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Translating a Path to College: Literate Resonances of Migrant Child Language Brokering

Although scholars have studied migrant children who translate for their families, less is known about how these experiences matter for life-long literacy experiences. This article argues that child language brokers develop advanced skills in literacy and rhetoric from which they draw throughout their lives, in multiple contexts.

Sia Kou, a Hmong refugee, was relocated to the United States from a refugee camp in Thailand when she was four years old.¹ She remembers that her role as a child language broker began shortly after her family's relocation. During our oral literacy history interview, when I asked her about her early memories about school, she told me:

Well, actually, I spoke all Hmong all the way up until going to grade school, and then once school started it was really intense, being forced to learn English right away. I knew that English is needed, and my parents were really stressing the need for all of us [the children] to learn English because we were basically going to be the interpreters for my parents.

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Her awareness of her family's need for her to be a child language broker—an unofficial interpreter and translator²—is one of her earliest memories of literacy.

As I conducted interviews with twenty-three women for the larger study of Hmong women's literacy from which this essay is drawn, participants often shared memories of times when they interpreted between English and Hmong when shopping, at healthcare visits, at school and during parent-teacher conferences, filling out medical or other paperwork, and translating letters and other correspondence. That these stories came up naturally as participants recalled their literacy histories is not surprising: often children in migrant families assume the role of language broker for their parents and other community members in any situation when English is necessary and the parents have just begun to acquire English. Because they attend school right away and because children tend to acquire the language quickly, children are a natural and obvious choice for this role. Such informal language brokering is essential for the survival and success of migrant families who arrive in the United States with limited English.

I use *language broker* to mean children who serve informally as translator and interpreter for their families and community members. Thus defined by scholars such as Steven Alvarez, Gloria Valdés, and Marjorie Faulstich Orellana, a language broker stands apart from institutionally supplied interpreters of oral speech or professional translators of texts and speech who are licensed, credentialed, and compensated for their work (Valdés). In most cases of informal child language brokering, the only necessary credential is that the child has some degree of proficiency in the languages needed for communication, and that the parents rely on and trust the child to do the translating.

As scholars of child language brokers have demonstrated, this work results in varied effects on the brokers themselves: they temporarily assume adult-like roles and responsibilities in the act of translating (Alvarez; Orellana; Valdés); they learn new vocabulary and institutional processes (Valdés); they feel burdened by the responsibility at times (DeMent et al.; Kasinitz et al.); they are proud that they are bilingual and can help their parents, sometimes assuming an advisory role as well as an interpreter (Alvarez; Kasinitz et al.). Often child language brokers view these contributions as a matter of course, just something that they do, and that it's as equally helpful to their parents as when they do housework, do chores, or

watch younger siblings (Alvarez; Orellana). These effects vary from one brokering situation to another, can change over time, and create affective ties within families (Guan et al.).

Although we know much about child language brokering as it is happening, less is known about the ways that the skills and experiences of child language brokering extend beyond the brokering situations and affect individuals' uses of literacy in new contexts—such as in school and at work. Shu-Sha A. Guan and colleagues, for example, have studied the lasting effects on individuals' empathy; such studies, however, focus more on psychological outcomes and less on those related to the “giftedness” that Valdés argues is also an outcome for child language brokers. This

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link, between language brokering and literacy, could be better leveraged for migrant students. Educational precarity is not a necessary condition for all child language brokers, but many migrant children who are multilin-

gual do face multiple obstacles to success in school: a short list of these obstacles might include lower socioeconomic status, moving often, and being multilingual in a monolingual-dominant culture. In the case of Hmong daughters, these obstacles are also complicated by culturally associated gender expectations, creating a network of forces that work to interfere with their accessing higher education. Knowing more about how serving as a language broker might support literacy, especially for those migrant children who are educationally precarious, seems urgent. This is especially true as global migration continues to increase, with an associated increase in the numbers of migrant and multilingual students in all levels of education. How do people experience the effects of language brokering later in life—specifically in their efforts to use literacy in later educational and work contexts? I address this question through an ethnographic study of Hmong women's literacy, which I explain in more detail below. By focusing on the language brokering experiences of this particular group of refugee migrant women, all of whom found a pathway to success in higher education, we are able to see the ways that resonances of child language brokering might support at-risk students' perseverance in school. These lasting lessons are experienced and enacted intersectionally, and understanding the long-term

effects of these literate repertoires must take into account the complicated histories of particular groups, gender dynamics, and language.

The women who participated in this study occupy a complicated, and conflicted, intersectional position of gender, diaspora, and language. They are multilingual refugee women who migrated either from Laos or Thailand when they were younger than twelve years old. The Hmong have maintained diasporic communities in the United States (Vang), and the patriarchal gender dynamics (that many Hmong women describe as disempowering) within these communities seem slow to change, according to the women I interviewed for this study. In the stories that they shared with me, these women demonstrate multiple ways they drew from the literate practices they developed as children in order to locate for themselves a pathway to higher education in ways that revised expected gender roles for Hmong daughters. The resonances of their language brokering experiences taught them to find spaces to assert individual agency within the collectivist context of their positions as disempowered daughters.³ Their deft navigation of the conflicting forces operating upon them reveals the robust, and lasting, lessons and skills they learned as child language brokers. Their experiences speak to ways that the work of language brokering resonates so that child language brokers draw from this part of their literate repertoires in new situations.

The stories that they shared during our interviews highlight the difficulties and challenges that educationally precarious students—such as Hmong students—overcome by drawing from child language brokering experiences to arrive in institutions of higher education. We should all know more about the often-overlooked literate and rhetorical resources, such as those gained through language brokering experience, that migrant students carry across borders and into college classrooms. As Todd Ruecker finds in an ethnographic study of Latinx high school students and their transitions to higher education, the transition to college for linguistic minority students can be easily derailed even after these students are accepted and attend classes. In addition to financial, linguistic, and cultural barriers, multilingual and migrant students often spend much of their K–12 educations being made to feel that they have a language and literacy deficit that is difficult for them to reframe to see as an asset. And

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as Nancy G. Barron demonstrates, such students can experience difficulties navigating stereotypes and expectations once they arrive in institutions of higher education. This essay contributes to the body of counternarratives to such deficit-model assumptions by articulating how the literacy gained through language brokering might make multilingual and migrant students exceptionally prepared for success in higher education. By reframing their experiences as assets rather than deficits, and understanding more specifically about the literate and rhetorical resources child language brokering creates in the brokers themselves, we might more effectively teach them how to draw from these experiences.

In the rest of this essay, I articulate the theoretical frameworks that inform this analysis. I then explain the context of the study, according to Hmong literacy history and gender contexts, the study's methods, and the focal participants. Next I elaborate the findings of this essay through the narratives of these five women, selected for this article because they all used the lessons they gained as child language brokers for a similar end: to move out to attend college.⁴ Their stories speak directly to the fields of composition, rhetoric, and literacy studies and serve to represent the larger phenomenon of the lasting resonances of child language brokering.

Framing Literacy Studies and Language Brokering

My research methods are grounded in New Literacy Studies, which argues that literacy, and literate practices, must be studied and understood within the contexts in which they occur (Street) as well as within broad geopolitical forces that surround and affect local contexts and individuals (Brandt and Clinton; Duffy *Writing*). My research also considers the ways that individuals can and do move literacy and literate practices from one context to another, with special attention to recent work in transnational literacy studies. In tracing the complicated movement of people and literacy across national borders, scholars such as Steven Alvarez, Laura Gonzales, Rebecca Lorimer Leonard, Catherine Prendergast, and Kate Vieira (*American*) have revealed that literacy's movement is complicated by location, language, economics, power relations, and translation. Literate practices that worked in one context may not work in another, or may not carry as much social capital, and so they must be adapted, abandoned, or relearned, for new use in new places. The narratives I share in this essay reveal one such way that individuals draw from literacy lessons they learned in one context for

use in another—in these cases, moving across and between languages and institutions (such as schools, clinics, and public assistance offices).

Studies of child language brokers often take a psychological or sociological approach and investigate the social, emotional, and economic effects of language brokering within migrant families. As Terri L. DeMent and colleagues, Guadalupe Valdés, and Marjorie Faulstich Orellana have pointed out, previous studies of child language brokers tend to highlight the negative psychological experience of language brokering on young people. Such studies emphasize the stress and burden of responsibility placed on the children who are asked to serve as brokers; others consider the shift in power relations within the family when the child assumes an adult-like role as translator and the parents become dependent on the child's English fluency.

However, as several more recent studies have demonstrated, language brokering creates positive psychological experiences for the children and their parents, as they work together to achieve a common goal (Valdés), as children appreciate being able to offer valuable contributions to their parents (Kasinitz et al. 252–53), as they learn and practice responsibility (Orellana), and as they develop lifelong empathic tendencies (Guan et al.). Transnational literacy scholars have also considered the role of affect in language brokers' experience, with Alvarez's recent work as well as Ligia Mihut's consideration of the emotional labor that accompanies language and literacy brokering. Ultimately, this body of work reveals that language brokering is an intergenerational literate activity that is informally assigned, learned, and practiced, and that it creates emotional and intellectual effects in brokers' lives. It is also essential for migrant families' survival in the United States.

Reviewing this literature on child language brokers foregrounds the commonalities that emerge from particular experiences and that I have synthesized into the three types of literate lessons. The first is that child language brokers learn early how to participate in the literate conversation between individuals and institutions such as schools, businesses, social service organizations, and clinics and hospitals. The second lesson is an awareness that language and literacy are always intertwined with authority, and that authority can shift, depending on context. The third lesson is a heightened sense of audience, and the ability to tailor a message to meet the needs of various, and at times conflicting, audiences. The women I feature

in the essay drew from these powerful and practical lessons as they revised traditional gender expectations in order to pursue a different pathway to higher education than the one their families expected them to follow. The analysis I offer here illuminates how understanding the successful use of the lessons learned as child language brokers is best accomplished through understanding the intersectional contexts of the brokers themselves. The next sections of this essay establish some of this intersectional context.

Hmong Literacy History and Gender Considerations

The Hmong are refugees originally from Laos. They were relocated to the United States from refugee camps in Thailand, spanning from the end of the Vietnam War until the last camp closed in 2005. The Hmong have been of particular interest for scholars of literacy because of their unconventional literacy history. Although it is not accurate to describe the Hmong as “preliterate” before their arrival to the United States (Duffy, *Writing*), it is true that most Hmong had limited, if any, formal literacy education in Laos (Inui), where they maintained a primarily oral culture even up to the time of their relocation. Historically, formal access to literacy was systematically gendered: in Laos, if Hmong families were able to send children to school, they would give priority to sons, not daughters (Duffy, *Writing*; Donnelly; Ireson). Daughters were kept home to perform more domestic duties from young ages as training to leave their fathers’ families to join their husbands’.⁵ The history of exclusion of Hmong women from school means that the women who participated in this study have the distinction of being the first generation to have widespread access to literacy from childhood.

One of the legacies of the limited formal literacy access for all Hmong is their educational precarity, made evident in US census data and in studies of Hmong college students. These data show that while the numbers of Hmong with high school diplomas has increased, they remain one of the most impoverished ethnic groups in the United States (Ngo and Lee), with low levels of postsecondary education completion: 13 percent of adult Hmong in 2010 had postsecondary degrees, with even lower levels among Hmong women (Xiong).⁶ As Stacey J. Lee argues in her ethnography of Hmong high school students, Hmong students often have difficulty overcoming their “other” position in relation to whiteness within a mainstream high school: either they are “traditional” and positioned as foreign, or “Americanized” and positioned as black (*Up*). Hmong students navigate their identity

positions in schools in differentiated ways, with nuanced attention to ethnic pride, racial identity, Hmong language use, and the ways that these interfere with educational achievement (Nguyen). Hmong literacy history continues to be complicated, in other words, even in a nation where public education is the norm and all Hmong sons and daughters are expected to go to school. One lasting complication is the competing expectations that Hmong daughters face related to their educational pursuits and traditional gender roles for Hmong women.

The women who participated in this study were bound by two major competing and conflicting expectations from their parents and wider community. The first has been referred to as the Immigrant Bargain (Louie). Migrant parents make the Immigrant Bargain for their children: they willingly make material and emotional sacrifices so that their children have better opportunities in a new nation—and they expect their children to take full advantage of these opportunities. The second expectation the women who participated in this study faced can be summed up in the name of an idealized character called the Good Hmong Girl. The Good Hmong Girl became an *in vivo* code in my interview data, because participants referred to her or compared themselves to her throughout our conversations; she also appears in literary works and popular representations (Moua; Vang). The Good Hmong Girl has rigid, and consistent, gendered expectations of her role: she is to perform all domestic duties in her home (cook, clean, wash dishes, take care of younger siblings, do laundry, etc.) and to do so without complaint; she needs to learn her traditional roles and practices for Hmong rituals; she must guard her modesty and purity, never being out in public unsupervised (and, certainly, she cannot move out of her parents' home unless she is married); and in the United States, the Good Hmong Girl should earn straight A's. In other words, the idealized version of this role is nearly impossible to meet. While the parts about high expectations for school achievement are in alignment, the conflict between these expectations emerges because participants in this study found it nearly impossible to complete these domestic and cultural duties while also finding time to complete their school work.

All but two of the twenty-three women who participated in the larger study told me that their parents expected them to attend college. Because of their traditional expectations for daughters, though, their parents expected them to continue living at home while they did so because they

were unmarried.⁷ Added into these conflicting expectations were the material and social realities of their lives in the United States that made a more mainstream pursuit of higher education more complicated: their parents worked manual labor jobs for little money and often also received public assistance, their home language was not English, their parents and community elders were (and continue to be) deeply affected by grief and PTSD resulting from war experiences and relocation to the United States, and they did not have similar support in school as their middle-class, white peers. We know that these sorts of circumstances tend to interfere with students' access to, and retention in, higher education, no matter the degree of individual motivations they have to attend (Barron; Lee, "Road"; Ruecker). That twenty-two of the twenty-three women who participated in my study managed to complete higher education degrees makes them an exceptional subgroup among Hmong women. Their experiences as child language brokers can help us understand one way such educationally at-risk populations persevere in the face of these difficulties.

Methodology

This essay is drawn from an IRB-approved ethnographic study of Hmong women's literacy. Data collection for this project occurred over an eight-month period during 2015–16. I recruited participants through snowball sampling (Browne), beginning with my own personal and professional contacts and asking each of them to recommend others who might be interested in participating in my study. I conducted oral literacy history interviews (Duffy, "Recalling"; Vieira, "Doing") with twenty-three Hmong women from three cities in the upper Midwest. These cities ranged in total population from less than a hundred thousand to a major metropolitan area. All three cities were some of the first relocation sites for Hmong refugees beginning in the late 1970s. In each city, the population is predominantly white, and the Hmong are the largest and most visible minority group. Interviews lasted between 90 and 180 minutes and were conducted in English, though at times participants would use their Hmong language for expressions, to quote their parents in a narrative, or for specific terms for which there aren't easy translations.⁸

I chose to conduct semi-structured oral literacy history interviews because they offer unique insight into the workings of social forces on the individual experiences of literacy, over the course of a participant's life

(Brandt; Duffy, “Recalling”; Lorimer Leonard, *Writing*; Pritchard; Vieira, “Doing”). Interviews also allowed me to adhere to transnational feminist methodologies, advocated for by scholars such as Laura M. Ahearn and Saba Mahmood, that seek to give primacy to the voices of marginalized women. In addition to foregrounding their voices and experiences, the specificity of interview data also contributes to Asian American studies more broadly, offering nuance to the great variety of “Asian American” experience (Manalansan). Our conversations were guided by an open-ended interview protocol that included prompts for conversation rather than questions. As Rebecca Lorimer Leonard also found in her study of migrant women (*Writing on the Move*), the women I interviewed regularly told me that our conversation helped them see their own literacy history in new ways. They were, in other words, actively co-constructing meaning and their own representation within the context of our conversation. The lifespan approach to these interviews reveals the multiple ways that past literacy experiences as child language brokers offered participants the necessary literate repertoire to access new literacy opportunities and propel themselves onto new trajectories of literate, gender, and economic upward mobility.

I transcribed all interviews, coded them for literacy events (Heath), and compiled these literacy events according to common experiences across interviews. In working with these coded excerpts from the interviews, I performed thematic and narrative analysis (Packer) on each transcript, noting common themes that emerged from the data for further analysis (Charmaz). Many of the themes that emerged from these literacy events relate to migrant family literacy practices, which of course include language brokering. In addition to coding specifically for references to the “Good Hmong Girl,” as mentioned earlier, I also coded literacy events for language brokering. I analyzed these according to the three lessons I synthesized from the literature. After paying specific attention to the literacy events that were directly related to language brokering, I also analyzed the data to find literacy events where resonances of those experiences emerged. The excerpts I quote in this essay come from these layers of coding and analysis. While the data for the larger study included field notes and texts provided to me by participants, the findings in this essay draw primarily from the transcripts of our interviews.

Translating Paths to Higher Education

The five participants whose stories I feature here—Sia Kou, Mai, Nhia, GaoNou, and Yer—were between the ages of twenty-eight and forty at the time of our interview. They were children during the 1980s and 1990s, and most of the narrative excerpts quoted in this essay are of memories that occurred during these decades. At the time of our conversations, they had pursued professional careers in nonprofit management, public policy, nursing, counseling, and law. When they were in high school, all five planned to meet their parents' wishes by pursuing college educations. At the same time, they also planned to break from cultural tradition by leaving home, unmarried, to attend college. As Sia Kou explained:

[My parents] tried very very hard to keep me in the house. It was something that they were just terrified of. That's why when I was a senior and I applied to college, I knew that I did not want to stay home. I had lived in [my hometown] all my life, and I dreamed and read in books of faraway places, and I knew that I wanted to get away. So I applied to [five state system schools] and [. . .] My parents were like, why aren't you applying to [the two-year college] right here? and I was like, Oh I will, I will.

I never did.

This excerpt is a succinct version of a narrative that appeared in various forms across thirteen interviews in the overall study. Here are the common points in these narratives: the participants felt trapped by the gendered cultural expectations they faced as Hmong daughters and so they found a way to leverage the literate lessons they learned as child language brokers in order to spend some time away from home. I chose to highlight these five narratives for this essay because all related specifically to their college application process. In this example, Sia Kou speaks to the ways that she used literacy as she intentionally completed applications for various institutions of higher education to mediate her access to certain colleges and restrict her access to others. She also used rhetoric as she selectively translated and interpreted her experiences for her parents—an audience whose expectations differed from hers. I elaborate these literate lessons later in this essay.

As these women remembered their experiences of transitioning from high school to college, all five told me that they knew they wanted to delay marriage until they'd completed their college educations. They also all

wanted to leave home to attend college, hoping to alleviate the domestic expectations that threatened to interfere with their educations. At the time, they all had not wanted to completely rebel or disappoint their parents—they wanted to remain within the boundaries of their families’ and communities’ notions of being a “good Hmong girl” (Vang). These common elements stand out among the twenty-three total participants in the study, since the majority of participants followed their parents’ rules when it came to applying for college. Instead, Mai, Nhia, Sia Kou, GaoNou, and Yer acted upon the opportunity that the transition to higher education offered them. In this convergence of recognizing the opportunity, and then applying their literate practices and rhetorical savvy, they were able to subvert rigid gendered expectations, maintain “face” within their families and communities, and access higher education on some of their own terms. That they were successful in meeting both goals reveals their strategic literate and rhetorical awareness. Their deft ability to use literacy to assert individual authority in this complicated way is made possible because of the lessons they learned as child language brokers.

In the next section, I highlight selected excerpts from their narratives according to three literacy lessons: (1) learning the literate conversation between individuals and institutions; (2) awareness that language and literacy are always intertwined with authority; and (3) heightened audience awareness learned in translating and interpreting messages for multiple, and at times conflicting, audiences. Mai, Sia Kou, Yer, GaoNou and Nhia’s voices will speak to the ways that they were able to balance their intersectional identities as they brokered their own access to institutions of higher education because they practiced these lessons as child language brokers and then applied them in order to broker themselves a path to higher education on their own terms.

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Three Literacy Lessons That Resonate *Conversant with Institutions*

Child language brokers learn to become conversant with institutions and their processes through their translation work. Participants in this study mentioned multiple ways that they started interacting with institutions, and the people who worked within them, from young ages. They interacted with store clerks, asking questions or exchanging money; they translated for their own and their siblings' parent-teacher conferences; they translated letters their parents received; they read and interpreted questions on forms and wrote down the answers in English. GaoNou described one of the lasting effects of her experiences: "I think part of the reason I became an attorney was because I've always been really involved in their paper stuff. That's always been my role, to review the documents and make sure everything's in place . . . it's always been my job." Such acts of language brokering require the child translators to learn the institution-specific vocabulary and processes, which is one way they become conversant with institutions (Valdés). GaoNou told me that part of her "job" was to "make sure I understand this [letter or document] and how the implications of it play out for something else," so that she could explain both to her parents. Additionally, because they conduct transactions, complete forms, and translate letters, child language brokers implicitly experience institutional processes through literate acts. In the cases of the participants in this study, they experienced the ways that these documents, in many cases, provided crucial access for their families to receive institutional resources such as medical care and legal representation, and—in GaoNou's case—to secure and renew the license for her parents to open and run a grocery business (which she told me was the first-ever Asian grocery store in their small city).

These women leveraged their knowledge of how literacy fits within the workings of institutions in order to broker themselves a way to meet their conflicting goals: to comply with their parents' wishes that they attend college, and to rebel by leaving home to do so. College applications, dorm agreements, financial aid, and signatures all became their literate access points, as they used them to open their access to some institutions while foreclosing access to others. Yer, for example, only applied to colleges outside of her home state, to meet her "desire to run away from home." She also made sure to complete financial aid applications, so that when she "got a big scholarship, I thought, Okay. I can do this now. I can go. It's

not going to be too much for my parents to bear.” Sia Kou, in the narrative excerpt quoted earlier, told me that she intentionally applied to several of the public state system schools and purposefully did not apply to the two-year college in her home town—because she knew that there would be no way she would be able to live at home while also attending college. Nhia, knowing that her parents expected her to live at home, applied to a private liberal arts school in her home city that she specifically chose because “I would be mandated to live on campus for the first two years.” Mai, who did apply to the university in her city, told me that “I was really sneaky” when she received her acceptance letter and paperwork: without consulting her parents, she “signed the paper that says I will be taking a dorm” so that she could “go and explore” rather than live at home.

In all of these acts of completing applications and signing forms, these women understood that each form opened an opportunity to access institutional resources that they wanted: postsecondary education and moving out. In the acts of *not* completing applications, these five consciously restricted their access to colleges or universities that were located where they could live at home while attending them. These women demonstrate their understanding of the workings of institutions and leveraged literate acts that supported their goal to leave home. They understood how institutions work, and how literacy works within them.

Language, Literacy, and Authority

Embedded within this knowledge of how institutions work is also knowledge about the workings of authority: institutional authority, their own authority as speakers and writers of English, and their parents’ lack of authority in relation to both institutions and the English language necessary to work with them. While the literature on language brokers has made the case that the power shift between children and parents is not permanent, and that child language brokers do not have complete or permanent power over their parents, it can be true that during the translation situation, the child language broker has more linguistic authority than their parents (Alvarez, “Brokering Literacies”; Valdés). Child language brokers are aware of the power they hold in their ability to translate. Counter to the assumption that a child will inappropriately use this power, though, child language brokers often use it to contribute to their parents’ well-being and also to serve in advisory roles (Alvarez; Kasinitz et al.; Valdés).

Mai told me that in her family “we have different roles, so I tend to be the person who has always been going to healthcare visits.” She started attending these appointments when she was in middle school. At the time of our conversation, she was twenty-eight years old and still attending and interpreting between her parents and physicians and nurses at medical appointments. Mai told me about one example of her using the authority her fluency in English and awareness of the medical system gave her, as she described situations where she interprets for her father during appointments with his audiologist. Her father “feels uncomfortable having the interpreter [he doesn’t know] there, because if he takes off his hearing aid . . . he just feels embarrassed.” Mai has also intervened during these appointments, rather than serving simply as an interpreter, in situations when “the audiologist would not understand and think he’s faking things, [. . .] and I’d be like, no, this is not right.” According to Mai’s account, the audiologist was not accounting for the tonal nuance of the Hmong language in assessing Mai’s father’s hearing: “[with] these new digital hearing aids, frequency is different in different languages, so there’s going to be a different alteration in what you think will be for a normal person . . . and that’s what people don’t get. I’m like. Lady. You don’t get it.” After a few difficult appointments, Mai told me that “I had to change to a different audiologist because she was just giving us a hard time. I don’t want to see you if you don’t want to help my dad.” Mai is not simply an interpreter here: she demonstrates how child language brokers operate within affective and relational ways to use their linguistic authority to give more power to their family members. She knows this, too. She ended this narrative with this assessment of her ability to use this authority: “If this happens to my dad, it could happen to other people who don’t have the type of daughter that I am, and they will be in a worse position.”

In the stories participants shared about applying to college, we see how these women used literacy to draw from this sense of authority. All five women told me in various ways that they felt like they were authorized to figure out the college application process, and that they were able to do it because they’d had experiences where they felt more like adults. Yer described the entirety of her application process as “I did everything myself,” and that being left alone to learn the process allowed her to seize the authority to pursue her “socially sanctioned way to run away.” Nhia told me, after describing her parents’ emotional and physical absence during her

adolescence, “I was left to make my own decisions about going to college,” and so she “researched what was available” that would allow her to leave home to pursue higher education. They were all able to put their desire to make individual decisions because they could remember language brokering situations where they had authority, knew more than their parents did, and so knew what to do to take action.

Their understanding of the relations of authority extended beyond themselves. They also understood their parents’ relative lack of authority in the face of these institutions, because they had witnessed it as child language brokers. Nhia told me that because of her parents’ developing English fluency and refugee status, she realized from a young age that “you [her parents and elders] are going to need me to navigate America.” Even though she hadn’t necessarily asked for this responsibility, Nhia recognized her parents’ and elders’ dependence on her to survive and eventually to thrive in the United States. Mai shared her frustration that her father’s hearing loss was frequently mistreated because his audiologists didn’t account for the tonal nature of the Hmong language, and that she had to intervene on his behalf to demand better care; he could not do so on his own. In the excerpt at the beginning of this essay, Sia Kou remembers her parents telling her and her brothers that they needed to learn English well, and quickly, in order to serve as interpreters. When they were children, they knew that their parents were disempowered because they were less fluent in English than the interaction required them to be. As child language brokers, they did not actively seek to leverage their power over their parents. Instead, they used English in language brokering situations to advocate for their parents’ best interests.

When it came time to apply for college, however, these women used their awareness of their parents’ developing English language to their advantage: they used literacy to minimize their assertion of individual authority by blaming the institutions. In other words, they deflected their rebellious application process by deferring to the structures, rules, and authority of the institutions. They did so because they knew that their parents would not be able to interfere with the workings and authority of these institutions. Nhia, who chose her liberal arts college because of the on-campus housing mandate, told her parents: “Hey look, I have no choice: I have to live on campus,” and she remembers them acquiescing: “Then we have no choice either.” Upon finding out she’d signed up for a dorm on

her own, Mai's parents took her to the housing office to ask, "Is there any way she can withdraw?" When they learned Mai had entered a contract and would be required to pay for on-campus housing no matter what, she remembers that her "parents were like, fine, she can stay here"—but also that "they were just so protective, they called me, like, every single day." Yer did not reveal to her parents that she'd only applied to out-of-state schools until she was having interviews with them—because, as she told me, "I was afraid if I applied to schools out of state and they knew about it, [that] they wouldn't let me go." She knew that once the applications were submitted, her parents would lose that opportunity to interfere with her plan to leave home. In all these cases, their parents' desires could not overcome the rules that the institutions enforced. Their narratives here indicated that these women, as language brokers, witnessed their parents' authority in relation to the rigidity and authority of institutional processes—and then leveraged their knowledge and experience to bolster their tenuous sense of agency and individuality when they applied to college.

Heightened Audience Awareness

Translating as children for their parents and for institutions also taught these women rhetorical lessons: to always be aware of the audience for their message and to tailor their translations for the audience. For example, Philip Kasinitz and colleagues cite examples of child language brokers who "soften" their frustrated parents' language in translation because they don't want to offend the institutional representative with their parents' strong language (252–53). In a different situation that speaks to highly nuanced audience awareness, Nhia shared with me a story about translating her own parent-teacher conference in which such rhetorical skills were necessary. Nhia told me that "we would go to every parent-teacher meeting. Even though my father didn't understand what the teachers were saying and we were translating for them, we would go anyways." She remembered a particular translation challenge at a parent-teacher conference "where my English teacher was explaining to my father that the whole school had taken this writing test and that five was the highest score, and that I had achieved a four-point-five score, and my father didn't care what a four-point-five was. He was like, Is that an A?" As the translator in this scenario, Nhia was not only called upon to translate the words her parents and teachers were using between Hmong and English—she also had to

explain the nuanced differences between standardized test assessments and classroom grading practices in ways that her father would appreciate and understand. Her translation might have been accurate, but her father was not convinced of the value of the exam without a letter grade. As Nhia recalled the situation, “the teacher said, No. We’re not giving them A, B, C. Five is the highest score. And my dad was like, Well it doesn’t matter then, right?” Looking back, Nhia demonstrates her awareness of her audience as she noted that “my father was approaching this whole system from a very different place”—one that understood the significance of letter grades, and he wanted his daughter to always earn A’s. As child language brokers learn how to translate the cultural experiences of institutional life in the United States for their parents, such as Nhia’s experience during parent-teacher conferences, they gain awareness of mediating cross-cultural connections and learn how to explain mainstream Western experiences to make sense to their Southeast Asian refugee parents.

Interpreting and translating with an added layer of audience awareness is a complicated rhetorical act. When these women applied this lesson to the context of their college application process, it allowed them to broker a way to revise expected gender roles. They could be both a “good Hmong daughter” who can remain within her family’s and community’s esteem because she pursues higher education, while she also makes a highly visible break from cultural expectations and leaves her parents’ home before she is married. As Yer told me, moving out to attend college on the East Coast was her “socially sanctioned way to run away.” She had seen her peers run away to get married, she told me, or just run away, and she didn’t want to follow that path. She chose the “socially sanctioned” way instead. Nhia called her decision to only apply to a college with an on-campus housing mandate a “passive-aggressive way” to balance the intersectional position she felt herself navigating at the time: “I wanted to be the good Hmong daughter, but I was really trying to also be my own person . . . it was sort of this game of giving my parents a little bit of what they want but then trying to put the blame on someone else for why I was making the decisions I was making.” For each of them, a partial way to reconcile this intersectional tension was to meet their parents’ expectation that they attend college while defying their parents’ teachings about the totality of what makes a good Hmong daughter. Complete rebellion, and risking isolation from their families, was not what any of them wanted—which is why they drew from

their skills developed as child language brokers. They found a pathway that released them from some of the confines, while maintaining community and familial ties. In what Elizabeth A. Flynn and colleagues would identify as an act of *métis* (feminist rhetorical resilience), and what Laura Ahearn would identify as culturally situated feminist agency, these women cleverly leverage the rhetorical resources and kairotic opportunity of applying to college to write themselves a somewhat socially acceptable way to assert agency and leave home to pursue a college education. They work within the specific boundaries of their intersectional positions to make it all work.

This brokering, and moving to a new context, was not seamless or without struggle, however. A Hmong daughter who wishes to leave home, and then acts upon that desire, does not escape judgment from her family and community. Both Sia Kou's and Yer's stories included details that reveal the heightened audience awareness they gained as child language brokers, as well as their knowledge of what sort of language to use to assuage the consequences of their decisions. Sia Kou's parents "basically disowned me for a couple of months," barely speaking to her. As they "started to come around," she was able to assure them that she would continue to follow the rules they set for her: "they let me go, but they were like, 'No talking to boys' and 'none of this, none of that' . . . they just gave me a bunch of rules. I had to call home and anytime I was able to come home I had to come straight home." She agreed to follow these rules and was able to convince her parents she would continue to be a "good Hmong daughter" even if she didn't live with them; by the time they moved her to her dorm across the state from her home town, "they gave me their blessing." Sia Kou—as a senior in high school—withstood her parents' silence, remained committed to her decision, and eventually witnessed her parents coming around to accept her choice. After she told me about how difficult it had been for her to manage the consequences of her decision, I asked her whether she would still make the same choice. She would, she told me. "I felt it was the best decision I ever made."

After she had to finally reveal that she'd only applied to schools on the East Coast, Yer told me that she remembers "working through the emotions" her parents were feeling while she "also had my [own] worries too." Yer performed adult-like emotional labor for herself and her parents, having many conversations and bearing the burden of their anger and fear, in order to convince her mother that "it wouldn't make me deviant or whatever" to

attend college. It was important to her, she told me, that her mother would not only allow her to leave home but that her mother would also continue to consider her a good daughter.

Nhia's parents had an almost fatalistic reaction, unhappily telling her that "they had no choice" in her moving out to attend college. Her perspective at the time was that "as a young Hmong girl growing up in America that education was the only way out, and it would be the only tool that I would ever have at my own disposal," and so she focused on her education in order to ignore the judgmental comments she heard at the time. She even continues to hear similar comments from community members who question whether she is a "good Hmong daughter," since she remains unmarried and living on her own. She told me that she responds by pointing out her fluency in the Hmong language, her modesty, her careful public speech: these are all characteristics that she knows fall under the parameters of being a "good Hmong daughter."

In these narratives, the women reveal how their positions as daughters who are also child language brokers helped them find a way to translate their decisions in ways that their parents and communities would understand. They knew their audience. Additionally, the empowering experiences they had as child language brokers taught them that they were knowledgeable, smart, and able to have a voice in the conversation between their parents and institutions. Amid the difficulty of the consequences of their choice to move out to attend college, these skills and experiences gave them strength to hold firm. In so doing, they found a pathway to access additional opportunities to acquire more literacy and also to achieve social and economic upward mobility. All five of the focal participants graduated with their bachelors' degrees, two of them went on to earn master's degrees, and Yer had recently completed a doctoral program at the time of our interview. All enjoy working in their professions, and all acknowledged that they wouldn't be in the positions they are in without the difficult choices they'd made at the end of high school. In these cases, serving as child language brokers supported their desires to find a way through what might have seemed an

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impossible task: to revise their expected gender roles and move out to attend institutions of higher education, and doing so while saving face and remaining within their family's esteem. As these narratives demonstrate, these women's literate practices are complicated, and the ways that they leverage them successfully are best understood within the context of their intersectional positions.

Child Language Brokering as Life-Long Asset

The experience of child language brokering builds literate assets that the brokers draw from throughout their lives. Not only do child language brokers contribute to their family's survival and success in the United States, they also learn and practice skills that become rich resources from which to draw in future literate and rhetorical situations. Our growing knowledge about the important, informal, and pervasive work of child language bro-

Not only do child language brokers contribute to their family's survival and success in the United States, they also learn and practice skills that become rich resources from which to draw in future literate and rhetorical situations.

kering among migrant and multilingual families must continue to inform future scholarship and classroom practice; this knowledge can also extend into politics and policy, as well as social realms, to improve migrants' experiences in the United States. This is especially true if schools, workplaces, governments, and other

institutions begin to release their tight grip on monolingualist ideologies that prize English fluency above all other language values.

Because they experience dominant monolingualist ideologies in the United States daily, multilingual migrants are all too aware that their multiple languages position them at a disadvantage (Lorimer Leonard). As Valdés argues, though, these assumptions are incorrect: the complex work of language brokering gives children "exceptional abilities" that other young people their age (even those who are multilingual but who do not participate in language brokering) do not have (98). This means that we can point to such skills as those practiced by the women who participated in this study as a counterresponse to the persistent contemporary monolingualist policy movements and organizations (such as the organizations U.S. English and ProEnglish) that seek to frame multilinguality as a problem in our schools, governments, and society.⁹ Rather, as Laura Gonzales argues, the decisions made in "translation moments" reveal complex understandings of audience,

mode, and language (2). Those who do this work develop linguistic flexibility, audience awareness, and other advanced literate skills. Monolingualist ideologies stifle the potential for everyone to learn from the multilinguals for whom these skills become almost second nature.

One place to highlight these exceptional abilities that emerge from language brokering experiences is the writing classroom. This is especially salient in light of Ruecker's and Barron's findings that first-year writing classrooms can support underrepresented students' successful transition and retention in higher education. All who teach writing might encourage multilingual students to identify and then leverage these abilities in

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their composing practices. Instructors might also introduce these skills to monolingual students who haven't had similar life experiences in translation and interpretation. Such classrooms might include asking students to consider specific "translation moments" (Gonzales) and explore them for their persuasive opportunities. Instructors could ask students to either remember (or imagine) themselves faced with the rhetorical challenge of translating and share these in literacy narratives or during class discussions. As Steven Alvarez encourages, such classroom activities can also ask students to explore the role of accents and registers across languages and the ways that each are affected by translation and fluency. Additionally, by normalizing multilingualism in our classrooms, we can work to disrupt monolingualist ideologies on the level of individual students as we also cultivate multilingualism and help stave off language loss over generations. Our individual students and their stories will hopefully inspire varied lines of inquiry and specific applications for classroom practice. No matter the context-specific applications, these stories remind us that the assets developed by child language brokers are present in our classrooms and at our institutions.

As we continue to learn more about these literacy experiences particular to migrant and multilingual students, we can better support students as they move their literate and rhetorical lessons into new contexts. This seems especially important in our contemporary migration paradox: as global migration continues to increase and transnational experience becomes more widespread, anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiments

animate and perpetuate political divisions within and between nations. It shouldn't surprise us that languages, and those who are able to translate among them, might become more significant flash points of emphasis in our political and policy debates about who is allowed to easily cross borders into, and out of, the United States. All who teach, study, learn, and work next to migrants—which will be, if not already, almost everyone—will better understand the exceptional literate and rhetorical repertoires that child language brokers carry with them. We will appreciate these skills even more when we also understand the complicated intersectional positions that inform their use. The resonances of these experiences extend to new places and can be a source of literate and rhetorical strength throughout child language brokers' lives.

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Notes

1. All participants' names in this essay are pseudonyms.
2. Throughout, I use *interpret* to refer to oral language brokering and *translate* to refer to language brokering that involves reading and writing.
3. When I refer to *agency* here and throughout the essay, I am working within transnational feminist frameworks that resist Western-dominant notions of individuality and rebellion. Instead, I consider agency as do scholars such as Laura Ahearn, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Saba Mahmood: as Ahearn defines it, agency is “the culturally constrained capacity to act” (7). This definition of agency allows us to better understand these women's actions within the context of their Hmong identity.
4. Other participants used the skills in similar ways but to achieve different goals, such as to transfer to a different high school, attend summer camps, or improve their experiences as adults with various other institutions.
5. These practices are documented in ethnographies conducted in both Laos and in the United States (see, e.g., Donnelly; Duffy; Ireson; Lee, *Up*; Symonds). Participants confirmed them in our interviews, especially when referring to their mothers' literacy histories.

6. As a comparison, the National Center for Education Statistics estimates that 38 percent of the U.S. population ages 25–29 had an associate’s degree or higher in 2010 and that in 2016 this percentage had risen to 46 percent (U.S. Department of Education).
7. Two participants were married while they were in high school and so had already left their parents’ homes.
8. As part of my preparation for this project, I attended intensive Hmong language classes over the summers of 2014 and 2015. I informed all participants of my beginning Hmong language skills during each interview, which I hoped would make them feel comfortable to use Hmong language if and when they wanted to. I used my own translations in transcribing the interviews. All interview excerpts quoted in this article are in their original English.
9. As Katherine S. Flowers and Scott Wible have demonstrated, language policy discussions are also always indexing more broad social and political forces than just language itself.

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