



American by Paper: How Documents Matter in Immigrant Literacy

Kate Vieira

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American by Paper reveals how two groups of immigrants who share a primary language nevertheless have very different experiences of literacy in the United States. It describes the social realities facing documented and undocumented immigrants who use everyday acts of writing to negotiate papers—the visas, green cards, and passports that promise access to the American Dream. It is both an ethnography, filled with illuminating details about contemporary immigrant lives, and a critical intervention into two leading—and conflicting—scholarly ideas of literacy and its social role.

Although popular thinking and scholarship have viewed literacy as a method of culturally assimilating immigrants into the nation, Kate Vieira finds that upward mobility and social inclusion in the United States are tied to literacy in complex ways. She draws from extensive interviews with Portuguese-speaking migrants who live and work together in a former mill town in Massachusetts that she calls South Mills: one group from the Azores, who are usually documented, and another from Brazil, who are usually undocumented. She explains how these migrants experience literacy not as a vehicle for assimilation (as educational policy makers often assert) nor as a means of resisting oppression (as literacy scholars often hope) but instead as tied up in papers, particularly in the papers that confer legal status. Papers and literacy are inextricably bound together, both promoting and constraining opportunities, and they shape why and how migrants read and write.

Vieira builds on insights from literacy theories that have long been in opposition to each other in order to develop a new sociomaterial theory of literacy, one that takes into account its inseparable link to paper, forms, and documentation. This point of view leads to a deeper understanding of how literacy actually accrues meaning by circulating, and recirculating, through institutions and the lives of individuals.

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