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SCRIPT, THE LATEHOMECOMER
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Macalester College
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Note: Visuals are stored for presentation in a Google document.

[VISUAL: Grandmother]

Part 1.

In The Latehomecomer, Kao Kalia Yang narrates her family's difficult journey from the jungles of Laos to the streets of St. Paul, Minnesota. The story starts before her birth and ends soon after the passing of her grandmother, who was buried on a snowy day in St. Paul. The chapters of the book are arranged chronologically; the first seven chapters describe a perilous trip across the Mekong River and eight years in the Thailand's Ban Vinai refugee camp, where Yang was born. The last eight chapters describe "the American years," in Minnesota. Seventeen photographs interspersed throughout the book, including the cover image, provide a parallel visual narrative, reinforcing the idea of a successful—though complex—immigrant trajectory from war-torn Asia to freedom in America.

Offered as a "Hmong family memoir," the book is a selective, personalized history of the Hmong who fled Southeast Asia in the aftermath of the US Secret War, a fifteen-year-long event about which most U.S. citizens had no knowledge until relatively recently.[1] Far from a

[1] If you are interested in the causes of that War or its broader outcomes, you you might want to consult the scholarly texts by Keith Quincy or Paul Hillmer, or study the photographs and artifacts that are on exhibit at the Center for Hmong

primer on war, this memoir nonetheless puts forth many valuable insights into the long-term consequences of war, including death, displacement, forced migration, and cultural loss. In the two decades after the U.S. withdrew from Laos in 1975, about 130,000 Hmong entered the United States as political refugees (Faderman 10).

Why write a memoir? Yang's epigraph reveals one of the many reasons she was driven to write this book:

> "For my grandmother…who never learned how to write. To my baby brother…who will read the things she never wrote."

Because she translated her memories and those of her family into words, Yang's siblings can now read something extremely relevant to their own lives. That is a significant accomplishment because Hmong people had no written script until Western missionaries created one in the 1950s (Chan xxiii).[2] Since the Hmong arrived in the United States, non-Hmong historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and journalists have published a handful of scholarly books about Hmong. In 2002, Mai Neng Moua (another Hmong Minnesotan!) edited a collection of writings by Hmong Americans called Bamboo Among the Oaks. The Latehomecomer is a welcome and well-received addition to the literature about Hmong and written by Hmong authors.

Studies at Concordia University, at the corner of Marshall and Lexington Avenues in St. Paul.

[2] Currently, several systems of writing co-exist alongside this one.

This book represents both the end of Yang's own struggle to speak (for years she refused to talk out loud except to her family) and her awareness that the oral and visual traditions that once sustained her ancestors continue to be necessary but no longer guarantee the survival of contemporary Hmong culture. Putting thoughts into words is an act of survival, for herself and her people. As she writes in her Prologue, The Latehomecomer "unleash[es] the flood of Hmong into language, seeking refuge not for a name or a gender, but a people."

[VISUAL: Latehomecomer book trailer, 58 seconds]

[VISUAL: Cy Thao, #22 Secret War]

Part 2.

If we try to merge the Hmong American story into the master narrative of immigration and assimilation that is based on the European experience of the early 20th C, we miss an essential point. The major waves of European migration in the from the 1880s to the 1930s occurred in a very different historical and economic context. Also, European groups installed themselves as part of white American society in a series of contradictory and conflictual processes that involved state policy and state intervention. So the idea that immigrants come here of their own volition because they are looking for "freedom"—which they subsequently find in their suburban communities or at the Mall of

America—does more to discipline and categorize people than it does to explain the histories behind any one group's migration.

Even if we try to place the Hmong experience in some sort of Asian American frame, we miss a lot. Since Hmong can trace their roots to places in the Asian continent and they are phenotypically Asian (whatever that is), thinking of Hmong people as Asian Americans at least highlights the extent to which they might be treated as model minorities and perpetual foreigners, simultaneously. Where did you come from? Why did you come here? and, When are you going back? If you are an Asian person in the United States—whether refugee, immigrant, or U.S.-born, even third-, fourth-, or eighth generation in this country—I can guarantee that someone has asked you these questions.

We move closer to understanding the Hmong experience if we think about the United States' historical involvements in Asia, particularly the U.S. wars in the Philippines, Korea, and of course, Viet Nam. If you know this history, you might be tempted to compare Hmong to Filipinos, Koreans, or Vietnamese. But every situation is unique, and it is important for us to pay attention to all of the related issues—racialization, colonization, U.S. expansionism, war, and forced migration—that might be at play for any given group. This is not just another chapter in the American immigration story. We should seek to understand the broad array of historical ruptures, past and ongoing struggles for sovereignty, localized and racialized conflicts, generational divides, and new beginnings that constitute the Hmong experience.

Yang's memoir gives us now the perfect excuse to pay attention to the minute details of the Hmong life. Indeed, to put Hmong at the center of the American experience forces us once again to re-examine our deeply held assumptions and expectations about our society, from our notions of "who belongs" here to our ideas about meritocracy and the American Dream.

Why did Hmong come to the United States to begin with?

Let us watch this brief clip on the Secret War on Laos from a documentary about the Ravens that I found on the website of the Minnesota Institute of Public Health.

[VISUAL: Ravens: Secret War in Laos, 11 min]

This clip was furnished to the Minnesota Institute of Public Health via a blog by Tou Lee. Referring to the clip, he writes: "So many Hmong lives sacrificed, yet you will not find one Hmong name among the 58,260 names on the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, DC." Because our dominant collective memories of the US wars in Viet Nam, Laos, and Cambodia do not contain any references to Vietnamese or Hmong people, The Latehomecomer carries an even bigger burden: in a way, the book exists not only as a personal memory album, but also as a Hmong American memorial to war. When it comes to U.S. "conflicts" in Asia, most of us suffer from a weird kind of forgetting that not only

diminishes the losses of life of our allies abroad, but that also belittles their efforts to make a life in their places of refuge. Because of our selective amnesia, Kao Kalia Yang and other Hmong writers and artists cannot avoid engaging in strategic memory projects that attempt to challenge and reconstruct what mainstream U.S. society knows and thinks about the past.

So maybe there are some unexpected lessons we should take away. One refers not to past but to present U.S. involvements in the Middle East and around the world. Especially for those of us who oppose those wars and advocate for U.S. withdrawal, what considerations have we given to the future of our allies abroad? (Paul Hillmer, discussion with UFC August 2010). Another lesson relates to "globalization," the idea that Thomas Friedman and others extol for making the world "flat" and thereby bringing the benefits of global capitalism to everyone. But in the big scheme of things, the easy and rapid motion of capital across waning national boundaries has brought neither prosperity nor stability to the Hmong people or their culture.

Coming to the United States as a political refugee in the aftermath of war is different, and harder, than arriving as an immigrant who comes of their own volition, even under economic duress. The circumstances under which family, language, and other cultural ties are quickly and forcibly severed, combined with the heavy hand of the geopolitical state in displacing, moving, and resettling populations mean that this is not an ordinary Ellis Island story. By that I do not mean to make the story of

European assimilation happier, easier, or more uniform across all ethnic groups than it was; I mean only to disrupt the assumptions that all immigrants come here for similar reasons and with the same access to resources and opportunities. Furthermore, we should be very clear about the crucial role of government intervention in nearly all aspects of the Hmong refugee experience, so that we do not carelessly reanimate the stock morality tale of individuals seeking a better life, and finding it—wrapped in red, white, and blue—in America.

[VISUAL: Cy Thao, #43 adapting to winter]

Part 3.

Today, two-thirds of the Hmong American population is concentrated in California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. The Upper Midwest is home to nearly 120,000 Hmong people. For fans of Garrison Keillor and his radio show "Prairie Home Companion," the Upper Midwest is nearly synonymous with Lake Wobegon. What has become of Hmong culture in the land of powdermilk biscuits and Lutheran church suppers?

Just as in prior periods of their history, the Hmong community is adapting, modifying, and recreating their culture in a new context. For example, nearly 10,000 Hmong students are enrolled in the St. Paul public schools. Most of them cannot read or write in Hmong. But the school's English Language Learner program includes a Hmong Enrichment Program so that Hmong students can become fully bilingual

and bicultural, and at the same time students of all backgrounds can be exposed to Hmong culture and language (SPPS ELL fact sheet).

Our local urban landscape is enlivened by the presence of Hmong. Along University Avenue in St. Paul, Hmong community and business leaders have helped to establish the equivalent of an "Asian Main Street" complete with restaurants, groceries, auto repair shops, newspapers, social services, law offices, a funeral home, and a bookstore. Just a few blocks north on Dale Avenue, the Hmongtown Market is a 30,000 square-foot complex with hundreds of vendor stalls catering to an almost uniquely Hmong clientele. Every summer, the Hmong sports tournament—including men's and women's soccer, volleyball, and even women's football!—turns Como Park into a Hmong American place. At the Farmer's Market in downtown St. Paul, where all produce must be grown within a 70-mile radius of the city, a majority of the vendors are Hmong.

From this, it appears that becoming American has not made Hmong people less Hmong. What could be more American than holding an elected position in government? Cy Thao is a current member of the Minnesota House of Representatives. Along with a bachelor's degree in Political Science, he also has a degree in Studio Art. Some of his work is on exhibit now at the Minneapolis Institute of Art. Thao's series of 50 oil paintings depicting Hmong creation myths and migration through time continue a Hmong tradition of visual story telling. The first painting I showed you was #22, depicting the Secret War. This painting is #43. Its

caption reads: "To keep the culture alive we have to adapt. Instead of celebrating the New Year outdoor and after the harvest season, we celebrate it during American holidays or weekends because it is the only time we can get off from work."

Hmong practicality, fortitude, and perseverance allow Hmong culture to survive and thrive, even in Lake Wobegon. Actually, the real Minnesota is much more multicultural and racially diverse than the Wobegon myth reveals. This owes a lot to the long history of struggle and sacrifice on the part of many people in this state and around the nation, a history that is prior to the era we think of as "Vietnam." Hmong people, like other refugee and immigrant groups that arrived in the United States in the post-civil rights period, are beneficiaries of all the debates and protests and actions and initiatives that have insisted on America as a multicultural, multiracial society—rather than a society for rich, white, heterosexual men only. My point is that if we celebrate Hmong American culture today, we should remain cognizant of the social and political conditions that allow us to recognize and appreciate cultural differences to begin with.

[VISUAL: Cy Thao, #38 America! A rude awakening.]

Part 4.

I hope you were as moved as I was by The Latehomecomer. I found every section and every chapter full of beautiful phrases, surprising in their directness and simplicity. I laughed when she talked about "learning things in opposite directions," because that is what I do all the time, and I think that is what makes me a good teacher (149). I remember when I read the book for the first time, that I had to take a three-day break after I finished the tiger story in Chapter 4 because I felt so sick and sad at the same time. Of course, her relationship with her grandmother—a thread that pulls the whole book together—reminds me of my own grandmothers in the Philippines. Did you think about yours?

Perhaps Yang's biggest contribution is her own special point of view. I'm not saying that you need to see the world the way she does to appreciate the book. You might have your own reactions to the life she describes, and that is perfectly fine. But I think the biggest gift a writer or artist can give is their honest and undiluted perspective on the world. One of the very real things Yang says is that "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." (151)

Maybe even sadder is when she realized that life in America was all about money:

> "I started dreaming about money, dollar bills that folded into cylinders, looked like trashcans, and rolled around in my head, loud and angry, smooth and gentle. After my dreams, I made decisions. When I grow up, I'm going to have money. When I grow up, I'm going to never need money. When I grow up, I'm going to treat money so well that it will always want to stay with me…Money was like a person I have never known…Money we not the bills and coins or a check from welfare. In my imagination, it was much more: it was the nightmare that kept love apart in America." (135)

Cy Thao's painting #38, the one you see now, is captioned this way:

> AMERICA! The land of opportunities and freedom. To the new arrivals it was the land of uncertainty, confusion, and fear. Many ended up in the "projects" where the government housed the poor. Life there was hard. Many of the criminals preyed on the scared refugees. What a rude awakening for us.

The hopeful part of Yang's memoir is signaled by the title, "The Latehomecomer." Hmong, a people without a nation, have spent centuries without a homeland. Now in the United States, Hmong Americans have fashioned a way to belong. That is a huge accomplishment. As they await the publication of this book, Yang's father beseeches her to "tell it the way it is":

> "Other people, in moments of sadness and despair, can look to a place in the world: where they might belong. We are not like that. I knew that our chance was here. Our chance to share in a new place and a new home. This is so important to our story." (273)

[VISUAL: author photo from book]

Part 5.

Dear First Year Students,

Kao Kalia Yang opens her book with a set of questions on page 3, including: "What is Hmong?" Having read her book, can you tell me why that particular question is so important?

One of the reasons for my lecture today is that as a college professor, I want you to think broadly and deeply about what you read. When I ask you a question I am usually less interested in an answer than in your thoughts about why that question matters in the first place. I know this is going to drive you

crazy for the first few weeks of the semester, especially if you have trained yourself to give your teachers the so-called "correct answer." Most of the time, I don't even want an answer! I would actually prefer another well-formulated question, and a plan for how you might look for even more questions!

So when you are confronted with the question "What is Hmong?" one path you could follow is: Who cares? And I would suggest to you that Hmong people are NOT the only people who should care about this question. In fact, when I say that this book puts Hmong at the center of the American experience, I am suggesting that all Americans should think about this question because it leads to a very important field of questions and problems about places of origin and the territories and boundaries that necessarily accompany any definition of "belonging" and "identity."

Another question I might pose to you is: "What is the relationship between memory and history?" When I talk about strategic memory projects, I make a gesture to memory being something much more than just "things we remember." I am saying that The Latehomecomer is not just a collection of personal stories; in fact we could understand this book as part of a larger cultural and political strategy to commemorate the sacrifices that Hmong have made, and continue to make, so that they might finally "come home." As a memoir, this book fits nicely on a reading list for American Literature or Asian American Studies. But can a memoir like this one ever fulfill the criteria necessary to constitute History with a capital "H," the kind of book you could study, for example, in the History Department?

These are the kinds of open-ended and compelling questions that I relish because in effect they escort us from the relatively safe parameters of books directly back into the exciting complexity of our lives. A liberal arts education is meant to help people learn and grow, and to think widely and fearlessly about ourselves and others. I'm sure that in the semester that lies ahead, you will take many opportunities to do all of those things.

Thank you so much for listening. And to your folks over there in JBD: I look forward to meeting you at the discussion tonight!

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Web Resources

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