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Writing from These Roots: Literacy in a Hmong-American Community by John M. Duffy

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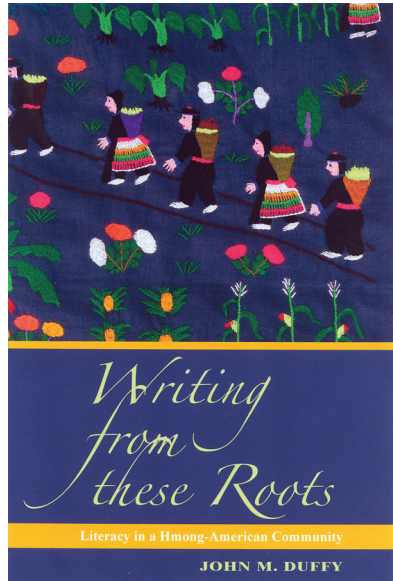
Writing from These Roots: Literacy in a Hmong-American Community

John M. Duffy

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The immigration debates of recent years have touched all of our communities and classrooms. In my hometown, government, family, church, and other relocation efforts have created extraordinary diversity for a rural town of 40,000, with the largest immigrant groups coming from the Middle East, formerly Soviet republics, and Mexico. Our high school represents over 40 languages spoken. My college's students reflect this diversity. I attend a church that conducts English, Spanish, and Arabic services and offers English lessons. John M. Duffy's *Writing from These Roots: Literacy in a Hmong-American Community* is an engaging and informative look, through the lens of literacy and rhetorical education, at two communities—one town and one ethnic group—responses to similar circumstances in the mid-to-late twentieth century.



Duffy explores literacy education and public rhetoric in Wasau, Wisconsin's Hmong-American community, placing many individuals' stories—gathered through extensive personal interviews as well as archival research—within a broader survey of their literate, political, and geographic histories. He aims to “[connect] ethnographic, historical, and theoretical perspectives” (10) and succeeds in admirable fashion. Duffy also grounds the book in an explicitly rhetorical understanding of literacy, literate practices, and literate acts. He describes “the rhetorical character of literacy, or the ways in which a writing system can offer a conception of identity and position” (42). In most chapters, he identifies one or several “rhetoric[s] of” that guide the identity formation, position occupation, and literate acts that describe the chapters' foci.

Roots opens with three epigraphs. One shares a Hmong student's experience in an American school; another references the Hmong role assisting United States military efforts during the Vietnam War. The longest tells a traditional Hmong story that Duffy returns to frequently, in which the ancient Hmong lived in an

independent, prosperous, literate nation in what is now China. The Hmong fled their homeland after being displaced by the Manchu dynasty, and in the course of their escape the Hmong 'book,' the metonym for the Hmong alphabet and knowledge of writing, fell into the waters of the Yellow River and was lost. Or it was eaten by horses as the Hmong slept, exhausted from their flight. Or it was eaten by the Hmong themselves, who were starving (22). This story ties loss of literacy to the losses of home, community stability, and political agency. Throughout *Roots*, pursuing and practicing various literacies remains tied to attempts at restoring or re-establishing those lost elements.

Duffy's first chapter, which argues that "histories of literacy are also histories of peoples," (23) starts long before the loss of the Hmong book. The chapter recounts a turbulent ancient Hmong history in China, the defeat by the Manchu dynasty, and Hmong settlement in Laos, then a French colony, in the nineteenth century. Later, members of the Hmong population in Laos were recruited to assist the CIA in espionage and military efforts against North Vietnam. As that war concluded, the Hmong were again displaced, this time to refugee camps in Thailand and then, for many, permanent resettlement in the United States.

Chapter 2 examines, as its subtitle says, "Hmong Writing Systems in China and Laos." Duffy focuses on the technical elements of literacy and the "rhetoric of writing systems" (56). The chapter covers early Hmong mnemotechnic writing systems and later alphabets created for the Hmong language by various nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Christian missionaries. The chapter highlights resonances between the Bible's book-based Christian salvation narrative and the notion of recovering home, political agency, and literacy from the lost Hmong book and acknowledges the irony of receiving a writing system for one's own language from an outside group.

Chapter 3 problematizes widely held notions of the Hmong as a long-preliterate culture, as well as the notion of preliteracy itself. Duffy explores how the "rhetoric of preliteracy" (61) has been used to marginalize the Hmong and to inaccurately simplify the history of their written culture. The chapter acknowledges that the Hmong culture that developed in Laos had little to no role for formal literacy but points out that Lao and French government policy limited Hmong formal education. Later, work with the CIA during the Vietnam War created another "literacy paradox" (77); many Hmong learned to read and write through CIA activities, but the aftermath of their involvement with the CIA was further upheaval and displacement—almost another loss of the Hmong book.

In-depth focus on Hmong literacy education in Laos in the twentieth century, largely supplied by "Lao village schools, the Hmong military, and missionary Christianity" (79), comprises Chapter 4, which expands on several issues from Chapter 2. This chapter identifies rhetorics of "Lao Schooling" (81), "Military Literacy" (93), and "Missionary Literacy" (107). Hmong students in Lao schools learned Laotian language literacy but also history and culture. Lao learning and cultural identity were privileged, Hmong identities marginalized. Other Hmong learned reading and writing as army scribes; still others learned to read and write from Bibles, prayer books, and song books brought by Christian missionaries. All of these literacies were offered to the Hmong by institutions that had their own goals—strengthening Lao cultural identity, running military bureaucracy, spreading

Christian belief—but Duffy documents that Hmong men and women then also used these literacy skills to their own ends, writing such personal documents as letters to family and memoirs that tell their own stories from their own perspectives for their own purposes.

The narrative moves to the post-Vietnam War United States and the experiences of resettled Hmong people in Chapters 5 and 6. Chapter 5 looks at rhetorics of “Christian sponsorship,” “public schooling” and “workplace writing” (126). The same pattern that had happened in Laos repeated itself, with institutionally taught literacies becoming tools for purposes different from or even in opposition to those institutions’. Many churches that assisted with resettlement of Hmong refugees offered a blend of English language and religious instruction; Hmong-language churches also developed. Language instruction that started with a religious emphasis did result in Christian conversion for many Hmong, but also in the re-purposing of literate practices for personal, business, artistic, and political ends. Hmong students’ school experiences ranged from warm welcome to physical abuse for being different, and—as earlier generations had experienced in Laos—education focused on technical aspects of literacy and constructing an American cultural identity. Some students, though, then applied the skills they learned in school to academic and professional study of Hmong history that has been left out of many mainstream accounts. Again, in the workplace, Hmong men and women often learned highly technical forms of literacy, but work-related literacy also became a means to create new positions within the Hmong community, especially for many bilingual Hmong working as translators in various fields.

In Chapter 6, through rhetorics of “new gender relations” and “the Fair City” (153), Duffy examines the successes, struggles, and tensions of Hmong public life in Wasau. Many Hmong women Duffy interviewed had initially been discouraged from working or attending school by their male relatives, and those who were pursuing work or school outside the home were also often expected to continue fulfilling traditional feminine roles within it. With more education and professional and social success, many women then used their new skills to challenge and change “inequitable gender roles in Hmong culture” (170). Just as many Hmong women encountered resistance to their educational and professional efforts from within their families and communities, the Hmong community at large encountered resistance, resentment, and outright racism from some white residents of Wasau. This tension unfolds in a series of literate acts—letters to the local newspaper. The “anti-immigrant letters” (172) accused Hmong residents of welfare fraud, eating others’ pets, and refusing to learn English, among other things. These letters also “suggested to a group of immigrant writers a particular kind of literacy” (172). Hmong Wasau residents then took up this suggested literacy, corrected these stereotypes, and extended invitations to productive community dialogue in their own letters to the editor. Again, Hmong rhetors used literacies and forms created and presented by others to carve out their own public positions and tell their own truths.

In a brief conclusion, Duffy reiterates his arguments about the rhetorical nature of literacy and its uses both to impose identities and positions on the Hmong and its re-appropriation by the Hmong to resist those impositions and express other, self-created identities and positions.

Writing from These Roots won the 2009 Conference on College Composition Outstanding Book Award, amidst other richly deserved acclaim. Duffy offers an enjoyable and educational read for both academic and general audiences interested in literacy, 20th-century social history, Hmong history, or immigration issues generally. He provides an introduction to an overlooked and misunderstood history. *Roots* is short enough and provides enough *in situ* background to incorporate in undergraduate courses in composition, literacy education, and social history. This book would work well as a supplemental text for students in twentieth-century American history courses or Vietnam War-specific courses. Its once-again-timely topical coverage makes it a good fit also for graduate courses in literacy education and for courses at various levels for pre-service and experienced teachers. The “rhetorics of” conceit would make the book or sections of it useful in graduate rhetoric seminars, from introductory survey courses to courses in rhetoric in immigrant communities, rhetoric of literacy education, or other special topics. To all readers, Duffy offers both a thorough overview of Hmong literacy history and a thoughtful invitation to reflect on how we conceptualize, teach, and interact with various literacies and diversities in our own communities.

Work Cited

Duffy, John M. *Writing from These Roots: Literacy in a Hmong-American Community*. Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 2007. Print.