

## **Review of Lorimer Leonard, Rebecca. *Writing on the Move: Migrant Women and the Value of Literacy*. U of Pittsburgh P, 2017. 182 pages.**

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Moving literacy is incredibly complicated. When people move across borders, they carry their literate repertoires with them, and multilingual migrant writers must learn, re-learn, revise, and abandon their literate practices for life in new contexts. Scholars of transnational literacy studies have documented the ways that moving literacy is a fraught process that results in a variety of uneven losses and gains (e.g., Alvarez; Lagman; Prendergast; Rounsaville; Vieira), and Rebecca Lorimer Leonard's *Writing on the Move: Migrant Women and the Value of Literacy* is an important contribution for the analytic nuance and feminist perspective it adds to this conversation. The book draws from an ethnographic study of twenty-six multilingual migrant women in the United States to paint a complex portrait of "the ways in which literacies move, the agents of that movement, and the fluctuating values that mediate it" (5). Lorimer Leonard notes that while she did not set out to focus this study on migrant women, she made the decision to do just that after she began collecting data because the women she interviewed tended to refer her to other women, for example, and because she noticed that wives' voices were often silenced when she interviewed married couples. Most importantly, though, she noticed that the women she met through this study did not fit the narratives of migrant women "experiencing inevitable downward mobility," as work in migration studies and educational policy tended to present (19). Lorimer Leonard found that the accounts of women she spoke to complicated this narrative, demonstrating that mobility and literacy are intertwined and that movement in any direction is not inevitable but instead the product of literate repertoires meeting social values.

Lorimer Leonard seeks to remind scholars and teachers, as well as public policy makers, that moving literacy is not a neutral or seamless process but that "literate lives are...lived at a nexus of prestige, prejudice, and power that creates multiple mobilities, simultaneous struggle and success" (5). In foregrounding the valuation of literacy, Lorimer Leonard reveals the potential contributions multilingual migrant writers can make to themselves and their

identity formation, to institutions, and to communities (local and global) when values align. Her work also identifies the wasted potential that occurs when literate movement is stalled or interrupted because values are mismatched. In my own work with multilingual Hmong refugee women, I have noticed that moving literacy across generations as well as across borders has worked better for some participants than for others and that there are clear affective and economic consequences of those workings in their lives. What Lorimer Leonard's book offers is theoretical framing that reveals how and why literate movement is inconsistent, and affected by social and economic values, over a lifetime of transnational migration.

The first body chapter, "Studying Writing on the Move," makes transparent the rigorous data gathering and analytic processes that undergird Lorimer Leonard's arguments about moving literacy. Her project is framed by three questions: 1) How do multilingual immigrant writers use literacy practices learned in one geographical location to write in another?; 2) How do multilingual immigrant writers use literacy practices learned in one language to write in another or many others?; and 3) How does movement itself—among languages and locations—affect, change, or produce certain literacy practices?

These questions lead her to conduct semi-structured literacy history interviews, which offer rich potential to reveal insights about how literacy matters in individuals' lives and also allow her to foreground the voices of her participants in the findings chapters. Lorimer Leonard also describes her grounded theory-based analytic practices in detail, in this chapter and in the appendices of the book. While many scholars with similar methodologies share interview protocols in appendices (especially since Deborah Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives*), Lorimer Leonard's narrative of her detailed coding procedures offers readers insight into this too-often opaque process that moves from coding-as-description to the sorts of higher-order codes that lead to the profound insights of this book. In this commitment to methodological transparency and rigor, she also reveals the emic nature and feminist commitment to reflexivity and responsivity that run throughout her analysis. In keeping with best practices in feminist research methods, Lorimer Leonard is committed to ethical and accurate representations of participants, with ultimate respect for the women who agreed to share their stories with her and the words they used while sharing them.

Following the methodology chapter, the body chapters are organized according to the three types of literate movement that Lorimer Leonard identifies from participants' accounts of their experiences with their multilingual literate repertoires in the United States: fluidity, fixity, and friction. These three types of literate movement reveal how the reevaluation process affects individuals' ability to draw from their literate repertoires in the United States. Each

findings chapter defines the type of literate movement by weaving together examples from several participants and then elaborates on each through more extended narratives from focal participants. Through her depictions and analysis of “the everyday experiences of multilingual migrant writers,” Lorimer Leonard reveals “with sharp specificity the complicated reality of multilingual literacy” (17).

The first type of literate movement described in body chapter two. “Fluidity: When Writing Moves” is marked by an ease of motion—when “writing is a courier, moving feelings, messages, and information among readers, listeners, spaces, and heads” (32). Fluid literate motion happens when the values of writers align with the values of institutions and leads to productivity and innovation by multilingual writers. Lorimer Leonard separates fluid literate motion into two types: “messy” literacy and literacy relays. Participants called it “messy” when they described “uncontrolled literate movement” (35) between languages and language varieties, and while some readers might associate such “mess” with struggle, Lorimer Leonard makes clear that “messy output is the result of multilingual ease” (35). Alicia, an ESL teacher, describes such ease as she moves between languages and writing styles as she explains concepts while teaching her students. She automatically adjusts to meet students’ needs in the moment. Literacy relays, a concept that plays off the image of passing a baton, show how “literacy practices and ideologies are handed off and passed around” (44). Relays occur in families between generations, in schools between teachers and students, and globally between NGOs or other organizations who share literate knowledge. As just one example, literacy relays in families might involve mothers ensuring their children learn and maintain a heritage language at home in addition to learning English at school. Those who experience fluid literate motion tend to possess metalinguistic awareness and a bifocal perspective that enables ease of movement; they are able to innovate with language, to benefit economically, and to benefit from “increased access to people, jobs, knowledge, and cultural understandings” (62). This chapter makes clear that fluidity is the type of literate motion that supports positive identity formation as multilingual writers and also provides the most economic and social benefits.

The third body chapter, “Fixity: When Writing Stalls,” considers what happens to literate movement when values are mismatched. In these cases, participants’ “fully developed literate repertoires are mediated by values that slowly shut down their multilingual practices in the United States” (67). Participants who experience fixed literate motion find that while they value their own literate repertoires, their literate practices are not valued in the United States. In situations of fixed literate motion, they also do not have the time or energy to learn to play the literate game in this context. Participants describe feelings

of loss of their heritage languages as they learn English. They also describe compartmentalizing language learning and literacy in terms of space (the contrast between home literacies and school literacies, for example) and in the difference between speech and writing (writing makes things too permanent, and so these participants are reluctant to write until they feel more confident about their skills). This being “stuck” among languages is a learning difficulty as well as an emotional and identity-based struggle. Defne, a focal participant in this chapter who is originally from Turkey, describes the emotional cost of fixed literacy when she tells Lorimer Leonard that she can’t write poetry in languages other than Turkish because “‘It’s not really connected to my soul anymore, let’s say that way” (81). At the time of the interview, Defne had left a PhD program because she could not maintain the rigorous, and voluminous, writing required by her program. Despite all her work to write well in English as a graduate student in the US, she saw that there was no guarantee that her labor would be rewarded and made the strategic decision to stop expending so much energy on writing. Her story powerfully shows that fixed literate motion results in “much wasted human and intellectual potential” of multilingual migrant writers (89). It is in this chapter that the social values surrounding gender and literacy emerge most clearly. As the women speak about their literacy being stuck, or about losing language and writing, they mention the factors that also seem to influence this fixity: as single moms, for example, or because they must work to support their husbands’ educational pursuits, they cannot spend the necessary time to work on writing in English. The intersections among gender, identity, language, and literacy—and the volatility in their associated values—are most obvious when they are in conflict.

In the context of the third type of literate movement, which Lorimer Leonard describes in chapter four, “Friction: When Writing Stalls in Motion,” “friction” means “not simply how values do or don’t match but how their mismatching is a joint venture between writers and powerful institutions” (92). In other words, friction occurs for the writers who “know how to play the literate game, but the game keeps changing” (93). And it is in the constantly-changing game that contradictions about literacy rise to the fore. For example, a participant named Sabohi was hired to be a principal at an Islamic school because her multilingualism was viewed as an asset—yet as principal, she is expected to oversee the primarily monolingual English curriculum (95). She is not able to fluidly draw from her multilingualism. Throughout the chapter, Lorimer Leonard highlights examples of literate friction in work, in the community, and at home—demonstrating that the changing revaluation of literacy happens among all realms of participants’ lives.

Lorimer Leonard concludes her book by extending her discussion of literate friction with a call for awareness that these deep contradictions in

moving literacy exist because of the ever-present revaluing of literate practices. She identifies four prominent deep contradictions: multilingualism, agency, English, and writing. Multilingualism is experienced as a contradiction because it is simultaneously an asset and a cultural deficit. Participants experience contradictions in agency because they both are and are not in control of their writing. English's deep contradiction emerges in its colonialist remnants and its necessary opportunity for participants to acquire it and benefit from it. Participants find writing to be at the same time both tedious and fulfilling. As she reminds us that these four contradictions make the lives of multilingual writers difficult, she asserts that scholars, teachers, and policy makers can take action to relieve these difficulties. While the contradictions might always be a product of moving literacy, the struggles that result from them can be lessened by changes in awareness, in pedagogies and in educational policies, and in public policies more broadly. The specific suggestions she offers for each contradiction are practical and speak to actions individuals can take, as well as more broad social actions that could lead to structural changes and make the United States generally more open to multilingualism. For example, Lorimer Leonard suggests that the contradiction of English as both possibility and constraint might be alleviated by methods of assessing English language proficiency that reflect multilingual values—such as directed self-placement. This would result in less misplacement or mistracking of multilingual writers in English as a Second Language (ESL) courses that often don't recognize or value the English proficiency that students placed in them bring.

All of Lorimer Leonard's suggestions for future actions speak to the troubling implication that without social, political, and policy changes, literate fixity and friction are inevitable and that multilingual migrant writers' literate potentials will continue to go to waste. Everyone, multi- or monolingual, misses opportunities to experience and learn from multilingual migrant writers' innovations, their creativity, their diverse literate repertoires. This is the lasting and important contribution of this book: through frames of movement and valuation, this book extends our field's already-robust critiques of monolingualist ideologies in the US by articulating the lived challenges and frustrations of the manifestations of the ideologies in migrant women's lives. All scholars, all who teach and learn, all who make and implement policies, and all who live in communities with multilingual migrant writers (and who among readers of *Peitho* doesn't do at least one of these?) can and should use the insights that Lorimer Leonard's book brings us to resist monolingualism as an ideology and to work for a more multilingual United States.

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