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## Investigating Literacy: Approaches, Tools, and Their Consequences for Inquiry

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## Investigating Literacy: Approaches, Tools, and Their Consequences for Inquiry

## INVESTIGATING LITERACY:

Approaches, Tools, and their Consequences for Inquiry

Gail Weinstein

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### BACKGROUND

Chou<sup>1</sup>, a young man of 25, sat patiently beside the pastor until it was time to give a bible reading in Hmong. During his two-minute reading, the Hmong in the congregation looked up to listen, and the Americans seemed to relax and let the music of the language wash over them. After the service, I was introduced to Chou as an English teacher who was interested in the refugees in the neighborhood. He invited me to visit at his home.

I accepted the invitation despite a cold and a sore throat. Finding their row house, the only one intact in a row of gutted and abandoned structures, I rang the bell and waited. I was welcomed into a second floor apartment. Two old beds were pushed together against one wall, where two babies were sleeping in heaps of blankets. Plants crowded a table next to a T.V. against the other wall. On the bathroom door there was a magazine picture of a very muscular wrestler gritting his teeth. As soon as my cold became apparent, Chou's wife, Sai, cut some ginger root and rubbed it on my neck and arms. This was the beginning of a friendship that is still in process.

Chou is among the better educated Hmong who fled from Laos. The son of a town merchant, he was able to attend school for four years before becoming a soldier. He guesses, with no aid from birth documents, that he was about twelve or thirteen when he left school to become a soldier. By then, he had already had what would soon be considered

some precious experience with print. Sai, on the other hand, did not encounter print until she was an adult in a Thai refugee camp. Unlike Chou, who had his first encounters with the Lao language, Sai read and wrote her first words in English shortly before her journey.

The Hmong in Philadelphia, like many other recent refugees, are faced with a transition from farming in the hilltops of Asia to coping with the people and institutions of a western urban center. If we are to understand their situation, what are we to watch for? How do we make sense of what we see? What is the role of literacy in adaptation? How do we interpret the processes by which Chou and Sai and their kin grapple with their new lives?

## I

Anthropologists have long contended that it is not only difficult to shed our cultural biases and observe "objectively"; it is impossible. As effective social scientists, the best we can do is to recognize what those biases are, and to take into account what effect they will have on what we find.

Section I of this paper reviews very briefly the work of some researchers and scholars who have pondered the role of literacy in human cognitive and social development. By looking at their questions, we can tease out their underlying assumptions. By scrutinizing their research tools, we can better evaluate the scope and limits of the tools available to us.

## LITERACY AND EVOLUTION: The Great Transformation

The earliest discussions about literacy were centered on its impact on human cognition. Havelock (1963) argued that alphabetic writing originating in Greece changed the structure of human thinking and logic. Goody (1968) expanded upon Havelock's assertion that a phonetic alphabet is linked with the eventuality of abstraction, and its corresponding abilities. In their work among the Wolof, Bruner (1973) and Greenfield (1972) found that illiterates scored much lower on sorting and labelling tasks than their literate counterparts and were more "context-dependent" in communication. They concluded from their research that literacy promotes cognitive development and suggested further that technologies available in a given culture determine the range and abilities of its members. Symbolic technologies (such as writing systems and the materials used to produce them), they have argued, push cognitive growth better, earlier, and longer than others.

English teachers, among others, will be the first to concur that among students have considerable difficulty in the classroom. In view of these difficulties, some of these speculations are compelling. Olson (1977) examined the "shift from utterance to text" as a phenomenon characterizing individual psychological as well as cultural processes. He argued that in the course of human development, spoken language becomes less ambiguous, more explicit, and more autonomous as a representation of meaning. Of individuals and social groups, Olson writes:

The bias of written language toward providing definitions, making assumptions and premises explicit, and observing formal rules of logic produces an instrument of considerable power for building an abstract and coherent theory of reality (1977:273).

This argument suggests that there exists a continuum along which one could map the stage of development of any individual or culture (whose concept of reality is correspondingly coherent or incoherent!). Is this model accurate? Does it explain the difficulties that Hmong people face in the classroom? More importantly, is it useful?

Scribner and Cole (1977) have addressed themselves to the "writing crisis" in the United States in a manner that provides a new framework that is useful for examining literacy. In a discussion of the Vai of Northwest Liberia, Scribner and Cole demonstrated that the effects on literacy are often confused with effects of formal schooling. In an extensive study (1981) they questioned traditional evaluative measures for testing consequences of literacy. They found that those Vai who are literate without schooling do better in some cognitive tasks than non-literates, but only in tasks involving closely related skills. Some literacy skills are transferred to other tasks, but within a very specific range. "Logic", they claim, is little affected by non-schooled literacy in the Vai people.

Scribner and Cole examined literacy uses in English, Arabic, and Vai scripts in a functional framework, looking to see which skills are used by whom for which particular ends. Their aim was to learn about cognitive consequences of literacy, specifically in areas where previous scholars have made assertions without empirical evidence. By examining the uses and functions of skills in context, Scribner and Cole were able to demonstrate how social organization creates the conditions for a variety of literary activities. With these kinds of questions in mind then, it becomes possible to examine the social

organization that encourages or restrains uses of literacy as well as the social and intellectual significance of these skills.

TROUBLE AT SCHOOL: Approaches for Problem Solving

Scribner and Cole examined uses of oral and written language as well as schooled and non-schooled literacy to discover intellectual effects. Other scholars have studied these distinctions to understand and explain the difficulties faced by children as they navigate their way through urban schools. Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz (1977) argued that the move from home to school demands a change in communicative tasks in which children are required to process "decontextualized" information in new social and linguistic codes; that is to say, a formal school setting involves introduction of information that is not of immediate relevance to the social situation. While language in the home might center around immediate concerns such as preparation for mealtime or hours of available sunlight for grandma's sewing, the language of schooling is removed in content from immediate experience, and is structured in different ways.

Scollon and Scollon (1979) contrasted their two-year-old daughter with other children of various ages at Fort Chipewyan near Alaska. They discovered that she had skills in "decontextualization of the information structure", including fictionalizing her own role in narration. She told a story about an experience she had, referring to herself in the third person. In a fascinating discussion, Scollon and Scollon demonstrated how their pre-schooler had an orientation that was characteristically literate compared with a 10-year-old Chipewyan child who could read, write, and even type! That is to say, literacy is not a set of mechanical coding and decoding skills, but rather a way

of processing information which will affect ways of interacting.

Scollon and Scollon concluded, as have others, that these skills are the result of specific socialization patterns in the form of conscious parental instruction. They suggest that prose, or "essayist literacy" underlies our (middle class) caretaker talk, and language and activity structures of western schooling. Michaels (1980) examined language in classrooms with black and white children. She found that differences in narrative style are interpreted as behavioral or cognitive deficits in black children by white teachers during "show and tell" time. While work of Scollon and Scollon and Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz make it clear that there are a variety of orientations that are socially and situationally determined, Michaels raises the dilemma that only one style is legitimized in certain settings.

Researchers who have approached literacy with the purpose of understanding and solving problems of children in schools have raised new questions and challenged old ways of viewing literacy. They suggest that literacy is not only a set of mechanical skills residing in individuals. Rather, new insight may be gained by viewing literacy as a mode of communication that takes on meaning within specific social contexts.

#### LITERACY AND THE SOCIAL ORDER

Scholars like Goody (1968), among others who have investigated literacy practices in traditional societies, have found that writing is associated with a wide variety of political, social and economic activities. Reder and Green (1979), in a thorough study of literacy activities in an Eskimo fishing village, followed two major historical strands in the development of literacy on the island, Russian and English. By observing the practice of literacy, that is, who writes



what, where and under what conditions, they discovered that there are distinct domains of literacy activity associated with each strand. In this study, Reder and Green present an analysis in which they demonstrated that social activity both shapes and is shaped by the distribution of literacy activities. Therefore, literacy provides a window into the structure of the social order, and the social arrangement furthers the understanding of literacy practices in cultural context.

Heath (1980) brought the framework closer to home. Examining the functions and uses of literacy in a black working class community in the southeastern United States, she argued that there are discontinuities between the meanings of reading and writing for families in the community as opposed to the schools where their children are enrolled. Specifically, Heath listed seven types of uses of literacy outside the school, all of which are highly contextualized and function to give the reader information that is judged necessary to gain control over the environment. The extent of learning to read, thus, depends on the degree to which this criterion is met.

Ogbu (1980) made a very strong case that cultural discontinuity alone cannot explain the "failure" of black children in American schools. He argued that blacks, among other "caste-like" minorities, find themselves in a society with such strong gate-keeping mechanisms such as job ceilings, that no amount of mastery of literacy skills in "essayist" or any other style is likely to affect or alter their position in the economic order. To understand the role of literacy in the adaptation of the Hmong, it is necessary to look at the organization of reading and writing in a minority that exists in interaction with a larger social and economic order.

LITERACY AND ADAPTATION: Preparation for Inquiry

Much of the literature on literacy and "oral/literate" cultures makes generalizations that are broad and far-reaching. These generalizations, while appealing, become problematic in light of investigation into the use of language in everyday life. For these reasons, I argue that researchers of the nature of language and literacy should bring several assumptions to the inquiry:

1) The meaning of reading and writing are not to be pre-defined or assumed, but rather are to be investigated. Studies of people in communities show that definitions of reading, writing, and literacy are problematic both within and between groups. Gilmore (1982) listened to classroom teachers lament that the kids didn't know how to write, while she observed a flurry of activity as children passed elaborate notes to one another under their desks. Thus, the social context determines what kinds of reading or writing "count" or not.

2) The relationship of speech and text is also problematic. While Olson's distinctions between the nature of utterance and text are stimulating, researchers who study actual language use find that even these distinctions become fuzzy. Tannen (1982) found that features used earlier to characterize text versus speech could be observed in differing degrees in the speech styles of two different groups, Greeks and Americans. Lakoff (1982) reflected on ways in which writers use both oral and literate strategies in written communication for specific effects. Observations of some Hmong families reveal that oral and written modes of communication are being used in interesting ways. Letters received by these families from relatives in other states or countries are usually read out loud among other listeners. Letters often include cassette tapes with oral messages. Speech and text are not distinct entities with clear boundaries. They are modes of

communication within a communicative economy in which changes in technology and/or social organization change the balance of how they are used and how they interact.

3) The third assumption is twofold: first, individuals are rational beings whose behavior reflects rational choices within their perceived options; and second, inquiry into human behavior must take into account the individual, the group (s) to which s/he belongs, and the wider social context in which the group(s) operates.

4) Investigation must have an empirical base. Suspicions about about the nature of literacy are interesting, but investigation of real people using language for specific ends holds the most promise for discovery, and for interesting surprises!

## II

### SOME SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF LITERACY: Reflections of a Backyard Ethnographer

To begin to explore the role of literacy in everyday life, I arranged to spend four weeks with Chou and Sai and their two children. Weekday evenings were characterized by meals together after our respective days of studying, childcare, and teaching. Weekends afforded more time for visiting, sewing and excursions (i.e. to Reading to visit a sick brother, or to the Spectrum for an evening of wrestling.)

My first discovery was that four weeks was time enough for little more than laying the foundations of a friendship -- where friendship grows from sharing not only great adventures, but also daily routines. Also, as I looked on while Chou and Sai navigated their

way through welfare and educational bureaucracies, community activities, and a variety of interactions with both Americans and Hmong, I made many discoveries.

I will suggest in these pages that literacy, as one among many modes of language, can be viewed as:

- 1) a tool used for negotiating with new institutions,
- 2) a tool possessed by those who mediate between culture groups,
- 3) a tool associated with articulating new social status in a changing social order

By describing some glimpses I have caught through my tiny keyhole, I hope to create a framework in which literacy can be examined as a communicative mode which is an addition as well as a change agent in a whole communicative economy with profound effects on the relationship of the participants.

#### LITERACY AS A TOOL FOR NEGOTIATING WITH NEW INSTITUTIONS

One Tuesday afternoon, Chou received a letter from his caseworker saying that he had to show up at her office Friday morning, or his "case" would be "closed". The letter instructed him to bring four documents with him, including one which had to be stamped by an agency several miles away ( and not easily accessible by public transportation), and others which required picking up various forms with signatures from several other places.

Chou had already planned to take off from school on Thursday afternoon to pay phone and electric bills. He says he has to pay them in cash, because if he puts more than a very small amount in a checking account, his benefits will be cut. This left only Thursday morning, since he had a test in school on Wednesday that he felt he could not miss.

That evening, Chou spent time usually set aside for homework to fix his bicycle. He knew that he could not cover all necessary bases on foot in one day. He called his English teacher to tell her that he would be absent on Thursday and Friday.

On Friday, Chou reported to his caseworker with all the forms that he had gathered. Both his signature and Sai's were required, and both had to be done in the presence of the caseworker. So when Chou got home at about midday, he took over the childcare so that Sai could repeat the journey. We took the Broad Street subway. I showed Sai how to distinguish the North-bound from the South-bound train and how to find the right stop for future reference.

At the welfare office, we waited in bolted-down wooden seats for Sai's name to be called. On the wall across from where we were sitting were two written signs: "EFFECTIVE 11-8-81 Foodstamps will be given out only between 2:30 and 3:30 p.m." and also, "PLEASE NOTE: Any foodstamps not picked up within five days will be returned to Harrisburg." Sai's name was called. She signed the forms and we left.

Chou comments that he likes his present caseworker because she "helps us everything." Just lucky, he reflects. In his previous apartment in another neighborhood, the old caseworker "window broken, he don't care. No heat, he not do anything. New baby born, he don't help extra money." Some neighbors have difficulty even with the "good" caseworker. An older woman living one floor below, does not know how to decipher forms, letters and bills. Preparing the required documents is an unsurmountable task for her. One evening Chou disappeared with a pan full of meat. Returning to the apartment, he explained that he had intervened with the caseworker on the woman's behalf, getting \$125 and \$60 for gas on two occasions. Therefore, she lets Chou and Sai

use her oven from time to time to help them save money on their own gas bill.

When the old woman cannot solve a problem, she sometimes brings it to Chou. When Chou is stuck, he turns to me or to another American in his church. He had done this on many occasions with puzzling bills or difficult homework. Sometimes a favor is returned in kind, as illustrated above with the gas money. Other requests for help cause conflict.

Chou had been complaining for a couple of days about a man who wanted him to write a fraudulent letter to welfare. The man, living six blocks away, had asked Chou to claim that he lived with him so that he could pick up welfare at Chou's address. I arrived one afternoon to find the two in frank discussion. When the man left, Chou was angry. "He want me to cheat for him . . . he not my relative, he never help me anything. He just make trouble for me." Chou felt that the request was inappropriate, and that it jeopardized his own standing with welfare. I advised him not to do it, as had another American.

I'm not sure why Chou was called upon for this favor. He is neither a neighbor, nor a clan member. I suspect it may be related to the fact that Chou is among the few literate household heads who would be able to perform the task. This remains to be better understood.

Chou later received a call from a Hmong man who he explains has a leadership position in Philadelphia. As in many other cities, social service agencies hired the earlier Hmong arrivals who became bilingual to work in the resettlement process. These people have become the prime mediators between caseworkers and the Hmong population in the

area. Not coincidentally, Chou tells me, the members of some clans seem to fare best in matters that require attention from the social service system. For example, Chou said that when he and Sai first arrived in Philadelphia, Sai was pregnant. When Sai began her labor, the leader called the police to pick her up, rather than accompanying the couple to the hospital himself as he did for certain other families. Speaking very little English at the time, Chou felt helpless when the doctors decided to perform a Caesarian section on Sai. He is sure it could have been avoided with the right advocacy. In Laos, this leader would appropriately be expected to aid members of his own clan. As a caseworker in Philadelphia, however, he is seen by Americans as a representative of the "Hmong" and is asked to be an advocate for members of many clans. The old and new expectations do not always harmonize.

From these examples, it becomes clear that decoding and composing documents play an important role in economic survival. Those who have literacy skills must use them to gain and maintain benefits, and those who don't must often rely on those who do. Who may rely on whom is problematic. Where dependence relationships once resided within families and clans, new categories such as case-worker/client, co-tendant or urban neighbor pose new possibilities and pressures for different kinds of interaction in this new setting.

## LITERACY AS A TOOL USED BY THOSE WHO MEDIATE BETWEEN CULTURE GROUPS

Members of Chou's church feel their way as they accommodate the hefty new population of refugees. Incorporating the Hmong into religious life is a priority. On any given Sunday, one or several Hmong couples are baptized, becoming full members of the "church family" (a term used by one of the Sunday school teachers).

Chou used to spend several hours each Saturday studying the bible with the pastor. Thus prepared, he led Sunday school bible lessons in Hmong for those who could not understand English. The group consisted mostly of new arrivals, women, and older men. With the Lao bible and English bible close at hand, Chou is able to synthesize each lesson to convey to the group.

Until their language mastery improves, newcomers depend on those like Chou to open a sort of lifeline with the church, permitting exchange of information and participation that would otherwise be impossible. In a conversation with me over a year ago, the pastor confided his difficulties at that time because the Hmong leader/translator moved away with many of his clan to resettle in Rhode Island. To his relief, Chou has moved into this position, bringing "wisdom" from the American religious leader into the world of the Hmong, and providing a way for them to become part of the church community.

On the other hand, when Chou does his short reading for the whole congregation, he is one sense, bringing a bit of Hmong culture over for consumption by Americans. His seat next to the pastor during the service, and his name printed in the service program legitimize both the task, and Chou himself as mediator in such an exchange.



Because of his accessibility through language, I suspect, Chou has been called by several homeowners offering him small wages for work in their homes. When he is unable to comply with all offers with his one precious Saturday, he is usually free to supply the name of an alternate.

Chou's role as mediator extends past the boundaries of the church. During my homestay, a social worker from a neighboring church called, asking him to translate a sign from English to Hmong that requested users of a free clothing room to limit the amount they took. She had gotten Chou's name as an able writer, and contacted him immediately. That evening, he put aside his homework, and wrote and rewrote the message, until he was satisfied that it was well done. The social worker picked it up that evening, thanking him for his effort.

This woman, then, a community worker, depended on Chou to convey information to Hmong people using services of her own church. He is therefore becoming a mediator for the neighborhood as well as for his own church.

Chou spends time deliberately cultivating relationships with Americans. Before I moved in with him and his family, he would often call me on the telephone for no apparent reason except to chat. One afternoon during the homestay when I returned to his apartment, I found him systematically going through his telephone directory calling each American on his list, one by one. The content of each conversation was more or less the same, as he asked each person what was "up" and spoke of his own state of affairs. My impression was that he enjoys trying to keep his American "friends" including teachers, church members, and oddballs like ethnographers engaged for as long as possible.

His decision with Sai to allow me to live with them for a month was another daring move that opened the boundaries to their world.

Incorporation of Americans into Chou's life surely has its benefits, but it must also have its price. After I moved in with Chou and Sai, a young Hmong man began "accidentally" kicking Chou repeatedly during soccer games. Sai found herself the object of suspicious questions at church. Chou and Sai asked which Hmong people I had told about the homestay, and asked that I keep the arrangement private. I didn't know whether the conflict arose out of jealousy, suspicion, or some other factor.

At one point, I asked Chou and Sai if they wanted me to leave. They assured me that I could stay, but their request for my discretion made it clear what a sensitive issue this was. There are surely grounds for much investigation to provide better understanding of what is gained and what is sacrificed in bridging two culture groups.

#### LITERACY AS A TOOL ASSOCIATED WITH ARTICULATING NEW SOCIAL STATUS IN A CHANGING SOCIAL ORDER

##### The New Year: Tradition and Change

One November, my oldest student, 58-year-old Jou, invited me to join her in New Year's preparations. She led me to a home on Powelton Avenue where 30 Hmong women were crowded into one room, wrapping themselves with colorful sashes over black velvet garb. Coin and silver-bedecked children ran in and out from the street, playing with each other. Jou's daughter helped the other women bind their hair in dark turbans with striped bands criss-crossed on their heads. One lovely teenager, heavily laden with coins and beads, with

black velvet wrapped around her calves, threw on a shiny green silk jacket over her dress. Across the back, in large letters, was printed: "ROLLER DISCO."

A couple of months before the New Year celebration, a meeting of the Hmong Association was called. A couple of hundred Hmong went by bus to gather at the Indochinese Center. The Association was then headed by a young man who is in his thirties. Jou's son showed me a flyer, in Hmong, with instructions and news of committee responsibilities for different aspects of the affair. It outlined financial arrangements, job responsibilities, and subsequent meeting times.

In the hills of Laos, New Year was an event anticipated all year. Heads of clans in each in each village, always the eldest men, met to arrange the event. Apparently New Year's festivals were planned at different times for different places, in order that villages might reciprocally invite one another as they took turns hosting the activities. Young men and women would line up in rows facing each other, throwing back and forth a cloth ball that the girls had made from their sewing scraps. Boys would sing, serenading beginning a process of courtship that would become manifest with a rash of marriages following the New Year.

How has literacy as a new communicative mode played a part in changing the social order? Previously, meetings would be called by word of mouth by a household head. Responsibilities were delegated and carried out accordingly. As Hmong people find themselves spread through the city, written materials become useful to organize meetings and arrange for bus transportation. As information sharing begins to depend on a literate mode, what happens to the role of elders in leadership? How will decisions be made when young people are those that have direct access to information and resources?

On the second day of the New Year festivities, costumed young men and women lined up facing one another on a strip of park grass in Philadelphia's Germantown. They threw green tennis balls back and forth. Jou complained that the boys didn't know the words to the songs anymore. How can a Hmong boy impress a girl with blessings and prayers he has memorized? These skills will no longer be crucial to prove himself a good husband. In an environment where information is recorded on paper, what traits will be sought or desired in a mate?

### The Craft Sale

It takes little time for an outside observer to discover the talents of Hmong women. Returning to the apartment in the afternoons, I would often find Sai rocking her youngest child on her back in a brightly embroidered baby carrier, while sewing decorative squares. Characterized by tiny precise stitches, reverse appliqué, and stunning colors, the handiwork is awesome. To my delight, Sai often works with her sister and mother, as well as other passers through. All are happy to chatter or sit quietly as I join them with my crocheting. From such gatherings, I imagined a party in which friends could come to look at the crafts, and Hmong women could display their pieces for sale. So it was planned. The party succeeded to the tune of \$700 of collective sales. The money was distributed to the individual artists whose pieces were sold.

I suggested to Chou and Sai that each woman contribute one or two dollars for a kitty to cover refreshments for the party, and to start some collective savings for renting craft tables, or even eventually saving for a storefront. Chou spoke out: "Hmong people can pay for food at the party, but not to save money together. My name \_\_\_\_\_"

(clan name), I help \_\_\_\_\_. We don't trust money together."

There were the divisions, starkly clear. Family helps family, clan helps within clan. Cooperation was only possible to repay the American authority. An interesting conflict then arose. By miscommunication between myself and another American who was keeping books, money was not collected for reimbursing me for the refreshments. I brought it to Chou's attention. "Don't worry," he comforted me. He would collect the money from the money from the people in Sunday school. He could not collect from the other sale participants, "They do not obey me," he commented. "But people in my church, I think we can help you." A new unit of cooperation is being formed — members of a congregation who can be influenced to act by a young man who may or may not share their name.

Chou once commented to me, "I don't have a family here — I have my church. People help me, give me a desk, dresser, chair ..." Indeed, the church has been a source of food and clothing for Chou and Sai. Individual congregation members have, during my short homestay, lent a space heater when the heat was broken, moved to investigate the delay in bringing Chou's brother over from Thailand, among other things. They have provided these things for which, in the past, Chou could only turn to "family" (clan?) for dependable aid.

It remains to be seen how, as newcomers adapt to their new urban environment, literacy will take its place within the communicative economy. Likewise as the new mode of communication enters the social fabric, we can look on with interest at the impact of literacy, on the process by which relationships between people evolve and change.

Note: On Being an Ethnographer

It would be easiest to say that I wanted to understand my students in order to be more effective as a literacy teacher, that I wanted to know how they processed things, what they could use, and what was important to make the classroom work. The truth is, however, that I became an English teacher because I wanted to find out how these people made sense of the world — not the other way round! Peasant farmers, once organizing themselves around the rhythms of subsistence survival, find themselves in a foreign literate city. How do they manage?

To many of the Hmong that I have known, I am an English teacher. I help them unravel the language, tell them all about their new city, and help decipher bills and other strange documents. To Chou and Sai I have been a frequent visitor, an unsuccessful language learner, an appreciative consumer of Hmong food, a source of rides, homework help, and tickets to the Spectrum wrestling matches. I have also been a hostess to parties where Hmong women can sell their crafts — one who does not understand the relationships between actors in the "Hmong Community" — my own category that may not be shared by them. I have also been a source of conflict for Chou and Sai, whose hospitality has caused various tensions for them with others in the community. I don't know what other things I am to them. A source of favors? An enigmatic curiosity? A lone person to take in and nurture? A source of language input and help? A friend?

To me, Chou and Sai have been many things. They are models of survivors. From Laos, across the Mekong, in boring, dirty refugee camps, to Powelton where they are robbed, and their neighbor's children beaten by angry black kids, they somehow continue with gentleness, courtesy, and good humor. They are a keyhole into a complex world that I have barely glimpsed. They are young people, making decisions about how to balance the old and the new. They have been hosts who have fed me, housed me, invited me to sleep next to them when it was cold. They are fun companions for watching wrestling, and they are family for sharing good meals. They are newcomers who need tips about getting around, and they are new language learners who can use my help in some areas.

I suspect that they have given me far more than I can give them. The "homestay" is over, but the feeling of home remains. In response to their obvious hurt/disappointment when I prepared to move back home, I left my nightgown for occasional visits. That seemed to appease their suspicion that I was pulling out forever. Indeed, if luck is with me, I will know Chou and Sai for a long time — and have the good fortune to continue a process with them of having fun together, sharing things, figuring each other out, and learning from each other more about the world and how it can look from different eyes.

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1. Names have been changed to protect anonymity.

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