GLOBALIZING LITERACIES AND IDENTITIES: TRANSLINGUAL AND TRANSCULTURAL LITERACY PRACTICES OF BHUTANESE REFUGEES IN THE U.S.

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ABSTRACT

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This critical ethnographic study explores how language and literacy shape the social identities and cultural practices of the Bhutanese refugees in the U.S., and how an understanding of their literate practices contributes to new conceptualizations of language and literacies research. Involving fifty-six Bhutanese refugees from a Midwest city, this study highlights linguistic and cultural resources utilized by the Bhutanese refugees at key literacy sites – such as an Elderly Care Center, mandatory ESL classes, weekly cultural and musical gatherings, men’s and women’s Kirtan (religious singing) groups, and youth online forums – for creating, changing, and transforming their linguistic, cultural, musical, and literate traditions. This study highlights and illustrates tensions between, on the one hand, dominant monolingualist views in the participants’ notions about Bhutanese/Nepalese culture/language and traditions, and, on the other, their actual engagement in fluid, diverse, shifting, situated, and emergent practices. This dissertation contributes to the development of studies of immigrant literacies by articulating the effects of distinctions among immigrant groups (distinguishing between “voluntary” and refugee immigrants) and the effects of intra-group dynamics (by caste,
gender, generation, and religious affiliation) on the specific literacy practices of
members of immigrant refugee groups.

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter One, titled “In the
Wor(l)ds of Language and Ethnicity: Literacies in Motion,” introduces readers to
Bhutanese refugee community and the development of their everyday literacy practices
as they navigate across various geopolitical locales. In its discussion of the development
of Bhutanese refugees’ reading and writing practices as historically, culturally,
politically, and religiously situated, the first part of this chapter also argues against the
traditional notion of literacy as the cognitive achievement of people and their learning.
The second part of this chapter situates the study in the context of scholarship in literacy
studies, transcultural and translingual theories, and globalization and media studies.

Chapter Two, “The Outsider Within: Critical Ethnography and the Representation
of Other,” first explains the research methods for collecting data, interview processes,
and the processes for interpreting and analyzing them, and the researcher’s positioning.
Then the chapter complicates a traditional notion of ethnography that reduces this
research method to fieldwork and description and that treats ethnography as a study of
the “other.” Posing an alternative to traditional ethnography that accommodates critical
voices and researchers’ self-reflection, this discussion reviews scholarship that
articulates issues on ethical representation and the use of critical ethnography in the
context of the researcher’s own positioning. A reflective analysis in the second part of
this chapter stresses the role critical ethnography plays in invoking the processual and
historical knowledge-making of the research participants as well as in helping document
the researcher’s own journey through knowledge.
Chapter Three, “Literacies Across Borders: Remapping the Boundaries of Literacy and Language Practices,” explores the literacy practices of the research participants as they migrate to various locales, and identifies the purpose of such practices in the transcultural and translingual contexts of their new home in the U.S. Observation, examination, and documentation of the everyday literacy practices of these refugees in the contexts of literacy sites as well as that of their homes and community demonstrate the ways in which the refugees utilize their literate practices to foster new understandings as well as to forge social networks while maintaining transnational connections. This section also analyzes identity as manifest in the language and literacy practices of these participants, especially by tracing the impact of multicultural, multimodal, and multilingual literacies on immigrant identities.

Chapter Four, “Globally Digital, Digitally Global: Multilingual and Multimodal Literacies in the Making,” examines how the participants adopt multilingual literacy practices, especially through the use of digital new media in globalized contexts, to challenge monolingual and monomodal discourse on learning. Analysis of the emerging multilingual and multimodal literate practices of research participants across generations – elderly and middle-aged, and college-going adults – shows how these refugees utilize and negotiate their multilingual repertoires in the process of adjusting to a host country. This chapter focuses particularly on alternative language/culture source networks and their impact on refugee literate practices when interacting with mainstream society.

Chapter Five, which is titled “Resisting the Finality of Monolingual Closures: Implications for Pedagogy and Educational Research,” summarizes and concludes the
study, exploring its implications for the understanding and interpretation of emerging literate practices of minority communities like the immigrant refugees. The chapter concludes with a review of the study’s limitations and directions for future research.

While most studies of out-of-school literacies treat formal and non-formal literacy practices as discrete entities, this study highlights continuities across these, forging a response to those who see literacy as a discrete cognitive practice that takes place mostly in the contexts of schooled reading and writing. Findings from the research indicate that the use of multiple languages, cultural resources, and new media have cultivated the Bhutanese refugees’ literate practices in relation to race, gender, and nationality in a digitized and globalized context. Although focused on a Bhutanese refugee community, the findings of this study are relevant for educators who look for new ways to imagine academic experiences that are socially and culturally responsive. This study reflects the shifting socio-cultural dimensions of U.S. population, not only in terms of social diversity but also in relation to the political and cultural conflicts that underpin the refugees’ lived experiences.