss so poignant.[394] The qhuab ki (guiding the way) ritual in a Hmong funeral leads the soul of the dead in a backward fashion through all the places it lived to the place of its birth in order to find the placenta, buried in the ground of the house after birth, and make its way back to loved ones who have passed before. The children are supposed to know these different places of Grandma's life so that they can help her properly re-trace her path. Yang describes how the man who would teach Grandma's soul the way back placed copies of her Social Security card and Alien card into her right hand, and started chanting, telling her that she had died in Minnesota and the journey back would be a long one.[395] She would need these documents that had defined her as legal alien but illegible citizen-subject on such a journey, which ironically authenticates her life.

Yet finding the way back means re-encountering the devastation and displacement of the war, which made the journey home a precarious process. Yang writes that in the part of the journey where Grandma had been instructed to cross the Mekong River back to Laos,

> The guide apologized at this point for no longer being able to take Grandma directly to each place where they had been during the five years

[393] Ibid., 253.
[394] Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces*, 146.
[395] Yang, *The Latehomecomer,* 253.

> in the jungle. He explained that after all, it had been a war, and they had been running for their lives, and their homes had been only made of banana leaves, stacked on top of small tree limbs. There would be no markers left. There was no way anyone could remember the many places they had hidden, one mountain cave or the next. He only wanted her to do her best.[396]

The guide's reminders of what these places of leaving and escaping had been like in the time of the war and its aftermath foregrounds the erasure of those years in the jungle, where there are no markers of the lives lived there. Grandma would have to try her best to muddle through the unmarked places of her life and escape. This journey indeed exemplifies the Hmong refugee escape where there cannot be traces of their flight not only because it was a secret war but also for how that secrecy necessitated an erasure of Hmong lives and deaths.

Grandma's stories are also imbued with a future vision for Hmong history and belonging. This envisioning of a Hmong future and Hmong dreams troubles the American Dream because it is sustained through attachments to history. At stake here is how to communicate a Hmong story and for what purpose. Yang addresses her father's worry about telling the story with an eye toward a Hmong search for home in reassurance that, "This year we tell the Hmong story the way it is, Father. Hold on, our dreams are coming. We didn't come all the way from the clouds just to go back, without a trace. We, seekers of refuge, will find it: if not in the world, then in each other."[397] Where other people might look to a place in the world to belong, Hmong could find refuge and belonging in each other, and create "many different places of holding on."[398]

Conclusion

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[396] Ibid., 255.
[397] Ibid., 2008: 274.
[398] Ibid., 225.

In this chapter, I have tried to show the everyday encounters and dilemmas, represented primarily through two grandmothers, as a way to conceptualize how Hmong refugees and their US-born children engage in history-making to attach histories to each other. Through an analysis of the memories that surfaced in *Gran Torino* and *The Latehomecomer*, I argue that Hmong women disrupt and work through the silencing of Hmong histories to unsettle the masculinist narratives of loyalty and refuge. These memories are strung through the stories of two grandmothers, which Yang allegorizes as winged insects flying around the light of her grandma,[399] who function as nodal points of reference for the things that have happened and those yet to come. My reading insists that the grandmas who "only speak Hmong" are not silenced, so that secrets constructed during a war refer less to a politics of state denial than are embedded everywhere in our stories and lived lives. These two texts question how we come to know that something is secret, revealing that the process of how secrets emerge in popular discourse is integral to the state's apparatus to re-inscribe memories as part of its linear narrative, which in this discussion revolves around white masculinity and refugee rescue. More importantly, my analysis of the texts together excavates secrecy as an event of incomprehensible dimensions, which produced Hmong racial subjection not only through militarism and rescue but also a discursive silencing that continues to circulate beyond the war. Thus the telling of displaced histories is a process of history-making in order to find a way back and to envision a future in which Hmong histories and refuge are attached through embodiment (in each other) rather than the nation or textual knowledge. Storytelling and performance co-constitute the production of strategies to not betray the past but to

[399] Ibid., 157.

encircle it. They create historical attachments that compel a refuge always already uneasy in place but which can be sought in each other. It is in the seeking of refuge rather than its finding, that insists upon our not forgetting.

EPILOGUE

Throughout this dissertation, I have pursued an account of the Hmong refugee figure and history-making, assembled from the paper trails left by refugees in the "archive of secrets" and the embodied knowledge in the refugee archive, to trace how the United States "secret war" in Laos not only produced and hid violence against Hmong and Laotians through its twinned projects of militarism and rescue but also generated their historical absence. In other words, secrecy's production of racial knowledge configures Hmong as gendered racial subjects who are primitive and exist outside of historical time. I use the term *displaced*, from Hmong displacement as refugees of war, to name Hmong racial subjection as a project of displacing them from both the nation and history through war and knowledge production. It is through the refugee as a critical strategy and an embodied category that we can begin to unravel the structure of secrets that is constitutive of Hmong racialization. Thus I argue that this historical displacement gives rise to Hmong history-making to draw together and attach those histories that are dispersed and lag in time to seek present and future forms of belonging. Each chapter engages with the negotiations of history, either from state recognition or Hmong-produced knowledge, and contends with the dilemma of how to narrate these histories without recuperating what is missing. Chapter one examines how historical absence about the "secret war" produced racial knowledge about Hmong as an "unincorporated" people, which gives rise to the racialized representation of Hmong refugees/veterans as the refugee soldier who is a loyal ally in need of rescue through citizenship, which I examine in chapter two. Chapter three expands on the concept of the refugee soldier as a loyal ally to examine its compositional formation as a terrorist who is also a US citizen. This

configures the displaced Hmong refugee as a terrorist who is present everywhere, even within the nation-state as a US citizen. Hmong refugees/Americans drag together histories of US imperial projects in order to illuminate these multiple configurations. Chapter four emphasizes the process of attaching Hmong histories that have been silenced in the archive yet embodied in the non-English speaking Hmong woman. It foregrounds the Hmong refugee grandmother and her stories as a repertoire of memories that not only challenge textual and national knowledge production but also critique the masculinist narratives about war that feature the US as rescuer and protector for Hmong refugees and the Hmong refugee soldier as a hero who activates Hmong liberation.

My aim in conjoining the displaced (stateless) subject with the refugee is to suggest that this figure emerges from the post/colonial project of overlapping forms of imperialism. History-making and race constitute my initial exploration into how the US imperialist secret project of militarism and rescue produced Hmong racial formation in a global historical context. I also hope to intervene in postcolonial studies and the discourses on state-making to examine how the refugee and terrorist *together* comprise a threat to the nation-state, and have become the target of state violence. In addition, the displaced or stateless refugee subject foregrounds my new direction to examine the intersections of Ethnic, Asian American, and American Studies with area studies, particularly Southeast Asian Studies, because the figure emerges not only through Southeast Asian state-making but also the colonial occupations and imperialist interventions of Western state-making. By foregrounding stateless status among Southeast Asian Americans, I contribute to exploring alternative sites of contacts and links that emphasize the ambivalent relationships of these groups with nation-states. My

research direction is animated by the conceptual space of "alternative contact" that Paul Lai and Lindsey Claire Smith lay out in their introduction to the *American Quarterly* special edition on indigeneity, globalism and American Studies to "offer alternative theorizations of links among US imperial projects, sovereignty, and racial formation."[400] The moments of alternative contact promote opportunities for activism and comparative conceptual analysis, especially by employing indigeneity as a framework to critique the nation-state and imagine different forms of nationhood and belonging. Yet indigeneity has been largely ignored in the study of immigration, race, and transnationalism.[401] I find indigeneity a useful concept to begin articulating the position of stateless peoples in world-making as "nonrecognized peoples."[402] The centering of indigenous peoples and ideas as active, mobile, and dynamic helps me to emphasize alternative spaces of thought and remembering that are not captured in the archive of US modern thought. Thus I turn to remapping the stories of Hmong displacement and flight against US strategic imperial construction of Hmong onto the geographic terrain.

I propose to remap Hmong presence through the fleeting places and moments of flight and escape as these alternative moments that illuminate the links between US imperial projects, sovereignty, and racial formation. But first, I begin with a critique of how displaced, stateless groups are understood in a binary context between the state

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[400] Paul Lai and Lindsey Claire Smith, "Introduction," *American Quarterly Special Issue: Alternative Contact: Indigeneity, Globalism, and American Studies* 62, no. 3 (2010): 408.

[401] Asian American Studies scholars, however, have examined the complicated relationship between Asian immigration and settler colonialism by highlighting the past and present roles that Asians have played in the U.S. colony of Hawai'i. See Candace Fujikane and Jonathan Y. Okamura, *Asian Settler Colonialism: From Local Governance to the Habits of Everyday Life in Hawai'i* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008). In addition, my participation in organizing and presenting at an "Indigenous Studies engages Ethnic Studies" conference at UCSD Ethnic Studies helped me to formulate ideas about the intersections between displaced, stateless status and indigeneity.

[402] Bruce Granville Miller, *Invisible Indigenes: The Politics of nonrecognition* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003).

(modernity) and nature (primitivism): their uncategorized position within nation-state boundaries purportedly suggests that they exist in nature. James C. Scott's argument about the strategic position of "ungoverned" groups in mainland Southeast Asia that I began with in the introduction, in particular, glosses over the colonial and state regimes that displaced groups who do not fit the national ethnic, linguistic or religious categories to the periphery. He explains that in the process of Southeast Asian state-making, the periphery of states became a "zone of refuge or a 'shatter zone' in which the "human shards of state formation and rivalry accumulate" to create regions of "bewildering ethnic and linguistic complexity."[403] Hence those groups who choose to flee from such state formations to embrace "barbarianism" and exist in a secondary form of "primitivism" pursue an alternative to the state.[404] Scott maps these groups onto the "upland" and mountainous landscape of Southeast Asia stretching west toward India. He borrows historian Willem van Schendel's term "Zomia" to name this "ungoverned" region that spans the different Southeast Asian state borders to rethink ideas about area and region. I contend that Scott participates in mapping these groups onto the landscape as natural subjects of the upland, mountains or hills where state governments have limited control, which is reminiscent of how the US government mapped Hmong as natural warriors who were tied to the Laotian landscape. Thus this engagement with geography and the "imagined" space of "Zomia" offers a limited critique of the nation-state because it racializes displaced groups as belonging in nature because they do not fit within the national paradigm. Rather than advocating for inclusion into the nation-state or an

[403] Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, 7.
[404] Ibid., 8.

existence outside of its boundaries, I complicate this setup by pursuing a decolonizing framework of place-based analysis that is attentive to mapping different forms of Hmong presence.

Here, I refer back to the end of chapter one and its remapping of Hmong histories through the list of occupations and skills that imbues an active presence in contrast to the colonial mapping of Hmong as natural warriors. While the physical embodiments of Hmong wartime service such as the "wounded right knee" or "blind right eye" underscores the war's evidence on the body, I am also interested in exploring how Hmong presence functions in the moments when their lives in war and flight are not marked. If re-creating spatial communities is important to promoting forms of spatiality and sovereignty according to Mishuana Goeman, then how do Hmong create spatial strategies to narrate the places of their lives that are unmarked as geopolitically significant for the US or Laos? In other words, I remap Hmong presence through the fleeting places of flight and escape that are coterminous with both the governed and "ungoverned" territory of the state rather than locating it elsewhere. My assertion of place refers less to geography such as the "jungle" or "mountain" then to narratives about places that structure Hmong existence everywhere. In a recent essay on place-based analysis for indigenous peoples, Glen Coulthard suggests that "place is a way of knowing, experiencing, and relating with the world—and these ways of knowing often guide forms of resistance to power relations that threaten to erase or destroy our senses of place."[405] While Coulthard's formulation of place is connected to land as resource,

[405] Glen Coulthard, "Place Against Empire: Understanding Indigenous Anti-Colonialism," Affinities*: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture, and Action* 4, no. 2 (2010): 79.

identity and relationship in the indigenous context, I find his analytic of place useful for understanding Hmong refugees' narratives that are structured around geographically unmarked places as a way of knowing and experiencing the world to remember the erasure of their flight.[406] These narratives constitute alternative sites of knowledge formation and belonging.

In my interviews with Hmong refugees and veterans, their stories about escaping violence describe how they could not stay in a place for any significant period of time. They were constantly on the move because, as one Hmong woman told me, "we were at war and didn't have a stable or peaceful place to live."[407] Curiously, in a life marked by leaving, that leaving must necessarily be unmarked. What interviewees remember are not events but the measures they must take to erase their presence as they escaped from the bombings during the war and from Communist persecution afterwards. In my interview with Yer Vang, he explained his family's escape after the US retreat in this way: "We would just stay in a place for ten to twenty days, because if you stay in a place for too long the grass and plants that you step on will have your footprints."[408] This description narrates place not as a specific location but a process of leaving so that what Vang conveys is how not to leave his footprints on the ground. Rememberings are marked by displacements and erasures, but such memories make poignant the spatial dimensions of leaving. These storytellings are de-colonizing practices to relocate the fleeting Hmong presences in places where not even the grass was allowed to be permanently marked by footprints of movement, leaving, and escaping—lives lived in displacement. Indeed, the

[406] Ibid., 81.
[407] Interview with Soua L. Lo in January 2010.
[408] Interview with Yer Vang in September 2009.

stories refuse the naming of such places as legible dots on a map, therefore, exposing how the spaces of exception and violence are indistinguishable from the nation-state's territory. The moments of displacement can complicate how we imagine "contact zones" because they constitute overlapping forms of imperial strategies and offer a standpoint from which to see connections with other moments of dispossession, violence, and genocide. They operate as reference points to link the stories that will have been told.

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