

Review

Languages and Literacies in Motion: Transnationalism and Mobility Matters in Writing Studies

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Fraiberg, Steven, Xiqiao Wang, and Xiaoye You. *Inventing the World Grant University: Chinese International Students' Mobilities, Literacies, and Identities*. Utah State UP, 2017. 279 pages.

Lorimer Leonard, Rebecca. *Writing on the Move: Migrant Women and the Value of Literacy*. Pittsburgh UP, 2018. 182 pages.

Writing teacher-scholars and WPAs have recently centered their attention on the nature and implications of a nascent *trans* turn (translinguality, transliteracy, transmodality, transculturalism, and transnationalism, to name a few), which pushes the field into sustained, perpetual questioning and rethinking of the ontologies and epistemologies on which its definitions of and normalized assumptions about core constructs, such as language, literacy, modality, culture, and nation-state rest. At heart, this move in writing studies toward the various terms with the “trans” prefix signals a fundamental shift away from the commonly taken-for-granted stabilities and boundedness of these social categories and instead draws attention to their dynamic making and remaking as deeply entangled with ever-changing contexts, physical bodies, subjectivities, resources, and ecologies without losing sight of historical relations of domination and difference. As these emerging “trans” orientations continue to gain momentum and visibility in the field, there is an exigent need to come to terms with what Adey has referred to as the “relational politics” (82) of mobilities and immobilities, which takes into account the variability, contingency, and inconsistency of movement within and across categories of “nations and cultures, spaces and places, modes and semiotic resources, and autonomous named languages”

and academic literacies in them (Hawkins and Mori 1). In its theme of “Mobility Work in Composition,” the 2016 Thomas R. Watson Conference on Rhetoric and Composition has brought the concept, theories, and practices of mobility—the defining feature of contemporary literate life—to the forefront of scholarly deliberations over potential consequences for teaching, scholarship, service, and program administration. Anis Bawarshi, in a response essay to the conference theme and keynote papers, has urged us to approach mobility and the concrete labor it demands in writing studies as “not only boundary crossing but also boundary marking and boundary moving,” always organized, regulated, and brokered through global-local economies, histories, “affordances, politics, materialities, embodiments, tools, media, technologies, and affective factors” (2).

Though explored in unique ways, from diverse standpoints and based on different research designs and methods, the complex negotiation, transgression and reinvention of (national, social, cultural, and language) borders and boundaries in light of macro- and micro-regimes of language and literate mobility is a common and consistent theme taken up and further developed by the two engaging transnational ethnographies I review here. Taken together, *Inventing the World Grant University* by Steven Fraiberg, Xiqiao Wang, and Xiaoye You and *Writing on the Move* by Rebecca Lorimer Leonard successfully bring into life the material, social and historical situatedness of transnational writers’ language and literate resources and practices and the “profoundly relational and experiential” (Adey 83) nature of their mobility and immobility. While Fraiberg et al.’s study focuses on tracking and tracing the language and literate trajectories of Chinese international students as they shuttled back and forth between the US and mainland China, Leonard investigates the rich language and literate repertoires of twenty-five migrant women in the US Midwest and how the differential social and economic values attributed to them shape whether or not these move across real or imagined borders and boundaries.

Starting from the image on its cover with a multiplicity of language and semiotic resources as dynamic records of mobility and sociohistorical trajectories tattooed on bodyscapes to the several case studies unpacked throughout its pages, Fraiberg et al.’s book sets up a “transliteracy” approach to conceptualizing and studying language and literacy as mobile, deeply embodied, and performative. The opening chapter in this book does a very good job of foregrounding the combination of transliteracy, network, and mobility theories underpinning the structure and analyses across the individual chapters. Despite the continued use of the slippery, polysemous notion of multilingualism (and its variant “multilingual”), often interchangeably with the more heuristically powerful notion of translanguaging,

Inventing the World Grant University will be of interest to WPAs at small and large, public and private universities across the country who are constantly navigating the phenomenal influx of international students to their campuses, programs, and classrooms as a means at the upper administrative level “to offset decreased national and state funding in an era of neoliberal reforms and privatization” (5). In light of the internationalization of higher education, an overarching question regarding student (im)mobilities and literacy practices that drives the entire book and that the authors keep alluding to throughout the various chapters is one of what and/or “who is able to move, how they move, when they move, and to what effect” (4).

In this multi-sited, mixed methods ethnography, chapters one through four are situated at Michigan State University (MSU), and chapters five, six, and seven transport readers to the local sociolinguistic landscapes at Sinoway International Education (SIE), a private study-abroad program in Guangzhou, China designed mainly for Chinese students at US universities. At educational landscapes where, as Fraiberg et al. put it, the linguistically and culturally diverse “minority becomes the majority” (40), the first chapter unpacks the tensions and contradictions inherent in discourses of and responses to diversity and internationalization at US university campuses generally and MSU more specifically. According to Fraiberg et al., while dominant institutional discourses and inventions of a world grant ideal at MSU seemed to nurture diversity and foregrounded a global outlook, those clashed starkly with actual efforts at administrative and structural levels to “fully tame” (49) and quarantine Chinese international students’ “underground literacy practices,” activities, identities, and mobilities. Despite various official policies and practices of containment, the unofficial language and literate mobilities of the Chinese-speaking students participating in this study are, as depicted by the authors, constantly and strategically dis-inventing and reinventing the very economies of language and writing at the university designed to “regulate and contain” them in the first place (39). Further attending to students’ active resistance to and transformation of wider institutional hierarchies and structures, subsequent chapters unpack a set of interlocking *guanxi* networks of social relationships and activities within the Chinese student community through which multiple practices, ideas, meanings, texts, and knowledges get unevenly exchanged, taken up, and reconstituted at the world grant university in relation to time and space. We are specifically offered a detailed description of this complex constellation of literate transactions and movements within and across transnational social fields—largely overlooked by and “less visible to administrators and instructors” (55)—through the telling cases of two transnational entrepreneurs in the second chapter who nimbly mobilized a

wide array of sociocultural and material resources at their disposal and of an avid English major in chapter three whose in-school and out-of-school linguistic, disciplinary literacies and identities were deeply intertwined and complexly negotiated. Chapter four uniquely features how these unofficial networks and economies contingently shaped, both enabling and constraining, student mobilities and the development of their academic and disciplinary literacies and identities as they traversed digital and physical spaces of composing.

The second half of the book takes readers on a journey into the heart of the sociocultural, linguistic, and politico-economic landscapes at SIE summer school, which is uniquely positioned at the intersection of US and Chinese higher education culture and deeply entangled in struggles over its status, legitimacy and recognition in the globalized educational market. A detailed analysis of the specific configurations of the administrative and curricular infrastructure at this US style business-oriented program is offered throughout chapter five. In chapter six, we get a glimpse of the challenges both SIE students and teachers faced in cultivating cosmopolitan dispositions and relationships amid ideological and social class differences while deliberately negotiating the defining principles of socialism sponsored by the Chinese government and those of Western capitalist regimes. Like much of the ethnographic perspectives from MSU, the complex interaction between students' academic, classed, and national identities both inside and beyond the classroom at SIE remains a common thread that runs throughout chapter seven with its primary focus on transmodal literacies in gaming and other online activities.

In their concluding chapter, Fraiberg et al. bring together the results of their ethnographic work across multiple transnational sites and social actors. With an eye toward the complex politics of negotiating official and unofficial "ways of thinking, doing, and being at the university" in the twenty-first century (238), their mobile literacies and languages approach emphasizes the need to be mindful of not only the exponential language and sociocultural differences in local educational landscapes, but, more importantly, to the unequal relations of power that are entangled with such differences and often render them invisible, hence inconsequential, to international students' language and literacy education. For that matter, the key question for WPAs and writing teacher-scholars, according to Fraiberg et al., should no longer be "whether to change or not" (244) since the "complex flow of students, pedagogies, ideologies, policies, and practices" (239) at a local, regional, national, and international level, have made "such changes largely inevitable" (244) and much more urgent now than ever.

Lorimer Leonard's work similarly provides insights into the complexity, messiness, and contradiction inherent in transnational writing in light of shifting social, cultural, economic, (geo)political and institutional contexts. Her study contributes to our growing understanding of the varied perspectives and lived experiences of female migrant writers constantly on the move and on the front lines of transnational and translocal processes and of what exactly becomes of the totality of the language and literate practices and resources they have accumulated over the course of a lifetime. Focusing on the hows and whys of language and literate movement among her participants, Lorimer Leonard explores "the ways in which literacies move, the agents of that movement, and the fluctuating values that mediate it" (5). Chapter one introduces the fieldwork methodologies informing this book and describes some of the unique potentialities and challenges of studying literate mobilities variously located in and mediated across time, place, and space. Rather than over-romanticize and subsequently fetishize the fluidic, free-flowing character of transnational language and literate work, Lorimer Leonard's study is of great significance in that it makes more visible the complicated realities of meaning negotiation and construction as transnational migrant writers navigate their ways through the simultaneity of fluid, fixed, and frictive mobilities (correspondingly addressed in chapters two, three, and four).

Drawing on extensive ethnographic interviews, chapter two offers a fine-grained account of how migrant writers in her study moved fluidly and meaningfully when the socioeconomic values they covertly or overtly ascribed to their language and literate resources and practices closely aligned with the actual value of those in the global linguistic market. From Nimet's back and forth translations across Azerbaijan, Russian, and English with the assistance of dictionaries to ESL teacher Alicia's messy reworking of Hebrew, Spanish, English, Arabic, basic French, and Portuguese, these are all important reminders of transnational writers' fluid and dynamic movement within, between, and across the language and literate resources within their reach. However, coexisting side-by-side with such literate fluidities and successes, as Leonard so aptly reminds us, were contrastive patterns and types of literate movement, i.e. "stalled movement" (67), that also deserve much of our attention. In this sense, the extended accounts in chapter three highlight transnational literate experiences of being "lost", "stuck" (67), and "frozen" (84) as previously valued and respected language and literate repertoires — both socially and professionally — became denigrated and marginalized after migration to the US. In chapter four, Leonard addresses a third and final feature of transnational literate movement, that of "friction", which she describes, quoting anthropologist Anna Tsing,

as “the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference” (92). More specifically, Lorimer Leonard explores the degree to which her participants experienced the uneasy dissonance of having to make sense of “the simultaneous mobilizing and fixing” (115) of their language and literate repertoires as they moved within and across the literate contexts of “work, community, school, and family” (93). Attending to both the successes and struggles of the transnational female migrant writers in this study as they dynamically negotiate the fluctuating, often conflicting, valuation of literacy, chapter five concludes with some potential implications for designing and redesigning more responsive pedagogies and policies.

Ultimately, Fraiberg et al.’s and Lorimer Leonard’s contributions demonstrate that there is a lot of work still to be done when it comes to understanding the politics of mobility in language and literacy learning and development among the increasing numbers of international and (im)migrant writers in our institutions, programs, and classes and subsequently deciding on how to most effectively address the linguistic and “literate speed-ups and slow-downs” (Leonard 68) they will encounter along the way in their academic, professional, and civic lives. Destabilizing and rewriting our usual views and treatments of language(s) and literacy/ies as neutral, autonomous, and self-contained entities “ontologically distinct from mobility,” these rich transnational ethnographies prompt much needed and sustained reflections on what it means to consistently reimagine and engage written English, including its study and teaching, “as *of* mobility . . . constituted *by* mobility and as a *construct of* mobility” (Stroud and Prinsloo xi), for whom, toward what effects, at what cost, and under what conditions. Such a mobility-oriented shift in language and literacy research and education will without doubt add considerable messiness and unpredictability to already over-worked WPAs, contingent writing faculty and graduate students who continue to staff writing courses. However, addressing the increasing complexity of the role and labor of the transnational WPA in response to the changing realities of higher education both nationally and internationally, Martins has emphasized the significance of emic, locally-driven knowledge and awareness beginning with increased, sustained “interactions of students and faculty across normally conceived borders . . . between languages, cultures, economies, and institutions” (15–16). Following this line of thought, “thinking big” in relation to mobile languages and literacies while “acting small” through making local and gradual changes to policies and practices in writing programs and individual writing classrooms—changes which are within the scope of our own power and attentive to the affordances of

our local material realities—seems to be a viable and productive way to approach the challenging yet necessary mobility work ahead of us.

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