

Daughters Learning from Fathers: Migrant Family Literacies that Mediate Borders

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Scholarship in literacy studies has long demonstrated the significance of family literacy practices, with particular attention in recent decades to the literacy practices of migrant and refugee families.¹ Studies on migrant families have illuminated multiple aspects of their literacy: the experiences of migrant children as language and literacy brokers for adults (Al-Salmi and Smith; Guan et al.; Orellana); the intergenerational conflicts that emerge from literacy and language variations within families (Chao and Mantero; Figueroa; Sarroub); and the development and implementation of family literacy programs that incorporate literacy resources of migrant families within, or adjacent to, educational contexts (Alvarez; Auerbach; DaSilva Iddings; Moll and Gonzalez). Such studies often demonstrate that the differences in literacy access, education, and language fluency among members of migrant families result in conflict within families and between families and schools. While such literacy differences are a result of unequal conditions of migration and might be inevitable, my research reveals that conflict stemming from these differences is not. Based on an IRB-approved, empirical study of Hmong refugees, I show how literacy differences among generations of migrants can in fact inspire positive relations among family members, alter disempowering gender dynamics, and productively connect migrant families outward to public realms of literacy use, such as schools and workplaces. Specifically, in this article, I examine how literacy mediates a relationship often under-explored in studies of family literacy and literacy studies in general: fathers and daughters.

These issues surrounding family literacies and relationships are particularly acute for migrant groups who arrive to the US as refugees with varying histories of literacy experiences; these literacy histories might be affected by the geopolitical forces that also propelled the group's migration to a host nation (Brandt and Clinton; Duffy, *Writing*). Additionally, refugee groups often face reductive assumptions about their cultures, languages, religions, and conditions of relocation: as Victor Bascara notes, part of the refugee condition is to be perpetually “emplotted into a narrative of innocence, victimization, rescue, and recovery” (198). This narrative can interfere with refugees' access to the public resources of literacy,

and especially so for refugee women whom many assume to be further constrained by gendered cultural practices that interfere with their ability to act with agency (Narayama). Placing authority within migrant family literacies, as my study does, resists this narrative of refugee disempowerment, particularly for women from these groups whose access to literacy historically has been restricted. This study also contributes to conversations in family literacy studies that seek to value, and not intervene in or correct, migrant family literacy practices. I find that these relationships, fostered by interactions that center on literacy, inspire daughters to cross gendered borders between public and domestic spaces in order to access literacy resources. The daughters use these resources to achieve upward mobility as they also transform gender roles. Such insights into migrant family literacies ask scholars, educators, and the public to see literacy's role within migrant families, especially those families and cultures assumed to operate within strict patriarchal relations, as a force for positive change within families and a resource that helps children mediate borders to access public literacy resources.

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The findings of this article are drawn from an ethnographic study of twenty-three Hmong women’s literacy, in which I explore the multiple intersections among literacy, family, gender, and culture. While the conflicts that circulate around migrant family literacies mentioned above are also present in Hmong refugee families (Lee, R. et al.) and patriarchal gender dynamics remain a potent force for Hmong women’s lives in general, I also find that literacy opened space for the women in my study to develop relationships with their parents that supported their development of multiple literacies within their homes. In terms of my focus here, literacy mediated daughters’ relationships with their fathers and also helped the women cross typical gendered borders in Hmong family relationships. These relationships, and the literacy lessons at the center of them, inform these women’s ability to achieve unprecedented access to education, professional careers, leadership, and advocacy. As the women who participated in my study cross borders into public realms and access literacy resources available there, they revise expected gender roles for Hmong women.

Context of the Study

When I asked participants to tell me about messages they received from their parents about literacy, twenty of the twenty-three women I interviewed mentioned specifically their fathers’ support for their educations. These father-specific comments stood out to me because, as is evident in studies that depict home literacy practices (e.g., Al-Salmi; Alvarez; Brandt, *Literacy*; Cintron; Heath, *Ways*; Moll and Gonzalez et al.), whether or not these studies focus specifically on migrant family literacies, fathers are largely absent. These studies reveal what Deborah Brandt calls “the heavy hand of mothers” (*Literacy* 151) and women in family literacies. In literacy histories where fathers do appear (e.g., Gilyard; Rodriguez; Rose), fathers are more antagonistic or absent than involved figures in

literacy acquisition. Catherine Prendergast (“Or You Don’t”) and Brandt (“Accumulating”) consider the role of fathers in accumulating, or not accumulating, literacy across generations. Vershawn

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Ashanti Young and David Kirkland consider the role of fathers and literacy in constructions of black masculinity. With the exception of Prendergast, these studies depict father-son relationships. All of this work points, from multiple approaches, to the data that the National Literacy Trust aggregates in its survey of studies of family literacy: fathers tend to be less involved, if

at all, in their children’s literacy acquisition and development—and even less so in the literacy of their daughters (Clark). Despite this trend in the literature, I find that for the Hmong women in my study, fathers played a noticeable role in their literacy development. Fathers verbally supported their educations, taught lessons at home, and invited them to cross borders into previously male-coded spaces. These relationships, and their fathers’ influence in their literacy acquisition, became a resource these women drew from throughout their lives.

The Hmong are an ethnic group from Southeast Asia. They fled their villages in the mountains of Laos for refugee camps in Thailand at the end of the Vietnam War, due to the Hmong’s alliance with the CIA in what became known as the Secret War.² For the Hmong who migrated to the US, relocation is what anthropologist Veena Das would call a “critical event”: their lives were “propelled into new and unpredicted terrains” (5). These terrains were literal—the Hmong moved from refugee camps in Thailand to the United States—and cultural, as the Hmong lived an agrarian lifestyle in the mountains of Laos, practicing a primarily oral culture with very little literacy, until geopolitical forces displaced them from their homes and their way of life. After a critical event, writes Das, “new modes of action come into being which redefine[d] traditional categories” (6). One of the new modes of action for the Hmong is literacy.

Literacy as a new mode of action is especially significant for Hmong women. At the time of their relocation to the US, the Hmong had little alphabetic literacy in any language and maintained a primarily oral culture. In *Writing From These Roots*, John Duffy documents the multiple, sometimes competing, geopolitical forces that have acted upon the Hmong since their earliest history and interfered with their widespread literacy acquisition. Hmong women faced additional gendered interference: daughters were often, as one participant’s mother told her, “prohibited” from access to the education that might have been available to their brothers, due to the patriarchal power structures that governed families. The daughters of the first generation of Hmong refugees, whether members of generation 1.5 or US-born, are the first to have widespread and expected access to literacy.³

These literate interactions are significant because in traditional father-daughter relationships in Hmong families, daughters often do not warrant much attention or investment from their fathers, literate or otherwise.⁴ Yer, the only participant in this study whose parents were not supportive of her literacy, explains what she called “typical” relationships between Hmong parents and daughters: “My

parents are very traditional, and when I say that, I mean my dad was a typical Hmong male where he had no involvement in our lives because we were women. My mom took full care of bringing up the girls. Her priority was to make sure that we were well trained to be someone's wife one day."⁵ Decisions about family matters, including education, often adhere to what fathers wanted: patriarchal structures of power, kinship, decision making, and the strict gendered division of labor are documented in ethnographic studies of the Hmong in both Laos (Ireson; Symonds) and in the US (Donnelly).

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By commenting on the centrality of literacy as a common site for opening, and fostering, the relationships between them and their fathers, these women reveal the interconnected nature of these gendered and cultural forces in their own literate development. I do not mean to imply that

patriarchal relations were dismantled by these relationships and interactions. Instead, I intend to offer these findings as a corrective to the pervasive representations of “rigid Hmong patriarchy and Hmong women's submissiveness,” as do Julie Keown-Bomar and Ka Vang in their study of Hmong women's agency and family relations (Keown-Bomar and Vang 140). The agency enacted by the women who participated in my study illustrates the need for approaches taken up by transnational feminist anthropologists Saba Mahmood and Laura Ahearn, who challenge scholars to expand notions of what agency means and how women experience it in their lived realities. In other words, agency does not have to manifest as resistance to power or conflict (Ahearn). Instead, I consider agency, as Mahmood does, in terms of women's ability to enact their desires. The relationships between daughters and fathers and the literacy lessons at their center are a form of cultural capital the women in my study use to enact agency as they pursue their desired literate opportunities in schools and workplaces, while they also maintain positive relationships with their families and communities.

In order to hone in on the effects of literacy for Hmong women, this study focuses on those who were children at the time of their relocation or were born shortly after their parents arrived in the US. I started recruiting participants from professional networks that I developed when living in communities that were primary resettlement sites for the Hmong beginning in the late 1970s. To expand participation from these networks, at the conclusion of each interview, I asked the participant to share the names of anyone who might also be willing to meet with me. Because such snowball sampling relies on social networks (Browne), the twenty-three women I interviewed have achieved educational levels that are not typical among most Hmong women. In contrast to the majority of Hmong women, who do not earn post-secondary degrees (Ngo and Lee; Xiong), all of my participants attended some post-secondary education and twenty-two have bachelor's degrees. Of these, thirteen continued to pursue graduate degrees, and eleven have master's degrees in fields such as counseling, social work, public policy, or education; one of my participants has earned a doctorate, and another was a PhD candidate at the time of our interview. Such credentials might lead readers to make associations between my participants and “model minority” stereotypes. As Bic Ngo and Stacey Lee make clear, however, the Hmong defy inclusion in this notion of Asian American upward

mobility for a few reasons. The Hmong resist assimilation as a diasporic group (Vang, C.) and do not demonstrate an upward trend in economic mobility in the 2010 census data, though more Hmong do earn high school diplomas and advanced degrees than past census records have shown (Xiong). The families of the women who participated in my study did not have the resources or social capital to be associated with the prominent image of Asian American families recently made popular by Amy Chua's *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. These scenes of literacy instruction between fathers and daughters are ad-hoc, improvised, and while they do participate in Immigrant Bargain and American Dream narratives (Alvarez, Vertovec), these interactions do not have the same neoliberal inflections that Susan Koshy locates and critiques in the Tiger Mother narrative as it applies to Asian Americans' upward mobility.

For my study, I conducted semi-structured oral literacy history interviews with twenty-three women who were children at the time of their family's relocation or born shortly thereafter and who are currently between the ages of 30 and 45.⁶ This methodology is of particular salience when studying this group of refugee women because oral literacy history interviews allow participants to reveal their own literate practices in relation to the macrosocial forces that operate upon them, so that researchers can work to "untangle the knotted threads of literacy and history" (Vieira, "Doing" 139). Additionally, these literacy history interviews document the voices of migrant women who are too often left out of historical records. For these reasons, literacy history interviews "provide unexpected insights concerning the literacy development of individuals" (Duffy, "Recalling" 87), especially in the ways they reveal the individuals' own understandings of the role of literacy in their lives. Data collection occurred over an eight-month period in 2015-16. My interview protocol asked participants to share their literacy histories in relation to their K-12 educational experiences, their pursuit of higher education, their current work and literate practices. I also asked them to share their parents' messages and influences on their education and work. I transcribed all interviews. To extend my data collection beyond the interview transcripts, I also kept field notes at each interview and engaged in memoing throughout data collection (Heath and Street). When participants mentioned specific texts in the context of these literacy events, I asked them to share any copies or versions of these texts with me. Unfortunately, most of the texts had been lost over time—but I did collect samples of workplace writing, personal writing, and films created for college coursework. I also noted whenever participants referred to publicly available texts (published books, YouTube videos, etc.) and created a bibliography of these resources. The findings in this article draw primarily from interview transcripts and field notes.

In order to examine literacy's role as a mediating force for change for this generation, throughout the corpus of data I identified narratives of "literacy events," as defined by Shirley Brice Heath ("Protean" 445): specific memories where talk and texts, and talk about texts, intersect. Literacy events are productive units of analysis to answer the questions that animate this project, because participants' specific comments on literate activity speak to the ways literacy matters in their lived experiences of cultural change. I coded the interview transcripts for accounts of family literacy events and organized these excerpts according to prominent family members present. As I compiled the accounts that featured fathers and analyzed them in tandem, I specifically noted places where

participants linked the literacy events with their fathers to their present day lives and drew parallels between the literacy event to lasting effects on their identities, their worldviews, and their ability to access the public resources of literacy.

My data analysis methods center on the narratives my participants offered within their oral literacy histories, in keeping with my commitment to reflexive transnational feminist methodologies (Mahmood; Mohanty; Narayan; Sato) that privilege and preserve the accounts and epistemologies of research participants. These methods both account for and minimize my positionality as I represent and analyze the interview transcripts by foregrounding the voices of the women who shared their histories with me. My analysis of these interviews pays careful attention to the language used by the women who shared their stories with me, so that their self-presentation is preserved and respected.

Likewise, as Martin Packer argues, such narrative analysis of interview data “invite[s] the interviewer to adopt a new way of seeing the world, including a way of seeing the speaker, the interviewee” (100) through its respect of the plot and language offered by the interviewee. Additionally, the participants featured in this article reviewed drafts and offered

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feedback in advance of its being sent out for review. I turn now to sharing the findings from this focused analysis, to demonstrate that family literacies mediated these women’s access to the public resources of literacy and informed their revision of traditional gender roles.

In what follows, I make this case through the accounts of five women. To protect their privacy, I refer to them by pseudonyms. Their names, education credentials, and current occupations are listed in Table 1 along with some notes pertinent to their experiences. The memories of these five women, related to me through literacy history interviews, represent in detail the various possibilities that these father-daughter literate relationships manifested in the lives of the women who participated in my study. These five women talked about how they carried these lessons and relationships with their fathers throughout their lives and revealed the meaning they assigned to these experiences. In the explicit connections they make between the relationships with their fathers, life-long literacy practices, and their articulations of how their gender roles have changed, we are able to see how they give credit to these experiences as they continue to use literacy actively to mediate gendered borders between cultures, languages, families, communities, and US institutions.

Table 1. Featured Participants

Name (Pseudonym)	Education	Current Work	Notes
Phoua	Bachelor's Degree, Elementary Education	2nd grade teacher	PaChoua's older sister
PaChoua	Bachelor's Degree, Elementary Education	5th grade teacher	Phoua's younger sister
Nhia	Bachelor's Degree, Political Science Master's Degree, Public Policy	Director of state government policy	Public advocate for Hmong women on marriage and domestic violence
Nalee	Bachelor's Degree, Ethnic Studies	Hmong language teacher	Began career in education as a tutor for pregnant teens
Mai	Bachelor's Degree, Political Science	Administrator at a state university	First woman president of the board for a local non-profit serving the Hmong community

Daughters Access Public Literacy Resources

Literacy facilitated these father-daughter relationships by offering them a site of connection that was new for Hmong daughters: access to education. As mentioned earlier, before daughters were expected (and required) to be educated in the US, they primarily occupied domestic spaces: doing chores, caring for younger siblings, cooking for the family. Daughters, by and large, did not have a public presence. After relocation, however, Hmong families had to readjust these practices to fit within a nation where the law would intervene if school-age daughters did not attend school. The place of daughters, and their relationships to other members of the family, were altered by their access to literacy. The women I interviewed told me their fathers responded by supporting their daughters' attendance and success in school, as long as she also contributed domestically as a traditional Hmong daughter might—and was at home when she was not in school.

By far, the most common literacy event between fathers and daughters—a narrative shared with me by twenty of my twenty-three participants—came in the form of “lectures” fathers gave to their daughters about the importance of an education, encouraging them to take full advantage of the opportunities presented to them. Fathers gave these lectures to both daughters and sons, which came up during interviews when participants commented that they weren't sure if they would have received the same encouragement to be educated if they'd grown up in Laos. Many participants told me that these lectures included a warning against taking work in manual labor. Five women voiced an experience that is common among children of migrant parents (Gonzalez et al.): that their fathers were supportive but “couldn't *really* help” them, meaning that these fathers were, like many immigrant parents no matter their previous home nation or languages, unfamiliar with school culture in the US. These interactions resulted in the building of father-daughter relationships where

these women felt that their literacy, measured in their educational achievements, was a reason their fathers took notice of them and became involved in their lives. They felt valued because of these interactions. In these lectures, fathers directed positive attention and messages about literacy to their daughters, centering literacy as the site of the interaction. The women I interviewed honored this relationship and expectation: all have pursued higher education.

Crossing Borders, National and Local

In addition to receiving verbal encouragement to access literacy through schooling from their fathers, the women also mentioned more literal acts of border crossing within narratives of literacy events. As literacy informed the development of relationships between fathers and daughters, fathers took action to make access to literacy physically possible for their daughters. Some of the fathers who participants told me “couldn’t *really* help” their daughters with education found ways to increase their literate access: taking daughters to the library, driving them to and from school, or taking them to college interviews. By increasing their mobility, these fathers did in fact help their daughters access literate resources.

Phoua and PaChoua are sisters who teach at the same elementary school, and I met with them together in Phoua’s classroom at the end of a school day. They are the two oldest daughters in their family, just over a year apart in age, and are, according to PaChoua, “always two peas in a pod.” As they told me their family’s story of migration, they included a literacy event featuring their father’s literate intentions for them. Part of their father’s inspiration to move his young family, as he told them, was his two daughters: “so we could have a better life, not in just wealth or whatever. He knew that education was the key, and if he stayed in Laos his daughters would never have the education that he wanted for us.” Phoua and PaChoua’s father made clear to his daughters that the opportunity for them to acquire literacy inspired him to move his family across national borders: from the jungles in Laos to the refugee camps in Thailand, from where they would eventually cross the border into the US. In their retelling of this family story, their father told them that he knew that if he decided to stay in Laos, his daughters would not be able to be educated. They knew he had always valued them, since he left his home country in order to ensure their access to literacy. His decision is an origin of the literate relationship that they continued to build, and neither daughter took her access to education for granted. They both expressed gratitude for their father’s forward-thinking decision.

Phoua also articulated the lasting effects in her life from her father’s actions to provide her geographic access to literacy. Phoua prioritized her education, saying that she was partially inspired by her father’s words and his own pursuit of literacy at the local technical college. She always wanted to be an educator, telling me she imagined herself as a child teaching English lessons to her elders at her home. Phoua now teaches second grade in a diverse elementary school, and PaChoua teaches fifth grade at the same school. They both mentioned that they are proud to be role models for all of their students, but especially for students who are learning English as a second language. Their father’s decision to cross national borders not only mediated their access to literacy at school but continues that access for the students they teach, many of whom have also crossed geographic borders to attend school.

Mai shared a similar literacy event of geographic border crossing as an example of her father’s

support for her literacy. I first met Mai a few years ago, when she was the board president of a local non-profit that serves the local Hmong community and gave the keynote address at an annual Hmong fellowship dinner. She is the oldest daughter in her large family and told me that her father's support of her education was "extremely progressive"; she quickly added, "But what was he to do? He had seven girls!" In imagining her father's process of arriving at this progressive stance, Mai said that he had to "rewire that traditional brain of his and widen it a little bit" first to believe that his daughters could "be whatever we want to be here in the United States" and then to tell them that they could, and should, use their educations to find the way to live that life. Mai's father took action and decided to support her education in a strategic choice to move their family to live within a particular school's boundary, so she and her siblings would attend an elementary school with fewer Hmong students. In the midsized city where she grew up in the early 1980s, most Hmong families lived in the same neighborhoods and attended the same elementary schools. Mai told me that her father's decision to cross this border to relocate was bold at the time. As she told me, he wanted to create the conditions where she would "either sink or swim": he wanted her to be forced to rely on English as her primary language in school (saving Hmong for home, making sure she also remained fluent) so she wouldn't be behind and would have the "asset" of English fluency. Mai ultimately believes that her father's "design" was wise even as she admitted to feeling isolated at school. She credits her elementary school experience with her fluency in English and that she learned to be "very comfortable being the only minority student in class," both of which have served her well in professional settings. Mai told me that her father framed his choice to relocate as one that would help her "survive," and she agrees that it has.

Mai related the lasting effects of her access to the elementary school literacy resources her father ensured by moving to a new home: she told me that because she was enrolled in a school where she was one of the only Hmong students, she learned to take different types of opportunities, to take risks, and not to stay "stuck in a niche grouping." As an adult, Mai finds these lessons still serve her well: she is still not afraid to be uncomfortable, and she does not feel out of place when she is the only Hmong person, or the only woman, in a space. When she was elected board president of the non-profit organization, she was the first woman ever to hold such a leadership position and faced resistance from many of those she worked to serve. Mai tells me her ability to endure as an outsider in majority-White or male-gendered spaces is shaped because "[my dad] has designed me to get to this place where, You want answers? I will figure that out for you. I can do that!" Her sense of her own capacity to increase the public visibility and leadership potential of Hmong women began to form during those elementary school experiences. She links this aspect of her personality to her father's intervention in her schooling.

These literacy events reveal the interconnections among fathers, daughters, access to literacy through education, and the lived consequences of crossing national and local political borders. These fathers encouraged their daughters to access public literacies through decisions that placed them in geographic locations that would make such access possible. These literacy events participate in the broader narrative of the Immigrant Bargain, which Alvarez notes migrant children often experience as a burden to succeed, since parents justify their sacrifices because of the potential opportunities for

their children. Years after their schooling is complete and they have achieved work in professional settings, Phoua, PaChoua, and Mai all acknowledged the hardships these decisions brought to their fathers and to themselves, but they did not say that they felt burdened by their fathers' expectations. Instead, they ultimately expressed gratitude for their fathers' decision making and for the opportunities they had because of them. Crossing geographic borders not only mediated their access to school but affected their literacy throughout their lives.

Crossing Borders Between Home and School

Some literacy events the daughters remembered were their fathers sharing school-based literacies with them, relying on schooling they'd obtained before their relocation. These literacy lessons crossed borders as fathers relied on knowledge and instructional practices from their own schooling and lives abroad. The lessons also crossed from home to school, as daughters drew from them throughout their educations. Seventeen participants' fathers came to the US with some alphabetic literacy (most commonly in Lao, French, or Hmong) and numeracy they had acquired through formal education in Laos, military training, or adult education programs in the refugee camps. Of these seventeen, five created an instructional relationship with their daughters, often centered in nightly lessons, homework time, or trips to the local library or bookstores to find reading materials. These scenes of academic lessons were more rare in my interviews, even among the fathers who'd been educated, because most of the fathers worked long hours in manufacturing jobs that did not leave time for home lessons. Nhia and Nalee both shared extended stories about how their relationships with their fathers developed through these lessons in alphabetic literacy, numeracy, and languages. They remembered their fathers supporting their access to school-based literacy by assuming a teacher-like role in their lives.

Nhia and I met in her government office, where she works in public policy. When I asked her about her earliest memories of education, she shared this literacy event:

My father and my uncle worked out a deal where, even as a teenager, my uncle would go to school, hold a part time job at a gas station, and then he would get home at around midnight. I always knew that my job was to stay up past midnight because then my father would go and pick up my uncle from the gas station where he worked at and my uncle would come in with all of the remaining donuts. We would eat donuts and we would learn our ABCs. It worked out well because I was waiting for the donuts and my father wouldn't let us go to sleep until my uncle Mickey was home and we had gone through our A is for Apple and B is for Banana kind of thing, And this is before I went to school.

In remembering her late-night lessons and donuts with her father and uncle, Nhia referred to it as a sort of Early Childhood Education. In addition to the lessons about the ABCs, her father drilled multiplication tables with her by papering her bedroom walls with large sheets of paper, writing multiplication tables all over them, and having her recite them nightly. She called these lessons her "bedtime reading," bringing together the cozy imagery of this often-maternal practice with the image of her joining her uncle and father around a table, eating donuts and trying to win dictionary

competitions. Nhia pointed to these family literacy practices when she remembered her ease of access to school: they were the reason she excelled in math class until “at least ninth grade” and continues to be careful and aware of the words she chooses to use when speaking. She noted that her father’s diligence in his lessons with her made her school experiences less burdensome. That he taught these lessons with no mind to her daily work in school—at times teaching her at levels far beyond what her teachers expected of her—also taught her to work hard to achieve the eventual ease of learning. She credited her father’s lessons as part of how she developed her diligence and success throughout her schooling.

Nalee has worked in school-based settings her entire professional life and currently is the director of a Hmong language program. When Nalee and I met over coffee and began our conversation, it became immediately clear that her father is an important influence in her personal commitment to education. She proudly told me that her father was a language teacher in Ban Vinai refugee camp before his family relocated to the US and that her family was “different than the average Hmong refugee family” because her father created a homework station at the kitchen table and gathered his children there for nightly practice. She told me that he taught her all he could, until “eventually the education that we were part of became pretty much over his head.” Nalee remembered learning to read and write in Hmong, multiplication tables, and how to count from one to eleven in French. She chuckled as she recalled the confused faces her teachers made when she repeated the lessons she learned from her father to them and they couldn’t quite decipher what she was saying: “even before we went to school he was teaching us already, but he taught us in his accent.” Nalee remembers feeling proud that she was ahead of her peers, even if her speech was marked as accented. For Nalee, education has always been and continues to be “a huge part of my life,” and she connects her belief in the power of education to her father’s influences that began with those lessons.

For both women, these nightly lessons facilitated their access to some literacies in school, but when fathers relied on the instructional methods they had experienced that did not align with classroom practices in American schools, there were some disconnects in expectations and consequences. Nhia remembers watching her sister play a multiplication game with her father that involved chopsticks and a ball, in which “if you recite any number that’s off you would get hit with the chopsticks . . . I had that luxury of watching, so I knew that I couldn’t get any answers wrong.” Nhia noted that her father’s methods were less sympathetic than what she experienced in school. Nalee also said that her father’s methods mirrored his own education experiences in Thailand where “once you learn the information you move on. It doesn’t matter how old you are.” When he introduced her to multiplication as a young child, she remembered, “I was just thinking what is this beast? I tried so hard . . . but I still didn’t understand! I have to say though, when I got to third grade, we started doing actual multiplication and I was ahead. [I thought] is this all this is? Oh, this is easy!” Both Nhia and Nalee remarked that they believed their fathers emphasized numeracy because, as Nalee put it, “math is its own language” and their fathers were not hindered by a lack of English. They turned to numbers to mediate these interactions with their daughters. Both women found these family literacy practices beneficial in their ability to perform among public literacy work of school, especially in math class.

In addition to feeling prepared for success in school by her father’s lessons, Nalee told me that

she has always felt “blessed” that her father did not adhere to “that community assumption that there was this whole sons and daughters thing where daughters were expected to do more housework and things like that” but instead “as far as education goes and opportunities and all of that it was just about who was interested in what.” Nalee said she knew that “whatever I wanted to be a part of, he would be right there.” In addition to helping her land her first summer job as an adolescent, Nalee credits her father for her “knack for tutoring,” which she drew from during her work as a translator in a charter high school for teen mothers. Her tutoring skills led her to develop support for Hmong-speaking students that was responsive to their language and culture, and she eventually assumed most of the instructional duties for these students: developing curriculum and planning and delivering lessons. Nalee highlighted this experience and her expertise in the Hmong language when she interviewed to be a Hmong language instructor at a university. She does not have all of the educational credentials the job asked for, but she accepted their job offer and has since received a promotion to direct the program. Nalee has spent her professional life in schools, and she traces her entry to working for these public institutions, and her desire to be the best teacher she can be, to her relationship with her father.

Nhia’s professional path has led her to work in public policy, which she decided to pursue partway through her undergraduate degree, when she switched her major from pre-med to political science. Nhia’s desire to be a leader stems both from her father’s messages about education and from a message her grandfather recorded for her parents on a cassette he sent them from Laos: her grandfather said that “the future leaders of the world are sitting inside the classrooms of America.” Nhia’s father, himself a military leader, told her that education would help her find a seat at the table “where decisions, our very futures, are being made.” The inspiration she found in her relationship with her father meant she made the bold move to pursue his dream that his children be leaders, while defying his desire that she become a doctor. Despite her prominence as a leader for the Hmong community in her state and particularly for women, she revealed that her father still believes she should have become a doctor. Even so, while her father’s lessons may not have produced the specific result he wanted, they manifest in her work in public policy. Nhia’s realization that she did in fact want to be a leader led her away from a more lucrative profession in medicine to a career where she uses literacy to advocate for justice for underrepresented groups. She is a visible, and at times controversial, leader in the Hmong community and in her state government. She chose to have this path because she grew up seated at her family’s table where she learned her ABCs and her future possibilities.

The literacy events depicted in this section reveal the ways that these fathers enacted literacy instruction with their daughters, developing relationships centered on home literacies that also support their success in school-based literacies. Even with the indirect connection to school, these lessons are clearly primarily grounded in family literacy practices—as these fathers relied on their heritage language as they share their own literacies with their daughters. These lessons are not always immediately accessible to daughters in school, but they eventually became a resource they draw from as a knowledge base and as an orientation to education more broadly. The dual nature of these effects results in their continued ability to access the resources that schools offer them: first as students

and later as professionals. These women credit the literacy events they had with their fathers as they locate the ways they developed and drew from these resources.

Family Literacies Revising Gender Roles

In the previous sections, I demonstrated how participants draw from their literate relationships with their fathers, crossing borders as they access public literacy resources in schools and workplaces. Many participants revealed that such access led them to question and revise the traditional gender roles they might have otherwise been expected to maintain when it came to marriage. Being married, becoming a daughter-in-law, and having children are central expectations for Hmong women. According to traditional practices, Hmong women marry young: in the US, if generation 1.5 and second generation daughters were not married during high school, then elders thought they should be shortly thereafter. Indeed, simply attending school during the day meant that these unmarried Hmong daughters had a public presence that resulted in great concern among many Hmong parents. They believed that their daughters' freedom outside the home would lead them to misbehave—making them less eligible for marriages into good families. Parents responded by restricting daughters' mobility outside of school hours, as participants told me during interviews and as Stacey J. Lee finds in her study of Hmong youth in schools. Accessing school literacies and choosing to continue to pursue higher education—in response to their fathers' support—often resulted in the disruption of typical expectations for age of marriage for Hmong women.

Among the women who shared their stories with me, three were married during or right after high school and pursued higher education while also filling the expected role of daughters-in-law in their husbands' families.⁷ The rest of the women in my study delayed their marriages while they attended higher education and married after they had earned degrees. Three women were single at the time of our interview. Mai, who delayed her marriage not only until she had graduated but until her term as board president ended, told me that she was an “eyesore” among her extended family before she married, adding: “I mean, they’ve never had a Hmong female in their family beyond the age of sixteen, seventeen!” As in her experiences in school, she found support for this revision of her expected role in her relationship with her father, who, she reported, “was like, you do what you need to do [with school and work] and all that other stuff [getting married and having children] will happen.” Her relationship with her father, and his support of her literate pursuits and public advocacy, offered her the resources she needed to withstand pressures to marry that came elsewhere in her community. Marriage, and the age at which Hmong women now get married, has shifted noticeably as Hmong women access public literacies. Delaying the age of marriage—and recognizing that a daughter has some agency in making the decision—is a clear revision of gender roles inspired by access to literacy.

The disruptions in expectations inspired by these relationships were not just in age of marriage, however. Literacy also became a resource that daughters could draw from as they measured their own value and attractiveness as future wives. Phoua shared one such literacy event that she said has informed one way she reconsidered her value as a Hmong woman. As a self-described “ugly

duckling,” Phoua told me that “in the Hmong culture, it’s so natural for people to do this . . . they will compare everybody. They will say oh, you’re not as pretty as this one.” Phoua told me these comments were hurtful until “my dad sat me down one day . . . and he was like, Okay. You might not be pretty, but I don’t want you think about just beauty. I want you to focus on education . . . one day you’re going to be educated and then you will be beautiful to everybody.” Laughing, Phoua ended this memory by saying “I cherish those words!” Her father intervened and interrupted the cultural practice of commenting on physical beauty of women to reframe Phoua’s sense of what she could, and should, value about herself as a Hmong woman. His message taught Phoua that literacy could open a different path to achieve different goals, that she could focus on herself and achievement rather than worry about outside judgment. She learned that literacy could be her access to resources that would make her an attractive wife. In this reframing, the gender roles and values for Hmong women are revised.

Crossing Borders into Male-Coded Spaces

For some daughters, their relationships with their fathers resulted in gendered border crossings into male-coded spaces that mediated their access to traditional oral literacies typically shared between fathers and sons. Nhia received lessons in oral history, which she told me her father “meant to be for the sons but he didn’t have any sons,” during times they went fishing together. She said that her father told her about the history of the Hmong people and about her clan in particular: “stories of what could be, what has been, what’s broken, what could be put together again...eventually [I could] begin to hear all of the other messages that were being told that he wasn’t just really putting into words for me. I just walked away from those years of my life with the understanding that I have an opportunity [to become a leader].” She told me that she felt these oral family histories shared by her father positioned Nhia in the long lineage of the leaders in her family, that her own literacy could give her the opportunity to contribute to the historical memory of her family and clan.

Nhia’s fishing trips and cultural literacy lessons demonstrate how such changed relationships between fathers and daughters opened space for fathers to include daughters in lessons previously reserved for sons, offering them access to privileged cultural literacies and the opportunity to imagine themselves part of them. Nhia’s current leadership in government policy places her within the stories her father told her: she is working to put things together for the Hmong in the US. She continues this difficult work even as she faces backlash from those in her community who feel she is out of her place as a Hmong woman—that she’s crossed the border too far in assuming her role as a public advocate for women. Nhia locates the resolve to stand firm in her advocacy in her knowledge of her family’s leadership lineage.

Phoua and PaChoua’s father also included his daughters in these male-only spaces. They told me that their father spent a lot of time with them and “literally imparted the knowledge and the wisdom that his dad passed onto him and his brother to us.” In this account of inter-generational teaching, “us” means two daughters: Phoua and PaChoua interrupt the patriarchal chain. PaChoua elaborates:

[My dad was able] to give us the knowledge and wisdom that they usually pass onto boys.

Because boys sat in meetings, they took care of the family issues. And we did, we got to sit through those too. We got to listen to it. We brought the waters in for the males like girls do, but my dad would always allow us to stay in the room. We weren't shooed away like girls usually do. He would invite us to stay, you know: It's okay girls. You can stay. He made us feel like we were important in this decision making, even though it was a room full of males. He's like: Listen. Listen. How did this person talk? Listen, how did this person talk? And did you see how wise he was with his words? And don't be like the fool like this one. And he would coach us. But if we were girls, we would be in the kitchen. We wouldn't hear that. We wouldn't get that coaching.

Even though PaChoua's language implies that she sees some separation between "girls" and herself and her sister when she repeats "like girls" and says "*if we were girls*," at the time of this memory they *are* girls. PaChoua's language indicates that in this memory she recognizes that her father is not treating her like a girl. PaChoua's father not only encourages her and Phoua to witness the male elders in discussion but also debriefs those discussions with her later, encouraging her active listening and evaluation of what she heard. In her memories of this rhetorical training, her father is inviting her to imagine herself one day also participating in these discussions. She can stay. He asks her to try to emulate the good examples and tells her "don't be like the fool." PaChoua concluded the story of this memory by telling me that she felt able to be a leader, and to become a teacher, because her father not only encouraged her to speak her mind but taught her how to do it eloquently.

Entry into these male-coded spaces inspired further revision to traditional marriage expectations for these daughters beyond delaying the age at which it happened. In this particular case, Phoua and PaChoua were invited to stay in and learn from elders' discussions, and their father demonstrated that he appreciated them and valued their opinions. Perhaps because they had been treated as more than just "like girls" by their father, Phoua and PaChoua both expressed that when the time came for them to think about choosing their partners, they'd wanted to marry men who "appreciate us as equal partners" and who "value our opinions." They understood that while this might be uncommon among traditional Hmong men, it was possible to find husbands who might have similar beliefs about their wives. Phoua and PaChoua, laughing, both told me that their "independence" can at times result in conflict in their marriages, but that ultimately they have found husbands who do consider them as equals and they are grateful to have married them. Phoua and PaChoua revised the courtship script for Hmong daughters by expecting to be treated with equality.

These women's fathers invited their daughters to cross the gendered borders within their families and gave them access to Hmong cultural literacies typically shared with sons. These daughters look to these interactions as one place where they gained a sense of their own potential for leadership. They continue to assert themselves into these community spaces and rituals, crossing gendered borders and in so doing transforming their own gender roles as they also publicly represent revised images of Hmong women as leaders. This is an important enactment of their access to public literacies, as Mai and Nhia especially offer public enactment of these leadership roles and can be models for expanding notions of the realms Hmong women should occupy. In their personal and professional

lives, literacy has allowed these three women to cross multiple borders and to participate as Hmong women in their families and communities, but in these cases we see them being Hmong women on their own timelines and on their own terms.

Family Literacies as Resources

Families, and their literacy practices, continue to move across borders. The current political unrest around the world is resulting in more displaced people seeking refugee status and protection. With the attention circulating around the migrations of groups of people, some of that focus has turned in particular to literacy access for young women and girls for whom education has been denied due to geopolitical interruptions and sexist forces.⁸ It is clear that as families migrate, literacy will continue to mediate changes within families and as members of those families use literacy to access public resources. Literacy's role within these families is complicated: at times the source of conflict and strife, at times a source of relationship building and strengthening. Family literacy practices, regardless of whether or not they directly support or related to the literacy practices of schools, workplaces, or governments, can have lifelong effects of the children of migrants as they continue to mediate borders and establish a public presence in their home nation.

In this article, I have shown how daughters rely on literate relationships with their fathers throughout their lives to access these public resources of literacy and to transform their gender roles within their families and communities. Literacy, and the relationships it mediated, supported their experiences of upward mobility as it also inspired them to revise their expected gender roles. While all migrant groups events will not necessarily follow the pattern of the Hmong relocation to the US and the introduction of widespread literacy for women in one generation, studies such as this should inspire transnational writing scholars to look to family literacy practices as capaciously as possible, in order to better understand these resources that individuals carry with them into classrooms, workplaces, and writing in public. Further, as we broaden notions of literacy's role in feminist agency, we better understand that transnational women's experiences mediating multiple gendered borders, and their revisions of gender roles, are also intricately connected to family literacy practices. These nuanced insights help us to recognize the complex interactions between individuals, family literacies, and access to the public resources of literacy—and should challenge us to rethink ways that migrant family literacies serve as assets, especially as they are carried from homes into public spaces.

NOTES

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² The relocations of the Hmong after the end of the Vietnam War happened in waves, with one occurring between 1978-1982, one in 1987-8, and one in the mid 2000's at the closure of the last remaining refugee camp in Thailand. For more on this history, see Chan; Donnelly; Duffy; Tapp et al.; C. Vang.

³ In keeping with common definitions among transnational scholars (e.g., Danico; Louie; Suarez-Orozco et al.; Vertovec), I define generation 1.5 as those who migrate when they are younger than the age of twelve.

⁴ While these cultural specifics of gender bias are particular to the Hmong, these biased tendencies between fathers and their children are not, as sociologist Dalton Conley notes in *Pecking Order*. Conley's study of a wide corpus of data as well as qualitative interviews reveals that these gender biases transcend culture and economic status and have real economic and emotional effects that last throughout adulthood. Sons tend to benefit in terms of their confidence, self-esteem, and economic stability while daughters tend to experience negative effects in these realms.

⁵ For another consideration of the "typical" roles and treatment of Hmong daughters, see Ka Vang.

⁶ Similar methodologies appear in the following: Brandt, *Literacy*; Duffy, *Writing*; Lagman; Mihut; Prendergast, *Buying*; Vieira, *American*.

⁷ When a Hmong woman marries, traditionally she becomes a member of her husband's family. Traditional kinship practices involve sons and daughters-in-law living with his parents, and the daughter-in-law (*nyab*, in Hmong) is expected to "serve" her in-laws through domestic labor: cooking, chores, caring for the family's children.

⁸ Malala Yousafzai (whose father plays a prominent role her education) won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014 because of her work to bring education to girls. "Boko Haram," the common name in the West for a Nigerian terrorist organization, is most often translated as "Western education is a sin." This isn't a perfect translation, but the words link the concepts of "education" and "harm." The group notoriously kidnapped girls from their school in 2014, inspiring the #BringBackOurGirls movement. For more on the translation of the name, see Murphy.

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