

## Book Reviews

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**Kate Vieira.** *American by Paper: How Documents Matter in Immigrant Literacy*. Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2016. xiv, 193p; 22 cm. \$25. ISBN 9780816697526.

As Kate Vieira notes in her introduction, she did not set out to write a book about papers. Instead, she was interested in testing claims that literacy is the “key to upward mobility, national belonging, civic participation, and ultimately assimilation” (2). She found, however, that her study participants frequently invoked papers when she asked about literacy; for them, “papers and literacy are intimately linked.” Vieira’s research challenges the theory that literacy is a means of achieving assimilation. She argues that literacy and papers are seen by migrants as a means of mobility—social, economic, and physical—and that papers serve as “a material lynchpin in the process of writing and being written” (9).

The Introduction outlines the thesis, goals, and methodology of the book as well as theories and historic goals of migrant literacy. Vieira provides context by describing the social milieu of the documentary society in which migrants’ literary goals and practices are exercised. In chapter 1, she argues that “papers and literacy mediated migrants’ physical and social mobility”; the rest of the book shows how this manifests for three groups: documented Azoreans and Azorean Americans (chapter 2); undocumented Brazilians (chapter 3) and Azorean and Brazilian young people (chapter 4).

For Azoreans, who tended to be less literate, papers represented a path to citizenship. Their literacy practices, like writing home to family and providing letters of sponsorship, became entangled in bureaucratic processes. For this group, “state and individual uses of writing comingled, associating papers with mobility and legitimacy” (21). For the undocumented, but generally more literate, Brazilians (who also associated papers with mobility and legitimacy), these same papers and the bureaucracies that controlled them represented their disenfranchisement from the society they wished to join and be recognized by. Unable to break the barriers to citizenship, they found alternate ways to write themselves into being through another bureaucratic institution, the church. Literacy in this context was exercised through written prayers, sermons, and religious literacy. The young Azoreans and Brazilians “associated papers with the mobility that literacy promised but rarely offered” (128). For this group, whose experiences with education are highlighted, literacy “functioned as papers” and vice versa, and literacy is used to claim legitimacy. The volume may have benefited from a clearer distinction between literacy and education. As was seen in the chapter on youth, which for me was the weakest chapter, education and literacy became inextricably enmeshed. Yet, this same ambiguity may perfectly reflect the experience of young people in navigating societies’ complex “documentary infrastructure.”

In clear and engaging language, Vieira successfully argues that “papers play a central role in transnational lives.... [a]nd... in transnational literacies” (8). Her methodology, ethnographic interviews, allows her to personalize cold, depersonalized state bureaucratic processes. Concepts integral to her arguments, such as strong texts, sociomateriality, and literary events, are clearly explained and made accessible to nonexperts in the field of literacy. Throughout, she provides examples of literacy practices and products and illustrates *how* papers (texts) become imbued with meaning and power, both literal and symbolic.

“American by paper” was how one interviewee described her status, and with those three words she articulated the significance and power of papers (and archives?) to modern life in a documentary society like our own. The book also invites the reader to witness the lived experience of migrants and their descendants, heirs of the immigrant experience. Archivists, especially those who lament the lack of diversity in the U.S. archival record, will find inspiration and insight into the documentary practices of at least one underrepresented group in the United States. By focusing on documentary evidence, from ubiquitous state papers (birth certificate, driver’s licenses, passports) to unique personal literary products (letters, interviews, artwork), and its role in the lives of migrants, the author sheds light on its role in all our lives.—*Mary A. Caldera, Head of Arrangement and Description, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library*