In the offices of the Wausau Area Hmong Mutual Association in Wausau, Wisconsin, a picturesque city surrounded by dairy farms and forests, is a collection of dog-eared scrapbooks. An employee of the association maintains these scrapbooks, which serve as an informal archive of the Hmong experience in Wausau and which contain virtually every newspaper article, editorial, and letter to the editor written about the Hmong and published in the local newspaper since the Hmong and other Southeast Asian refugees began arriving in the city at the end of the Vietnam War.

Collected in the scrapbooks are newspaper stories explaining how Lao-tian Hmong farmers were recruited by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to serve as a covert army in support of U.S. military objectives in Southeast Asia in the 1960s; how Hmong guerillas rescued U.S. pilots shot down over Laos; and how the Hmong suffered casualties so devastating that twelve-year-old boys were eventually pressed into battle. Other stories describe the defeat of L’Armée Clandestine in 1975 and the exodus of thousands of Hmong to the United States, where they arrived as economically impoverished refugees. Still other accounts focus on the perceived “otherness” of Hmong cultural practices, such as the early marriage age of women or the role of shamans in Hmong cosmology.

Also pasted into the scrapbooks are the numerous editorials and letters to the editor about the Hmong that have been published in the local paper, The Wausau Daily Herald, over the years. Many of these pieces are harshly critical, variously accusing the Hmong of abusing the welfare system, having too many children, refusing to learn English, and eating local dogs. There are letters published under such captions as “Send refugees back to Asia,” “No friend of Wausau Hmong,” and “New Citizens—adopt our values to be Americans.” The following excerpt provides a sampling of the criticism.

EDITOR: I too am becoming increasingly angry at the “so called” plight of the Hmong in the Wausau area. Where else would they be able to live as they do? Certainly not in their homeland. Perhaps they were hard
working farmers in years gone by but I certainly don’t perceive them as hard workers at all in the United States, but I guess they don’t have to be. They know where their next meal is coming from. (“Hmong ‘plight’ doesn’t make sense,” The Wausau Daily Herald, June 1993)

Such letters reflected the uncertainties felt by many Wausau residents about the changing demographics of the city. Prior to the arrival of the Hmong and other Southeast Asian refugees, Wausau was populated primarily by the descendants of German, Polish, and Scandinavian immigrants (Kronenwetter 1985). The arrival of the Hmong began to change the city’s demographics, however, as the refugee population increased from a few isolated families in 1976 to 3,128 individuals in 1990, to 4,403 in 1995, or approximately 10 percent of the total city population (Wausau Area Hmong Mutual Association, 2000). Hmong people were drawn to Wausau by the possibilities for employment, by the rural environment—which, if very different from Laos was less alien than the urban centers where many Hmong were originally resettled—and by Wisconsin’s comparatively generous public assistance programs. As the refugee community began to establish itself, more Hmong came to join family members already settled in the city, further increasing the size of the Southeast Asian population. The letters collected in the Hmong Association scrapbooks document the social tensions that accompanied Wausau’s demographic shift—tensions that became so pronounced as to draw national attention, including an article in The Atlantic Monthly (Beck 1994) and a segment on the television program 60 Minutes.

Initially, few Hmong wrote to respond to criticisms made of them in The Wausau Daily Herald. Indeed, it is impossible to know precisely how many Hmong were reading the newspaper or were aware of its contents. Most Hmong refugees in the United States in the 1980s did not speak English, and many were not literate in any language, including their native Hmong. A people who trace their origins to China, the Hmong have long been known in the West as a “preliterate” or “oral” culture—terms that obscure more than they reveal but are meant to indicate a situation in which most members of a culture do not read or write. While the existence of so-called “preliterate” cultures may be a historical fiction (Besnier 1995), and while Hmong culture has long reflected a mixture of oral and literate influences, it is nevertheless accurate to state that the majority of Hmong who arrived in the United States in the 1970s and early 1980s had received limited education and did not read or write in the Laotian, Hmong, or English languages (Green and Reder 1986; Reder 1985a, 1985b; Strand and Jones 1985).
By the early 1990s, however, letters and op-ed essays written by Hmong people began appearing in *The Wausau Daily Herald* with increasing frequency. In these writings, Hmong residents of the city replied to criticisms of Southeast Asians and sought to explain something of Hmong culture, values, and history to the majority community. The following editorial by a Hmong man, for example, addresses an accusation, widely circulated in the city and published in a previous letter to the editor, that Hmong people receiving public assistance were buying new cars and “$80,000 houses.”

What about the Hmong man who buys an $80,000 house when he has been here only a couple of years, when there are so many people who were born in this country who cannot afford a $30,000 home? Before getting mad at this person, maybe we can all learn something from him and try to live our lives as he did. Obviously, if he bought an $80,000 house, he is not on welfare. . . . I can almost guarantee that he neither smokes, nor drinks, nor goes out to eat regularly, nor drives a $20,000 car, and a portion of [his down payment] came from his family. (“Expand the clan; we’re all one Wausau family,” *The Wausau Daily Herald*, n.d.)

Similarly, a letter written by a Hmong woman responds to criticism of the Hmong people for speaking their native language in public.

EDITOR: I also would like to respond to the article called “Asians shouldn’t speak native tongue but adapt!” There are many like myself who have been here in the U.S. for about 14 years and still want to, and can, speak Hmong. I am glad to be a bilingual. (“Don’t blame Hmong, but work to solve problems,” *The Wausau Daily Herald*, September 11, 1993)

And an op-ed essay authored by a Hmong military veteran reminds Wausau readers of the Hmong alliance with the United States during the Vietnam War and the drastic consequences of this for the Hmong people.

When the United States withdrew its troops from Southeast Asia, you let your enemies take revenge on us because of what you did to the Vietnamese and the communist Laotians. We were killed and gassed with chemical weapons—bleeding agents that tore our skin and made it impossible for us to breathe and eat. We died because we fought with you. (“U.S. turns deaf ear to killing fields of Laos and Hmong allies,” *The Wausau Daily Herald*, May 19, 1993)
This book tells the story of how these letters came to be written.

More precisely, the book tells a story of literacy development in a midwestern community of Laotian Hmong, a people whose language had no widely accepted written form until the late twentieth century. Consequently, the Hmong have often been described in scholarly and popular literature as “preliterate,” “non-literates,” or members of an “oral culture.” While such terms are fraught with empirical and conceptual problems, it is true, as previously noted, that the majority of Hmong did not read or write in any language when they arrived in the United States. For this reason, the Hmong provide a unique opportunity to study the forces that influence the development of reading and writing abilities in cultures in which writing is not widespread, and to do so within the context of the sociopolitical developments that have defined our own historical moment.

Unlike studies of literacy development set in the distant past—in ancient Athens (Havelock 1982), the Middle Ages (Clanchy 1979), or colonial New England (Lockridge 1974)—the Hmong literacy narrative is located in the context of twentieth-century life and can be told, to a great extent, in the words of those who lived the experience. And unlike modern anthropological studies that examine the literacy development of so-called “non-literate” cultures in fixed geographical locations, such as the Pacific Islands (Clammer 1976; Topping 1992; Besnier 1995), the Hmong literacy story is situated in the welter of political, economic, religious, military, and migratory upheavals that we classify as “globalization.” One of the reasons the Hmong story is so compelling, then, is for its temporal proximity, for the unique vantage point it offers on questions of literacy both past and present, in both stable and shifting cultural settings.

In relating the particulars of the Hmong story, we seek insights into broader questions, still urgent and unresolved, about the nature of literacy development generally.

• How do people learn to read and write? What are the processes through which people come to make sense of graphical marks upon a page and then reproduce these? How do cultures become literate, shifting from conditions in which literacy is absent or limited to conditions in which it is widely practiced?
• How does literacy develop in minority cultures, including refugee and immigrant cultures, in which literacy has not historically had a deep purchase? What are the forces that direct the literacy experiences of such cultures in the twentieth century?
• What are the effects of literacy? How does it serve those who disseminate it, and what does it offer those who learn to practice it? Literacy is
a notoriously malleable property: “an instrument for the enslavement of mankind,” in Levi-Strauss’ (1964) dark phrase, but equally a means for liberation and “reading the world” in the more hopeful language of Paulo Freire (1970). But whose understandings of literacy prevail as people learn to read and write, and why? How are the contradictions of literacy negotiated? And how is literacy implicated in our constructions of identity, perceptions of reality, and exertions of power over one another?

• Finally, what do these questions and their possible answers mean for literacy education and scholarship? What does the Hmong narrative add to our understandings of these activities? Of what reading and writing ultimately mean?

In addition to addressing these questions, the book will seek to provide another perspective on the Asian-American experience, which has been historically constructed through two distinct narratives, both pernicious. In the first of these narratives, Asian immigrants to the nineteenth-century United States were inscribed by white Americans as “strangers” and “heathens,” barbaric and essentially unassimilable (Takaki 1993, 7). Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and other Asian immigrants to America’s Western shore were thought to constitute a threat to Anglo-American sovereignty and white racial purity. Such racist attitudes were not mere abstractions but were codified by law, including the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which restricted the numbers of Chinese allowed to emigrate to the United States, and the National Origins Act of 1924, which prohibited Japanese immigration altogether (Takaki 1989, 14). An 1885 San Francisco board of supervisors report written in response to a Chinese-American effort to integrate the public schools of the city captured the prevailing attitudes.

Meanwhile, guard well the doors of our public schools, that they [Chinese children] do not enter. For however hard and stern such a doctrine may sound, it is but the enforcement of the law of self preservation, the inculcation of the doctrine of true humanity, and an integral part of the enforcement of the iron rule of right by which we hope presently to prove that we can justly and practically defend ourselves from this invasion of Mongolian barbarism. (In Okihiro 1994, 159)

In this exclusionist narrative, the “racial uniform” of Asians (Takaki 1989, 13) obscured all else, including their diverse cultures and nationalities.

In the second and superficially opposite narrative, Asian Americans are viewed as the “model minority,” immigrants whose educational and economic achievements speak to their successful assimilation in the United
States. While the “model minority” narrative ostensibly praises Asian Americans for their achievements, it too imposes a homogenous and essentialist identity, as Lisa Lowe (1996) has argued, subsuming the differences of class, gender, and nationality under the single all-encompassing category of “race” (68). As a result, Ronald Takaki (1989) writes, “Asian Americans find their diversity denied: many feel forced to conform to the ‘model minority’ mold and want more freedom to be their individual selves” (477). Gary K. Okhiro (1994) has argued that the racialized “stranger” and “model minority” narratives are not in fact separate stories but represent a “seamless continuum” (141). Both constructs, Okhiro contended, give credence to the problematic construct of a “White” identity, whether as a race of people threatened by hordes of “heathen” strangers or as the ideal for hard-working, obedient immigrants that have accepted the status quo of white domination (139–142). Both stories deny what Lowe called “Asian American heterogeneities”—the existing cultural, political, gender, and other differences among peoples of Asian origin that mark them as discrete, as diverse, and as human beings.

In relating the literacy development of the Hmong, this book contributes to the dialogue within Asian-American studies by recovering another episode of what Morris Young (2004) called the “hidden histories” of Asian Americans (9). The book offers an alternative to essentializing constructs—whether the “model minority” trope or the still virulent racism of the “Stranger” narrative (see Takaki 1989, 479–483)—by exploring the history of one group of Asian Americans, the Hmong of Laos, and demonstrating how the distinctiveness of that history influenced Hmong literacy development.

To tell this story, I examine the literacy histories of Hmong refugees—men and women, elders and young adults, college educated and those who have never learned to read or write—resettled in one American community. Interviewed at their homes, workplaces, and churches, these people recalled their memories of learning to read and write in Laos, in refugee camps in Thailand, and finally in the United States. In these interviews, Hmong people describe the circumstances under which they learned to read and write, the identities their literacy training offered them, and the various ways they appropriated their literacy skills for the purpose of advancing their own complex and divergent cultural, political, spiritual, and economic agendas.

From these narratives I have derived a theoretical account of literacy development, one that offers a critical vocabulary for talking about the ways in which people learn to read and write in diverse settings and across the boundaries of cultures, states, languages, economies, and writing sys-
tems. I call this theoretical framework, this way of thinking and talking about literacy, the “rhetorical conception of literacy development” and elaborate upon it below. In offering this conception, I seek to contribute to the interdisciplinary study of reading and writing that has become known as “New Literacy Studies” (Collins 1995; Street 1993).

Before going further, let me say what I mean by “literacy.” In this book, “literacy” refers to the activities of reading and writing at a basic level: “the ability to decode and comprehend written language at a rudimentary level—that is the ability to say written words corresponding to ordinary oral discourse and to understand them” (Kaestle 1991, 3; see also Graff 1987, 5). However, since literacy can be understood as both an activity and a condition, let me specify further. “Literacy” in this work refers to the ability to read and write at the primary school level or above. “Literate” means possessing the skills to perform these acts. And “literacy development” refers to the gradual accumulation of these skills over a span of years, in the case of individuals, or decades or centuries, in the case of cultures.

In the remainder of this introduction I describe New Literacy Studies and what this book seeks to contribute to it, discuss the research methods used for collecting the ethnographic and historical data presented in this work, and elaborate upon the “rhetorical conception” on literacy development. The introduction concludes with a brief overview of the book’s chapters.

New Literacy Studies at the Crossroads: Perspectives on Learning to Read and Write

Over the last few decades, ideas about the nature of literacy, and in particular about how people learn to read and write, have changed profoundly. Well into the 1980s, literacy was considered a product of individual cognition, an essentially solitary act of mind. In the United States, the understanding of reading and writing as individual activity has been most clearly articulated in psychology, particularly the branch of psychology associated with behaviorism. Mike Rose (1985) has written that when turn-of-the-century educational psychologists such as E.L. Thorndike began studying the teaching of writing, they discarded the study of classically influenced grammars in favor of more scientific conceptions of mind, language, and literacy. However, the model of language from which they proceeded, according to Rose, was narrowly reductive, “a mechanistic paradigm that studied language by reducing it to discrete behaviors and that defined language growth as the accretion of these particulars” (343). Literacy was seen
as one of the “discrete behaviors,” and its development was construed in terms of appropriate mental conditioning.

Pedagogy proceeding from this conception of literacy was similarly reductive. Teaching and learning were modeled on the principles of industrial scientific management and stressed the importance of drills and language exercises as the means to develop “habit formation,” which Rose calls “the behaviorist equivalent to learning—the resilience of an acquired response being dependent upon the power and number of reinforcements” (344). In the “skill-based approach,” as this perspective became known, everything could be broken into isolated parts, and all the parts could subsequently be taught, learned, and ultimately tested (Barton 1994, 162). Students were expected to learn to decode the preexisting meanings of texts, and reading programs were based upon the “gradual mastery of subskills such as letter recognition, sound blending, word recognition, and ultimately deciphering meaning” (Olson 1977, 262). Literacy in this conception becomes a kind of mechanical puzzle in which parts can be disassembled, spread over the pages of a primer or basal reader, and examined in analytical isolation from one another.

Significantly, skills-based approaches to literacy were conceived of as objective, disconnected from the social and moral content of everyday life, while learning was regarded as the responsibility of the individual learner. In the skills-based approach, each human being acts, as Ira Shor (1992, 92) has written, as a “lone entrepreneur” operating independently of social institutions and economic systems. This is the conception of literacy that has for years dominated in the schools, where reading and writing have been understood and assessed in terms of individual ability, motivation, and effort (Luke, Comber, and O’Brien 1996). In this sense, the individual conception of literacy has been more influential than any other and has directed the schooling and literacy experiences of students from the elementary to the college levels.

Dissatisfied with the limitations of the skills-based approach, scholars in the 1980s began to move away from thinking of literacy in terms of individual mentality, or as a private act of mind, to conceiving of it as fundamentally social, or as an expression of cultural practices, values, and beliefs. Such studies, which have become known collectively as the New Literacy Studies, have drawn upon interdisciplinary perspectives and methods of inquiry, including those of psychology (Hayes 1996; Scribner and Cole 1981), linguistics (Chafe 1985; Gee 1996), history (Brandt 2001; Gere 1997), and anthropology (Besnier 1995; Street 2001). This work, while diverse, is typically characterized by fine-grained observation of a culture, by description of the features and patterns of reading and writing
within that culture, and by attention to the details of daily existence that make visible, as Brian Street (2001) has written, “the complexity of local, everyday community literacy practices” (7). Moreover, unlike the putatively “value-neutral” position of the skills-based approach, New Literacy Studies acknowledges “the ideological character of the processes of acquisition and of the meanings and uses of different literacies” (Street 1993, 7).

The contributions of New Literacy Studies have been profoundly important, shifting the focus away from the individual and psychological perspectives that have dominated education research over the last century to reveal the socially situated nature of written communication. Among other things, New Literacy Studies scholars have complicated our understandings of oral and literate communication (Heath 1983), explored the relationships of literacy and ethnicity (Ferdman 1990), legitimized the nonstandard literacy practices of minority populations (Moss 1994), and examined the intersections of home and school literacies (Rose 1989).

In recent years, however, there has been an increasing sense that New Literacy Studies may have arrived at a crossroads of sorts; may have reached the limits of its explanatory powers. The problem is that while culturally based approaches have provided insights into the socially situated nature of reading and writing, these same approaches too often fail to delineate the historical relationships that have shaped the very practices being described. Consequently, literacy practices may end up being represented as though they were self-generating, a product of unique cultural characteristics rather than an outcome of historical and often violent contacts between peoples of unequal power. The result can be models of the world that become, as anthropologist Eric Wolf (1982) wrote of ethnography in his discipline, “a global pool hall in which [self-contained] entities spin off each other like so many hard and round billiard balls” (6).

Failing to make such connections in literacy research, Street (2001) has warned, leaves us with “the old reifications” in which “a particular group of people become associated with a particular literacy; another group of people become associated with another literacy” (9). Literacy scholars have yet, Cushman et al. (2001) argue, “to compile these specific studies into a larger theoretical understanding of literacy” (11), one that can connect the local, historical, and hierarchical relationships that govern literacy development. Street (2003) has gone so far as to suggest that New Literacy Studies may be at an “impasse,” having produced many necessary studies of literacy in cultural context yet still not having fully engaged the structural forces that shape the meanings of literacy and the implications of those forces for learners, especially minority learners.
What is needed, then, it seems, is literacy research that transcends what Brandt and Clinton (2002) call “the limits of the local” in such a way as to connect the diamond-sharp observations of ethnographic studies to the larger structural, systemic, and global forces that shape local contexts. That is the undertaking of this book, which attempts to contribute to the interdisciplinary project of New Literacy Studies by examining the literacy development of one people, the Hmong of Laos, in a way that connects ethnographic, historical, and theoretical perspectives. The book is ethnographic in that it is located in a single community and attempts to represent literacy development from the perspective of community members, communicating their diverging values, beliefs, and attitudes about reading and writing. It is historical in that it considers how literacy in the “ethnographic present” may be seen as a product of a culture’s encounters with other cultures, states, institutions, and other powers in the past. Finally, the book offers a theoretical framework, an interpretive lens and language through which to understand the “general tendencies that hold across diverse case studies.” Writing from These Roots thus attempts to offer a path beyond the current impasse by presenting a model for tracing the ethnographic, historical, and theoretical dimensions of literacy development.

**Stories as History: Notes on Research Methods**

To understand the Hmong experience of literacy, contemporary and historical, I went to what seemed to me the most direct source: Hmong people who had lived the experience. In living rooms and kitchens, workplaces and churches, over cups of tea, rich Hmong meals, and the occasional bottle of beer, I asked people how, when, where, and why they had learned to read and write. In the course of these conversations, often conducted while children were clambering about the room or a television set was blaring in the background, I listened to stories of rural life, civil war, exile, and, interwoven and entangled among all these, literacy development.

In the social sciences, the term for this kind of storytelling and listening is the *life history interview*, or the qualitative data-gathering method in which the researcher seeks to understand the relationships between patterns of daily life as described in the stories of ordinary people and the larger patterns of social relations that govern cultures, states, and societies (Bertaux 1982, 1981). In life history research, patterns of historical experience and change are interpreted from the vantage of the individual, whose story represents a perspective often missing from historical and ethnographic writings (Marshall and Rossman 1995, 88). Life history research looks to indi-
vidual narratives for what Bertaux (1981) called “a progressive elucidation of the historical movement of social relations” (41). From the mosaics of the particular, in other words, may come some apprehension of the whole.

This was my approach in interviewing the Hmong. In the interviews, I wanted to learn how individual experiences of learning to read and write might be representative of larger patterns of literacy development. Though each of the testimonies I collected was in its own way compelling, I read them for a larger story, looking for the ways in which individual testimonies might reveal a broader narrative. In this sense, I offer in this book an example of what the historian Paul Thompson (1978) called “cross-hatching” in oral history, or the mining of a diverse collection of oral narratives to construct a larger argument.

While qualitative research offers an array of methodological options for collecting data (Marshall and Rossman 1995, 78–107), the life history approach seemed the best possible method for conducting this project, given my aims. First, the approach is fundamentally historical. Recalling Bertaux’s (1981) admonition that “the only knowledge we may hope to reach is of a historical character: our present is our past” (35), I wanted to go beyond the “ethnographic present” and locate much of my study in the past. The life history approach promised a means to that end.

Also, the life history approach was a methodology of necessity. As the Hmong do not have long-established traditions of reading and writing, there was no body of Hmong documentation to call upon in researching my study, no Hmong archives to which I might turn. To be sure, there are Hmong academics today writing scholarly accounts of their culture and history, and there are numerous studies of Hmong culture and history written by Western authors. (For recent and excellent examples of both, see Tapp et al. 2004.) In addition, there are other sources on the Hmong from which to draw, such as newspaper accounts, public documents, and government records. None of these published sources, however, offered the insights into Hmong literacy development provided by the oral testimonies of people who had experienced it.

The final reason for choosing the life history method was my desire to collaborate with Hmong people in writing a small piece of their history. One of the characteristics of life histories and oral histories is the way in which they seek to “repair the historical record,” as Shulamit Reinharz (1992) puts it, by co-constructing history with those who have traditionally been excluded from historical writings. In the life history interview, the act of knowledge making is not reserved for the researcher but is shared by storyteller and listener (Bertaux 1981; Thompson 1978). Indeed, one of the strengths of life history research is the place it reserves for people—women,
working people, minorities—who have been marginalized in standard histories of an era or event (see Reinharz 1992, 126–144). In this way can oral history, as Thompson has written, “give back to the people who made and experienced history, a central place” in the way it is written (1978, 2). In writing this book, I sought to create a narrative in which participants might speak for themselves, recalling and interpreting their own histories of life and literacy development. Ultimately, I did not fully realize this goal, for reasons I shall explain presently.

**Interviews and Analysis**

Who was interviewed, and how were they selected? In this project, I relied upon a network of personal contacts to suggest people whom I might interview and to facilitate the meetings. As a former employee of the local Hmong Association in the city where the research was conducted, I had excellent contacts with the educated class of Hmong professionals, including teachers, social workers, business people, and community leaders. However, I did not have the same access to other segments of the Hmong population, including elders, women, and non-English speakers, who had less education but whose insights promised a richer understanding of the Hmong literacy experience. My procedure for reaching these individuals was to go to my contacts, explain what I was interested in, and ask them to recommend people I might interview. These contacts would then typically schedule the interviews by telephone and in some cases accompany me to the home of the person to be interviewed. In the language of social science, this is the form of nonprobability sampling known as “purposive” or “snowball” sampling (Bernard 1988, 97–98), in which the researcher selects a topic of interest, locates people qualified to talk about it, interviews them, and then asks them to recommend additional interviewees. This is essentially the procedure followed in this book.

Over a two-year period, I interviewed forty-one people, conducting fifty interviews in all. Counted in this number were interviews with several non-Hmong, including the late William A. Smalley, one of the creators of the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA), the script that has become widely used by many Hmong in the United States and throughout the world. The number of interviews was not preordained but was arrived at when I came to feel that I understood the historical relationships that had most influenced Hmong literacy development. This is the point in life history research that Bertaux (1981) calls the “saturation of knowledge,” or when the life history interviews have revealed the underlying social relations that
are the object of the study. Shortly after arriving at this point, I concluded the interviews.\textsuperscript{4}

Interviews were open-ended and generally informal. Though I brought a question script to each interview, I never asked all the questions I had prepared; rather, the script was used as a compass, to point in directions I might wish to go.\textsuperscript{5} Interviews were two to six hours long, were taped on audiocassettes, and were subsequently transcribed.\textsuperscript{6} The transcripts were then organized into categories to create what Anne Haas Dyson (1993) called “a vocabulary of sorts” (28) for interpreting the material. The purpose of the categories was to help me understand, as Anselm L. Strauss (1987) puts it, “What’s the main story here, and why?” (31).\textsuperscript{7}

Interviews were conducted in either the Hmong or English languages, and sometimes in both. While many of the people interviewed for this project were fluent English speakers, others were not comfortable speaking English or did not speak it at all. Although I have studied \textit{Hmoob Dawb} (mong daw), the White Hmong dialect of the language, I do not speak it well enough to conduct Hmong-language interviews without assistance. When necessary, then, I worked with an interpreter, who translated my questions and the interviewees’ responses through the course of the interview. The tapes of these discussions were then transcribed by another Hmong speaker who translated, for a second time, the Hmong-language portions of the interview tapes. In this project, eleven of the fifty interviews called for the use of an interpreter; of those eleven interviewees, seven spoke Hmong and some English, and four spoke only Hmong.\textsuperscript{8}

Along with oral testimonies, I also collected a limited number of Hmong-authored writings in both the Hmong and English languages, including personal narratives, poetry, songbooks, historical documents, business plans, school essays, and a screenplay in the Hmong language on the subject of generational conflict. Along with these, I collected letters and editorials written by Hmong authors and published in \textit{The Wausau Daily Herald} and in various Hmong newsletters. I discuss these texts in chapter 6.

\textbf{“Passionate Attachments”: Writing and Representation}

To what extent did the Hmong people who consented to speak with me reclaim, as I had hoped, the “central place” in telling their history? To what extent did they “co-author” this narrative? Whose knowledge is, ultimately, represented in this work, and whose voices are privileged? Such questions
reflect the increasing self-consciousness that qualitative researchers have come to feel about their methods and their acknowledgment that in seeking to give voice to others they are in fact writing from a specific cultural, political, and ethnographic position (Clifford 1988; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Rosaldo 1993; Tapp 2004). Researchers working with so-called “marginal” or “disenfranchised” populations must address the issue of who speaks in a research project, whose story gets told, and whose interests are represented. Moreover, the “subjects” of research have in some cases refused their traditional identities as the silent partner in ethnographic research and offered counter-narratives and identities to those created for them by the researcher.

I wrestled with these issues in writing about the Hmong. My vantage point was that of a white, middle-class male. I was introduced to the Hmong in the 1980s, when I worked in refugee camps in the Philippines and Thailand. I came to know the Hmong in Wausau through working in the early 1990s for the local Hmong Association, doing English-language development and community organizing. Through this work, I came to admire the Hmong people both generally and as individuals. In writing this book, I sought to acknowledge my respect for the Hmong by giving them a central place in telling the story of their literacy development. But this is not what finally happened. As the project went on, my own questions, motivations, interests, and limitations predominated. In the questions I asked, the categories I created, the testimonies I edited, the project became more my own and less the property of those who spoke with me. And while I have tried to represent faithfully and ethically what the interviewees told me, what I ultimately present here are my own interpretations, polemics, and conclusions about the Hmong experience of literacy. This statement in no way absolves this work of the questions of representation raised above, but it is my way of acknowledging my own “passionate attachments,” as Jacqueline Jones Royster (2000, 280) termed the stance and commitments of the researcher. This story, then, is not “the Hmong story” or even “a Hmong story,” even if we could sort out the definitions of such terms. Rather, it is a story told by a scholar about one aspect of the Hmong experience—their literacy development. So must this book be judged.

The “Rhetorical Conception”: A Theoretical Framework for Literacy Development

The life history approach revealed the breadth of settings, purposes, and even writing systems implicated in the narrative of Hmong literacy devel-
opment. Hmong people I met with variously recalled learning to read and write in rural villages, military bases, and church basements. They spoke of becoming literate so that they might write letters, read bibles, or compose autobiographies. They recounted studying scripts representing the Lao, Hmong, and English languages. Listening to these stories, I was struck by the extent to which Hmong people learning to read and write did so in contexts of distinctly different symbolic environments—environments that offered them unique ways of understanding themselves and their positions in the world.

Becoming literate, it seemed, meant learning to manipulate a graphical code not for its own sake, not simply to read and write for its own sake, but so that one might enter a particular symbolic universe and take up any one or many of the social identities—student, Christian, soldier, refugee—offered in that universe. Becoming literate also meant, the Hmong stories suggested, refusing or re-imagining these identities and using literacy to create alternative understandings of self and the world. Listening to the testimonies, I came to think that what mattered were not so much the actual practices of reading and writing, but rather the symbolic worlds in which these acts were given meaning. In this book, I call these symbolic worlds “rhetorics” and posit what I call the “rhetorical conception of literacy development.”

Let me say what I mean by “rhetoric,” which is a troublesome term, one laden throughout its history with cultural baggage, much of it pejorative. In this book, when I refer to “rhetoric” I do not mean the classical arts of persuasion or the ornamentation of elite discourse. Nor am I referring to the popular conceptions of rhetoric as a synonym for doubletalk, manipulation, or bombast. Rather, rhetoric as I mean it here refers to the ways of using language and other symbols by institutions, groups, or individuals for the purpose of shaping conceptions of reality. This means that we may think of “rhetorics” in the plural rather than imagining a single, coherent, and all-unifying “rhetoric.” For example, the languages of governments, schools, and media I think of as “rhetorics,” and the ways these operate within community life I consider “rhetorical.” Rhetorics provide the frameworks in which individual acts of reading and writing take place.

I derived this view from Kenneth Burke (1969, 1966, 1945, 1937), the critic, philosopher, and boundary-breaking thinker whose vast landscape of work anticipated much of the contemporary conversation concerning discursive formations of identity. Burke extended “the range of rhetoric” beyond the classical function of persuasion to what he called “identification,” sometimes called “consubstantiality,” by which Burke meant the use of symbols for the purpose of inducing identification and cooperation
with others (1969, 20–23). Rather than simply persuading people, Burke suggested, rhetoric socializes them, inducing individuals to identify with one another and to assent to the communicative norms of their society. While rhetorical language is instrumental, a means for gaining advantage and deflecting “the...regions of malice and the lie,” it is also the means by which listeners and speakers come to know themselves and their place within cultural and material hierarchies. Rhetoric in this sense offers, Burke suggested, “sheer ‘identities’ of the Symbolic...the identifications whereby a specialized activity makes one a participant in some social or economic class” (1969, 27–28).

This is the rhetoric of identity making, or the ways in which language has been used to invite human beings to understand themselves within the framework of tribe—a nation, culture, faith, institution, or family. “Our basic principle,” Burke wrote, “is our contention that all symbolism can be treated as the ritualistic naming and changing of identity” (1937, quoted in Eddy 2003, 2). Burke’s notion of “identity” does not refer to a single, solitary, and unified self, but rather, as Timothy W. Crusius (1999) puts it, to the particular “pattern of identifications” (40) or engagements with different forms and practices of symbolic activity that make up an individual’s world. In this, Burke anticipated more recent understandings of identity not as an individuated and private essence, but rather as a gathering place of diverse symbols, commitments, and social practices (Ivanic 1998).

Symbolic identities are not merely individual, but also public. Paul Stob (2005) has argued that for Burke, language was fundamentally social and “transforms the individual into a specific type of social being” (236). “The mind, being formed by language,” Burke wrote in Attitudes Toward History, “is formed by a public grammar” (1959, quoted in Stob 2005, 236). In this formulation, rhetoric’s identity-making functions, the ways in which it constitutes the individual as an individual, as a citizen, soldier, family member, or other, are regarded as prior to the persuasive devices recognized by classical theorists. Before the citizens may be persuaded, they must first identify themselves as citizens. “If it is easier to praise Athens before Athenians than before Laecedemonians,” Maurice Charland (1987) has written in a twist of Aristotle’s famous observation, “we should ask how those in Athens come to experience themselves as Athenians” (134). Human beings define themselves, in other words, within the symbols and ideology of a given rhetoric. In doing so, they build for themselves and inhabit a social identity that is subject to persuasion. “We are invited by the rhetoric,” in Edwin Black’s (1993) words, “not simply to believe something but to be something. We are solicited by the discourse to fulfill its blandishments with our very selves” (172). In this way of understanding, rhetoric
does not merely persuade but helps to create the ideological identifications that make persuasion possible.

I use the term “ideology” here not as a synonym for “false consciousness” or adherence to a particular doctrine, but rather, after James Berlin (1987), as “the pluralistic conceptions of social and political arrangements that are present in a society at any given time” (4). Rhetorics are the languages of ideologies and offer the symbolic means through which ideologies become known and are imposed, shared, understood, or overthrown. Rhetoric and ideology are in this sense enmeshed, impossible to separate. Rhetorics are ideological, and ideologies rhetorical.

In a rhetorical conception of literacy, individual acts of reading and writing, of decoding and encoding, have little meaning in themselves. They are largely technical operations that assume significance only in what Burke (1969) called the “wider context of motives” (31), or the shaping ideology of the rhetoric. This means that all elements of literacy instruction, including the selection of reading materials, the choice of teaching methodologies, the assignment of essay topics, and even the teacher’s conception of the learner are ultimately rhetorical and ideological, ultimately intended to promote a vision of the world and the place of learners within it. To see literacy development as rhetorical is to consider the influence of rhetorics on what writers choose to say, the audience they imagine in saying it, the genres in which they elect to write, and the words and phrases they use to communicate their messages. It is also to acknowledge the influence of rhetorics on what people refrain from saying and the expressive possibilities that are foreclosed to them. Literacy in this sense is a product of powerfully shaping rhetorics that work to define, inscribe, and organize human activity.

What I am calling a rhetoric is closely related to the concept of “discourse,” another term used across disciplines to suggest a range of theoretical and general meanings. Literacy scholars have called upon the term “discourse” in examining the material, social, and political dimensions of literacy and how these affect individual learners (e.g., Gee 1990; Street 1995; Yagelski 2000). James Gee (1990) defines discourse as the “socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group . . . or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful ‘role’ [within the group]” (143). In this view, literacy operates as a discursive practice that works to construct identity and one’s position within a group or culture.

This work has been indispensable in explaining the role of symbolic activity in shaping human identities and positions, and the ideas presented in this book are indebted to such scholarship. However, I choose to use
the terms “rhetoric” and “rhetorics of literacy” over “discourse” and “discourses of literacy” to emphasize the role of human agents, in this case readers and writers, to negotiate these shaping discourses, and to construct new identities and social positions. The term “rhetoric,” for all its elitist history, its cyclic declines in reputation, and its popular connotations of bombast, misdirection, and deceit, yet retains its associations with agency, social action, and democratic practice. Rhetoric, Burke reminds us, is a kind of symbolic action, a means through which individuals may respond to and influence the institutional forces that work to define human possibilities. There is, therefore, a tension in the definition of rhetoric offered here. Rhetorics are the specialized collections of symbols and languages used by institutions to control human beings. Yet rhetorics may also be understood as the response, the opposing set of symbols and languages used by individuals and groups to negotiate or resist institutional pressures. So if institutions can “control people by controlling their literacy,” in Beth Daniell’s (1999) words, so it is also possible, again quoting Daniell, for “individuals and groups to use literacy to act either in concert with or in opposition to this power” (406). The terms “rhetoric” and “rhetorics of literacy” are meant to indicate these opposing possibilities—the ways in which reading and writing can be used to define, control, and circumscribe, but also the ways in which human beings can use written language to turn aside, re-create, and re-imagine.

Finally, the rhetorical conception stands in sharp contrast to standard treatments of literacy acquisition by immigrants, refugees, and adults generally, which are often framed in terms of life-skill competencies (Seufert 1999), vocational training (Grognet 1997), and citizenship (Nixon and Keenan 1997). Such treatments typically view literacy as instrumental, a means for assimilation into the dominant culture, political institutions, and economy of the United States. Students learn to read and write so that they may competently “function” within the new culture, or find a job, or become an American citizen. In the rhetorical conception of literacy, however, the emphasis is on symbolic activities that offer learners their “sheer identities of the symbolic,” whether those of new resident, employee, or citizen, and what these may mean for readers and writers who may be new to the United States.

**Overview of the Book**

Chapters 1 and 2 provide the historical background necessary for understanding the Hmong literacy narrative. In chapter 1, I review Hmong
history in China and Laos, concentrating on those events that led to the Hmong involvement in the Vietnam War. The chapter traces the beginning of Hmong history in China, follows the Hmong migration to Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century, and examines Hmong entanglements with the French, Laotian, and U.S. governments in the twentieth century. All of these historical episodes, I argue, played a part in the way Hmong people have come to use and value literacy. In chapter 2, I consider the history of the writing systems developed for the Hmong language and the role of these systems in the construction of individual and cultural identity. Reviewing the array of scripts invented for the Hmong language by assorted governments, missionary organizations, and messianic Hmong leaders, I look at how each of these scripts invented for the Hmong language offered readers and writers a place in a larger social, cultural, political, or religious hierarchy.

In chapter 3, I examine the concept of Hmong “preliteracy.” Drawing upon testimonies I have collected, I critique the widely held notion of Hmong “preliteracy” by arguing that this term and its cognates—“non-literate,” “semi-literate,” and so forth—are rhetorical constructions that devalue the cultures to which they are applied and obscure the historical processes through which literacy is promoted or suppressed. The chapter documents the ways in which Hmong preliteracy, far from being an expression of Hmong values, practices, or aspirations, should be seen as a result of the Hmong historical interactions with the Chinese, Laotian, French, and U.S. governments.

In chapter 4, I draw again upon the testimonies, as well as upon published ethnographies and histories of the Hmong, to argue that when the Hmong in Laos did encounter literacy, it came in the context of three powerfully shaping rhetorics: those of Laotian public schooling, Hmong military life, and missionary Christianity. I suggest that each of these rhetorics influenced the ways in which literacy was taught, learned, and practiced and that each also offered learners different conceptions of themselves and the world. The chapter also considers the ways in which Hmong people began appropriating their newfound literacy skills for their own purposes, such as writing personal letters, keeping journals, and organizing political resistance after the communist victory in Laos.

Chapters 5 and 6 move the story to the United States. In chapter 5, I consider the rhetorics that shaped reading and writing instruction in the United States and the implication of these for Hmong learners. Specifically, I examine the rhetorics of U.S. public schooling, Christian churches, and the workplace. As in chapter 4, I also recount the ways in which Hmong people came to use literacy learned in these settings for purposes of their
own. In chapter 6, I examine literacy practiced outside of institutional contexts. I look at personal narratives authored by Hmong adult refugees, at the writings and literacy histories of Hmong women in the local community, and finally at the letters and essays published by Hmong writers in the public forum of the daily newspaper. I consider how all these literacy practices and texts offered alternatives to majority inscriptions of the Hmong and suggested new readings of the Hmong experience in the United States at the end of the twentieth century.

The book concludes by considering what implications the Hmong story and the rhetorical conception of literacy might have for other literacy learners, in other settings, inscribed in other rhetorics. I consider, too, some of the practical implications of this study, what it might mean to literacy teachers and learners in schools, community centers, prisons, colleges, and other institutional contexts. My intent in the final chapter is to demonstrate how the Hmong story offers a constructive way of thinking about the question of how people learn to read and write in the twenty-first century and what these practices may mean for individuals and society.