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“Maybe We’re Not So Different: Cross-Racial Solidarity in  
Gran Torino and Frozen River”

The term “solidarity” has been a rallying cry in working-class literature and culture because the concept is integral to working-class lives. However, political scientists and labor historians agree that solidarity is frequently undermined by rifts along racial and ethnic lines.¹ The prevailing view, according to Erin O’Brien, is 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” (13).² Hence, the demographic diversity of the United States is an anchor weighing down worker solidarity (12).

The tensions between working-class solidarity and ethnic and racial identity are as old as the United States itself. Political and social developments since the 1980s—stagnant wages, decreased union representation, and global outsourcing among them—have prompted some contemporary writers and film makers to examine the realities of working-class lives and to imagine the possibility of solidarity across differences. In the words of Janet Zandy, writers and film makers imagine movement from filiation to affiliation, from identification with race or ethnicity to identification with shared conditions and grievances (Hands 138).

The word “imagine” is crucial, for I take my cue from Edward Said’s claim in Culture and Imperialism 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

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¹ Erin O’Brien cites the following as among the scholars who have argued that racial and ethnic identities undermine worker identities: Wilson, The Bridge Over the Racial Divide and Scholzman and Verba, Injury to Insult.
² In The Politics of Identity: Solidarity Building among America’s Working Poor, O’Brien 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.
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” (919).

Two relatively recent films *Gran Torino* and *Frozen River* represent working-class people of different races recognizing the substantial bonds they share. In each of these films, the white characters finally opt to make substantial sacrifices for their new found brothers and sisters, which is a hallmark of solidarity. That this solidarity is represented on screen rather than in a text further suggests the filmmaker’s impulse to make it a communal and public event.

*Gran Torino*, a Hollywood film directed by Clint Eastwood, who also plays the star role, tells the story of Walt Kowalski, a decorated Korean War veteran and retired Ford auto worker living in Detroit. Perpetually angry and frequently mouthing racist slurs, he is alienated from his two grown middle-class sons, one of whom works for a Japanese automaker. An attempt to keep Hmong gang members off of his lawn 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. 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.

Early in the film Walt Kowalski sees the Hmong as Other. They have strange customs (such as killing chickens at celebrations). Walt’s traumatic experiences in Korea undoubtedly fuel his bias against Asian-Americans; when he aims a rife at the Hmong gang on the lawn he snarls, “we stacked you five feet high in Korea.” Furthermore, the dominance of Japanese cars has devastated the American auto industry where Walt had worked for forty years.

After Walt rescues Sue from an abusive African-American group, he begins to form a bond with her and the walls of difference he has erected begin to collapse. Sue tells 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 Hmong family’s home for a celebration, Walt begins bonding 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. This enjoyment is all the more understandable when we hear the shaman’s remarkably accurate reading of Walt: people do not respect him, he is worried about a past mistake, and he has no happiness or peace. At his juncture, Walt secludes himself in the bathroom and ponders that “I have more in common with these gooks than I do with my own spoiled family.”

The root of Walt’s bonding with his Hmong neighbors, however, is his search for a son and a son’s search for a father. When Walt finally gives his confession to the parish priest, one of the three sins he names is never being close to his two sons. These sons have assimilated into the middle class, and thus they have no use for the home repair skills and working-class values Walt espouses. The estrangement of their ideology 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. [SCENE] Walt spends a considerable amount of time mowing his tiny lawn and maintaining his modest home. This maintenance is a source of pride, and he is continually irked that his neighbors neglect their properties. While Walt has in effect lost his sons, Thao is missing a father. Sue describes her brother as lacking direction, partially because he received little guidance from his late father who was “old school” in the Hmong tradition, and thus unable to guide his son in being an American male.
The Hmong family—and indeed the entire neighborhood—need and appreciate Walt’s home repair skills. He first teaches Thao, who is required to labor for him in atonement for attempting to steal Walt’s signature Gran Torino, to make repairs on the Hmong houses. In working with his neighbors to better their homes, Walt enmeshes himself in the entire community, but most importantly with the Lor adolescents. As the relationship with Thao and Sue progresses, Walt fixes appliances and further instructs Thao on using tools.

More important, Walt teaches Thao how to respect himself and behave as an American working-class male. Thao is eager to go to college, but has no job and no confidence in himself. Walt sets up an interview for a construction job and in preparation takes Thao to a barbershop to learn how “guys talk.” Thao has difficulty (as do audiences) interpreting the mores that govern the use of racial slurs. Yet he learns important details about American culture that have eluded him: rather than tell his potential employer he does not own a car, he says it is in the shop. He also learns, in contrast to Hmong cultural traditions, that he should look people in the eye. Finally, Thao learns the appropriate swagger that a working-class man must have and successfully presents himself to the construction foreman, thus getting the job. [SCENE]

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 the Hmong gang, Thao is eager for revenge and looks to the gun-toting war veteran Walt as his accomplice. Instead, Walt locks Thao in his home and goes to settle the score himself—by tricking the Hmong gang into shooting him down and thus getting themselves arrested. While locking Thao inside, Walt reveals the source of his post-traumatic stress disorder—he shot “some scared little gook just like you right in the face.” He knows the weight of killing and wants to spare Thao this, as well as a likely prison sentence. Again, Walt is viewed as a neighborhood hero; the Hmong neighbors attend his funeral in their
traditional mourning clothes and sit across the aisle from Walt’s white family and friends. The Gran Torino, a vintage car no longer made that is synonymous with the “old-school” Walt, is bequeathed to Thao.

*Gran Torino* underscores the commonalities in the lives of working class people, but it does so within the context of a Hollywood film and within the context of the Clint Eastwood canon. The characterization of Walt Kowalski verges on stereotype in the pervasiveness of his racism, and it is problematic that while his feelings toward the Hmong people change, his vocabulary never does. Nevertheless, the film is a realistic depiction of the circumstances of working-class life; *Gran Torino* emphasizes the hard work, loyalty, and integrity that are central to working-class life. In this respect, it fulfills Zandy’s criteria for a working-class text: people can recognize and identify with Walt’s working-class life (*Hands*). The film is also an imaginative construction of common interests between working-class people of different races.

*Frozen River*, the first film by independent film maker Courtney Hunt, presents what might on the surface seem like a common plot—women bonding over issues of motherhood. However, the film is outstanding not only for its depictions of how a white and Native American woman come to recognize their common bonds, but also for its complex representations of relationships among working-class people. The tale 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 the approximately $4300.00 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 Littlefoot, a Mohawk who is smuggling undocumented people from Canada to the United States. Lila herself has experienced a family tragedy: her husband was
killed in illegal activity with her. As a result, the tribe has ostracized her, and her in-laws have snatched her son. Driven by desperation, Ray joins Lila in smuggling, driving over the frozen St. Lawrence River in the dark. As one reviewer pointed out, this river becomes symbolic of the precariousness of the women’s lives (French).

Poverty-class scholar Vivyan Adair argues that poor women’s bodies are “branded” by deprivation and stress. The opening SCENE depicts a wrinkled woman smoking a cigarette, tears streaming down her face. While this scene is unique in its focus on the body, throughout the film Ray and Lila are depicted as working poor: they wear functional, non-designer jeans, neon vests, and work jackets.

While the women dress similarly, they inhabit different communities, and Frozen River depicts the animosity that exists between whites and Native Americans. The association of Native Americans with gambling undoubtedly feeds Ray’s prejudice, and her teen son T.J. is more blatant in his racism. 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 and kick some Mohawk ass.” Later, he scams an elderly Native American woman out of her money. Lila is also suspicious of white people; she tells Ray that she doesn’t usually work with whites and refers to them as “you people.”

The film itself, while representing the daily struggles that each woman faces, acknowledges the role of white privilege. Ray owns a single wide-trailer with rusted, crumbling bathroom appliances; Lila lives in a camper that she rents from an elder on the reservation. When Ray, who drives, frantically asks Lila about evading the troopers on their runs, Lila tells her that unless she commits a moving violation, she won’t be stopped: she’s white. Later, when

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3 Courtney Hunt indeed saw this animosity when she was filming.
a trooper pulls the car over Lila again says “Just remember, you’re white.” Indeed, the trooper gives her a warning about a minor violation on her car and later stops by her house to tell her the Native American passenger who was in the car is a smuggler. Ray is not assumed to be a criminal.

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 Asian-American men who are loaded into the trunk and dropped off as cargo. When a Pakistani couple appears, however, Ray reacts to their race with the suspicion they may be terrorists (even though she does not know where Pakistan is). She leaves a bag on the ice, unaware that the luggage contains the couple’s infant child. When Lila and Ray return the infant to their mother, they witness the Pakistani woman’s humanity; she is trying to protect her children in difficult circumstances, as are Ray and Lila. [SCENE]

Lila and Ray are representative of the many women who are disproportionately impoverished due to sexism and structural changes in the nature of employment. Ray has been employed part-time at 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. 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” (127). Ray
turns to illegal activity because there is no other way to support her family. Lila does so because she has been ostracized by her tribe and sees no other way to regain her child.

When they are discovered on their final Christmas Eve run, Ray is faced with the realization 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. Ready to run from the scene, Ray appreciates that Lila loves her son as much as Ray loves her boys. Ray also recognizes that she has white privilege, and thus will be sentenced to only three or four months, if she pleads guilty. When she decides to do so, she turns over her smuggling proceeds to Lila so that she can buy a new single wide trailer with insulation.

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. Lila had previously insisted that smuggling people over the border was “not a crime,” for the land on both sides of the border is Mohawk land. The construct of the border between Canada and the United States might be as circumstantial as the frozen St. Lawrence itself or the construction of race.

*Frozen River* and *Gran Torino* represent visions of solidarity across racial lines among the working classes. *Gran Torino* is a daring Hollywood film, but it is nonetheless a Hollywood film that does not raise the subversive questions about the nature of borders or the various forms of bias that impact people’s live that are so provocatively explored in *Frozen River*. *Frozen River* also represents women whom many would describe as working poor—who did not have the opportunity to work in good-paying blue-collar jobs such as the one Walt Kowalski had. Yet the differences between these films are not as important as their similar projects: an imagination

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4 E.L. Doctorow has employed the trope of interracial blended families in *Ragtime* and *The March*. 
of solidarity across racial lines among working-class people. In imagining solidarity across races, one might be taking a step toward imagining and creating better material circumstances.

Works Cited


