

Commentary

Biliteracy, transnationalism, multimodality, and identity: Trajectories across time and space

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Herein, we are privileged to be given a close and detailed look at the lives and literacies of transnational multilingual youth and adults of diverse origins and communities from across the United States. These are multilingual lives and literacies located on the west coast, or in western mountain, southwest, midwest, or northeast U.S. There are New Yorkers of Dominican, Colombian, Bengali, and Chabad Jewish-American heritage, Mexican immigrants from Guanajuato and Jalisco in Iowa and California, respectively, and adult women refugees from Bosnia, Iran, and Sudan now residing in the intermountain west.

The authors make clear that these cross-border movements of bodies, as of goods and information, are the direct result of globalization and specifically the internationalization of systems of production (Richardson-Bruna), processes which “tend to de-territorialize important economic, social and cultural practices from their traditional boundaries in nation-states” (McGinnis et al., citing Suárez-Orozco & Qin-Hillard, 2004: 14). The youth and adults we meet herein are transnational in that they have moved bodily across national borders while maintaining and cultivating practices tied – in varying degrees – to their home countries.

The accounts tell us, in-depth, about the multilingual and multimodal literacies and literacy practices these transmigrants bring with them and those they develop in their new contexts, and about the identities and social relations maintained and transformed through those literacy practices. The analyses show us how these local practices and identities are profoundly rooted in processes of globalization, and how they constantly shift and develop across time and space.

In reading and re-reading these essays, most of them the first time for the 2005 American Anthropological Association session at which they were presented, and all of them now for this

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special issue, several themes stand out for me in the cases presented: the image of transnational spaces, the emphasis on multimodal literacy practices, the demonstration of active construction and narration of self and identity through those practices, and the evidence of trajectories of literacy practices across time and space. Equally notable are the innovative, long-term, in-depth ethnographies the researchers have undertaken to plumb these themes. The following paragraphs comment on each theme in relation to the cases, followed by brief remarks on the ethnographic methods used. I conclude with reflections on the accounts in light of my own related ethnographic and theoretical work on the continua of biliteracy and the opening up of ideological and implementational spaces for multilingual language education policy and practice.

1. Transnational spaces

In every case, the lives of the individuals we are introduced to through these essays have been materially affected by global and transnational processes. In some cases, they are immigrants or refugees recently arrived to the U.S., while in others they are more settled first- or second-generation immigrant or transnationally affiliated individuals. Recent immigrants include María, a student at Luperón High School in New York City who arrived in 2004 at age 17 with her family from the Dominican Republic, one of the large and fast-growing Dominican immigrant population in the U.S.—and in particular New York City where they are the poorest of all ethnic and racial groups (Bartlett). Similarly, Gabriela, Rosa, and Aalia, newly arrived from Mexico in 2003 and in their first year as students at Captainville High in Iowa, are part of a large movement of Mexicans from Guanajuato to Iowa as a result of globalizing economic forces (Richardson-Bruna); and Alouette, Mary, Moría, Ayak, Alma, and Sheida, at Valley Instruction and Training Program in the Intermountain West, arrived in 2000 as adult refugees from war-torn areas of Africa, Europe, and the Middle East (Warriner). More settled immigrants include Carlota, Genobeba, and Maria, three young Latinas in the San Francisco Bay area whose families maintain ties with their home communities in Jalisco, Mexico (Sánchez); and the three transnational youth in suburban communities of New York, along a continuum from newly arrived Julia from Colombia, to first-generation American-Bengali immigrant Subosh whose family maintains ties with the home community in India, and on to U.S. native-born Jewish-American Amanda who identifies with and is currently living in Israel (McGinnis et al.).

The cases show how, though these individuals move or have moved bodily across national borders, they maintain affinity ties and social networks in more than one country, in most cases their home and host countries. Transnationalism is differentiated from immigration, in that the latter involves a more permanent affiliation with the host country and separation from the home country while the former may imply no long-term intention to stay beyond what is economically necessary. Transnationalism thus lends itself to a dually linked process of ‘becoming other’ to both home and host national-cultural contexts (Richardson-Bruna, citing Trueba, 2004).

Indeed, the accounts herein demonstrate how these youth and adults carve out and maintain transnational spaces—be they pedagogical spaces (Bartlett; Richardson-Bruna), social spaces (Sánchez), online spaces (McGinnis et al.), or employment spaces (Warriner); and document the ways in which they use, or seek to use, literacy practices within these spaces to position themselves as academically or socioeconomically successful. To be sure, some of the spaces are more social or geographic while others are instantiated primarily in the literacy practices themselves; yet in all cases the analyses here emphasize how these spaces afford opportunities for the construction and narration of self and identity through transnational literacies.

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