

Introduction

From Warzone to Natural Disasters

In the summer of 2022, I was returning home to the US from a short visit to Eastern Europe. Four days before my flight, the airline had been sending notifications about the unexpected course of hurricane Ian and its potential impact on travel in the southern states of the US. I live in Florida and such messages no longer scare me. As I was carefully packing my carry-on in case I would be stranded for days away from home, I could not shake the thought that I was flying from a warzone (Romania/ Eastern Europe/ Ukraine-Russia war) to a disaster area (Hurricane Ian). Before I left the US, I had bought, among other things, potassium iodine tablets in case a nuclear attack was launched against Romania and other neighboring countries. Perhaps, such measures seem futile, but they may indicate a small amount of control we attempt to exert in a world that has made transnational movement a daring endeavor.

Transnational mobility in the last five years (2020–2025) experienced numerous, dramatic, and rapid changes due to wars, natural disasters, or epidemics. Some of these happened in the span of twenty-four hours.¹ The recent COVID-19 pandemic accelerated our sense of connectedness as we have become incredibly susceptible to health mandates or political and economic directives. Migrants, whether they are refugees, temporary workers, tourists, or immigrants seeking to arrive to a new homeland, are central actors in transnational mobility. Whenever

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(im)migrants become the center of public discourse, they are often depicted as either heroes or foes. The heroic narrative of the immigrant who left everything behind and pulled themselves up by their bootstraps is a well-known trope. From public figures to ordinary folks, this trope is as pervasive and convincing as its counterpart—the foe. The immigrant becomes vulnerable, particularly in times of political, economic, or societal crises—like the COVID-19 pandemic. It is not only the public sphere that perpetuates this dichotomy. My fieldwork in an immigrant community in the Midwest reveals a similar pattern. The first immigrant I met for my study in this community wanted to introduce me to people who made it: successful businessmen and women, doctors, professors, etc. I, on the other hand, sought to document the literate experience of the plumber, the cabinet maker, the cleaning lady, along with the accounts of outstanding success. These typological narratives of the immigrant experience, divided between success and failure, are not necessarily detrimental to the representation of the immigrant experience unless we neglect the range of different experiences and the diverse and complex lives of these immigrants. Remaining unidimensional, stereotypical depictions of immigrant narratives capture only *the economic* man, through either success or failure. This book aims to change that. While acknowledging the significance of political economies that shape the immigrant life, I account for the economic, political, *and* emotional work that configures the complex lives of immigrants. I use literacy brokers as an analytic to do this. In this ethnographic study of transnational literacies of Romanian immigrants, I show that as literacy brokers move across contexts, they accumulate knowledge, negotiate discourses, and create alliances (co-brokering) to help others with reading and writing. In doing so, these brokers serve more than instrumental ends; they perform literacy as affinity by brokering personal experiences and languages of nation-states and by participating in advocacy for the sake of others.

In the book *Philadelphia: An Open Door for You*, celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the Philadelphia Romanian Church in Niles, IL, Reverend George Galiş narrates fragments about his arrival in the US in the early 1970s. As he boarded on the last leg of his trip to Chicago, emotions ran wild, Galiş writes. He wondered whether anyone would wait for him at the airport, whether he would have a place to live, and what sort of interactions he would forge with the local community of faith. His anxieties were appeased as a group of ten people waited for him. One slender man, who Galiş did not know, approached him, and said, “You, Rev. Galiş, are coming to live with me until your family arrives” (Galiş 2013, 29). The same slender man introduced Galiş to the south side of Chicago and the division of neighborhoods: “From the Onciu family, I learned

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that we were in the South side of the city of Chicago and that neighborhoods were situated by nationalities as such: In the South, there are the Polish, Yugoslavian, Slovak, African-American, Mexican neighborhood[s]. In the North, there were Scots, Germans, French, Romanians, Hungarians, Italians, and a part of the Spanish” (Galiş 2013, 29–30).

Narratives like this make history. Personal stories—about leaving Romania and arriving in the US but also accounts detailing how the personal intersects certain institutions or social groups such as churches or ethnic communities—document experiences that transcend physical boundaries. From these immigrant narratives that circulate in ethnic communities, I focus on the “slender man,” the one who approaches the newly arrived and mediates their process of becoming American. The “slender man” placates the fears of the unknown in a new country, walking with the new immigrant through the steps and aspects of the new life: housing, jobs, enrolling children in school, social security, and so on. Providing a generic map of ethnic neighborhoods, he is the trail guide concerning issues of ethnic divisions, hierarchical structures, and marginalization. Ultimately, the “slender man” functions as a broker—he negotiates boundaries between the old world and the new world, between personal and larger socio-economic and political structures such as immigration and governmental agencies, administrative offices, local communities, schools, and churches. My goal here is to examine how this brokering operates through language, text, and culture.

Deborah Brandt’s work on literacy sponsorship and her deep awareness of economic realities has influenced my ethnographic work in the Romanian immigrant community in the Chicago area. Like Brandt, my work on individual literacy development in everyday life is a portal into larger economic systems as they have been discussed, challenged, and reconfigured by individual agents. However, unlike Brandt’s work, my analysis shows that, in the economic exchange of information between the sponsor and the sponsored, there is a middle ground occupied by what I call broker and co-broker.

I present here an ethnographic study of transnational literacy histories of Romanian immigrants who immigrated to the US before and after 1989—the year that marks the official overturn of the Communist regime in Romania. Since these immigrants were educated for the most part during Nicolae Ceauşescu’s political regime (1965–1989), I was interested in documenting the socio-economic and political conditions that shaped these immigrants’ literacy education in their home country (Romania) and what aspects of those literacies they carried with them into the new country (the US). I embarked on this project with a broad question: How do people negotiate textual, cultural, and physical boundaries

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through literacy? As I progressed in my research and conversations with immigrants, my questions became more focused:

- Given these immigrants' history of censored literacy and a pedagogy focused on the collective rather than the individual, how does one create a space for oneself? How does the individual manage and maneuver larger institutions and to what end?
- As immigrants move, which aspects of literacy education move with them and become recontextualized in the new country? What are the new literate practices emerging in the country of destination and how do people learn to perform them?

The initial data analysis using grounded theory guided me to the middleman, the broker that helps other people with reading and writing in the process of immigration. Hence, subsequent data collection framed the research and the analysis with literacy brokers at the center of this inquiry on immigrant writing. My refined research was informed by these questions:

- Who are the literacy brokers in the context of immigration and what roles do they take?
- What forms of literacy mediation do these brokers perform and under what conditions—socio-economic and political?
- What implications can we derive from their emotional work and how does this impact our view of literacy in transnational contexts?

A focus on Eastern European (im)migrants allows for a few unique perspectives that complement the work of other scholars on immigrant writing.² First, due to the Cold War era and the formation of the Communist bloc as a conglomerate of countries that shared similar socialist agendas, political economies are central in the lives of (im)migrants from this region. Certainly, political economies are important in any circumstance, including our day-to-day moments, yet in critical situations like a pandemic, natural disasters, or war, they become incredibly powerful. Immigrant narratives offer a lens that makes political economies conspicuous, allowing our attention to be directed toward and shaped by the mundane and, by extension, our literate lives. Eastern European immigrants have often been treated as a conglomerate, even if each country from this region has its particularities. Romania, for instance, has become known as a Latin island in a Slavic sea, a common self-identification inspired by nineteenth century Romanian historians and linguistics in search of affirming the Romanian national identity (Boia 2001, 36). Romanians speak a Romance language and identify linguistically and culturally with the French, the Italians, the Spanish

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or the Portuguese. This cultural and linguistic affiliation with Romance languages and cultures becomes significant in the process of migration. It impacts their jobs, professional trajectories, and adaptation.

Second, Eastern European immigrants often are less visible in the US context. Many stories of refugees remain untold because at the time of their departure, Romania continued to be under a dictatorship until 1989. Making their stories known too soon would have posed a risk to their lives. On the other hand, the new immigrants, who came after 1989, also remained largely invisible because the majority were college educated and spoke English well. Many blended smoothly into mainstream America. While their stories remained hidden from public contexts, in other contexts, such as immigrant enclaves, around kitchen tables, or at cultural ethnic events, stories of “escape” have often delighted the ears of the listeners. As a Romanian ethnic, I often heard these stories whispered in small circles even before any research had begun. “How did you escape?” or “How did you cross the border?” Such questions generated many conversations. Such questions have influenced this research.

Finally, the Eastern European experience in the US also provides a window into other immigrant and minority groups’ literate and linguistic experience. Due to their historical ties and geographical proximity, immigrants from the southern US border are more likely to be featured in the public or political discourse.³ Recent immigrant policies to contain or manage immigrant waves are geared more towards immigrants from Mexico, Guatemala, Venezuela, Honduras, and El Salvador and less towards Eastern Europeans. Certainly, the recent war in Ukraine has slightly changed this trend, as it happens with other major global events, but the southern US border continues to be at the center of attention when it comes to immigration. Important to note is that often immigrants develop affiliations with other immigrant groups. As such, stories told by one immigrant group, especially one less visible, can provide insights into trends and problems in other groups and in immigration in general. Eastern European immigrants as a group become that middleman that sees and engages different perspectives. Certainly, immigrant literacy is my main focus. Throughout the book, I will show how Eastern European migrants and refugees use language and literacy bureaucratically and affectively to negotiate political economies across borders. In this process, I also account for how immigrants engage alternative economies that foreground collaborative actions, informal sites, and affinity as energizers for and within discursive formations. Immigrants’ connection to political economies is not just engagement, but a transformative experience.

Writing's Impact on Economic Activity, Economic Frames

A quick look at the history of writing shows its strong connection to economic activity. Graham Smart elaborates on how writing has contributed to the flourishing of economic activity, leading not only to the diversification of genres/ types of texts but also to innovation across geographical areas.⁴ In seventh century China, documents paved the way for a legal system that would record “commercial disputes” of the Silk Road trade. The innovation of papermaking and printing in the eleventh century helped develop paper currency, thereby connecting the state to business and trade.⁵ While writing has helped the expansion of economic activity, this influence has been reciprocal.⁶ Smart (2008) explains this through references to new forms of writing that emerged as more complex economies developed through the increased monopoly of the state (e.g., lists, contracts, bookkeeping records and more). On the other hand, in the larger network of economic activity, writing supported information storage and textual mobility. These two processes have thus facilitated the move from simple genres, such as bookkeeping, to more complex genres. Smart (2008) connects the development of new genres to the expansion of international financial markets, the establishment of financial institutions, and new technologies: “New literate practices and textual forms have played an essential role in the development and organization of these financial markets and institutions, which have spawned—and relied on—a vast web of spreadsheets, shareholder newsletters, and myriad other texts” (105). With the help of new technologies—the telegraph, the typewriter, and of course, currently the computer and the internet—writing has sustained thriving capitalist economies and, in turn, these economic developments have contributed to new writing functions, genres, and mobilities.

Taking a step further in analyzing connections between writing and the economy, I build on Smart’s critique of political economies to show why it is necessary that we learn from how immigrants have used and reframed economic systems through writing. In this process, we begin to understand how economic activity is linked to knowledge-making, the written word, and alternative economic frames where brokers operate. One of Smart’s critiques of economic developments refers to the Keynesian perspective (see Maynard Keynes’s *The General Theory of Employment Interest and Money*) and neoclassical discourse in economics and the process of mechanization. Essentially, the critique concerns the fact that economic systems have grown to be overly rational or machine-like rather than a “living organism.” Another critique comes from feminist economists, Marianne Ferber and Julie Nelson, for the neglect of poverty

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and gender as well as disregard of economic activity in the homes. A final critique is directed at global market analysts' skewed policies that protect the developed countries rather than those at the margins of economic activity. All these points of critique—the mechanical over humanistic; neglect of homes and the private sphere as sites of economic activity; and unchecked inequality—shape the economic frame that I propose through the lens of literacy brokers in the context of immigration.

First, the mechanization of economic exchange and writing leads to valuing the rational over personal and emotional discourse. In the context of immigration, rational discourse objectifies personal experience, but brokers compensate for that through emotional work. Literacy brokers reveal that immigrant writing is imbued with personal and affective discourses and networks that help sustain immigrant mobility from one context to another. Second, a neglect of economic activity in the home or domestic spaces is problematic. The economies of writing that I propose in this book will account for this oversight. In chapter 3 and in several other instances, I show how brokers operate in informal sites, away from the official purview of formal institutions. Finally, attention to brokers and political economies will also address inequality in the global mobility of people. Brokers, by definition, are the middleman and intervene to offset unequal power dynamics and, whenever possible, give voice to marginalized people whose experience is censored, silenced, or managed.

Rather than create a stereotypical narrative of the immigrant as vulnerable to neoliberal economies, in this book I show a different account. In addition to the mediation work explained earlier, I also foreground the agency and collaboration that immigrants summon as they engage overpowering economic forces. This agency is captured in the concept of co-brokering as a non-capitalist project, informed by the postcapitalist geographers J. K. Gibson-Graham's notion of diverse economies. Against profit-driven globalism that configures most human activity by market principles (Scott 2016b), Gibson-Graham argue that we need diverse economic frames and with these, new discourses that account for alternative economic activities and subjectivities, ones that have the potential to disrupt, alter, or possibly complement capitalist projects. Expanding on the concept of brokering, co-brokering, conceptualized as the act of mediating texts collectively or with others, is fundamental in the formation of new subjectivities when bureaucracies and standardization erase personal agency. Co-brokering is thus marked by collective action, informal exchanges, and strategies of translating bureaucratic protocols into manageable bits of information through which one can develop a new economic framework and diverse economic discourses.

In doing so, co-brokering not only critiques capitalistic frames, but also helps individuals use bureaucratic literacy to accomplish their goals.

Literacy Brokers and Immigrant Communities

I concentrate on the literacy broker's emotional work in the process of mediating linguistic, cultural, and institutional boundaries. As other scholars have noted (Ahmed 2004; Jacobs and Micciche 2003), emotion comes from the Latin word, *emovere*, which means "to move out, to stir." More importantly, to study emotion in the context of immigration—which implies physical mobility of people, a process of leaving a place and arriving to a new location—entails a study of mobility on multiple levels: social, economic, affective, and certainly, textual and literate. When immigrants travel, their literate repertoire and communicative practices accompany their passage across multiple contexts. They must repurpose their language and literacy inventory and adapt it to new contexts; they also need to compensate for the dispossession that comes with such movement. Loss in the context of literacy includes partially missing one's language, familiar audiences, and a social-cultural context that affords a space for meaning, belonging, and situated knowledge. In this transnational movement, then, the emotional work of literacy brokers intervenes precisely in this gap. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's (2004) work, I approach emotions as an expression of both individual and collective experiences. As such, I envision the emotion work of literacy brokers mobilizing personal stories, language of empathy—which Ann Jurecic (2011) defines as "multidimensional, flawed, and fascinating," attending to both political and the cultural contexts—and an entire socio-economic and political infrastructure connected to situated literacies.⁷ With this emotional repertoire—or what I call *literacy as affinity*—literacy brokers intervene in multiple contexts: immigrant communities, churches, schools, governmental agencies, court rooms, libraries—all together co-constructing a multitude of sites that are local, transnational, or anywhere in between. I highlight all these contexts, not because I intentionally sought to address them, but because my participants took me there. In doing so, they confirmed that literacy is much more intricate than we have acknowledged, that personal stories cross over into the public sphere, that filling out immigration forms is indeed a rhetorical act as Ellen Cushman (1998) notes, and it is highly political as well.

In this ethnographic study of Romanian immigrants in the US, I show that literacy brokers intervene with significant emotional work that cultivates deep human understanding through language and literacy. Literacy brokers assume more complex roles and responsibilities than what current scholarship on brokers seems to suggest. While brokers as-

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sist people with reading and writing, their role is not just instrumental in accomplishing a literate action. They perform emotional work of mediation by using their own personal experiences, their connections, and language of empathy while also aiding with translations, dealing with legal papers, or compiling the immigration file. They also shift positions, accumulating knowledge from multiple contexts where they broker texts, languages, or cultural gaps. Brokers essentially engage with *literacy as affinity*. Many writing contexts, particularly institutional sites—such as workplaces, governmental agencies, courtrooms, schools, and so on—aim to streamline communication and through this process, to remove the emotional fabric that often supports the literacy practice. Broadly, literacy as affinity is also about sustainability. With its focus on relationality, literacy as affinity provides a framework where the literate experience endures despite gaps of knowledge, unfamiliar texts, or discourse. Literacy as affinity matters for its ability to emerge in spaces of in-betweenness, transitions, and uncertainty, and to thus connect, seemingly disconnected experiences.

Ethnographic and Archival Research

This study combines archival research and ethnographic methods. These methods were informed by the purpose of the study: to understand the relation between personal literacy stories and official literacy education. While ethnographic data allowed me to account for personal narratives, the stories of escape that I mentioned earlier, archival research helped me document the official literacy education and reforms that aimed to subjugate the individual to strong ideological goals. Ethnographic data include literacy history interviews (Bertaux and Kohli 1984) with Romanian immigrants, observation notes of literacy-related events in the Romanian immigrant community located in Chicago, IL, and documents and artifacts functioning as “witnesses” of the immigration experience (e.g., letters from refugee camps, legal documents, etc.). Literacy histories, a qualitative research method used in social sciences, is appropriate for this study because through narratives of daily events of ordinary people, the researcher can explore broader connections to communities, states, or institutions (Bertaux 1981; Duffy 2007). Literacy history interviews focus on the relation between the immigration experience and reading/writing practices in both the country of origin, Romania, and the host country, the United States. I collected thirty-two interviews, each interview lasting between one to three hours, under the University of Illinois IRB approval. The literacy histories come from both old immigrants—those who escaped Romania before 1989, when Romania was still under the Communist rule, and new immigrants—