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Imagining Cross-Racial Affiliation in *Gran Torino* and *Frozen River*

In the aftermath of white working-class men's substantial role in electing as president a man who tarred Mexicans as criminals, threatened to bar Muslims' admittance to the United States, and alienated African Americans with his dystopian description of their lives, contemplating the possibility of working-class people coming together across racial lines for their common welfare can seem like a quixotic venture. Indeed, scholars have long recognized what the tumultuous 2016 election has demonstrated: solidarity among working-class people is frequently undermined by rifts along racial and ethnic lines. In his seminal *The Wages of Whiteness*, David R. Roediger ([1991] 1999) demonstrates that white workers in response to their economic insecurity invested in whiteness rather than in camaraderie with people of color. Further examining class divisions, Erin E. O'Brien in her study of low-wage workers states that members within an ethnic or racial group "feel close with fellow group members, perceive a linked fate with them, and feel disadvantaged compared to other social groups" (2008, 13).¹ Realizing how crucial solidarity across ethnic and racial lines is, artists across genres have repeatedly tried to imagine and represent it. Pietro di Donato's novel *Christ in Concrete*, for example, shows the Italian-American protagonist's friendship with a Jewish boy whose values are closer to his own than are the values of his family. With such a shift in allegiance, to paraphrase Janet Zandy, characters move from filiation to affiliation, from identification with race or ethnicity to identification with shared conditions and grievances, though the two are not mutually exclusive (2004, 138). The word *imagine* is crucial, for I take my cue from Edward Said's claim in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) that culture not only reflects society but creates it. Similarly, in his commentary on the political in literature, Jean-Jacques Lecercle states that he is "proposing not a return to the old Marxist concept of literature as a reflection of the historical, political, and linguistic conjectures but an active concept of literature as an intervention in them" (2010, 919). Rather than just mirror the impediments to racial harmony, a text might imagine an idealized alternative to it. Idealization and utopian impulses, however, are not neutral states. They are inflected by ideology even as they seek to intervene in it.

In this article, I am applying these concepts of affiliation and art as intervention to film rather than to literary texts and focusing on two contemporary films that represent alliances between whites and people of color. In his essay “Filming Class,” Tom Zaniello argues that film offers a unique means of understanding class formation because “representations of class in film are both authentic—the visuals are accurate photographically—and problematic—ideological content may be open or suppressed. It is, therefore, essential to read films as texts simultaneously privileged and ‘thick,’ that is, as capable of both the erasure and disclosure of issues of class” (2005, 152). Zaniello further argues that to understand films’ impacts, working-class studies scholars must take note of varying audiences and complicated financial infrastructure in filming (153); thus he enriches Bakhtin’s idea of answerability applied by Peter Hitchcock (2000) and Zandy.

The two films under discussion, Clint Eastwood’s *Gran Torino* and Courtney Hunt’s *Frozen River*, represent people of different races forging familial bonds. Both were released in 2008, a pivotal year marking both the financial collapse and the election of Barack Obama as the United States’ first black president. Each of these films also depicts a postindustrial landscape: of Detroit in *Gran Torino*, after the American auto industry has waned; of the upstate New York town of Massena in *Frozen River*. Yet the films are different in striking ways. Most obviously, *Gran Torino* is a Hollywood blockbuster and part of a long list of films by an acclaimed director, while *Frozen River* is the first independent film by Hunt. An analysis of each film will unpack how it constructs the basis for cooperation between characters of different races as well as the kind of affiliation it imagines. The latter is particularly relevant to the film’s answerability to its audiences and cannot be completely divorced from the film’s production and reception.

Gran Torino tells the story of Walt Kowalski, a decorated Korean War veteran and retired Ford autoworker. Perpetually angry and frequently mouthing racist slurs,² he is alienated from his two grown middle-class sons, one of whom works for a Japanese automaker. His attempt to keep Hmong gang members off his lawn and prevent his *Gran Torino* from being stolen results in his unlikely heroic status among the Hmong neighbors and his friendship with the Lor family next door—especially the young adult Sue and her younger brother Thao. Sue educates Walt on the history of the Hmong immigrants, telling him that the Hmong people fought with the Americans against the communists during the Vietnam War. Walt himself fought against the communists in Korea. When he is invited to the Lor family’s

home for a celebration, Walt begins bonding with them over food; he describes the Hmong people as “nuts,” but their food as delicious, and also enjoys the reverence with which the Hmong women shower dishes upon him. As the relationship develops, Walt witnesses the Lors being terrorized by the Hmong gang that wants Thao in their ranks. In an effort to protect Thao and Sue, Walt takes drastic and, for his character as an angry gun-ready veteran, unexpected measures.

In their introduction to *New Essays on Clint Eastwood*, John M. Gourlie and Leonard Engel state that Eastwood uses family, history, and myth to transcend generic conventions (2012b, 15). They see *Gran Torino* as a mythical narrative of multicultural unity (4), a judgment shared by many film critics.³ It is mythical because it addresses its audience’s deepest insecurities about gender, race, and social class. For working-class men living in an era when blue-collar work is disappearing, anxieties about the meaning and performance of masculinity run high. Thus it is not surprising that Walt’s interaction with Thao is devoted to teaching him how to perform American masculinity. The film suggests that Thao has been feminized by his mother and grandmother and possibly by race (Schein et al., 2012, 769). His physical demeanor of holding his head down and evading eye contact defies American expectations of male directness. In the often-cited barbershop scene, Walt and the barber prepare Thao for a job interview at a construction site by teaching him how “guys talk.” Thao treats the lesson with some amusement, even making a joke about how sore his ass is from sexual activity, but he learns how to perform working-class masculinity.⁴ At the actual interview he realizes he should not tell his potential employer that he does not own a car. Instead, Thao says his car is in the shop. He further adopts the swagger of a beleaguered working-class man, inventing a story about the high cost of repairing his automobile and the refrain “It ain’t right.” This performance earns Thao the job.

Eastwood has a long history, particularly in his Dirty Harry movies, of creating masculine heroes. William Beard states that “the Eastwood persona represents probably the single strongest icon of heroic masculinity in popular cinema over the past quarter century (quoted in Gates 2012, 168).⁵ The evolution of Eastwood’s characters from the Dirty Harry movie to *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) and *Gran Torino* illustrates Eastwood’s efforts to formulate an ideology of masculinity—an Anglo equivalent of machismo. As prominent film and feminist critic Drucilla Cornell argues, Eastwood’s films not only explore how difficult it is to be a good man, “but . . . they illustrate so

powerfully what a struggle it is to even make an attempt” (2009, 189). In the context of *Gran Torino*, the struggle is to be a good American working-class male in a postindustrial Detroit in which not only is Walt retired but his line of work and the composition of his neighborhood are radically altered. Alienated from his family and his church, Kowalski performs virtue by taking care of the possessions he has acquired: mowing his lawn and keeping up his house and car. The film’s scenes illustrate that he is part of a community of men—he interacts with the barber and the construction foreman—but it is a community of older men. This role shifts when the Hmong community tells Thao to work for Walt in repentance for attempting to steal the *Gran Torino*. Walt becomes a mentor and a father figure. In Thao, Walt finds the son he did not in his biological family.

Audiences reacted favorably to this informal adoption, but as Rebecca J. Kinney notes, they do not have the cultural background to understand Thao’s situation (2015, 54). The Hmong people whom Walt reflexively groups with the Koreans he fought during the war are a Laotian minority who were part of a secret war, fighting with the Americans during the Vietnam War. The CIA and the US government did not at the time acknowledge Laotian involvement (Hamilton-Merritt 1999, xvi). When the communists were victorious in 1975, the Hmong were persecuted and fled to refugee camps in Thailand (xvi). Some were accepted into the United States. Eastwood’s depiction of the Hmong in Detroit casts light on a generally unrecognized refugee group, and many members of the Hmong community were excited both by the news of the film and by Eastwood’s casting of local Hmong residents rather than actors in the roles. Yet once the film production got underway, the Hmong people were troubled by their lack of impact on *Gran Torino*. Bee Vang, the man who played Thao, has been especially outspoken and has, in articles with scholars Louisa Schein and Va-Megn Thoj, critiqued the representation of Asian sexualities and customs (Schein et al. 2012; Schein and Vang 2014). While prevalent stereotypes of East Asian men paint them as emasculated (as Thao is), other stereotypes, such as those of the Viet Cong in circulation during the Vietnam War, depict them as ruthless villains (the Hmong gang members). Some scholars have suggested that these are not diametrically opposed poles but rather paired regimes of dysfunction in a people in need of disciplining (789).

The question of discipline cuts to the quick of the white-savior trope that is being employed in *Gran Torino*. According to Matthew W. Hughey, this film genre is defined as one in which “a white messianic

character saves a lower- or working-class, usually urban or isolated, non-white character from a sad fate” (2014, 1). Ultimately, the white-savior complex serves as a modern equivalent of white man’s burden.⁶ Such a trope is consistent with the problematic nature of *Gran Torino*’s script and film production. According to actor Vang, Eastwood gave little directorial guidance other than that Vang act natural, suggesting that appearing as an authentic Hmong was sufficient. Vang was further frustrated that he could not own his performance because the image of the Hmong was already “historically conditioned and rigid beyond my articulation of it” (Schein and Vang 2014, 564). Furthermore, Hmong performers saw the scene in which a shaman slays a chicken as inaccurate. There is no Hmong custom of leaving food as a sign of gratitude, so the scene in which neighbors repeatedly left quantities of food on Walt’s porch represented a completely fabricated tradition. However, Eastwood was not interested in cultural accuracy or giving voice to the Hmong community; rather, his answerability was to mainstream white Americans, primarily men, facing anxieties about masculinity that are heightened by demographic shifts. As numerous critics have noted, the film represents Walt’s redemption for his crimes in Korea; the Lor family serves as the vehicle for his redemption.

The film makes no judgment as to the justness of the United States’ involvement in the Korean War, but in its depiction of Walt’s PTSD it underscores the lasting trauma of taking a life. As Mark W. Roche and Vittorio Höfle argue, Walt’s projection of hate onto all Asians, casting them as inferior beings, shields him from his crime of having shot a man (2011, 657). His closeness not only with Sue and Thao but with their family enables him to name the burden that has been with him for decades. *Gran Torino* likewise gives audiences a chance to recognize their unwitting complicity in the treatment of a disenfranchised population but also, paradoxically, to participate in resistance to giving up control. Walt Kowalski tells Youa, the young Hmong woman whom he encourages Thao to date, that he finishes things.⁷ Significantly, Walt’s job with the American automaker involved putting in the steering mechanisms for cars, a task that clearly implies control. In some respects, Walt’s teaching Thao American masculinity and working-class home maintenance skills represents his efforts to assimilate him; as reviewer Stephen Webster stated, if Walt cannot make his neighborhood more white, he may be able to make his neighbors behave more like the whites who once lived in his neighborhood (cited in Kinney 2015, 57). Indeed, when asked what scene in the film was most believable, many Hmong stated the shooting that killed

Walt. The verisimilitude comes not only from the realities of gang violence in their neighborhoods (as well as in many other poor neighborhoods nationwide) but also from the gang members' being the only characters who take independent action in the shooting and beforehand; they exhibit agency (Schein et al. 2012, 789).

We can acknowledge the paternalism and white-savior motif in the film while also examining the vision for bonding across races that it presents. In "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," Frederic Jameson posits a way to break the binary between mass and high culture. He addresses both the ideological and the utopian impulses in mass culture as ways of addressing social and political anxieties (1979). The utopian impulses are those that would prod for a transcendent vision of multicultural unity. The vision is not realistic, but it functions not only as unearthing what Jameson refers to as the repressed anxieties about social formation but also as a fantasy that gives hope that a reality will be found.

With this concept in mind, we can look at the bonding between Walt and the Lors as built upon each party's search for the family it needs. One of the sins that Walt confesses to the parish priest is never being close to his two sons. We know nothing of their youthful estrangement, but the film shows that these sons have assimilated into the middle class. They do not value the home repair skills and working-class self-sufficiency that Walt espouses. The divergence of their values is best represented in the scene in which the older son and his wife try to convince Walt to go to a retirement home, presumably an assisted living facility, that they compare to a "top notch resort" where all chores, such as mowing the lawn, would be performed by staff, a proposition that enrages Walt. Yet his advanced age cannot be ignored. In this film, Eastwood's slim, wrinkled body represents his fraught past and limited days ahead. It is urgent that he pass on a legacy to a young man who can actually use his skills.

While Walt has in effect lost his sons, Thao's father is deceased and, as an immigrant parent, was never able to model for Thao how to be an American male. Sue tells Walt about the disturbing trajectory for Hmong youth; girls go to college, men go to prison. Thao's self-sufficiency is thwarted, for he has no entrée to the handful of working-class jobs still controlled by ethnic whites. In the most effective use of his white privilege in this film, Walt arranges for Thao to be interviewed for a construction job.

As the relationship between Walt and Thao progresses, it seems to become more reciprocal. At his home after his wife's funeral, Walt

himself had to retrieve additional chairs from the basement; none of his children or grandchildren thought to do so. Thao, in contrast, helps Walt carry chairs. When the two are moving a freezer up the stairs, Thao insists on taking the bulk of the load, addressing Walt, "Listen, old man."⁸ The two have reached a level of comfort at which both can acknowledge the role that a young adult son should play with his father.

Walt's final act of mentoring Thao is, ironically, teaching the young man not to be like him. After his sister is beaten and raped by Hmong gang members, Thao is eager for revenge and looks to the gun-toting war veteran Walt as his accomplice. Instead of a battle plan, Walt reveals a crucial part of his psychic burden by confessing to Thao the substantial sin he neglected to reveal in the sacrament of Confession. Walt's phrasing of his crime—having shot "some scared little gook just like you right in the face"—distances him from his pain and tempers Thao's sympathy. After locking Thao in the basement, Walt goes to confront the gang members. His reaching for what appears to be a gun but is his cigarette lighter is in effect a Trojan Horse, enabling the numerous Hmong neighbors to testify that they saw gang members shoot down an unarmed man.

Walt's crucifixion-like pose as he is shot has been widely commented on. As Hughey notes, overt religious symbolism is an important plot device required to make the white-savior role explicit (2014, 41). However, an alternate reading of this scene suggests a revision of Christ's crucifixion as the father's mandated sacrifice of the son.⁹ This trope has its roots in Abraham's near murder of Isaac under God's command, but throughout history it has most frequently been embodied through war, in which the older generation sends its sons into combat. The lighter for which Walt reaches bears the insignia of the First Cavalry and is from his time in Korea.¹⁰ Again, Walt takes up the burden of confronting an adversary rather than let young Thao risk his life, future, and peace of mind. What may be the single most profound structural move of the film is Walt's staging of his own murder to facilitate prosecution of culpable gang members for the murder of an unarmed elderly man in front of numerous witnesses. He also informs the neighborhood that gang members raped Sue, a member of their clan, and thus provides additional motivation for the neighbors to speak to the police.

As a film depicting Walt's redemption, *Gran Torino* has been widely praised and has received awards. Yet just as the Hmong performers in the film were given no agency, the Lors and the Hmong

people are consistently depicted as lacking agency. Locked in a basement, Thao is not given a voice in Walt's decision to confront the gang or even asked if the two of them could come up with a nonviolent solution. Sue's portrayal is more noteworthy. Although she is obviously intelligent and tells Walt that Hmong women attend college, viewers never see her pursuing an education or a career. After she is beaten and raped—some critics would argue disciplined for her outspokenness—her voice is no longer heard. The men decide how to deal with her attackers. True, her silence might be attributed to PTSD, but nonetheless Walt and Thao make no effort to determine what her wishes are.¹¹

In the final scenes showing Thao driving Walt's car with Walt's dog inside, the young man's position as Walt's heir is firmly established. Gourlie and Engel find utopian elements in the film's representation of a new multicultural bond and in the possibility that one's family can reach beyond one's bloodline, nationality, or race, thus achieving affiliation rather than filiation. Kinney views the film more critically than many reviewers and scholars, arguing that it implies that upward mobility is possible for immigrant groups only if they literally and figuratively leave the inner city. She makes insightful arguments about what the film leaves out. *Gran Torino* does not examine the transnational forces, as opposed to individual desires for upward mobility, that goad people to emigrate from their lands. Nor does the film critique the nation's investment in whiteness. Yet ultimately Kinney's reading of the film rests on the final scene of Thao driving the *Gran Torino* outside the city. She sees this as his drive to a suburban home, while I and other critics have seen it simply as a drive to the Great Lakes. The Hmong community attends Walt's funeral in ceremonial funeral dress. It is not a given that Thao's assimilation of American working-class masculinity will erase his identification with Hmong culture or with his Detroit neighborhood. One objection of Hmong viewers, however, is particularly striking; to achieve manhood, Thao must gain a job, a car, and a woman. Though he has been dating Youa, Thao not only drives away with only Walt's dog in the car but also attends Walt's funeral with his sister, not with Youa, suggesting he has not reached a high degree of emotional intimacy with her (Schein et al. 2012, 789).

Gran Torino indeed represents the possibility for new family alliances between people of different races, but in problematic ways. Typical of white-savior films, it depicts interracial cooperation without addressing race (Hughey 2014, 168); in the realistic discussions

between Sue and Walt about problems confronting Hmong men, racism is never mentioned. As the film ignores transnational issues, it also ignores structural causes of the depicted gang prevalence in Detroit: a dearth of good education, community resources, and job opportunities. Yet it speaks to a postindustrial time in which people do not have strong work or organizational identities and represents an American view that individuals working with good will can solve problems on a micro level.

While the film is a realistic depiction of the circumstances of working-class life and thus fulfills Zandy's criterion that a working-class text represent characters whom working-class people can recognize and with whom they can identify (2004), the filtering perspective is that of the white male. After a brief period of simultaneity in his relationship with the Lors, Walt seizes control of the action and the narrative. It is possible to read his sacrifice as that of a father refusing to sacrifice his son, but even under this scenario Walt refuses to consult with his son about his actions. Ultimately, the film's possibilities as an intervention in cross-racial relationships are limited. What strikes white mainstream audiences as generous strikes East Asians and likely other minorities as paternalistic and thus suggests that affiliating with whites entails letting whites remain in control.

Frozen River, the first film by independent filmmaker Hunt,¹² presents what might on the surface seem like a common plot—women bonding over issues of motherhood. Its audience is much smaller than that of Hollywood films and likely more attuned to race and gender issues. Thus its collective fantasies and fears are somewhat different from those of Eastwood's audiences. This text's answerability is both to its audience and to the communities it depicts—especially to a community of women who understand how women's lives can be undone by patriarchal structures within the family and society.

The film is outstanding not only for its depictions of how a white woman and a Native American woman come to affiliate but also for its complex representations of relationships among women in precarious positions. As Stephen Holden points out in his review, *Frozen River* does not air political grievances but rather explores the bond between Lila and Ray that suggests an alternative to the immediate problems of racial divisions among working-class women (2008). The film's climactic utopian fantasy answers anxieties that people, especially whites, have about demographic shifts and the erosion of borders.

The film focuses on Ray Eddy, a working-class white mother of two boys living in Massena, New York, near the Canadian border.

Her gambler husband has deserted the family days before Christmas, absconding with money she needs to complete her payment on a double-wide trailer—her dream alternative to the crumbling single-wide the family now inhabits. Her search for her husband and his car puts her in contact with Lila Littlewolf, a Mohawk who is smuggling undocumented immigrants from Canada to the United States. Because Lila's husband was killed in a smuggling operation with her, the tribe resents and distrusts Lila. Her in-laws have snatched her son, and Lila smuggles in the hope of getting the resources to regain him. In desperation, Ray joins Lila in smuggling people over the frozen St. Lawrence River into the United States.

Although the Indian reservation is not named, it can be quickly identified as the Mohawk Reservation. Hunt spent ten years researching the Mohawks in New York State, which indicates that, unlike Eastwood, she was interested in an accurate representation of Native American lives and values. She cast professional actors in her *Frozen River*, but the film evokes authenticity in other ways. Hunt's film was necessarily low budget and involved the cast far more in the gritty details of production. Reviewer Penelope Poulou notes that the film was shot in the region during sub-zero weather and that women actually drove cars across the ice (2008). Hunt's background was also somewhat precarious, as she was raised by a single mother who had been married at the age of eighteen. Undoubtedly Hunt drew on her experiences in directing the film, thus imbuing it with what Zandy (2004) calls the lived experience of class.

The reservation itself, Hunt learned, is a highly complex and liminal space. The entire Mohawk property comprises sixty-six square kilometers, some of which is in the United States—completely within the state of New York—and some of which is in Canada and spans Ontario and Quebec (Jackson, 2015). Mohawks have dual citizenship, and the reservation is a separate national entity. In his *Al Jazeera* article, Joe Jackson notes that traditionally Mohawks had been farmers, fishermen, and hunters. However, in the twentieth century heavy industry filled the surrounding areas, not only encroaching on Indian land but also contaminating it. As one St. Regis Mohawk Council (the American wing of the Council) member stated, "We went from being a farming community to not being able to farm anymore because of pollution." Ironically, the area around Massena is, like Detroit, part of the Rust Belt; the industry that drove the Native Americans from their work has moved elsewhere, leaving a landscape of joblessness and low-paying jobs.

To support themselves, the Mohawks narrowly approved a referendum to permit the construction and operation of a large gambling casino, even though the Native Americans do not consider gambling to be part of their culture, and a sign at the casino informs patrons of this fact. Although the Mohawks are among the best-educated tribes, poverty is still entrenched on this reservation. The actress who played Ray, Melissa Leo, commented that she was stunned by the degree of poverty she saw among the Mohawks (Poulou, 2008). Smuggling both contraband goods and undocumented immigrants across the border of the Mohawk reservation was a profitable business, especially after 9/11, when the US-Mexico border became more heavily patrolled.

As one reviewer pointed out, the frozen St. Lawrence River becomes symbolic of the precariousness of the women's lives (French, 2009), and I argue, of the arbitrariness of borders, for the national border in *Frozen River* is a highly charged construct. When Ray expresses discomfort with smuggling people into the United States, Lila counters, "It's not a crime . . . it's free trade among nations." The Mohawk reservation is not only a sovereign nation; its people move freely between the reservation, the United States, and Canada. Furthermore, the land surrounding the reservation, including Massena, was once Mohawk land. The constructed borders between nations mirror the constructed borders between people—specifically, whites and Native Americans—as well as the relationship of border construction to power.

While the Native Americans live in dire poverty, the working-class whites in this postindustrial area fare just slightly better, for they too have lost the work that sustains them. Their hardship cannot be concealed. In "Disciplined and Punished," poverty-class scholar Vivyan C. Adair argues that through deprivation and stress, poor women's bodies are, like the victims in Foucault's scenes of torture, marked in ways that publicly brand them "with infamy" (2003, 28).¹³ The opening scene depicts Ray—a tired, wrinkled woman smoking a cigarette, with tears streaming down her face. Her bathrobe covers her naked or near-naked flesh, thus emphasizing her vulnerability. While this scene is unique in its focus on the body, throughout the film Ray and Lila are dressed in clothing that marks them as working poor: they wear functional, nondesigner jeans, neon vests, and work jackets. Close-ups of Ray's face show her eyes as perpetually circled and deeply lined, her expressions always agitated and on edge, as though she were an icy river ready to crack.

While *Gran Torino* depicts an intergenerational relationship, *Frozen River* represents two women who are roughly peers (though

Ray may be somewhat older). Lila and Ray are representative of the many women who are disproportionately impoverished due to sexism and structural changes in the nature of employment. Unlike Walt, Ray never held a good union job. She has been employed part-time at the equivalent of a Dollar Store for two years; yet when she asks her supervisor for a promotion to manager, she is told she is a short-term employee. His treatment of Ray contrasts with that of a much younger employee who reports for work baring her midriff and is often late or absent but is given considerable leeway. Given the ageism and sexism that Ray faces, a work ethic such as Walt's would not help her to advance. And Ray's situation is typical of many women's. As Stephanie Luce and Mark Brenner point out, the women who have most benefited from workplace changes are college-educated professionals who have the resources to find individual solutions to issues such as childcare, not high school graduates working in service jobs. The authors articulate, "It is possible that the Wal-Mart cashier job of today could carry pay and benefits comparable to the Ford assembly line of the 1950s, but it would take collective organizing . . . to change those jobs into good jobs" (2007, 127).¹⁴ The impact of sexism on Lila's life is less clear, but she has been marginalized on the reservation because the elders blame her for her husband's death. Presumably, her husband participated willingly and knew the risks, so we might ask if Lila's ostracism fits into a familiar pattern of men demonizing women. What is clear is that neither woman sees legitimate opportunities for economic gain. Ray turns to illegal activity because she sees no other way to give her boys the shelter they need or the Christmas presents that would signal her family's participation in an American holiday (one that many Mohawks, including Lila, do not celebrate). Lila smuggles in undocumented immigrants to regain custody of, and indeed access to, her baby.

Nothing in Ray's life situation or attitude marks her as a potential white savior. Like Walt Kowalski, she has biases, especially against Native Americans. The association of Native Americans with gambling undoubtedly feeds Ray's prejudice; married to a compulsive gambler, she sees the casino as threatening her sustenance. Her adolescent son T. J. not only feels racist sentiments but also wants to act on them. When Ray tells him that a Native American woman took his father's abandoned car, T. J. urges that the two of them "go back there [to the casino] and kick some Mohawk ass." Later, he scams an elderly Native American woman out of her money, and though he apologizes

to his victim, he does so at the order of a sheriff, and there is little evidence that his repentance is heartfelt.

Ray has no desire to rescue Native Americans from their privations or to school them in how to accommodate to white values; she has enough difficulty negotiating these matters herself. Rather, the cool business arrangement between the women is a fairly equal partnership. Lila has experience in smuggling people into the United States and knowledge of the reservation land. In fact, she did not want to work with Ray; she did not work with whites, whom she refers to as “you people,” most likely due to trust issues. However, Ray has a car, and Lila quickly realizes that Ray’s whiteness is an asset. Ray also does not tutor Lila in the performance of femininity; her own gender performance has not privileged her.

In contrast to *Gran Torino*, *Frozen River* acknowledges the benefit of white privilege—even among the struggling working poor. Ray owns a single-wide trailer with rusted, crumbling bathroom appliances; Lila lives in a dilapidated camper that looks decades old and is rented from an elder on the reservation. But white privilege plays out in far more important ways than in access to material goods. When Ray nervously asks Lila about evading troopers on their runs, Lila tells her that unless she commits a moving violation, she won’t be stopped: she’s white. Later, when a trooper pulls the car over, Lila again says, “Just remember, you’re white.” Indeed, the trooper gives Ray a warning about a minor violation on her car and later stops by her house to tell her the Native American woman who was in the car is a known smuggler. Ray is not assumed to be engaged in criminal activity. Even after she is arrested and is being driven to jail, the trooper speaks to her matter-of-factly, almost as a peer, about the light sentence she will likely receive. Although we do not know the circumstances of how Lila’s husband was killed by police during a smuggling operation, we can ponder law enforcement’s diverse responses to American Indian and white criminal activity.

In addition to exploring the dynamics between a white and a Native American working-class woman, the film probes these women’s interactions with the undocumented people they transport. Most of these people are East Asian men who are loaded into the trunk of Ray’s car and dropped off. When a Pakistani couple appears, however, Ray reacts to their nationality with a suspicion they may be terrorists (even though she does not know where Pakistan is, a fact that suggests the quality of her education). Fearful that the couple may be transporting

weapons, Ray leaves a piece of their luggage on the ice, unaware that the bag contains the couple's infant child. After Ray and Lila frantically travel back to retrieve the baby and fear it may be dead, they return the breathing and crying infant to its mother, who is overwhelmed with gratitude and relief. The scene evokes sentiments similar to those Ghazala Khan, mother of a Muslim American soldier killed in Iraq, expressed after Donald Trump criticized her for merely standing by her husband as he addressed the Democratic Convention rather than also speaking: "Whoever saw me felt me in their heart," she said, indicating that she was like the figure of *La Pieta*, a universal representation of the grieving mother (2016). In the reunion, Lila and Ray similarly witness the Pakistani woman's humanity through the visceral display of motherhood. She is trying to protect her children in difficult circumstances, as are Ray and Lila.

Significantly, Hunt avoids giving anyone responsibility for saving the baby's life. Astonished that the infant is alive, Ray tells Lila, who was just holding the child, that she, Lila, had brought the baby back to life. Quietly but firmly, Lila refuses the credit, "That was the Creator, not me." While putting Lila in the position of the rescuer would reverse the white-savior trope, Lila's words dismantle it, in effect stating that matters of salvation should, like the fate of Hamlet's mother, be left to Heaven. Ray's statement, however, suggests her understanding of this universal language and budding affiliation with women across racial lines.

Ray convinces Lila to make one final operation on Christmas Eve by stressing how helpful the money would be in regaining custody of her son. When Ray and Lila are discovered on this last run, Ray's first instinct is to flee and leave Lila to face the legal consequences. However, she realizes that if Lila is charged with smuggling undocumented persons, the tribal elders will expel her for years, and Lila will never see her son again. Ray understands that Lila loves her son as much as she herself loves her boys, and, as important, she recognizes that her white privilege will mitigate her punishment if she pleads guilty. Thus she turns over her share of the smuggling proceeds to Lila, asks her to buy her sons a new single-wide trailer with insulation and to take care of her boys. The plan is Ray's, but she approaches Lila directly rather than use subterfuge as Walt did. That Lila offers no protest indicates that the arrangement is acceptable to her.

The final scene depicts Lila's and Ray's two small children playing on a circular jungle gym while T. J. and Lila watch. This blended interracial family suggests that the next generation may interact as

friends rather than as adversaries.¹⁵ Drawing on Jameson's work on utopia in mass culture, we might interpret the final scene as a pocket utopia, a small space where an idealized harmony is reached. This representation offers imaginative hope that different alliances and approaches to problems can be forged. Notably, the pocket utopia is a snapshot; the plan is for Lila to return to the reservation when Ray is released from prison rather than acclimate to white culture. Indeed, the women's arrangement was made so that Lila could remain on the reservation.

Gran Torino presents a vision of affiliation across racial lines and the extreme sacrifices that Walt makes for his adopted Hmong family. *Frozen River* depicts two women who forge bonds of solidarity that are based on a shared and similar understanding of their circumstances. Despite Walt's modest circumstances, there is a gulf of privilege separating him from the Hmong, a privilege that is a function of age, gender, and race. Walt's position prompts him to seek an heir for his legacy, and it is difficult for a father not to fall into paternalistic traps. *Frozen River* represents working-poor women who did not have the opportunity to work in good-paying blue-collar jobs such as the one Walt Kowalski had, who have never been part of a union, and who are alienated from their communities. One need barely scratch the context of the film to see that Native Americans and whites have unintentionally worked against one another, as working-class people are often pitted against one another. Whites destroyed the possibility of Mohawks' making a living from their land, and out of necessity Mohawks operated gambling casinos that destroyed the lives of whites, among other races. Ray and Lila operate as twenty-first-century entrepreneurs and business partners marketing access to the American Dream.

Frozen River starkly depicts the realities of its protagonists' lives, but the ending of the film is not realistic; rather, it represents hope by presenting a pocket utopia of multicultural alliance. The women are not standing together on picket lines, but although they do not name the forces that oppress them, they stand together against classism and sexism. While Ray makes sacrifices for Lila, she gives not her life but a few months of her life. And rather than the act of a savior, her going to prison is an act of recognition of her white privilege even in the face of economic adversity. The protagonists of *Frozen River* do not take on the forces of globalization, sexism, or modern colonialism against the indigenous people. Yet they show how two people who, in the words of Hunt, would never ordinarily get together come to recognize the people under the ethnic stereotypes (Ultrabook 2012).

This analysis of *Gran Torino* and *Frozen River* underscores that if a representation of cross-racial affiliation is to be an effective intervention in relations among diverse working-class people, it has to be a representation of exchanges among equals. There may indeed be circumstances in which a white person, largely because of the many ramifications of white privilege, must sacrifice for cohorts of other races, but the plot line and symbolism must signal a proportionate sacrifice. In *Selma* (Ava DuVernay 2014), for example, whites lose their lives in the civil rights struggle, but so do many blacks, and blacks lead the struggle. People of color maintain their agency. In reflecting on *Gran Torino* and *Frozen River*, the consideration of gender also becomes paramount. Under patriarchy, women have considerably less economic and social capital than men do. Women of color are further disadvantaged. Considering these points may enable us to recognize films and other art forms that do not adhere to an aesthetic that soothes whites with paternalistic depictions but rather that prod us to think, again, about the complexity of building alliances and the way class intersects with gender, race, and other identities. The latter art form may not be realistic; it may present utopias. Yet it may also serve as an effective intervention into the reality it represents.

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Notes

1. In *Politics of Identity*, O'Brien (2008) surveys low-wage workers about their attitudes toward workers of other races and the ways in which they see their individual interests converging with those of other service workers. She cites the following as among the scholars who have argued that racial and ethnic identities undermine worker identities: William Julius Wilson, *The Bridge Over the Racial Divide: Rising Inequality and Coalitional Politics* (1999) and Kay Lehman Scholzman and Sidney Verba, *Injury to Insult: Unemployment, Class, and Political Response* (1979).

2. Before Donald Trump's presidential campaign, I would have argued that Walt's continual use of ethnic slurs verged on the hyperbolic.

3. See, for example, Ebert (2008) and Dargis (2008).

4. Thao's inappropriate remark can be seen as his talking back to his mentors; it suggests that his performance of working-class American masculinity does not mean that he has completely assimilated into this culture.

5. Roche and Hösle note that Pauline Kael went so far as to describe Eastwood as the "reductio ad absurdum" of macho (2011, 666). Yet Eastwood's code of masculinity certainly evolves from the days of the Dirty Harry movies to *Gran Torino*, which some critics see as an answer to the Dirty Harry persona of vengeance and violence.

6. Hughey demonstrates that this trope is widespread and easily finds more than fifty films produced in the last decade that represent it. He further connects the trope to the nineteenth-century idea of Manifest Destiny, which not only decreed that the United States was meant to span from the Atlantic to the Pacific but also was undergirded by the assumption that white America was exceptionally virtuous and divinely inspired to spread its virtue to others, notably unenlightened members of other races (2014, 9).

7. Readers may recognize a comparison with Eastwood's later movie *American Sniper* (2014), in which the protagonist also says that he finishes things.

8. Hmong critiques of this scene have played with the banter around whether Thao or Walt will take the top position and who will be on the bottom.

9. Roche and Höfle refer to *Billy Budd*: the authority figure Captain Vere sacrifices the young Budd in the name of maintaining order (2011, 662). Walt's actions reverse such generic and mythical conventions.

10. Gourlie and Engel read Walt's death as the price of the new mythology of American manhood, one more sensitive and self-aware than the Dirty Harry persona of Eastwood's earlier career (2012b, 274).

11. Film reviewers, especially women, found Eastwood's early films sexist. The assessment changed somewhat with *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), but some of Eastwood's comments on gender are controversial. For example, Scott Foundas quotes him as saying, "The idea that men and women are the same is crazy — because they're not. . . . They're equal in the eyes of the law and they're equal in a lot of ways—in fact, women are superior in a lot of ways and men are superior in a lot of ways" (2011, 233).

12. *Frozen River* was critically acclaimed. It received two Academy Award nominations: Hunt was nominated for Best Original Screenplay, and Melissa Leo (Ray Eddy) was nominated for Best Actress. Among other awards, the film won the Twenty-Fourth Independent Spirit Award, and Missy Upham (Lila Littlewolf) won the 2008 American Indian Film Festival's American Indian Movie Award for best supporting actress; see "*Frozen River* (2008): Awards."

13. See also Adair 2001, from which the cited article was adapted.

14. An article by Alice Hines (2011) in *HuffPost* states that women retail workers earned an average of \$9.77 an hour compared with men's \$10.64. In retail, women make up 64 percent of low-paid "frontline" cashier and stock clerk retail positions, according to a 2008 study from the Ford Foundation's Economic Development Program. Meanwhile, they make up a mere 33 percent of higher-paid management positions.

15. E. L. Doctorow employed the trope of interracial blended families in *Ragtime* and *The March*.