

# At the "Ends of Kinship": Women Re(kin)figuring Literacy Practices in Protracted Displacement

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## KEYWORDS

transnational literacy; family literacy; language learning; migration; diaspora; older learners

*Hāmi cinnu bhayo, bolnu bhayo, hāsnu bhayo. Maya sanga bhayo.* We recognized [each other], spoke, and laughed. It happened with love.

—Kausila, personal interview, Nepal, January 2013

As with rope or thread, some relationships fray through migration while others are newly knotted. The **ends of kinship** are ties that bind people to one another in dialogue with the emotional and structural forces that can sever or reformulate these bonds [my emphasis].

—Sienna Craig, *The Ends of Kinship: Connecting Himalayan Lives between Nepal and New York*, 11

## INTRODUCTION

*"It's not good," Kausila says to me in Nepali one day while I am going through a box of her old photos and documents. Kausila's English teacher, Manju, a young woman from the camps, nods sympathetically. We're seated together on Kausila's quilt-covered cot. Family pictures and old identification cards strewn about. We've just come from Kausila's morning English classes and the heat and mugginess of midday begins to creep up all around us, leaving a warm and damp film on the objects that we pass back and forth.*

*Kausila has invited me and Manju into her home, a makeshift bamboo hut with thatched roof and a polished, mud floor, to discuss her resettlement case and family history in more detail. Kausila has been living, here, in the Beldangi I Bhutanese Refugee Camp in Jhapa, Nepal, for close to two decades. Her resettlement application to be reunited with her daughter in Australia is pending the resolution of a difficult family situation that has led to Kausila's case file being separated from her daughter's.*

*"Anyway, it's a sad thing," she continues, "That is why I am trying to go there [to Australia]. I tried not going there, but finally I wondered, what would I do here? Sometimes I think that . . . where should I go from here? I think to myself, [about] leaving Bhutan, why [did] we have to leave? Maybe it would be better if I died. But what to do? My daughter is gone. She says it's nice and good [in Australia]. It is good.*

*And if she says it is good, it will be good for me as well.”*

*“I miss her,” Kausila trails off deep in thought.*

*“Anyway,” she continues. “She is gone alone . . . No one is gone [to Australia] from my parents’ side. All others have gone to America. My daughter has gone to Australia, and she is the only one from my own house [to go there]. We are here, but ours [our resettlement process] is also going on. Let’s see when we will go.”*

**A**midst a decades-long displacement and massive refugee resettlement process, women from Bhutan, who were living in refugee camps in Nepal, sat down to speak with me in their common language, Nepali, about learning to read and write in English for resettlement. In these conversations, we discussed the interconnections among their desire to learn English and their complex experiences of literacy denial and forced migration. Often our conversations would meander, picking up and pulling at threads related to family separation and relocation, the protracted displacement, and uncertainty about the future. Across hundreds of interviews with women living in the Bhutanese refugee camps in Nepal, I heard stories like Kausila’s, stories intimating both the limits and potentials of relational belonging forged in and through the circuitous, often overlapping, routes of both chosen and forced migrations, and the educational trajectories that could both “sever and reformulate these bonds” (Craig 11).

When I first met Kausila in the spring of 2013, she was 50 years old and had spent nearly half of her adult life in the Bhutanese refugee camps. Early in our conversations, Kausila talked about how her husband had abandoned her after they came to Nepal. She spoke about how her children had grown up in the camps and were now tending to families of their own. Alone in the camps at the time of our meeting, and painfully aware of each passing day, Kausila longed to be reunited with her resettled adult daughter in Australia, but she was unsure if that would be possible due to a complication with her application for resettlement. In the meantime, she attended English classes at a community-run language center in her camp sector. There she gathered with other women close in age, many with very limited experience of formal schooling, most unable to read or write in any language. Together they recited the English alphabet, memorized dialogues, and took to practicing writing their names in a language that was not their own. Beyond learning English for resettlement, women came to the language centers to share their stories, speak, and laugh with one another, or as Kausila describes in the first epigraph, “*cinnu*”—to recognize [each other], to become familiar. According to Kausila, at the language centers, women gathered not just to learn English but also to come to know each other through their shared affection, to hold each other in high esteem across differences in caste, ethnicity, and education. As Kausila says, “*Maya sanga bhayo*.” It happened with love. Yet, the ties that bind women like Kausila in friendship and *maya* emerge from relational ties that have become stretched to their limit by the forces of global movements. In this way, the ties that bind are the very ends of kinship, wherein “[as] with rope or thread, some relationships fray through migration while others are newly knotted” (Craig 11).

This article explores women’s language and literacy learning in the context of transnational

migrations and what Sierra Craig, an ethnographer with deep commitments to the study of Nepali migrations, calls "the ends of kinship." It is based on a participatory ethnographic study of transnational literacy practices undertaken during Bhutanese refugee resettlement from 2007 to roughly 2018. For this article, I draw from a time during that process, from August 2012 to late June 2013, when, as a research affiliate of Caritas Nepal's Bhutanese Refugee Education Programme, I collaborated with local teachers and learners in conducting a series of interviews, focus groups, and community-led workshops in four language centers located throughout the Bhutanese refugee camps to gather information about women's investments in language and literacy learning for resettlement. Stories and dialogues like Kausila's, as well as other forms of expression, including ritual performances and ceremonies involving singing and dancing, would repeatedly pull my focus to questions of kinship and friendship in relation to women's learning. It was in this context, "at the ends of kinship," that women came together around their various, dynamic investments in learning to (re)negotiate the "ties that bind" (11). This article explores this (re)negotiation and how through conversations, stories, singing, and dancing, the women of the language centers came together in kindred solidarity around their learning and in dialogue with the forces of transnational migration.

## LANGUAGE AND LITERACY LEARNING AT "THE ENDS OF KINSHIP"

The main part of this study took place from 2012–2013 at the mid-point of a vast local-global effort to resettle over one hundred thousand people displaced from Bhutan. I conducted the study in collaboration with Caritas Nepal's Bhutanese Refugee Education Programme's efforts to highlight the stories of women learners and teachers in the camp's language centers. As part of our collaboration, I taught demo lessons in the language centers, attended and participated in teacher-led planning meetings and trainings, developed interview protocols with local teachers, and presented reports and brief talks on the status of my research to program coordinators, local staff, and learners.

During this time, I learned from collaborators about the history of the language centers' investments in language and literacy education tied to resettlement and the ways in which the centers convened women who were not only interested in learning English but also actively negotiating the effects of resettlement in their daily lives. While investments in women's literacy and adult education had ebbed and flowed for the length of the protracted displacement, an increased focus on "eradicating illiteracy" emerged locally and in concert with international non-governmental organizations' (INGOs) agendas in response to resettlement processes (Perekhatt). In 2007–2008, grassroots efforts backed by INGO donor and implementing agencies led to the opening of multiple language centers along the outskirts of the seven Bhutanese refugee camps (Beldangi I, II, and Beldangi Extension, Sanischare, Goldhap, Khundunabari, and Timai). Then, just as suddenly, many of the language centers closed during resettlement, as the dismantling and merging of camp sectors commenced with the rapid emigration of the camps' temporary residents to third-party countries of resettlement. As hundreds of people were leaving the camp on a weekly basis for uncertain futures on the other side of the resettlement process, the women who attended English classes at the language centers

were feeling acutely the effects of being separated from family and friends. As these women waited for their own cases to make their way through a monolithic and labyrinthine system of external review and approval, they began to reimagine and reconstruct relational belonging in the interim, forming family of the neighbors and friends left behind, while also learning how to be in new forms of relationship with the immediate family members that had already departed the camps. For many of these women, the language centers functioned as a home away from home, a place they could go to be in community with other women who were also experiencing the effects of the resettlement's relocations, separations, and indefinite periods of waiting for cases to move forward.

During the earliest stages of my collaboration with these women and their teachers, nearly twenty thousand people remained in the camp awaiting either voluntary resettlement or integration of some sort. The people in the camp represented a rich diversity of language and culture backgrounds, including identification with various caste, indigenous, and ethnolinguistic groups. Just a cursory glance through the attendance logs of the language centers revealed that a majority of adult learners from 2010 onwards were among the indigenous, ethnic tribal groups native to Nepal who had migrated to Bhutan from Nepal, India, and Sikkim as agrarian laborers: Tamang, Rai, Gurung, and Magar (see Mabuhang, "Re/Visiting," for a critical overview of indigenous peoples of Nepal). That these groups were among the last to be resettled and among the most likely to experience delays and complications in their resettlement process is worthy of pause. Indeed, most of the women that I interviewed between 2012–2013 were among these groups and were negotiating complicated, stalled, or altogether absent resettlement cases. Many women from the language centers felt that those groups with historically more access to formal education, including highly literate Brahman-Chhetri, were the first to be resettled, while those from groups with historically less access to formal education, including non-literate people, older adults, and indigenous Nepalis, were the last to be resettled. Older adults of all backgrounds, who held political commitments to repatriation, were especially slow to engage with the resettlement process. Many older adults among the first generation of camp residents were skeptical of resettlement on the political and cultural grounds that relocation to third party countries was part of Bhutan's plan to permanently revoke refugee ties to the country through repatriation or citizenship claims ("Last Hope"). Generational and education differences as well as gender, caste, and ethnicity contoured people's experiences of navigating the resettlement process.

Unlike a generation of women born into camp life, the women who attended English classes at the language centers grew up in the rural, southern lowlands of Bhutan's swampy forests as agrarian laborers. Many women self-identified as either a *khetālo* (farm laborer) or a *gothālo* (herder). Lack of proximity to formal schools, as well as gendered practices related to domestic work, agrarian life, and family roles, limited women's access to primary education. Most women attending classes at the language centers had never been to school and could not read or write in any language. Despite this uneven access to literate resources compared with younger generations of women living in the camps, the women who came to learn at the language centers often committed themselves to months or years of learning during the resettlement period. At the height of the resettlement process, the language centers offered English classes six hours a day, five days a week in four-month batches to thousands of women. All classes were led by younger adults, mostly women in their twenties, who

grew up in the context of displacement and had completed secondary, English-medium education in camp schools. The women who gathered at the centers attended classes daily and learned to recite the English alphabet, memorize simple greetings and dialogues, and amass a new vocabulary for everyday items.

Beyond developing basic oral and literacy skills in English, the centers functioned as a respite for many older women beyond their childrearing days who were managing other difficult transitions at home. The vast majority of learners were middle-aged women or older, women in their late forties, fifties, and sixties, who were considered by their communities to be beyond the age of formal schooling, but whose movements were not restricted by pregnancy, breastfeeding, or raising young children. Compared with their younger counterparts born into camp life, these women were managing different sets of constraints related to learning, including having to negotiate both the effects of biological aging as well as shifting structures of responsibility within the family unit, as family separation through the resettlement process often propelled older adult women into roles as the head of a divided household. A home away from home for many women experiencing the fracturing of family units and shifting of familial responsibilities that came with resettlement's upending of camp life, the language centers provided a source of daily connection for a generational cohort of women caught between generational experiences of displacement, not young enough to have been born in the camps but also not old enough to be considered "too old" to work once resettled. In this space between generational polarities, women gathered in the language centers to navigate together the intersections of their experience and learning.

This context lays the groundwork for the conceptual discussion and key terms that follow in which I draw from theories and frameworks of experiential and negotiated kinship, together with intergenerational literacy perspectives in composition studies and education, to be in dialogue with how the women of this study creatively and performatively engaged in emergent forms of kindred solidarity through their learning. While certain kinship framings can lead to systems of classification that support "biological or heteronormative affinal underpinnings of relatedness" (Goldfarb and Schuster 2), new conceptualizations of kinship yield richly grounded studies of relational ties within specific cultural contexts as discursively and materially constructed and as contingent upon dynamics of power. These studies explore the social, material, and experiential meaning of such ties for individuals, families, and communities. Kinship continues to be, as Craig has noted, a necessary construct for thinking about relationality as "negotiated" and "experiential" (256; see also Carsten "Cultures," *After Kinship*). Indeed, vast bodies of work among Western and Nepali-centric scholars alike support this view (e.g. Bennett; Levine; Uprety, Pokharel, and Dhakal; Joshi). In what follows, I review the relevant literature, bringing together research into transnational literacy in composition studies, intergenerational and family literacy in education, and Nepali kinship studies before turning to a conversation among women living in the camps who were also attending language center classes at the time of my research. I then consider the ways these women *kin*-script and (*kin*)figure their own ideas about and practices of literacy in relation to kin and friends as these relational ties stretch, contract, and become transformed throughout a protracted displacement and ongoing resettlement process.

## KINSCRIPTING TRANSNATIONAL LITERACY

In composition studies, research on literacies in transit across nation-states, regions, local communities, and households has contributed to discipline-specific ways of conceptualizing reading and writing as a resource for personal achievement, including economic and educational advancement, and for creating and sustaining trans-local connections and communities. Recent conceptualizations of literacy and mobility in writing studies, for example, link situated, textual practices of reading and writing to cross-border relations that both promote and inhibit certain kinds of mobility, predominantly upward, economic mobility fueled by formal education (e.g. Lorimer Leonard, Vieira, Young; Vieira *American, Writing*; Lorimer-Leonard “Traveling,” *Writing*; Simon). Additional studies of literacy and migration that inform composition research limn local literacy practices in migrant families and communities in order to illustrate how situated literacies facilitate movements and networks across international borders (e.g. Farr; Warriner “Multiple Literacies,” “Transnational Literacies”; Ek; Machado-Casas; Lam and Warriner; Moore), contribute to immigrant livelihoods and family intimacies (e.g. González; Fürstenau; de la Piedra; Kwon; Vieira *Writing*), and are involved in creating and sustaining transnational community (Pandey; Pahl).

Research on transnational literacy in composition studies has tended to draw on socio-cultural and political theories of transnationalism as a construct that helps to describe the mobility of literacy in terms of relationships and connections across national spaces in the context of an emerging global economy. Within the context of transnational migration, literacies, including family and community literacies, are considered by many compositionists to be mobile, migrant resources for achieving personal goals, connecting family members, and building alliances within an economy of literacy tied to the accumulation and amalgamation of language skills, practices, and values. Yet, as Iswari P. Pandey discusses in *South Asians in the Mid-South: Migrations of Literacy*, it is “tricky” to talk about how literacy moves, what he calls “literacies in motion” or the “migrantness of literacies,” because of the autonomous and decontextualized view of literacy skills associated with progress and colonialism (22). A concept of literacy as sets of practices in motion, too, is limited, argues Pandey, in that it fails to consider the ways in which literate activity is involved in creating, maintaining, mediating, and negotiating social relations in and across local and translocal contexts (25-6). More recent studies consider as well diasporic framings of mobility that contribute to questions of (de) territorialization, displacement, and relocation in relationship to migrant investments in literacy as acts of border-crossings. Kaia Simon, for example, has argued recently in *Literacy in Composition Studies* that resettlement processes enable people to make sense of new forms of literate action in new contexts of cross-boundary relations (3).

Similarly, I am interested in the ways women in the context of an ongoing protracted displacement and refugee resettlement process navigate mutable forms of relational belonging across their differences and in relation to their literacy investments. However, rather than draw from women’s lived experiences of transnational migration and relational belonging to argue for literacy as a resource, I am interested in how women’s stories of experience and cultural practices of learning help them to negotiate competing literate values and also re-story, or re-script, forms of relational

belonging in the context of their literacy practice. In speaking with women like Kausila at the language centers, I found that many women engage in critical negotiations around how and why literacy matters by evoking kin-full and kindred relationships that have shaped their access to and investments in education over the course of adult lives unfolding within a protracted displacement. The ongoing relational dynamics that Kausila evokes in her conversations with me, and others, seem to suggest motivations and investments in learning that extend beyond the achievement of personal goals, to the creation of new forms of relationality that serve both individual and collective purposes at a particular moment in time. Women's temporally defined experience of kin-full and kindred relations in the context of their transnational mobility mediates the collective, community context of learning as well as women's individual investments in literacy.

To better understand how kin-full and kindred relationships contour women's storied experiences of literacy learning throughout the life course, I turn to literacy studies in education fields, and in particular anthropology and education. Core research in family and intergenerational literacies in these fields provide frameworks and conceptual terminology for thinking about how shifting dynamics of culturally specific forms of relational belonging over the life course of a family mediate the possibilities and constraints of individual family members' literacy learning. Vivian Gadsen's work, for example, which brings family life course studies in anthropology into conversation with intergenerational literacy research in education, has provided me with a way of understanding the relationship between literacy practices and women's shifting roles and responsibilities within a family structure over time. Citing Carol Stack and Linda Burton's

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groundbreaking ethnographic work on family life course, Gadsen introduced the interlocking constructs of *kin*-scripts, *kin*-work, *kin*-time, and *kinscription* to studies of intergenerational literacy. Kin-scripts are family scripts, or patterns, that discursively and materially shape the structures of relationship within families, indexing complex interplays of beliefs, values, and cultural practices. Kin-scripts shape individual family member's access to and investment in various forms of social activity beyond the home, including literacy (Stack and Burton 160). Kin-work describes the various types of work that particular families need to accomplish in order to survive and how this work gets distributed, often unevenly, across family members according to sex, gender, and age (160). Kin-time refers to shifting roles and responsibilities within particular family structures over time (162). Kinscription is the negotiated process of assigning family obligations, or work, to individuals based, in part, on their scripted roles and responsibilities within a family structure (163). Putting family life course studies into dialogue with literacy studies in education research, as Gadsen does in her work on intergenerational and family literacy, helps to illuminate the relationship between literacy

practices and “how families as multigenerational collectives, and individuals embedded within them negotiate the life course” (Stack and Burton 157).

The intersections of family and transnational literacy learning in the context of the indigenous, inter-ethnic, inter-caste relations that make up the Bhutanese refugee diaspora is its own particularly complex, trans-local site of practice. Bhutanese refugees are not a homogenous group. Area studies scholars as well as scholars of migration have pondered this question, wondering to what extent the mostly Nepali-speaking population of southern Bhutan should be considered ethnic Nepali. The question of the Nepali identity of the southern-living farmers forced out of Bhutan in the 1990s is a complex one. In *Unbecoming Citizens: Culture, Nationhood, and the Flight of Refugees from Bhutan*, one of the first scholarly monographs written by a Westerner on the history of the Bhutanese Diaspora, Michael Hutt cautions against projecting the relatively new category of Nepali ethnicity backward through time. Although a process of cultural and linguistic homogenization had been underway in Nepal during the mid-twentieth century, the varied peoples of Nepal, especially of Tibetan-Burman ethno-linguistic identities, still maintain their own distinct identities to some degree and assert them or play them down according to the political and economic circumstances (5). Regardless, there has developed a relatively homogenous, ethno-linguistic identity known as Nepali within which ethnic sub-categories have been subsumed (6). In a dissertation project on the literacy practices of recently resettled Bhutanese refugees in the US, Tika Lamsal also discusses the complex identity of Bhutanese refugees as diasporic migrants. Lamsal draws from participant accounts to complicate Bhutanese refugees’ identifications in relation to the shifting contexts of their national belonging. Lamsal’s participants unsettle a strong, singular ethnic or national identity, claiming neither a fully Bhutanese nor fully Nepali identity, and not yet able to claim citizenship in the US. Lamsal argues, “Being everywhere but belonging nowhere, the Bhutanese refugees are in search of an identity” (97).

Turning to kinship studies in the Nepali literature provides some helpful framing for thinking about the value of kinship among Bhutanese refugees with relational ties to Nepali cultural practices, language, and identity. More recent approaches to kinship studies in the Nepali-centric scholarship of cultural anthropology, for example, provide locally grounded, culturally inflected frameworks for conceptualizing and analyzing the ethnic diversity and multidimensionality of kin relations in Nepal. In Laya Prasad Uprety, Binod Pokharel, and Suresh Dhakal’s edited collection, *Kinship Studies in Nepali Anthropology*, kin relations in Nepal are studied through a variety of new theoretical frameworks and grounded examples that push against the structural functionalism and unilineal descent systems of conventional approaches to kinship and culture. In Nepal, kin relations, whether through bloodlines (consanguine), marriage (affinal), or through ritualized bonds to non-relatives (*mit laune*), powerfully influence both society and language.

Linguistically, kinship terms contribute to the rich morphology of the Nepali language and are often used explicitly to express familial relationship as well as metaphorically to express non-kin relations. Kin terms are so significant to the structure of everyday interactions in Nepal that they are often used as a form of address that replaces an individual’s given name (Singha, Sarma, and Purkayastha 49). This was the case in the refugee camps where learners at the language center were often referred to by their teachers as “aunties” and where I, as a fixed presence for almost a year, took



on the endearing though somewhat diminutive title of "*hāmro bahini*" (our little sister) in relation to learners and staff. Indeed, kinship terms were used to frame everyday interactions, maintaining an explicit structure of relationality among insiders, outsiders, and go-betweens.

In bringing together the above conceptual and theoretical constructs, my aim is to tie the study of transnational literacy in composition and education fields to the study of intergenerational, family life course, and kinship in anthropological fields. I do this in order to address limited theorization of dynamic, experiential, and negotiated forms of relational belonging among adult learners in protracted contexts of transnational migration, especially among older adults. As Lauren Marshall Bowen has noted in "Composing a Further Life," there remains a dearth of studies in the field of rhetoric and composition specifically geared toward the complexities and dynamics of older adult literacy learning across the lifespan and through the lens of intergenerational perspectives. Marshall's significant review of the literature of cross-generational perspectives on literacy in composition studies illustrates how previous studies tend to figure older adults as "literacy sponsors and mentors for younger generations, or as points on a timeline" that "[mark] historical shifts in literacy" without troubling the complex layering of identities and relationships involved in making those shifts (Bowen VIII).

Bowen's synthesis and critique of cross-generational perspectives in composition studies, as well as research spanning family relations and literacy learning in education fields, has helped me see how transnational literacy studies might be more attentive to shifting relations within the family collective over the lifespan of individual family members. Engaging these shifting family dynamics with consideration of the temporal contexts of specific migrations and protracted displacements could help transnational literacy researchers better account for the ways in which people's investments in literacy learning across the life span are influenced by how kindred relations are interdependent, experiential and re-negotiated over time and in particular circumstances. In addition, studies of transnational literacy learning might also consider the way community-based concepts and practices of kin-scripting and re(kin)scripting relations, within and beyond the family, influence people's sense of self and identity in relation to their literacy access across the life span; shape individual and generational investments in learning later in life; and contour shifting literacy practices throughout various stages of the life course. Thus, I would like to suggest that analyzing women's literacy practices in relationship to the way culturally inflected kin-scripts shift and change over the life course in transnational migration provides a more dynamic approach to migrant family literacy than a literacy-as-resource lens does alone, as it encapsulates the tensions and contradictions of everyday living in relation to others over time.

In the discussions below, I introduce three women among Kausila's peer group at the language centers, Susmita, Suk Maya, and Abi Maya. Ranging in age from 52 to 68 years old, these women explore through their dialogue with each other the working frameworks of kinship, friendship, and belonging that shape their investments in learning at a time in their life when the future remains uncertain. More specifically, in the first discussion, women share their generational perspectives on kinship, literacy access, and their changing roles within family during protracted displacement. Drawing on the terms of kin-scripts, kin-work, and kin-time from family studies and intergenerational literacy

research, I explore the role of women's shifting relational ties and responsibilities in relation to their language and literacy investments. In the second discussion, I explore the theme of friendship as it emerges across group interviews and a performance of learning and discuss how women at the language centers draw on their connections with each other to reformulate kindred ties and in the process re(kin)figure and re(kin)script their literacy practice.

## *Gāi Bastu Jhundaera Ani Jānu* Just Hang Up the Cows and Go!: Kinscripts and Access to Literacy Education Before Resettlement

Abi Maya, Suk Maya, and Susmita sit side by side on the instructors' work bench in the Sanischara Camp language center office on a warm day in early summer. Just behind them along the back wall of the office hangs a chalkboard, beautifully decorated with a hand drawn border of dahlias, featuring the center's attendance tallies. The day's attendance totals remain stable compared to previous weeks at around 200 learners. Abi Maya, Suk Maya, and Susmita have come from their morning classes to talk with me about their experiences with schooling before displacement as well as their goals for learning during resettlement. The teacher who recommended them for the interview, 24-year-old Muna, sits quietly and watchfully nearby. She is the lead facilitator and resident artist at the center and is responsible for the decorated chalkboard. Abi Maya, Suk Maya, and Susmita seem eager to talk and the mood is light. After some initial introductions, I begin with a series of questions I had developed earlier with Muna, who as a center facilitator was curious about what brought women to the center and how this information might be used for recruitment purposes.

"Did you go to school?" I ask Abi Maya in Nepali.

"I didn't get the chance," replies Abi Maya. "My parents gave me to another when we were young. It was also to another's husband. There was already a wife, *jethi māthi thiyo*. There was a sister above me [a first wife]. So, my parents gave me a *jethi māthi*."

"The time was not like now!" interrupts Suk Maya. "The time was very difficult. How was that time!"

"We got many problems," continued Abi Maya. "I gave birth to children and cared for them. And staying like that the agitation began. We were afraid at that time, being illiterate. Being illiterate without any sense, even the small person could frighten us. Without education, there was nothing inside our sense . . . . That is why we, the farmers, we used to go only to the market, but for the school, we didn't see. Though, my older brother used to read there. I didn't see the school where my brother used to go. Some studied, though. Some people led their children to study more. But for us, since from the young age, we were sent to work in the field to look after animals, cows, goats and to go for working outside. It was all very much. If I have to speak honestly, we didn't get a chance to enjoy or even take time while eating, also."

"In Bhutan, we women had all the work to do," interrupts Suk Maya. "We had to look after the baby and the cows. We also had to look after the buffalo, goats and sheep. Also, we had to do our own work and the work of our friends, as *kethālo* in the fields, but if I request the same thing here of my daughter-in-law, she will probably tell me, this old woman is going mad! We will be considered crazy

if we make a request like that! We used to do seven different types of work before we could go to sleep, but here, we just cook and eat. Eh! I used to do all the work.”

“Being a daughter-in-law in Bhutan there were many duties, ma’am,” Susmita says, addressing me, directly. “I would wake up early every morning to clean the drinking vessels until they shined. Then I would bring the water and prepare the tea and give it to father-in-law and mother-in-law. While the tea was getting ready, I would make sure my parents washed their faces. We used to have a pitcher of water that we kept ready on the floor, and I would make sure my mother and father-in-law washed their faces while the tea was getting ready. After that I carried the water vessels into their house. I prepared all the food and looked after the children. Sometimes, mother-in-law would help, but most of the time I had to do it myself.

“For us,” says Susmita, “the school was very far. There was no system to send anyone to school. There was only to look after the cows and work in the field. That is what we used to do. There was no school. Only a few people’s children used to go to school. Also, they used to say that girls should not be taught but only the boys, and my brothers were the only ones taught. There were two brothers and three sisters. My sisters are in Bhutan itself, and I am the only one to stay here. All others are there, and I am the only one stuck here.”

“Education is important,” says Susmita, “but what to do? *Buddhi aaudaina!* The sense doesn’t come. It’s time for us to die but I’m interested to learn!”

“English comes a little bit,” Abi Maya says. “We understand only a little. But I’m afraid that reaching there we will not understand what they talk, and they will not understand what we talk.”

“If we go there,” Susmita nods, “it will be like *latang patang*, beating around the bush, to get them to understand. I asked a lady who was there, how are you working there? ‘Eh!’ she says, ‘You study the language for some time,’ and she told me, ‘But I am still working and speaking with body language!’ She is saying it’s easier now, ‘because many Nepalese are here.’ She studied here in the language center and went there and was resettled three or four years ago. She was clever and studied here.”

Susmita thinks about it and then says, “Automatically we will learn things there, even we uneducated people. If we don’t know how to read, but know how to speak, and know a little something about the place, it will be OK. Now we are learning.”

In a separate interview at Sanischare later that week, I speak with Suk Maya at her home a short, walkable distance from the language center.

“If father and mother had known at that time that life would be like this,” says Suk Maya, “then they would have sent us to school, and it would be easy to read now. But they were only rich by money, not by education. Nothing else was there. If there was money, it was everything for them. They gave us one *tola* of gold and a pregnant cow to all the ten daughters as dowry. To all the ten daughters, they slaughtered pig and sheep, and they gave us extravagant weddings. For Brahmins, they gave sheep to eat. If some sister’s cows died, they gave another one, double! One *tola* of gold and a cow with a baby. Two were given! Double, as the cows died! Though they were successful financially, they did not permit us to study. I had two brothers, they looked after us, but the educated one among the two is gone now, resettled. Only the deaf and dumb are left behind.

“Ma’am, a long time ago, my father and mother—though school was just over there—if we said,

I want to go to school, they would say, “*Gāi bastu jhundaera ani jānu!* Just hang up the cows and go! That father and mother were like *duplicates* of one another; they both said the same thing! Another father and mother I think I am getting now. The mother and father who gave birth to me were like duplicates, but the father and mother that I have got now [referring to teachers and staff at the center] are real ones, I think.”

~

Susmita, Suk Maya, and Abi Maya’s investments in learning, and especially literacy, are deeply influenced by what they felt to be the possibilities and constraints of learning after a certain, lived age, when responsibilities of managing family life were to take precedence over schooling. In this way, Susmita, Suk Maya, and Abi Maya kin-script their various experiences of schooling and access to literacy education. Kin-scripts illuminate how one’s individual life course is connected to others and how “scripted,” or patterned, roles within family get negotiated through the family as a collective (Stack and Burton). Kin-scripts highlight the temporal as well as interdependent nature of the life course as individual’s roles within family settings change over time and in relation to the dynamic movements of other family members (Stack and Burton; Elder 279). In the dialogues above, women describe similarly patterned experiences of being denied schooling at a young age because of their sex and because of gendered expectations of girls’ roles within the family. This is not to say that all displaced women from Bhutan experienced these denials and gendered expectations, but that many women at the language centers discursively drew on these kin-scripts to express their historically layered and dynamic investments in learning.

The related concepts of kin-work and kin-time also play out in the examples above. As discussed previously, kin-work refers to the often age and gender-based distribution of labor within families that is needed for families to survive, while kin-time refers to the temporal and sequential ordering of family roles and responsibilities over the life course of a family. Suk Maya evokes through colorful language the gendered roles and responsibilities girls were expected to fulfill in their natal home – “*Gāi bastu jhundaera ani jānu!*” Just hang up the cows and go! In Suk Maya’s telling of her early childhood experience of schooling, she portrays two immovable parents who mock her pleas to be educated, and who, according to Suk Maya, think the very idea of girls leaving home to be educated is ridiculous and impractical. The family’s survival depended on Suk Maya herding cattle, tending to livestock. Over time, and as adults living in the camps, women continued to manage the daily affairs of the household. Educational opportunities were few and far

***“Reaching deep across indigenous, ethno-linguistic, caste, religion, and generational lines, women’s performance of learning was evocative of both their shared experiences and non-mutuality, their differences. It contoured a collective practice of transnational literacy that had nothing to do with reading and writing in the conventional sense, but everything to do with re-(kin)scripting and re-(kin)figuring ‘the ties that bind’ through literacy practice.”***

between. Now, at their age, in their middle years and getting older, women struggle to become fluent in the language of resettlement. Abi Maya says, "We understand only a little [English]." Cracking jokes and commiserating with one another, the women wonder if they will be "beating around the bush" to make themselves understood by others after they resettle. "Isn't it funny," Suk Maya wonders, "that now at the time of dying, I am interested to learn."

Even so, and while contending with the rapid social changes unfolding within an ongoing resettlement process, these women commit themselves to learning English by attending class, memorizing English-only dialogues, and reciting the ABCs. This commitment to learning begs the question: if women remained unconvinced of the possibility of becoming literate later in life, why did they invest so much time and energy in learning? One answer may be that women continued at the language centers, despite not making much progress in written language, not only out of a sense of responsibility to resettled family members or a sense that they would need English to survive, but out of the "love" that Kausila describes as coming about through acts of connection and togetherness involving speaking, laughing and getting to know each other's stories at the language centers. Below, I contend that the women of the language centers take up learning later in life at the edge of their impending resettlement not to become literate, but as a form of critical negotiation and solidarity at the ends of kinship. This form of critical negotiation and solidarity involved performances of learning that, rather than leading to fluency or proficiency in English, led to questioning, challenging, and intervening in "ties that bind people to one another in dialogue with the emotional and structural forces that can sever or reformulate these bonds" (Craig 11). Reaching deep across indigenous, ethno-linguistic, caste, religion, and generational lines, women's performance of learning was evocative of both their shared experiences and non-mutuality, their differences. It contoured a collective practice of transnational literacy that had nothing to do with reading and writing in the conventional sense, but everything to do with re-(kin)scripting and re-(kin)figuring "the ties that bind" through literacy practice.

### *Maya Sanga Bhayo* It Happened with Love: Recontextualizing Learning through Performances of Kinship And Friendship

Many women were skeptical of the promises of English and literacy. Rather than attend the language centers for the singular goal of learning to read and write in English for resettlement, women were also interested in creating community with other women across caste, indigenous, and ethnic group differences. Across interviews, women described the importance of center activities that went beyond learning English to meeting with friends, exchanging dialogue with each other, laughing, celebrating joys and sorrows, nurturing a shared affinity. Some women described it as *maya*, a kind of love or affection for each other, including 30-year-old Jannuka, who had been coming to the center for months while she waited on her medical examinations to clear for resettlement processing. When I ask Jannuka about what she hoped to gain from attending daily classes at her local center, Jannuka explains, "I know many friends here [at the center], and I am getting help from them. If I had stayed at my house, there will be tensions and feelings. But coming here? I meet friends and have friendships."

The women of the language centers evoked friendship repeatedly in private conversations with me and in dialogue with each other. In many ways the friendships formed in the language centers operated as metaphorical family, or fictive kin, for women who were experiencing physical separation from biological family members. Such relationships enabled new forms of kin-scripting literacy practice. A focus group centered on language and caste differences in the language centers, for example, highlighted for me the way women evoked new kindred relations in the context of their language center friendships. Sitting in a circle one afternoon in a Beldangi II language center classroom, I spoke in Nepali with 19 women about the effects of caste, ethnicity, and language differences on their relationship to English, literacy, and learning at the center. Going around the circle, we each introduced ourselves, and then I commented on the great diversity of the group.

“There are many different groups and family names represented here. There are Tamang, Magar, Limbu, Bishwa, Bhattatrai. Is there any ‘tension’ among you here?”

Parbati, a teacher-facilitator among the group, helped to translate my accented Nepali, “You are here from many castes. Do you have any tension or problems being together?” she asked.

“Not at all!” the group answered in unison. “[Tension] doesn’t come here, miss!”

Then, one by one, women interjected:

“We are all friends!”

“If we cut ourselves, our blood will be the same!”

“Though we are different castes, our race is Nepali.”

“Everyone’s blood is the same. No one’s blood is either thicker or thinner than anyone else’s”

I interrupted the consensus to try to make a finer point about the differences in inter-caste tension and collaboration both inside and outside of the language center:

“But there is tension sometimes, outside of the language center, yes?” I asked.

“If we have tension outside,” came a voice from across the room, “regarding anything, we will have no tension coming inside this center because, here, will be many friends, and we will enjoy. And, also, we’ll forget our tension at home, after coming here. There will be no tension inside the language center. We are all friends here, and we gather and enjoy [each other].”

Another woman agreed, “We carry the load of tensions, but we will feel we are light coming inside the center. We unload that load. We feel peace. If there is something in our mind, it will become cool. That is what we want to say. If we get a chance to talk and learn [together], we’ll feel ourselves at peace and the grating tension in our mind will be gone. Tension runs away.”

Other women continued to add to the conversation:

“I feel the same way. All the problems run away. We get a chance to study. I’ll be able to greet friends and introduce myself. I know friends [here].”

“I feel the same.”

~

Less than a month after this focus group was recorded, I sat in the Beldangi II language center for the last time before the leaving the camps in June 2013. The students and teachers had prepared a farewell ceremony for me that overlapped with the closing of another four-month batch of classes, complete with several hours of ceremonial *tika*, speeches, singing, dancing, and other performances

to mark the occasion. About mid-way through the ceremony, several women gathered in front of the crowd that had formed, and they began to sing and dance the *sangini*. They sang,

*hāmro hāmro rakshā gara*

*hāmi khelchum sangini*

*hāmi khelchum sangini*

/Protect us and our way of life and

we will keep singing and dancing together as friends;

we will keep singing and dancing together as friends.

Successive verses of the *sangini*, sung on that day, illustrate the metaphorical entanglement of women's knowledge, the sacred, and the power of friendship. The flower and pond imagery in the lyrics represented below are associated with feminine deities (Davis). The school and temple are mirrored reflections of sacred space.

*Īśwarakō kinārma, phulāi phulyō*

*Iswarāi ujjālo*

*Eschoollāi ma, phulāi phulyō*

*Eschoollāi ujjālo*

*Ek thuga tipi ne mathāi*

*Dui thuga eschoolmāi lagāula*

/In God's pond, flowers bloomed.

God is bright.

In the school, flowers bloomed.

The school is bright.

Put one flower on the head for a blessing.

Keep two in the school.

*Īśwarakō kinārma, phulāi phulyō*

*Iswarāi ujjālo*

*Mandirlāi ma, phulāi phulyō*

*Mandirlāi ujjālo*

*Ek thuga tipine mathāi*  
*Dui thuga mandiramāi lagāula*

/In God's pond, flowers bloomed.

God is bright.

In the temple, flowers bloomed.

The temple is bright.

Put one flower on the head for a blessing.

Keep two in the temple.

Typically performed by high caste women during the Nepali *Tij* festival, the *sangini* is an intergenerational performance involving the return to the natal home of married away daughters. *Sangini* songs are often composed of dialogues among women at various points along the life course as they share stories of suffering and happiness through their singing and dancing (Subba; Chaudhuri, Lepcha, and Maiti). Yet, as a literacy event, this *sangini* was contextualized differently from the traditional performances typically associated with festive occasions and annual homecomings. Situated within a language center developed to support a language policy of expediency in response to a rapidly unfolding refugee resettlement process, this performance is tangled up in not only cataclysmic social change, but also in the gradual shifting of structures of responsibility within family and community that come with prolonged periods of indefinite waiting in protracted displacement. Women who were young mothers at the time of leaving Bhutan are grandmothers now. Family separations caused by complicated resettlements have left some women alone, desperate to be reunited with their loved ones through “the process,” as others struggle with decisions about whether to leave Nepal at all.

As a performance of learning, this *sangini* signals not only these women's complex, and at times, contradictory investments in literacy for resettlement but also their dialogic participation with the larger “emotional and structural forces” of transnationalism that contour belonging (Craig 11). The women of the language centers sing and dance for the protection of their way of life while also invoking divine blessings for their learning and going to school, which were considered unusual practices for older women in the camps. Situated at “the ends of kinship,” their performance shifts focus from learning English to the way resettlement stretches family relations across the globe, putting pressure on familiar structures of responsibility and shifting roles within the family over time, opening new possibilities for literate

***“As a performance of learning, this sangini signals not only these women's complex, and at times, contradictory investments in literacy for resettlement but also their dialogic participation with the larger ‘emotional and structural forces’ of transnationalism that contour belonging (Craig 11).”***



subjectivities and practices. Just as the flowers in the school have bloomed, within the ends of kinship, women's friendships have also blossomed, illuminating other options and possibilities for literacy beyond the kin-scripted practices that women recount in their recollections of the denial of literacy in early childhood. In re-(kin)scripting and re-(kin)figuring literacy practice through their friendships at the language centers, women claim ownership over their learning in ways that support their ideas of wellbeing, including a reorganization of literacy practice away from the functional goal of learning English for resettlement toward literacy learning as a re(kin)scripting of the ties that bind.

## *SANGINI*: RE(KIN)FIGURING TRANSNATIONAL LITERACY

Over the course of a decade, from roughly 2008–2017, or the length of the Bhutanese refugee resettlement process, thousands of women gathered for daily English classes at language centers scattered throughout the Bhutanese refugee camps. Nestled deep within the jungles of Jhapa and Morang districts in southeastern Nepal, across several language centers, women speak with me, their teachers, and each other about their conflicting desires related to learning. Often women point to the irony and contradiction of learning later in life, like when Susmita says, "Now at the time of dying, I am ready to learn!" Woven into their stories and experiences of learning at the language centers are other, more deeply sedimented experiences of literacy denial and opportunity. Women recall not being admitted to the rural schools that dotted the ridgelines and swampy marshes of Bhutan's southern hills and valleys. They speak of early marriages and motherhood taking priority over education, of weighing the promises and failures of short-lived literacy programs during their protracted displacement, of the relational ties that bind. Through their stories women evoke and perform relationship. They explore relational and community attitudes toward women's learning and call into question later-in-life literacy investments. In doing so, women evoke histories of literacy, examine kindred relations, and reformulate affective investments in ways that trouble and enrich what is meant by transnational literacy.

For example, rather than submit to resettlement's language and literacy imperatives that one must learn English in order to survive migration processes and become self-sufficient in the country of one's relocation, Susmita is rather skeptical of the benefits of literacy on the other side of the resettlement process. She wonders about the irony of learning after a certain age – what good is learning *at the time of dying?* – and considers whether learning English might just be *latang patang*, a big commotion over nothing. Suk Maya, too, weighs the limits and potentials of language and literacy learning as an older adult against her experience of being denied access to literacy education throughout her life, and Abi Maya is concerned that the little bit of learning they do in the language centers is not enough to become self-sufficient. Regardless, Susmita, Suk Maya, and Abi Maya attend English classes religiously. They are invested in the space of learning, sending word to their teachers and friends when they are not able to attend, and actively working to recruit their neighbors and peers to the center. In the language center, these women find community and a place to belong. For Suk Maya, her teachers and friends at the center are like her natural family, even more than her biological parents, who Suk May describes as *duplicates*, an English loan word that Suk Maya wielded

intentionally to critique what she perceives as her parent's duplication of the sexed and gendered norms that reinforced their decision not to educate her in the first place.

Suk Maya comes to the language center every day, along with Susmita and Abi Maya, but their investment in learning does not come without a critical sense of ambivalence about the whole endeavor. In this space of learning, women share stories of being denied access to literacy education in early life, and they weigh the possibilities and constraints of learning after a certain age. In talking with each other and with me, they share stories of experience that are in dialogue with conflicting sets of expectations and desires. They set their current literacy practices against the engendered and kin-scripted literacies of early childhood and contextualize their investments in their experience of ongoing migratory dispersals. They are critical of accumulating literacies, but also engaged in a re-storying of themselves as educated persons. As a navigational practice (a practice of navigating the complexities of resettlement), the goal of literacy is more than the accumulation of sets of skills needed to survive resettlement. Rather, literacy learning is an activity through which women might negotiate together their experiences of happiness and suffering related to migrations. Women use the resettlement imperative to become literate to create a space for solidarity that enables them to collectively make sense of their experience of the past, connect that experience to the present, and imagine a future that is not disconnected from that experience but is also not a reproduction of it. Women look to the past to reimagine and re(kin)script literate possibilities.

Furthermore, women's discursive and embodied construction of the value of friendship, including performances like the *sangini*, call into being a collective intervention in the kin-scripted literacies of the past. In effect, women re(kin)figure their literacy practice through kindred ties with one another that provide the affective, embodied, and imaginal means through which to navigate changing relationships and literate subjectivities. As a performance of possibilities, situated in the learning context of resettlement exigencies, the *sangini* interrupts conventional associations between transnational literacy learning and individual achievement or progress, by grounding literacy practice in the collectivity of women's singing and dancing together. As a song and dance of women friends typically performed at the time of marriage, the *sangini* evokes kindred ties in a reformulation and recontextualization of relational belonging *in the language centers* and in relationship to a communally organized adult learning program. It is through a re(kin)figuring of literacy practice involving "friends" that "bleed the same blood," that women learners at the language centers seek to create and sustain ties that bind them to each other across their differences in caste, home language, or *aaphno bhasa*, and religion and through these ties, navigate together, the possibilities and constraints of learning during a protracted displacement and ongoing resettlement process.

## CONCLUSION

This article illustrates how women learners use the language and literacy imperatives of resettlement to create an effectual, kindred solidarity across their differences that transforms the outcomes of their learning from functional sets of language skills and resources for crossing borders to active negotiations of transnational "realities" within the ephemeral and liminal space of

a protracted displacement. The women I spoke with at the language centers were rightfully skeptical of literacy resources and of learning to read, write, and speak in English after a lifetime of being denied full access to a formal education in their first languages. And yet, despite their ambivalent attitudes toward language and literacy acquisition in English, many of the women at the language centers persist in learning, committing themselves to hours of instruction daily for months, if not years, on end. Women continue to come to the language centers to be with their friends, to love and laugh and to support each other. Rather than focus solely on becoming proficient readers and writers of English for resettlement purposes, women in the language centers navigate relational movements, from gendered kin-scripts to circles of friendship that re(kin)figure literacy practices in diaspora. Through their stories of, conversations about, and performances of learning, women explore the kindred ties that bind them to each other. Their literacy practice becomes entwined with these efforts, as a labor of love at the “ends of kinship,” a labor that connects them to the past while making way for an uncertain future. In the liminal space of protracted displacement, women sing and dance as friends, performing for each other, as well as for the wider community, the limits and possibilities of their literacy learning, beyond the accumulation and amalgamation of skills and resources for migration. Rather, it is in working gently at the limits of their language and literacy practices, and in reformulations of relational belonging, that the women of the language centers construct a space of practice that enables them to re(kin)script and re(kin)figure kinship, friendship, and learning in migration.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I chose to transcribe the Nepali words and phrases that appear throughout this English language text using Roman letters versus Nepali script (Devanāgarī), as this choice reflects the limits and potentials of my language knowledge and experience. I am aware, however, of recent efforts in writing studies to produce translations of Nepali texts using both Devanāgarī and English scripts, particularly Laura Gonzales' *Designing Multilingual Experiences in Technical Communication*. I find these efforts to be beautiful and rich in pluri- and translanguing resources as well as in the promises and challenges of participatory translation practices. Being a learner but not being a native speaker of Nepali myself, I consulted with the following texts and persons to aid my transcription and translation process: *A Course in Nepali* by David Matthews, *A Comparative and Etymological Dictionary of Nepali Language* by R. L. Turner and D. R. Turner, *Basic Course in Spoken Nepali* by Tkia B. Karki and Chij K. Shrestha as well as local sources, including learners and family members from the language centers. Any discrepancies, variances, or inaccuracies in the transcription and translation reflect my own emergent language skills and plurilingual learning process.

<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms have been used.

<sup>3</sup> This study was reviewed under IRB project number 09-1007-02 with the support of the offices of the Fulbright-International Institute of Education and The Commission for Educational Exchange between the United States and Nepal/USEF-Nepal and in affiliation with the Caritas-Nepal regional sub-office and Bhutanese Refugee Education Programme in Jhapa, Nepal.

<sup>4</sup> Caritas Nepal's Bhutanese Refugee Education Programme implemented education programming at all levels and ages throughout the camps. Implementing agencies typically drew from camp leadership and community members to staff and run grassroots programs, while financial and organizational support came from worldwide donors or sponsoring agencies. All teachers and staff at the language centers came from within the Bhutanese refugee community and they set the goals, objectives, and daily agenda of education programming based on community input and in dialogue with NGO officers.

<sup>5</sup> *Abi Maya* is referring to the political situation in Bhutan that eventually led to the mass expulsion and migration of Nepali-speaking Bhutanese refugees.

<sup>6</sup> *Latang patang* is a colloquial term that means different things in different contexts. During the transcription and translation process in Nepal, a family member of a language center participant translated it as "beating around the bush." Years later, a friend and family of a language center participant resettled in Ohio described it to me as "trying to do some work very fast but not getting it done." In the context of what Susmita is saying about older women learning English for resettlement, I take her meaning to refer to all the commotion around learning English, a "hurry up and learn English and then come [to the US]" mentality, that in Susmita's experience has not resulted in increased language and literacy acquisition.

<sup>7</sup> *Tola* is a Nepali unit of measurement.

<sup>8</sup> *Tij* is a festival of women celebrated in Nepal and North India in late August/early September.

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