

## Film review and interview

*Mémoire hmong à la croisée des chemins/Hmong Memory at the Crossroads* (2015) [Run Time: 105 min. Subtitled: French, English, Hmong].

### Review

In the wake of the Indochina Wars (1946–1975), involving France and the US, thousands of Hmong refugees left the region from Laos through Thai refugee camps. The largest Hmong community to resettle outside Asia went to the United States. By 1990, more than 100,000 people had arrived. California became home to half this group, while the rest relocated in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Washington, Pennsylvania, Montana, North Carolina and elsewhere. To date, the US has been the primary destination of the Hmong people who have continued to contribute to the cultural diversity of many cities and regions now for over forty years.

*Hmong Memory at the Crossroads* is a documentary that weaves the stories of three generations of Hmong refugees residing in the US Midwest and France. Liachoua Lee, a Hmong-American from Rochester Hills, Michigan, revisits his past as a former refugee and son of Hmong veterans of the French Indochina War (1946–1954), and of the American Secret War in Laos (1961–1975). As he journeys to France and then Laos, accompanied by his French wife and eldest son, Lee engages with the events and nations that represent traces of his personal history and the emotional scars left by the war that still haunt him.

Lee's story begins in Detroit, Michigan, where, in his forties, he owns a successful business and contributes significantly to the large Hmong community that lives there. The first segment of the film follows Lee's journey to France, a country where he and his family sought asylum before immigrating to the United States in the early 1980s. His decision to delve into his family's history before emigrating compels him to return to Laos, the country of his birth almost forty years prior. "Pour moi, les souvenirs ne pourront jamais disparaître," Lee notes as he mulls over photographs of his

father, dressed in a uniform, indicating his military support of the French and Americans in Laos during the 1950s–1960s.

The film documents Lee's rereading of key chapters of his refugee history, recreating memories of wartime Laos as experienced as a young child who was forced to flee across the Mekong River with his parents. Standing in front of a war memorial in France to the Hmong, Lee notes, "ce monument me donne l'impression que je me mets en contact personnellement avec mon père." Lead project director and producer Safoi Babana-Hampton follows Lee's journey of remembrance, drawing on his personal story to make connections with the larger context of the Hmong's international community. This vast interconnection of people and places includes American Vietnam veterans, French Indochina War veterans, historians and government officials, in the Midwest and France.

Instead of focusing on blaming the political and military manipulation by the US and France in Laos which caused chaos, destruction, and thousands of deaths in the country, Babana-Hampton chooses to concentrate her visual study on the lives that were affected, both negatively and positively, by these "secret wars": conflicts enduring for almost twenty years spurred on by imperial powers which claimed to be fighting communism in the region. Through Lee's story as well as those of his relatives – his French wife, who accompanied him from France to Michigan in the late 1970s, and his trilingual and multicultural son – audiences recognize the power of the immigrant narrative that has made the United States the diverse country that it is. The film does an excellent job of building historical information into the context of the personal narratives of the individuals' lives depicted in the film. We are made aware of just how important Laotian Hmong history is to the historical fabrics of three different countries, languages and cultures. In France, the Indochina War has always been characterized as forgotten, as one French official notes: "la pensée collective [française] n'est pas encore penchée sur ce sujet." Similarly, for the US the Secret War in Laos was overshadowed by the longer and more visually represented war of Vietnam (the first televised conflict in the American twentieth century). In both countries, the Hmong people, who aided these Western powers to combat communist guerrilla forces, were virtually forgotten once France and the US pulled out their military forces. Those Hmong who were able to leave Laos in order to escape being massacred for having aided France and the US were condemned by others left behind for "abandoning" them. When Lee returns to his native Laos in 2015, he must contend with this lingering blame and guilt still present in his rapport with his extended family.

Lee's journey ends on the banks of the Mekong River where it began over forty years before. Like so many immigrants' stories, Lee's is one that led from war, famine and death to hope and prosperity. These are truly lessons to take to heart in the politics of our era where refugees have become something Western nations seek to keep out. As a teaching tool, this documentary is effective because it enables current generations of American students to investigate a history that has all but faded from historical memory. It also helps contribute to positive debates about how important immigrants have been and will continue to be to our country.

*Hmong Memory at the Crossroads* was screened at an independent film festival in Paris at the Musée de l'Histoire de l'Immigration, Palais de la Porte Dorée, in the series, "Quand l'immigration fait débat," hosted by historians Françoise Vergès and Benjamin Stora, and was nominated for Best Feature Film at the Indie Fest USA International Film Festival, Garden Grove, California, in October 2016. The film is a Michigan State University production, in partnership with the Humanities Without Walls Consortium, based at the Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Official website: <http://hmc.cal.msu.edu>.

## Interview

The following is a transcript of an interview I conducted with Professor Safoi Babana-Hampton on 4 November 2016. The Department of French and Italian at the University of Maryland, College Park, invited the filmmaker to present and discuss her film, *Hmong Memory at the Crossroads*. After her presentation, I sat down and discussed the film, its reception and more broadly her work as an academic in the field of Francophone literatures and cultures. I was curious to know how she integrated her film and the process of filmmaking into her teaching at Michigan State University.

**Valérie Orlando:** Please elaborate on what inspired you to make your documentary.

**Safai Babana-Hampton:** Building on an already vibrant and vastly rich scholarship in Francophone postcolonial, transnational, and global studies, this film grew out of my long-standing interest in the critical excavation of the French colonial legacy throughout the world. These critical works have made it possible to untangle subaltern voices silenced in French

colonial historiography and to uncover invisible stories in the broad field of mainstream French culture. Often, such reflections are deemed integral to larger efforts to address the internal tensions and anxieties postcolonial French society confronts in the contemporary moment. But the foundational moment that launched this film production was the campus-community conversational experiment I led in March 2014, thanks to a unique opportunity created by the institutional support of my home university to pursue this project. This rare experiment allowed me to tie my scholarly concerns more directly to a larger academic conversation at Michigan State University. More specifically, I sought to integrate my scholarship to the university's mission to embed, enact, and embody values of inclusion and inclusivity in community life. These conversations contribute to larger public, national and global ones that concern immigrant histories and refugee experiences as they intersect with the current crisis of democracy in Western multicultural societies. This conversational experiment culminated into a ten-day themed-event titled "The Place of Inclusive History, Memory of Cultural Minorities, and Human Rights in Academia, the Media and the Public Space: The Case of Hmong Refugees." At its very core, this campus event was designed to carry out a campus and community discussion on the meaning of social justice, human rights advocacy and inclusive writing of history – a conversation in which members of academia, global media and the community intervened as equal participants imparting their unique and heterogeneous perspectives. The open conversational framework of this event is the same one that inspired the transnational, multidisciplinary and multicultural approach to storytelling that this film took. Many of the key participants in this event became essential as film collaborators and project allies.

**VO:** You are Moroccan, yet you chose to make a film about another part of the world very different from your own. Could you tell us how this decision came about? Would you say that there are some universals that one can draw with respect to immigrant stories?

**SB-H:** Though the trajectory leading to the choice of this film's theme (as with any intellectual journey) was not a linear one, the theme itself naturally fits with preoccupations that have shaped the direction of my scholarly activity for a very long time. One's national origin, gender, cultural roots or other markers of identity can bring a unique and valuable lens from which to appreciate the complexity and diversity of the human condition. As scholars and creative thinkers, however, we seldom speak exclusively

from an ethnocentric stance, cultural difference or Otherness. In fact, I would say that in general we value more complexity and ambivalence in our positioning. In my view, there are certainly universals that can be drawn, from stories of immigrants, refugees and cultural minorities. By integrating and bringing more visibility to these groups in the public consciousness, we increase the possibility of expanding our definition of humanity and our histories, in ways that move our scholarly and creative activity in the direction of justice, sustainable peace and human solidarity.

**VO:** How did you seek and ultimately find the funding for the project?

**SB-H:** In the academic world, there is hardly a dearth of creative and intellectually compelling projects. Yet, in the absence of adequate institutional resources, mentoring, research infrastructure and facilities for supporting and promoting collaborative work and opportunities for networking and seeking external funding, they may be doomed to never see the light of day. Being affiliated with a research institution firmly dedicated to connecting scholarship to teaching and community outreach, I had through this film project the good fortune of receiving from its inception the institutional support it needed to succeed at various levels and phases of production. Thanks to the institutional support received, I felt well positioned as senior project principal investigator to prepare a strong grant proposal to lead what later became a collaborative film project. A pivotal moment during this journey was the funding obtained through a competitive external grant, the Humanities Without Walls award. In my view, a successful search for funding begins by seeking and making optimal use of one's institutional resources and building partnerships, while also looking outward for additional funding opportunities that are a good fit for the project.

**VO:** How do you think the film will help American students understand this part of our US history?

**SB-H:** In a world torn by an unprecedented rise of global violence and conflict since the Cold War, it is hoped that this documentary can in a very small way encourage healthy and constructive discussions in the classroom and in the local and global community around difficult subjects that often divide very good citizens, societies and nations. I hope that the personal stories featured in the film will allow students to recognize that we live in a world where many languages are spoken, many cultures coexist, many histories are interwoven, and many realities are simultaneously unfolding.

It's my hope that the film offers them an opportunity to reflect on the ethics of understanding our world and knowing our histories from a lens that privileges complexity, multiplicity of perspectives, cross-disciplinary, comparative, and transnational approaches. I envision the film's educational potential to consist in encouraging students to understand the ways that empathy operates as a unique mode of critical and creative inquiry into the fraught legacies of French colonialism and global armed conflicts such as the American Vietnam War.

**VO:** What are some of the challenges you faced while making the film?

**SB-H:** Funding is typically the main challenge one faces when undertaking a complex and ambitious project such as this transnational film, *Hmong Memory at the Crossroads*. Being keenly aware of this challenge drove me to work closely with institutional resources that ultimately helped me identify great opportunities for seeking external funding. The perfect forum for carrying this film project to its full potential was provided by the Humanities Without Walls Consortium, based at the Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Thanks to the uniquely bold intellectual vision of the Humanities Without Walls Consortium and its commitment to publicly engaged humanities research, it was possible to forge immensely valuable and new cross-institutional partnerships. These collaborations allowed me to realize the full potential of the documentary project. They also made it possible to appropriately expand the frontiers of the conversational experiment I had previously explored in 2014. This experiment helped me to reflect on the meaning of research activity in the humanities in ways that are responsive to current local and global challenges.

**VO:** How did your academic world, as a professor of French/French-speaking literatures and cultures, influence the way you filmed and interacted with your subject matter?

**SB-H:** As a comparatist and scholar of French and French-speaking literatures and cultures by training, I consider scholarly and creative activity in very close analogous terms, insofar as these can offer and/or become instruments of engaged, critical, constructive, and transformative analysis of the human condition. By setting the film in France, the United States, and Laos, traversing multiple mental, cultural, geographical, and temporal landscapes and realms of consciousness, the approach I hoped to adopt was

to visually immerse the mind and the senses in the process of (un)becoming a refugee, of (un)becoming an Other, of affirming agency, through storytelling and self-narratives. In other words, to visually document the mechanism by which it becomes possible to envision a passage from invisible journeys to possible worlds. These are journeys of empowerment reveal the stories of historically oppressed populations. They allow these populations to free themselves from legacies of past colonial traumas and Eurocentric hegemonic narratives of history and frames of references.

**VO:** What are some of the similarities and differences you see between writing on literature/film and actually being behind the camera/writing a script and then directing? Essentially, can we say that using a camera is like using a pen to write a book or article; or, are these media completely different, requiring different thought processes, etc.?

**SB-H:** I found through the experience of making this documentary that crossing from film critique to film production was an organic process. Both activities have been for me deeply intertwined and mutually informed by their internal modes of functioning. The role of film critique is shaped by creative work. To me creating the image (conceptualizing the stories) means highlighting narratives as dynamic, spatialized, and embodied events and experiences. In the documentary genre, the creative role is informed by film critique when the image is crafted, in order to bring to the screen life narratives that visually and consciously reflect on the ethics of storytelling. In my opinion, the documentary must generate meaning in ways that respect the voices and agency in these stories. This means also creatively and critically engaging with the worldviews they vehicle. Framing interviews, giving a human face to individuals who tell their stories, foregrounding the sites from which they tell their narratives, using narrative techniques that affirm their complexity and humanity are all concerns that are inherent in both activities.

**VO:** Where do you see your film work going? Can you describe future projects you hope to pursue?

**SB-H:** Though this film project has been a departure from my previous scholarly work, insofar as it is the first creative work I have undertaken, it allowed me to extend the space of reflection on issues examined in my previous scholarship. Making the film opened a new critically engaged platform that invites rethinking publicly engaged humanities at a more profound level. I am currently leading another documentary project, a



sequel to *Hmong Memory at the Crossroads*, which allows me to continue to explore the unique ways that the humanities can respond to current local and global challenges. I strongly believe that the humanities allow us to grow in our understanding of our world and the complicated realities and issues that affect people here and elsewhere, and that they can produce and nurture socially transformative practices and knowledge.

VO: This is wonderful. Thank you very much for your time and allowing us to explore this wonderful film together. My colleagues and I wish you the very best on your future film projects and scholarship.

### Biographical Information on Safoi Babana-Hampton

Safoi Babana-Hampton is Associate Professor of French in the department of Romance and Classical Studies at Michigan State University. Her primary areas of teaching and research are twentieth- and twenty-first-century French and Francophone literatures and film. Her research is informed by comparative and postcolonial Francophone studies. Her book *Réflexions littéraires sur l'espace public marocain dans l'œuvre d'Abdellatif Laâbi* (Summa Publications, 2008) critically examines of the role of culture in the construction of civic consciousness and the formation of a modern public space in Morocco. She has also authored articles on a wide range of topics relating to conceptions of citizenship, memory, interfaith relations and artistic hybridity in French-Beur literature, Moroccan Sephardic literature, and other Francophone literary and filmic narratives from North Africa and Québec. She is the producer, executive producer, scriptwriter, and director of the documentary *Hmong Memory at the Crossroads*, 2015. She is currently directing the sequel to this documentary titled *Growing up Hmong at the Crossroads* that spotlights the Hmong diasporic experience and expressions of identity from the perspective of post-memory generation, or children of former refugees who were born and raised in France and the United States. She is a former Fulbright fellow.

*Valérie K. Orlando, University of Maryland, College Park*