

In Place of a Preface

Cautions, Considerations

As I compose these prefatory remarks, memorials are being held across the United States to mark the thirteenth anniversary of the September 11 (2001) attacks. In these thirteen years, much has been reported about what the day signifies, and how it has changed the United States and the rest of the world. In a response essay discussing what the events have meant for educators in the United States, Jennifer Bay observes, “While we teach our students argument and vehemently defend its importance, argument fails. The events of September 11, 2001, were not arguments; they were statements. They were events; they were not arguments. For all of our conviction about arguments and the ability of arguments to accomplish understanding and mediation, they often fail to enact change. What we see all around us in contemporary culture is less the use of argument and more a pervasive enactment of the statement” (2002, 694).

Bay’s assertion makes sense: when wars and vengeance determine the course of history, it is difficult to imagine the significance of arguments to develop understanding, establish common ground, and build consensus or enact change. Her observation also echoes that of many other educators concerning their responsibility in the current climate characterized by unending

wars and transborder flows of information, labor, refugees, and disease. However, it is important to recognize that Bay is also speaking from a certain cultural-institutional and epistemological location. Her major concern is what the event means for those of “us” who are in the business of literacy learning and instruction in a primarily Greco-Roman, Anglo-American tradition. For people like Sameer, a US citizen born to South Asian parents and whose story figures prominently in this study, however, 9/11 became, in his own words, “a sentence” rather than a statement.¹ It was a sentence that a majority of recent immigrants, especially of Islamic faith, had to live through although they had “nothing to do with the crimes” of that day.² How does such a politico-cultural backdrop shape the literate lives and politics of South Asian immigrants in a post-9/11 United States? What arguments do these immigrants develop and deploy in response to such a “sentence” and the general condition brought about by migrations across borders, accompanied by other recent changes in global economy and information technologies? More generally, how have these immigrants responded to the rhetorical exigency created by globalization, immigration, relocation, and new communications technologies? In this book, I seek to address these questions by exploring the ways in which South Asian immigrants carried (or needed to carry), created, taught, negotiated, and used different literacies both within and across communities of different faith traditions in a Mid-Southern US city that will be known by its pseudonym, Kingsville.

Literacies are not just a set of technical skills but cultural practices ranging from reading and writing to other ways of using symbols and interacting with, and being in, the world, as recent scholarship has stressed. Scholars have studied how literacies are acquired, used, and valued in a variety of settings, and how the values of certain literacies or their practices shift over time. However, the usual approach in those studies is to look at literacy acts or practices as shaped by or characteristic of a given institutional or discursive context. As a result, the practices we study are often projected as bounded by that context, community, or setting, whether intended thus or not, even as the actual practices may

defy such a codification. Sometimes such an emphasis may be the consequence of one's desire to zero in on certain practices in a given space. Or it may be just a problem of language use, as when one characterizes a given iteration of literacy practice as "local" to contrast it with a version of the "global." In any case, such studies may lead us to tune out how similarly identified meaning-making practices are carried out across spaces, and how literacies themselves are in motion, constantly reinvented and refigured in response to unfolding exigencies. In short, we fail to notice the migrations of literacies across spaces and contexts, or, as instances of such processes, how literate practices are re-created and recirculated in the process of relocation and socialization across spaces.³

This book, then, revolves around this question: how do literacies travel? How are symbolic resources invented and reinvented, circulated and recirculated, within and across communities and vast geocultural boundaries? The study primarily looks into South Asian immigrants' (re-)creation and (re)circulation of "native" identified languages and cultures by attending to various contexts of those practices and demonstrates the multidimensional migrations of literacies. In so doing, this book also illustrates how the creation, sustenance, and re-presentation of native-identified languages and cultures actually constitute real work, which I will call "word work" to align with and articulate some of my research participants' experience of their labor of love—their work of building and rebuilding culture and identity through literacy acts and practices. Word work here is not the same as teaching and learning vocabulary, as this phrase may sometimes indicate, nor is it limited to work with words in print or speech alone. It is rather the use of language(s), writ large, in any mode or media as well as its strategic use in a given cultural ecology or network and is closer to Toni Morrison's use of the term ("word-work") in her Nobel lecture. Word work also carries a clear rhetorical overtone: it changes according to the audience, the occasion, and the creator or enactor of that work, which is to say that it is in flux and constantly on the move.⁴ To account for the mobility of literacies, we need to understand why, under what conditions, and with whom they travel.

To stress the mobile nature of literacies, I use the trope of travel as an organizing metaphor of this book, also evident in the chapter titles. Literacies for the South Asians in this study are what these immigrants do between their points of departures and returns, literally and metaphorically. The trope is, in fact, an attempt to capture the research participants' understanding of identity and life's purpose—both as individuals and as a culture or community—and their reinvention of certain symbolic practices to construct their heritage. They often called such practices “roots” of their identity and strove to “preserve” that identity while “fitting in” in the new places they now thought of as home. To clarify, they defined cultural heritage and identity in terms of a continuous flow, sometimes even using the metaphor of a river. Their cultural practices demonstrate that such a history and identity are not a given but to be re-created and sustained through specific sets of cultural practices or word work. Moreover, most of them used the metaphor of a journey not only to describe their life as immigrants but also (and especially) to highlight the value of learning, transfer, and reinvention of their knowledge and identity in response to unfolding exigencies. It is, therefore, only by looking through an analytical framework of migration and word work that we can begin to understand their cultural practices and the use of those practices to create and sustain their identity (or route and reroute their roots) and, in the process, appreciate the migrantness of literacies.

I understand the risk that the focus on cross-border movements may entail: it can be used (or seen as an attempt) to eschew attention to location or its attendant complexities, but the migrations of bodies and literacies here are occasioned by a complex web of local-global and internal-external forces. The mobile bodies not only leave their footprints behind but also carry deep impressions of their “roots” that they work to (re)define and (re)enact in relation to internal and external pressures in their new homes (although these “roots” are in play in their putatively originary home, too). My hope here is to demonstrate how the very idea of locale in itself is in motion, as demonstrated by the work (the word work) of South Asian immigrants to contextu-

alize and recontextualize languages and cultures presented in this study. This is one of the themes that should be consistently evident throughout the book. Therefore, without further ado, I would like to invite my readers to consider getting onboard and into some ways of making meaning along the way, for the presentation here will occasionally veer off the more or less predictable contours of academic prose.⁵ With apologies to St. Augustine, let it be a travel to the worlds mediated through a book.⁶ There is an inherent irony in this invitation. Mobile bodies carry and modify their “own” ways—and adopt different ways—of making meaning, as they adapt to new cultural, political, and professional contexts. Their literacies, as practices and processes, are far from settled, and this is precisely what a book may be ill-equipped to show. My hope is that paying attention to the literate lives at the interstices of cultures and nations will not only show how “imagined communities” are formed and transformed across vast distances of geography, history, and culture, but it will also lay bare those constructs as fluid, hybrid, and interstitial.

A note to my readers with regard to the language and style of the book may be in order here. I have no illusion that this book is for a scholarly audience with interest in literacy studies, cross-cultural communication, globalization, South Asian American studies, and transnational cultures irrespective of their disciplinary training. However, I have tried to keep the language and style in some parts here closer to what some of the study participants considered “normal.” That means, for example, initiating the discussion by announcing where I come from, as in chapter 1, instead of a topic sentence directly leading to my major claims and beginning each chapter with a series of quotations, primarily from the research participants. While it is not entirely unusual in standardized academic writing to begin a chapter or a book with a quotation or two to introduce the major claim, I use more than one to announce each chapter here to alert my readers to different threads that the section is going to weave together. Although this practice is not that radical either, my choice is guided by the preferred practice of some of my key research participants, who started their discussions or lectures with popular and well-

regarded aphorisms while addressing the audience from their own discourse communities. Their audiences knew those proverbs well, so the speaker achieved persuasive force without having to explain or interpret the quotations. I choose a middle path here for obvious reasons by engaging them only sparsely, so I cannot claim the same degree of persuasive effect. I also provide different kinds of details pertaining to literacy in chapter 1 before joining in on the scholarly conversations about literacy and culture.⁷ Among other things, in the early part of that chapter, I try to emulate Brinda's approach to what she sometimes casually called "work with words." In one of the many productive sessions midway through the project, Brinda, a Hindu school teacher on the weekends and a physician during the week, argued that illustrative details trumped telling. In her own words, "If you have the patience and the right attitude, you will get more out of illustrations than just a few short statements. I know the value of accurate and precise kinds of information. I am in the medical field, so I know its value . . . life is on the line, right, if something goes wrong? But you've got to understand that you should use descriptions and details . . . in their contexts. To tell the truth, that gives a truer picture of life. Short statements are incomplete and often exaggerate or mislead."

Fortunately, for me, I am in no rush to save lives. In fact, I am in the business of crafting descriptions and can even afford a little digression here and there if that helps re-create the context of meaning-making, especially if Brinda and a few others who populate this work think that such details and quieter reflections facilitate a better understanding of as amorphous a subject as literacy and culture at a time of profound change. In the interest of time and space, and owing to my own academic training, I will, however, be making "short statements" as well, not the kind of statements that Bay (2002) referred to metaphorically but the kind to which Brinda refers as a code for the convention of making explicit claims in academic writing. Indeed, a lot of them. It will, of course, be up to the readers to judge the completeness of those statements. After all, this is nothing but a word work.