“Sneaky” Literacy: Documents as Authority

This talk focuses on the intersections of migrant family literacy practices, gender, and the role of documents in mediating authority for refugee women to access mainstream institutions. Drawing from my dissertation research, which is an ethnographic study of Hmong women's literacy, I focus here on a set of documents that played important roles in the lives of the participants in my study: college applications. Several of the generation 1.5 Hmong women who participated in my study revealed that they defied their parents' wishes as young adults as they completed applications and other paperwork that would require them to leave home in order to earn degrees in higher education. They trusted the authority embedded in these documents in order to participate in the mainstream rite of passage that many high school seniors in the US take for granted. I argue that these women leverage the depersonalized authority of documents in order to bridge competing identities and narratives that operate upon them. The documents mediate their access to the institutions, and they also offer a "socially sanctioned" way for these women to move from domestic to public spaces. Drawing from their experiences as child language brokers for their families, these women are savvy in their ability to ensure access to establish a public identity—that can also continue to be welcomed and recognized within their families and communities as a 'good Hmong girl'. 