

Hmong Americans, literacy, and the rhetoric of community ethics

The aim of this paper is to evaluate the intersection between the public rhetoric of sustainability and the experience of the Hmong diaspora, particularly in the context of local efforts to develop culturally appropriate literacy programs. I juxtapose the Hmong experience of farming and its role in community self-definition with sustainability-focused adult literacy programs in the upper Midwest. I am particularly interested in the way that these programs, which are designed to teach immigrant farmers how to market sustainable and organic produce at farmers' markets, bring rhetoric about sustainability and environmentalism into the knowledge system of the Hmong. These programs, while offering very particular training in American food ethics, often fail to integrate the Hmong community's own ways of doing/knowing into their programs.

This paper takes as a starting place two theories in rhetorical scholarship: recent work on subaltern counterpublics, and the ecocomposition movement and its ideas for developing local literacy programs. From the former, I take an interest in understanding the Hmong American community's relationship to farming, which I attempt to reconstruct through interviews and memoirs. Once I have established the rhetoric of this particular 'counterpublic,' I then consider how ecocomposition can help educators develop programs that are sensitive to the community's needs and desires. My intention is that this will eventually lead to considerations of how local systems of ethics can point towards new approaches to adult literacy programs.

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