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## Finding Husbands, Finding Wives: How Being Literate Creates Crisis

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# Finding Husbands, Finding Wives: How Being Literate Creates Crisis

Loukia K. Sarroub

Creativity does not happen inside people's heads, but in the interaction between a person's thoughts and a sociocultural context.

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 23)

## Introduction

Literacy and immigration scholars have not considered how refugees and immigrants negotiate the subtle and important connections between marriage, literacy, and migration to the United States. This chapter attempts to move these understudied connections to the forefront and does so by examining the ways in which young Iraqi and Yemeni immigrant and refugee women and men strive to become literate and simultaneously search for husbands and wives. Investigating these social connections involved in finding the appropriate spouse inevitably brings researchers to the field of education, as those young immigrants considered find themselves in a crisis that brings educational, economic, political, and religious factors into play. And, in order to understand these interconnections we have to take seriously the issue of how transnationalism, the phenomenon of living locally with global connections, demonstrates both the local and global tensions of refugees and immigrants as they interact in shared cultural sites. Moreover, transnational literacy, as described in this chapter, is evoked as a means to sort through particular literacy practices that simultaneously foster status and knowledge and explain the youths' sense of powerlessness and desperation as well as their perceptions of their success. The tension, between literacy as success and literacy as threat to marriage fosters crises of "glocal" proportions (see Robertson 1995; Sarroub, 2008). Measures taken by the young people to combat their own desperation by mobilizing literacy practices in the milieu of unfamiliar and often alien(ating) American cultural norms are the features that best express how glocalism can be understood.

The working definition of literacy in the context of marriage and transnationalism is that of a social event that accounts for communication with and through print as well as talk and rituals. Thus, literacy is broadly conceived

to encompass local activity such as reading and writing that can be tangibly documented in addition to the communication norms with which people convey meaning and communicate with others. "Situated" and "local" literacies are now commonplace names in the research literature (see Alvermann, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps, & Waff, 2006; Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; Lewis, Moje, & Enciso, 2007; Rush, Eakle, & Berger, 2007), but they also serve as an important reminder that in everyday life, people often do not distinguish among different types of literacies, such as school vs. home, print vs. oral communication, in the same ways that scholars of literacy do in relation to achievement in schools. For example, in transnational contexts that mix the oral rituals of Muslim weddings with the print literacies of U.S. visa and citizenship forms, literacy takes on more ambiguous and fluid roles. Young people engage in the literacy practices necessary to achieve certain expected ends (such as travel to find a spouse) and sometimes, as in the case of some young Muslim women, being literate and educated reduces their chances of finding a spouse from the homeland.

## Background

Spanning several years and drawing on a series of semi-structured and ethnographic interviews (Spradley, 1979) with Yemeni women (1997–2002) and Iraqi and Kurdish women and men (2001–2007), and on field work in two cities in different states of the Midwest, Dearborn, Michigan, and Lincoln, Nebraska, the analysis of the interviews offers a comparative perspective of immigrant and refugee youth attempting to live and thrive in the United States. In particular, three cases illuminate how marriage both empowers and mitigates social and academic success. The notion of marriage is further examined as it is constructed through various literacy practices, such as passing reading and writing exams in high school and community colleges or communicating with prospective spouses in the "homeland." Similarly, local marriage processes such as finding a prospective spouse, marrying the spouse, and living in a marriage with one's spouse are mediated by the global marriage market, which, in current times, is woven into a war economy.

Approximately 2 million Iraqis fled their country during the First Gulf War, and although many returned at the end of the conflict, a greater number remained in countries of first asylum, including Syria, Jordan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. In 2006 alone, an additional 1.5 million Iraqis were displaced from Iraq and traveled to neighboring countries, such as Syria. The Iraqi refugees are part of a larger permanent, global refugee population, approximately 19.8 million, 40% of whom were living in camps by 2001, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). However, from 2003–2007, only 464 Iraqi refugees were allowed into the United States; and during the fiscal year 2008, 13,000 were admitted, and as many as 17,000 will be allowed to seek refuge in the United States during fiscal year 2009, following international criticism that the government has not

sufficiently participated in facilitating resettlement. It is estimated that 30% of the displaced Iraqi refugee youth have not attended schools in the camps, which means that the children of thousands of families who resettled in the United States prior to the war in 2003, and after long stays in refugee camps, arrived in the United States with a variety of school experiences. Many lack preparation for formal schooling at primary and secondary levels. Literacy is therefore of paramount importance in the lives of these young people, who creatively find ways to negotiate the crises of texts, power, and identities in relation to marriage in the United States and the Middle East.

Examining transnational literacy in relation to gender, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status contributes to our knowledge of new populations in public school and communities in the United States. The chapter explicates the ways in which literacy serves as the “imagined home” for individuals and families who deal with the “crisis” of marriage and whose daily American lives are governed to a great extent, by conceptions of their country of origin’s normative values.

## Literature that Informs the Study

The examination of the lives of refugees and immigrants from the Middle East is informed by literature associated by the study of language and power, a field of inquiry that has a home in philosophy, sociology, semiotics, and linguistics. The philosophical perspectives of Barthes (1972), Foucault (1970; 1977), Butler (1997), and Fairclough (1989) have shown that language is more than arbitrary symbols. It is a system of signs that we place between us and the world to make sense of reality and communicate our ideas about it. However, signs not only reflect or represent reality, they shape both the objects they point to and ourselves as sign users. Throughout history, discourse has imposed its order and its ideology on the way we know and talk about the world. The sociological and anthropological perspectives of Bourdieu (1991), de Certeau (1984), Goffman (1959), Street (1995), and Collins and Blot (2003) advance that language is a marker of our place in society in relation to social class, ethnicity, and level of education, among other factors. Language categorizes the world and is a carrier of ideology that creates in us durable dispositions that both structure and are structured by dominant discourses. We use language and literacies to position ourselves favorably *vis-a-vis* others, or to acquire a symbolic “profit of distinction” to gain advantage over them. At the same time, as Bakhtin (1986; Holquist, 1992) notes, no word is ever lost. Every utterance is always a response to other real or potential utterances, past or present, to which there will be a response in some way in the future. There is no sharp distinction between Self and Other. “Our speech, that is, all our utterances (including creative works), is filled with others’ words ...,” writes Bakhtin (1986, p. 89), and language has power precisely because it is heteroglossic, intertextual, conflicted and conflictual, and always open to question.

Much literacy and language research explores micro-level phenomena and dialogical encounters in everyday life (Cameron, 1998, 2000; Lakoff, 2000; Sarroub, 2002b; Scollon & Scollon, 2001; Tannen, 1994). This literature, informed by linguistic analyses, focuses on how encounters, discourse (utterances, speech acts), and Discourse (ideologies, worldviews) intersect to create instances of (mis)communication across people from different cultures, generations, genders, and social class. Communication itself has become a shibboleth of a culture of fast capitalism in the name of individual "empowerment" (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996), impacting the transnational texts of marriage and crisis.

Finally, an important aspect of literacy in the lives of the immigrant and refugee youth from the Middle East is that literacy is created and mastered. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) argues that creativity is a process by which a symbolic domain in the culture is changed. He notes that creativity "results from the interaction of a system composed of three elements: a culture that contains symbolic rules, a person who brings novelty into the symbolic domain, and a field of experts who recognize and validate the innovation" (p. 6). I argue that the creativity with which individuals become transnational, local experts as they learn new literacy domains through which they are then judged as successful (or not) is as significant, if not more so, as the publicly acknowledged cultural and social creative works of our society. This is so because youth and their families must master cultural and linguistic domains while sustaining and reproducing a commonness in their own "home" cultures. This entails a complex web of creative energy that changes, even if it is not immediately apparent, not only the local place but also the host country (in terms of national and international policy) and individual lives.

## **A Brief Synopsis about the Research Methodology**

My research is based on seven years of fieldwork and a systematic comparative inquiry that includes procedures and strategies derived from ethnographic and anthropological methods (Erickson, 1986) and qualitative research methods (Wolcott, 1994). Overall, the research is guided by procedures grounded in sociolinguistic processes, such as symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959; Spradley, 1979), to understand how people perceive and enact meaning in different contexts.

Since September 2001, I have followed 16 (8 female and 8 male) focal students as they progressed through high school (grades 9-12) and as they moved into jobs or post-secondary educational institutions. Supplemented with audio and/or video-taping whenever possible, I wrote field notes of school and classroom life, home learning, literacy and religious practices, and work and community. I also mapped demographic changes in the Midwest over time.

Methods of analysis include ongoing traditional ethnographic techniques such as constant comparative analysis, triangulation, and, if warranted, nega-

tive case analysis. Discourse and narrative analyses (Cazden, 2001; Coulthard, 1985; Gee, 1999) refine some of the sociolinguistic processes observed in classrooms and in the home. I employed a comparative and ethnographic analysis of the interviews including audio-taping, transcription, and coding based on domain, taxonomic, componential, and theme analyses (as elaborated by Spradley, 1979). Observation field notes were examined through a process of open and focused coding in which I paid particular attention to the participants' use of culturally relevant terms and meaning making (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Analysis software such as Nudist, Nvivo, and Atlas were used as analytic tools for both the interviews and field notes. Part of the interpretive process of analysis included the creation of analytical memos that serve two functions: (a) they relate the data to the formulation of theory, and (b) they help me gain analytical distance from the field itself (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In addition, a case study design (see Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Creswell, 1998; Erickson & Shultz, 1992) was used to document the discourse and language practices of each of the focal young people. Attention to the particulars of each case illuminated construction of their identities as readers in different contexts. Triangulation of codes and themes was applied across interviews, field notes, and various artifacts. A constant application of member checks (with teachers, students, parents, and community members) across time was conducted. I did this by sharing analysis reports with administrators, teachers, and the focal students.

The research culminated in comparative and multiple within-case and cross-case studies (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of the focal young people, descriptive statistics of school and district reading and writing assessments, and an ethnography of the school culture and the literacy classroom language and cultures. I also wrote within-case and cross-case study reports and discourse analyses of family and work literacy and language practices. Documents, records, images, and cultural artifacts were interpreted through a systematic content analysis that includes discourse analysis of printed texts, content analysis of material culture with particular attention to the symbolic and pragmatic meanings embedded in this data. Archival research was documented in analytical reports delineating the geopolitical, international, and historical factors that impact the lives of youth in American public high schools.

For the purposes of this chapter, I present two cases from this current research as well as a third case from my primary site of field work in Dearborn, Michigan. Together, the three cases illustrate how crisis can be created as youth become literate. Literacy, then, implicates a set of practices that are conflictual in their transnational locality and in their locality.

## **Three Cases of Marriage, Crisis, and Creativity**

### ***Team Up and Scrabble as a Way of Learning***

In the case of Sabrina, a young Yemeni American woman I interviewed in February 2002, crisis, in her words, describes everyday life as she helps her

young Yemeni husband navigate being in the United States after 9/11. Reading and writing take on new meaning as the young wife takes charge of her husband's institutional identities while simultaneously fulfilling her roles as mother and worker. Negotiating transnational literacies locally in the United States necessitates a sojourner stance in order for Sabrina to successfully be American.

During one interview, Sabrina, an American citizen from the Southend of Dearborn whom I have known since 1997 (see Sarroub, 2001, 2002, 2005), described her journey to her family's village in Yemen, where she married her husband, a first cousin whom she describes as eventually also becoming her friend. The interview suggests that Sabrina's marrying a non-English speaker from Yemen rather than a Yemeni American in the United States does not make for an easy transition into motherhood or adulthood. Her responsibilities, which had earlier included negotiating various print texts for her parents and siblings, tripled when her husband also became part of the household. In adapting to the crisis of socializing a Yemeni subsistence farmer into the American auto factory, Sabrina dealt creatively with literacy learning at home when she found that her husband was not print literate in English.

*Loukia:* What, what kinds of, and the other issue is your husband, too, if he's learning English, what, what kinds of, you mentioned family time includes watching TV and playing, what kinds of activities do you do that are literacy oriented?

*Sabrina:* I love to play Scrabble.

*Loukia:* You do?

*Sabrina:* Yes.

*Loukia:* Is that a family thing?

*Sabrina:* It's a family thing.

*Loukia:* And you play it in English?

*Sabrina:* And we play it in English. So, but we like team up.

*Loukia:* Uh huh.

*Sabrina:* So, my husband and I will team up and my brothers will be like on their own, but the girls [two young children] will sit and watch us. They won't play because obviously they won't be able to get the words but that's one thing I like to do. And I felt that by playing Scrabble, my husband *will* learn the letters and words and things, even though he doesn't, *by working as a team*, I'll say oh, that's the word. We can do this. This means this and that's the letter. He can identify letters but when we have game time, it would be definitely, *we play Scrabble as a way of learning*. He's very, like if I was to sit and give him worksheets and do stuff like that, it wouldn't be an interest to him.<sup>1</sup>

*Loukia:* Is he taking English classes?

*Sabrina:* No. With his work schedule —

*Loukia:* It's hard —

*Sabrina:* Cuz he works from seven til eight, so it doesn't, doesn't, it just, the weekends, and there's nothing offered on the weekends, seven in the morning til eight in the afternoon, nothing's really open by eight. And then he's, by the time he's done taking a shower, getting ready to eat and stuff, it'll be like nine.

Sabrina has found a way to engage her husband in a literacy activity that her Yemeni American family enjoys. "Scrabble as a way of learning" and "working as a team" both offer an opportunity for her to teach her husband English, allowing him access to letters and words which she helps him remember. On his own, her husband is not likely to find ways to learn English during his 12-hour work shift or during the weekends, so Sabrina models "making words" for her young daughters and husband with a game that she and her brothers (three families live in the house) clearly enjoy. The "team up" approach further facilitates their unusual partnership, in which she, an English literacy expert does exert more power that she willingly shares with him in the game competition, thus preserving to some degree, male status and dominance in the household.

The next interview excerpt illustrates that the power dynamics are more complex in this marriage, for the husband also willingly gives his time for social occasions in which Sabrina wants to participate. Having a husband allows her more freedom to socialize with community members, to travel and drive faraway to places. Later in the interview excerpt, Sabrina returns to the topic of literacy learning and the impact her husband's print illiteracy has on her.

*Sabrina:* Yeah. They're gonna, we're thinking of driving there [Florida], too. We wanta like forget the plane, forget the bus, wanta enjoy the country. He's very like ... you know, most, most, like when I talk to friends, they're like you're kidding? Your husband? Like yeah, he likes to, he always says *I only do it for you*. Like when we go to events, and dinners and stuff.

*Loukia:* He must love you very much.

*Sabrina:* He's a really great guy. You know, and he always says like *I only go because of you*. Or we stay for an hour or two, then we leave.

*Loukia:* Does he talk about returning to Yemen?

*Sabrina:* He always talks about going home. Cuz he just, what tires him is work.

*Loukia:* It's a hard job.

*Sabrina:* Yeah, it's a hard job. And it's 12 hours.

*Loukia:* I wonder if there's a way for him to get some minimal education so he can do a non-factory –

*Sabrina:* The point is that he's, *he doesn't want to*. I mean, I teach him at home. *And he goes in and he doesn't want to*. I go why don't you take classes? I mean, they offer night classes.



- Loukia:* Can he, yeah, or once they start the family literacy program, or the ESL—
- Sabrina:* I wish they'd do weekends.
- Loukia:* Well, you're here, Sabrina. You have a little bit of power.
- Sabrina:* But he's so stubborn about learning. He just wants to learn as he goes because he's learned a lot. Just his writing, he needs.
- Loukia:* Tell him it's for the sake of, tell him it's for the sake of his children so he can help them in school when they grow up.
- Sabrina:* *He always relies on me to do all of that.* I do the financing the house. I do the budgeting in the house. I do the shopping when he doesn't feel like doing it. *He, he likes to enjoy life but he ignores all the other stuff.* Like I take care of the bills. I take care of appointments. I take care of this for the girls, that for the girls, get this for the girls, that for the girls.
- It's hard. It's really hard nowadays. It's really hard for, I mean, I know it was hard for my brother-in-law [also from Yemen and who married her younger sister]. It took him practically, he was here in November. He worked like for a few weeks and then he was like two months until he went back to work, like recently. So it's hard for, especially for immigrants. You know, the language barrier.

Sabrina finds herself in a partnership that paradoxically gives her power because she does have access to the literate world, and at the same time increases her responsibilities to an extent that she is overwhelmed by them. As a part-time working mother with a full-time home life, Sabrina not only fulfills all the parental roles and is the English teacher in her small family, but she also continues to support her parents and her younger sister's family. Sabrina noted that "every day there's a crisis" in relation to her husband's attitude that he would eventually learn English on the job. While she wanted to speed up the process so that their home life responsibilities could be more balanced and shared, she found that her being literate caused the opposite reaction. Her husband did not actively pursue venues in which he could become literate when Sabrina could do it all—work outside the home plus household tasks—as a mother, wife, daughter, and sister.

### *Love and Marriage in a Time of War*

The cases of Hakim and Amina, young refugees from Iraq, illustrate how the credential of having passed a U.S. high school reading exam enables Hakim to make the dangerous journey back to Iraq in pursuit of the ideal wife. School literacy practices along with savvy travel-know-how through Iraq, Jordan, and back to the United States, in Lincoln, Nebraska, and Dearborn, Michigan, demonstrates the challenges faced by young people whose national status is in crisis.

In her analysis of the impact of immigration on Lincoln, Nebraska, Mary Pipher (2002) notes in her best-selling book, *The middle of everywhere: Refugees come to our town*, that Lincoln, Nebraska includes children from over 50 nationalities. What is more unusual is the fact that the immigrants to Lincoln from predominantly Muslim countries arrived in the city not voluntarily but at the behest of the U.S. government. We know little about their education in their home countries, or their experience of assimilation and concomitant language and literacy learning in English and their native language(s). Pipher's book is the first "popular audience" narrative to examine refugees chosen by the U.S. government to apply and seek refugee status. The refugees, some 20,000 a year admitted to the United States prior to 9/11, are brought to refugee-designated sites, such as communities in Nebraska, North Dakota, Virginia—states with relatively stable economies and low unemployment rates—and are expected to make new lives for themselves.

I met Hakim at Central High School in 2002 as I was shadowing his sister, Amina, who at the time was in a Level 3 English Language Learning class and in tenth grade. Amina and Hakim had spent ten years in the Rafha camp of Saudi Arabia after fleeing from Iraq during the First Gulf War. Known for its non-humanitarian conditions, Rafha camp, for Amina and her family, was a living hell, with no toilets, no schools for the thousands of children, and very little hope of ever getting out. In high school in Lincoln, Hakim was identified as a student with Special needs in reading and writing, so after failing the reading and writing graduation exams several times, he was allowed to bypass the exam requirement because of this Special education status. Once he earned his diploma, he and his family made plans to travel to Iraq during the current Gulf War for him to meet and marry his first cousin. Amina told me the story of her brother's journey while I helped her to read and understand her textbook and do her geometry problems. Her talk is peppered with affectionate insults for her brother as she explains what happened.

- Loukia:* OK, Amina. Let's read this textbook together. I have to tell you that it's been a while since I last saw a geometry textbook, but it was my favorite subject when I was in high school, so I hope I'll remember something that will help you.
- Amina:* I understand the problems. I don't get the text, the textbook, what it says. Mrs. S says we have to read the directions and I don't.
- Loukia:* OK. This is about isosceles triangles. What do you know about them?
- Amina:* Umm, that *I can't say that word* ?
- Loukia:* Funny. It's iso-sceles, but don't worry about saying the word. What do you remember about these triangles from class? What's interesting about them?
- Amina:* Did I tell you that my brother married our cousin?
- Loukia:* Really, when did he do that?! The last I heard, you said that your family was thinking about that.

- Amina:* They're in Jordan right now and he's trying to get back to Lincoln. Can you believe my dumb brother got married? *How is he supposed to take care of a wife? He can barely take care of himself. He doesn't even have a job. I do everything at home and I even found the house we're living in now.* He just finished high school, he's not ready to have a wife.
- Loukia:* So, what happened? Did he go to Iraq?
- Amina:* Yea, he went to Jordan first and then he and my uncles drove to Baghdad to my other uncle's house and he got married to my cousin there. I don't know how he's going to support her, what they'll do when if they have kids. She doesn't know English.
- Loukia:* Why is your uncle's family still in Baghdad? Did they stay during the Gulf War?
- Amina:* We had to leave cause Saddam was going to kill my dad [a car mechanic with little formal education] so we went to Saudi, but my uncle was quiet and he could stay.
- Loukia:* So, tell me more about Hakim's trip so far. How is he managing all the paperwork in Arabic and English?
- Amina:* I don't know. *He can't read nothin.* My mom's back is hurting her a lot - she's worried about Hakim.
- Loukia:* Well . . . if your uncles are helping him, he'll be OK. I'm just trying to imagine how he'll be able to get out safely and then how he'll deal with all the immigration forms for his wife and himself.
- Amina:* He got out of Baghdad – he's in Jordan now with her and they have people who help refugees get out. I'm the only one who doesn't have citizenship yet. He's an American citizen now, so it's easier for him, especially if there's someone there to help him with the reading.
- Loukia:* Oh.
- Amina:* But what'll they do when they get here. Hakim has no job and she don't know English. *I can't believe my stupid brother got married.*
- Loukia:* What do your parents say about this?
- Amina:* Nothing. They like having more family here, and my dad talks about going to Dearborn for more opportunities. Hakim could get a job there. Remember my cousin? The one in the picture?
- Loukia:* Ye –
- Amina:* My mom really wants me to marry him, *but I don't want to get married.* But if he came from Baghdad, he could get a job in Dearborn. Yea, she said the sides of the triangle are the same.
- Loukia:* What? Oh, the triangle ... what do you mean by the "same?"
- Amina:* This side is as long as this side.
- Loukia:* I want to talk more about your brother's trip, but you're right, let's finish this math homework and talk more later.

Amina and Hakim successfully negotiated their ELL (English Language Learner) program at Central High School with the help of excellent teachers

(see Sarroub, 2007; Sarroub, Pernicek, & Sweeney, 2007). Amina, the most print-literate member of her family (she tested at a fifth grade reading level) helped her family move to Dearborn and rent a house when her brother returned from Jordan with his new bride. Our conversation illustrates the interplay of several relevant texts in Amina and Hakim's lives. First, there is the context of geometry and the textbook narrative with which Amina struggled. Textbooks took on a life of their own when Amina worked with them, becoming the backdrop of dramatic life stories such as this one, almost disappearing from the significant literacy events that pervaded her everyday refugee life. What is clearly emphasized in the conversation are her worries about her brother's (and parents') decision to let Hakim travel to Iraq and marry their cousin. Her use of "dumb" and "stupid" reflect her brother's status as a Special education student during high school and her lack of confidence in his ability to be responsible for his own new family. In addition, Hakim's successful entry and exit into Iraq during the war spell impending doom for Amina, who is not interested in marrying her cousin (or anyone). Her foci on geometry, reading, and school life have, to this point, made life happy for her. The year after high school, during which time she took classes at the local community college, she complained that now that she was home and more visible to the Iraqi refugee community, everyone in the neighborhood was watching her, and someone had even reported to her parents that she was in a car with a strange man, who turned out to be her brother giving her ride to her classes (see Sarroub, 2005). Life outside of public school for Amina meant restraint and lack of freedom. She thought of marriage as further limiting her options, and as she observed the transnational ease with which her brother, a Special education student who did "nothin," traveled to Iraq and Jordan to marry, Amina found herself in an identity crisis. She failed her immigration test on purpose in order to avoid becoming a citizen, not because she did not want to be a citizen, but because her literacy skills would inadvertently bring a future for which she was not ready. Amina is not yet a citizen and continues to struggle with the marriage crisis, using her ameliorating literacy skills with savvy and creativity and as a form of resistance.

*"I'm too old" and "I want to marry a virgin man"*

- Loukia: Hello?
- Marstan: Miss Loukia?!
- Loukia: Yes, hi Marstan!
- Marstan: Miss Loukia, hi. It's Marstan.
- Loukia: Yes, I know, Marstan. It's nice to hear from you. How are you?
- Marstan: Miss Loukia. How's your family? Your husband? Your children? Your mother and father? Your sister?
- Loukia: Everyone is fine, Marstan. Set and Sofia had bad colds last week, but they're much better this week.

- Marstan:* Oh good. Miss Loukia. I miss you so much. Come to my house this weekend.
- Loukia:* I will, Marstan. You tell me what would be a good time.
- Marstan:* OK. I clean at the hospital on Saturday, but Sunday I'm home and you see my mom and sister, Shaima.
- Loukia:* That would be great!
- Marstan:* Miss Loukia?
- Loukia:* Yes?
- Marstan:* I passed Level 7 at Southeast Community College.
- Loukia:* That's wonderful, Marstan!! I am so happy for you. Does this mean you're finished with ELL?
- Marstan:* Yes. I'm studying for nursing, Miss Loukia. I want to marry too. I'm too old.
- Loukia:* Marstan, why do you say you're too old? You just finished high school recently.
- Marstan:* Miss Loukia, I'm 22 and my sister Kurdistan, *no one wants to marry us if we're old.*
- Loukia:* Is there someone you would like to marry?
- Marstan:* I would like to go back to Iraq, to Kurdistan, to my country, and find someone there.
- Loukia:* When will you do that?
- Marstan:* I hope next summer. Miss Loukia?
- Loukia:* Yes?
- Marstan:* *I want to marry someone good, someone from my country. The Kurdish men are bad here. They do bad things with women. I want to marry a virgin man. It's safe now in my country. It's friends with America. Did you see the news about Turkey?*
- Loukia:* About Turkey? Oh, you mean that the Turks and the Kurds don't get along and the United States supports Kurdistan? I did read about that. But wait, I thought last time we talked you said that you wanted to marry someone from here.
- Marstan:* No. Miss Loukia? *I need your help.*
- Loukia:* Tell me.
- Marstan:* Do you know a good lawyer for immigration? We have to wait five years to becoming citizens. *I read all the questions for the test, but five years is a long time and we want to go to our country to find husbands. Can you help me find a lawyer? I looked in phone book but there are many names.*
- Loukia:* Marstan, I don't know any immigration lawyers in Lincoln, but I know someone who does and as soon as we hang up, I'll call and find out and call you back.
- Marstan:* Thank you, Miss Loukia. You always help when I call. Thank you.
- Loukia:* You're welcome, Marstan. Now tell me about the immigration test. I know that the questions were changed recently.

- Marstan:* Miss Loukia. *The questions are hard!* But I want to pass so that I can marry.
- Loukia:* But Marstan, if you're not a citizen, you have to wait three more years before you can even take the test and only after that can you actually bring someone to the United States from another country –
- Marstan:* Miss Loukia, my sister, she too old, and I'm too old. *We can't wait three more years.* She wants to marry a Kurdish man who is in Greece now, a refugee – our cousin, but he has no papers.
- Loukia:* I think it would be a good idea to talk to an immigration lawyer. He knows more than I do about these laws.
- Marstan:* Miss Loukia, *I want a good man. In my country they're good.*

Marstan, the third case I explore, focuses on a young Kurdish Muslim woman that I shadowed in high school and who arrived in the United States print-illiterate and successfully graduated from high school five years later. Her successful academic experiences are part and parcel of the social and emotional upheavals her teachers dealt with as they taught her to read and write and to pass the writing and reading demonstration exams. Her goals of becoming literate, graduating from high school, and becoming a nurse were motivated by a real and desperate desire to be married to someone from her culture and religion.

Of the 37 telephone conversations that Marstan and I had had to this point, 31 were devoted to the subject of marriage and finding a “good man.” The conversations typically followed the same pattern. Marstan inquires about each member of my family, then gives me some news about her literacy progress, and finally focuses on a problem with which she and her family need help. This was the first conversation that gives a clue as to whom a “good man” might refer to: someone from Kurdistan and someone who is a “virgin man.” This was also the first conversation in which Marstan clearly spells out the dilemma she faces as her prospects for marriage become slimmer in her twenties. Her friends and acquaintances married between the ages of 14 and 22, and the fact that she is not married casts suspicion on her and her family. As such, Marstan's school literacy learning has been both magical and full of anguish, and more space devoted to her story is necessary than can be accommodated by this chapter. However, like Amina, Marstan wants to make a life for herself in the United States. She works in a hospital as a cleaning woman and takes classes in preparation for entry into a nursing program. In a family often children, ranging from their early thirties to teens, all the older children do service work entailing cleaning in Lincoln hospitals, hotels, or cafeterias. Marstan views literacy as her ticket to success, tackling the immigration test questions early, helping her non-English speaking mother with household literacy tasks, and constantly telling/showing her supervisors at work that she is becoming a more fluent reader so that she can get better cleaning jobs, when clearly, literacy is not the significant issue in her

work place (see Hull, 1993). However, unlike Amina, Marstan uses her literacy skills to be more successful on the marriage market. She thinks she has a better chance of finding a husband (and keeping him) if, similarly to Sabrina in the Yemeni case, she sponsors (see Brandt, 2001) and supports his literacy learning and life financially in the United States. The dilemma she faces is that of access to the type of husband that, in her view, is only available in Kurdistan. Marstan's glocal dilemma is in direct conflict with U.S. law. She cannot marry someone who is not a U.S. citizen until she herself is a U.S. citizen, and an older one at that, thus further limiting her chances of finding someone from Kurdistan who will marry her.

### **Literacy, Ordinary Lives, and Creativity**

Literacy is a curious thing. It seems to envelope our lives and be central to modern living, yet most of humanity has done without it for most of human existence.

(Collins & Blot, 2003, p. 1)

Curiously, print literacy was not a significant part of Sabrina's husband, Amina and Hakim, and Marstan's lives prior to their arrival in the United States. They each come from places—Yemeni and Kurdish villages as well as refugee camps—where success is not measured against one's facility with print literacy. Crisis is evoked when one's identity (an ordinary life) becomes embedded in institutional texts, where every desire and form of communication must be visibly met through an endless array of sanctioned print forms whose language must be mastered. In the Bakhtinian sense, these young people are speaking through the words of American institutions (see Rogers, 2003 and Varenne & McDermott, 1998, for a good analysis of this through the lens of adult literacy in conjunction with the Special education discourse). At the root of these textual identities are competing notions of power.

In each of the situations described the young people adopt a set of institutional literacy practices, thus mastering domains of power in order to fully participate and expand possible boundaries for legitimacy and agency. For example, playing Scrabble at home as an alternative to worksheets enables participation, even from the margins. Butler (1997) enjoins her readers to "expand the domain of linguistic survival" (p. 7). Butler's analysis is focused on speech acts in relation to injurious speech and how individuals might try on and use, so to speak, the injurious speech, such as calling someone a taboo name, in order to expand one's range of linguistic survival tools. At the heart of this recommendation is the resolution of the tension between "the agency of language" and the "agency of the subject" (p. 7). This means that one cannot underestimate people's potential for adapting language practices to surmount political, social, or religious obstacles. Marstan's inquiry into what is possible under immigration constraints is an affirmation of her understanding that in the United States she can ask these questions and seek help to do

so. Similarly, I argue that learning various forms of literacy can also expand power and agency *vis-a-vis* the textual identities that individuals master as they react to crises stemming from such texts and interactions with texts.

Crisis denotes an unstable moment in which a decisive change is impending, and it also connotes an emotionally significant event or radical change of status in a person's life (*Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary*). The glocality of marriage situated in transnational and textual identities certainly qualifies as a form of crisis for these young people, and while literacy may have been of little significance in their pasts, mastering literacy in the present and then creating new identities with it invokes what Butler (1997) calls "insurrectionary potential" (p. 145). Sabrina and her husband, Amina and Hakim, and Marstan, with and through their new literacies reinvoke and restructure the conditions of their own possibilities in the United States, creating hope out of crisis and becoming literate, thus sharing a common set of perceptions about what it means to succeed transnationally. Finding husbands and wives as refugees and immigrants from the Middle East and elsewhere is, along with everything else, a creative process that calls for the mastery of powerful literacy domains that are transformative. Literacy in such a context is both a hindrance and a potent form of liberation.

## Note

1 Italics denote both the speaker's emphasis and a theme (evidenced through patterns) in the data.

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## For Further Exploration

- Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services, Dearborn, Michigan: <http://www.accesscommunity.org/site/PageServer>
- Classroom windows 06/17 Episode 05: Culturally responsive teaching: <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-6066894268476055581>
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