

# Literacy Brokers and the Emotional Work of Mediation

Ligia Ana Mihut University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

## ABSTRACT

Literacy brokers—defined as people who assist others with reading and writing—have gained increasing attention in Literacy and Composition Studies (for example, Jerskey; Lillis and Curry; Lunsford). Yet their analytical richness has been marginally examined or subsumed under already established terms such as *sponsors of literacy*. This essay seeks to reclaim the significance of literacy brokers in doing critical emotional work through what I call *literacy as affinity*. In this ethnographic study of transnational literacies of Romanian immigrants, I show that as literacy brokers move across contexts, they accumulate knowledge and develop a bi-institutional perspective. In doing so, these brokers serve more than instrumental ends; they perform literacy as affinity by brokering personal experiences and languages of nation-states and by participating in advocacy for the sake of others.

## KEYWORDS

literacy/language broker, transnational literacy, affinity, emotional work

“We pleaded our case. I read a few stories. I read a few letters that I received from people in the refugee camps. And I said, “Look, these are stories from our people. They escaped from Communist Romania. If we do not do the papers for them to come to the United States, they’ll be sent back to Romania and they’ll be imprisoned.”

(Eugen, an American of Romanian heritage)

**E**ugen, a former political refugee from Romania, now a US citizen, is aware of the power of writing a personal story. Eugen learned to write in a rather unexpected way—through drafting immigration documents for other people, including their stories of oppression. With these stories, he also appealed to not-for-profit organizations advocating for the cause of many other asylum seekers stranded in refugee camps in Europe. Different from the work one might do in a typical writing classroom,

Eugen would write in the high-stakes context of US immigration, where his literate actions generated life-long consequences for many immigrants. Eugen is what we might call a “literacy broker,” a go-to person in the community in regards to documents, writing, immigration, and other issues. The term “literacy broker” has gained much traction in New Literacy Studies (NLS), especially in cross-cultural studies of literacy (for example, Baynham; Kalman; Papen, “Literacy Mediators”). In a rather comprehensive definition, Kristen Perry defines literacy brokering as “a process of seeking and/or providing informal assistance about some aspect of a given text or literacy practice. Brokers bridge linguistic, cultural, and textual divides for others” (256). While current work on literacy brokers underscores their instrumental roles as translators, scribes, or helpers with texts, in this essay I draw attention to literacy brokers’ emotional work, performed in mediating texts locally and transnationally.

Literacy mediation has been studied in multiple social contexts, such as tourism businesses in Namibia (Papen, “Literacy Mediators”), the public plaza in Mexico (Kalman), academic publishing of multilingual scholars (Lillis and Curry), a Moroccan community in London (Baynham), and others. A large body of research focusing specifically on language brokering—which, based on Perry’s definition, has been subsumed under the broader term of literacy brokering—has been conducted on children of immigrants translating or interpreting for their parents (C. Chu; Orellana, Meza, and Pietsch; Tse). This work contributes to a broad understanding of various social contexts where literacy mediators operate. Building on this scholarship, in this ethnographic study of Romanian immigrants in the US, I argue that literacy brokers assume more complex roles and responsibilities; they also shift positions, accumulating knowledge from multiple contexts where they broker texts, languages, or cultural gaps. Most importantly, I contend that literacy brokering implicates emotional work, or what I call *literacy as affinity*—a discursive repertoire comprised of language of empathy, personal experiences, and even social relations embedded in the literate experience. Many writing contexts, particularly institutional sites—such as work places, governmental agencies, courtrooms, schools and so on—aim to streamline communication, and in doing so remove the emotional fabric that often sustains or enhances literacy practices. Literacy brokers, I argue, intervene with significant emotional work that ultimately cultivates human understanding through language and literacy.

I use the term “affinity” as almost synonymous with emotion, with the former offering a broader umbrella concept that captures how emotions manifest in language use, in personal stories that people share, and certainly in relations between people. The study of emotion posits some challenges, precisely because it has been historically defined as oppositional to rationality: “something natural rather than cultural, irrational rather than rational, chaotic rather than ordered, subjective rather than universal, physical rather than mental or intellectual, unintended and uncontrollable, and hence often dangerous” (Lutz 69). Yet Julie Lindquist reminds us that “emotions are situated and constructed,” connected to all aspects of the social (201). Lynn Worsham also defines emotion as “the tight braid of affect and judgment, socially and historically constructed and bodily lived, through which the symbolic takes hold of and binds the individual, in complex and contradictory ways, to the

social order and its structure of meanings” (216). Based on these definitions, emotions are integral components in the fabric of everyday life, entangled in how people think, speak, and act socially and historically. Central to my conception of emotion is Laura Micciche’s explanation of “emotion as a valuable rhetorical resource” (*Doing Emotion* 1). Rather than just expressions of personal feelings, emotions have rhetorical force intersecting and shaping personal and interpersonal, social and

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political realities. Yet what studies on emotion show is that emotions are also tied, managed, or regimented particularly in the context of institutions; in Megan Boler’s words, “within education, as in the wider culture, emotions are a site of social control” (xiv). Educational institutions are such locations where, as Jennifer Trainor explains, affective experiences are

being constructed or managed. In exploring connections between emotions and racism, Trainor further shows how language, particularly in institutional contexts, engenders “emotional regulation” (85). Similarly, Julie Lindquist contends that institutions must acknowledge the “emotional labor” of writing teachers and the emotional formations that emerge in the writing classroom (189). In the context of immigration and bureaucratic practices, institutional constraint operates by the state officials’ overemphasis on procedural knowledge rather than emotion: what forms to use for what purpose and how to fill out a given form in the most efficient way. For these types of tasks—filling out forms, translating, writing documents, and others—literacy brokers have been conceived as tools serving very specific literate ends. And similar to Lindquist’s example of the writing classroom, emotional work in these bureaucratic writing contexts, including immigration applications, has been controlled and managed. In this study, I aim to show that literacy brokers recover emotional work lost in the context of immigration, and in doing so they humanize a system that otherwise tends to reduce immigrants to “case studies.” Since literacy brokers hold multiple positions and develop bi-institutional perspectives—a concept I will develop later in this essay—they perform emotional work in the following ways: 1) through their own experiences of migration, they are able to tap into these personal narratives when they assist others with their literate immigration experiences; 2) when institutions prescribe ways of being, reading, and writing, literacy brokers are attuned to emotional regimentation and regulations since they function “across” institutions. This means that sometimes brokers work from within institutions, and sometimes they act from outside institutions. This process of changing perspectives, of adopting an emic viewpoint and alternating it with an etic angle, allows literacy brokers to develop a critical stance of institutional language and to recover the loss of affective discursive experiences.

Since literacy brokers in this study emerged as significant players in the lives of immigrants, particularly in the process of acquiring US citizenship, I examine their role in mediating and mitigating the force of state powers as these immigrants negotiate textual paths through the languages of institutions and nation-states.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, I analyze here the literacy histories of Romanian immigrants who escaped Romania before 1989, when Romania was still under Communist rule. Representing a profile of mobile subjectivity, these Romanian immigrants' narratives reveal strategies used to negotiate both internal and external boundaries during the Cold War era. Romania's 40-year period of cultural and political isolation is reflected in the ways in which these immigrants broker language and literacy restrictions as well as the rhetorics of nation-states. Having experienced the control of a totalitarian regime, Romanian immigrants perceive the state as both rigid and flexible, the challenge being to negotiate the in-between space of these extremes. The Romanian emigration/immigration in the 1970s and 1980s must be understood in terms of economic benefits and human rights advocacy, as these refugees were allowed for the most part to leave the country on grounds of religious, ethnic, or political persecution; many of them were given a passport and permission to depart, only as a result of significant international transactions and trade benefits that Western countries, including the US, initiated with Romania. Although the US and Romania had divergent interests—the US was concerned with the lobbying of human rights, Romania with extracting economic benefits from the US through the Most Favored Nation status<sup>2</sup> (MFN)—the US became one of the main destinations for Romanian refugees.<sup>3</sup> These refugees found themselves navigating both Romanian emigration restrictions and US immigration qualifications.

In the context of US Immigration and Citizenship Services<sup>4</sup> (USCIS), the pursuit of legal papers creates a discursive market entangling individuals and state powers in complex ways. This market of legal papers regulated through forms, applications, or affidavits allows little room for the individual to negotiate his or her interaction with the state. Since in an immigration context, an alien seeking to obtain US citizenship must have a sponsor, and since in Composition and Literacy Studies the notion of sponsors of literacy (Brandt, "Sponsors") is a widely-used analytical concept, a brief explanation of terminology is necessary. Deborah Brandt defines sponsors of literacy as "any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way" ("Sponsors" 166). In the context of US immigration, the notion of sponsorship implicates mobility, national identities, and access through one's mediating role. Specifically, to sponsor someone in the immigration discourse means "to bring to the US or 'petition for'" a particular individual (US Dept. of Homeland Security). Thus, a sponsor supports the action and the process of moving one from a place to another, in this case, a foreign national's mobility to the US. Whether the petition supports a family member, potential employee, or asylum seeker, a sponsor is crucial in the pursuit of legal papers. Without a sponsor and an affidavit of support from a sponsor, the application is incomplete and cannot be processed.

Despite the central role of sponsors in the context of immigration, in this study, literacy brokers surfaced as significant actors in day-to-day interactions. Based on my participants' accounts, literacy

brokers are the ones who participate in the moment-by-moment interactions brokering texts, such as applications, declarations, documentation, and knowledge gaps between the immigrant and state rhetorics. In immigration papers, the sponsor often remains a formal inscription on a document, responding to governmental constraints but in reality achieving no significant impact on the petitioner. Framed by US state stipulations, the sponsor involved in the petition process has to be a US citizen and must show evidence of sufficient income to support another person. On the other hand, literacy brokers are less visible, almost invisible in formal papers, yet their role shapes the processing of legal papers in significant ways. Unlike the sponsors who want their name acknowledged, as in the case of commercials that inspired Brandt's ("Sponsors") choice of the sponsor metaphor, literacy brokers remain rather obscure in formal, institutionalized sites of writing. I distinguish their lack of visibility from that of ghostwriters, also discussed in Brandt's "When People Write for Pay." While literacy brokers are rather invisible, they certainly do not seek to impersonate someone else as ghostwriters do. Rather, their lack of prominence comes from their mundane roles and from lack of attention to mediation, especially when the focus is on the literate goal to be accomplished rather than on the person who is facilitating the mediation. In the immigrants' experience, the literacy broker surfaces where there are gaps between what an individual has to accomplish and the scarcity of available resources for that goal. Beyond brokers' instrumental roles, I highlight their affective work, deeply intertwined in the process of migration and in other institutionalized contexts of writing.

## LITERACY BROKERS: BACKGROUND & PROFILES

Data for the current study come from a larger ethnographic project focused on transnational literacies of Romanian immigrants in the Midwest area, particularly living in a large Midwest metropolis and its surrounding suburbs. Given Romania's history of closed borders before 1989, the official fall of the Communist regime in this country, I divided the participants into two categories: old immigrants who left the country before 1989 and new immigrants, who arrived in the US after 1990. Data for the present study, consisting of thirteen literacy histories, come primarily from old immigrants who came to the US under the category of refugee in the 1970s and 1980s. In my discussion of brokers, I will mainly concentrate on four participants (see Table 1) who have taken on the role of brokers in the community and illustrate the interactions with the rest of the community. Both first-hand accounts, the brokers' narratives, and second-hand sources, the community members' stories, help build the profile of these brokers, specifically their emotional work.

The centrality of literacy brokers in an immigrant community is not marked by quantity, but rather by their reputation and the large number of immigrants who call on these brokers' services. Occasionally, I rely more on one of the four brokers, Eugen, whose story I highlighted at the beginning of this essay. As someone who has occupied various brokering positions from volunteering in the community to becoming a church representative in legal affairs and working as paralegal, Eugen offered the most details about literacy brokering relative to legal papers. Given that his brokering

role of legal documents had ended, he was the most open to relating practices and events as he remembered them. The other brokers' experiences complemented details that Eugen either missed or did not recall during our interview. Although George, a different broker, agreed to participate in the study, he seemed unexpectedly hermetic in his answers. For this reason, I reference him the least. To protect the privacy of these participants, I use pseudonyms, and in the far right column of Table 1, I list arbitrarily various roles these brokers held in the community, rather than associate particular roles with particular people.

Table 1: Literacy Brokers

Literacy Brokers	Education	Education & Training	Languages	Multiple Roles in Literacy Brokering
<b>Eugen</b>	High school degree (Romania) Associate degree (US)	Volunteer; training on the job	Romanian, English, Italian	Former green card applicant
<b>Manuela</b>	High school degree (Romania)	Training on the job; feedback from supervisor	Romanian, English	Community volunteer Legal representative
<b>Claudiu</b>	College degree (Romania) Certificates (US)	Certificates, training, translation conferences; training on the job	Romanian, English, French, Hungarian	Consultant Translator Official interpreter Unofficial reporter
<b>George</b>	College degree (Romania) College degree (US)	Training through formal education; informal training gained from interacting with community members.	Romanian English (information about speaking additional languages was not provided)	Paralegal Legal consultant Community interpreter

I supplement interview data with copies of travel documents, refugee certificates, and documents pertaining to the refugees' immigrant experience shared during our interviews. Additionally, I use historical documents, particularly newspaper clippings about Romanian immigrants and Romania-US relationships in the 1980s; all of these primary documents<sup>5</sup> originate from the daily news in the 1970s-1980s and Radio Free Europe news broadcasts, the main source of uncensored information for many Romanians before 1989.

The immigration experience, as the participants in this study attest, is marked by numerous forms—certificates, identity cards, affidavits, letters of invitation, and many other documents specific for each category of immigration: humanitarian, family reunification, or employment. Although I

had limited access to some of these documents, they were often referenced during the interviews, either by the brokers or by the immigrants who needed the brokers' services. Table 2 includes a selection of these documents and various activities that entailed some form of literacy brokering.

Table 2: Types of Brokering Activities

Types of Documents	Activities
<b>Forms</b>	Filling out: green card applications, applications for citizenship, biographical forms
<b>Legal Documents</b>	Filling out or writing: affidavits, declarations; documenting or writing personal stories of persecution (asylum seekers) Researching and writing briefs
<b>Consulting</b>	<i>Applicants:</i> giving/asking for legal advice; giving /asking for advice concerning particular forms <i>Other entities:</i> consulting senators and other government officials in regards to an immigration issue Researching and writing briefs
<b>Advocacy &amp; Research</b>	Interviewing people Recording and collecting stories of oppression Compiling reports Preparing briefs
<b>*The Immigration File</b>	Compiling and organizing various forms into a coherent "file self": applications, birth/ marriage certificates, divorce papers, etc.; evidence of mailing addresses of applicants.

\*The immigration file includes a compilation of documents and immigration forms that can be considered individually but also as a whole unit. Individual files need a particular rhetorical arrangement to make up the immigration file as single unit.

The language that surrounds the mediation process in the case of Romanian refugees includes phrases such as "helped sponsor," "helped these people come to the US," "helped them bring their families," "church representative, legal representative," "doing translations," "[doing] all kinds of legal paperwork," "advice on immigration," "we pleaded our case." These activities denote the broker as an assistant, consultant, advocate, translator, suggesting flexibility of roles and perspectives. Building on these multiple identities, the literacy broker materializes as a malleable construct permitting the creation of new meanings based on context and roles. Acknowledging this flexibility of positions and contexts, I draw attention to the dynamic nature of literacy brokering. While previous scholarship has succeeded in highlighting a multiplicity of social contexts where the brokers operate, it has been limited in capturing the brokers' complex social worlds and their literate repertoire in multiple roles. Since I have looked at brokers and their literacy histories, I have been able to capture the mobility of their positions as well as the larger forces that shaped various changes. It has been their mobility that disclosed the affinity work they perform through literacy.

## BI-INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVES: ACCUMULATING ROLES AND POINTS OF AFFINITY IN LITERACY BROKERING

### *Accumulating Knowledge, Accumulating Roles*

A closer examination of the literacy broker in more than one context and with more than one role reveals the complexity of knowledge gleaned from multiple social contexts where the brokers operate. In 1987, Eugen and his family arrived in the US at the intervention of an American congressman. Three years later, Eugen became himself a broker for several other political refugees from Romania. As a broker or more precisely “the go-to” person, the actual term Eugen used to refer to his brokering activity in the Romanian immigrant community, he negotiated and mediated the mobility of religiously persecuted Evangelical Romanians in various capacities. He started as a volunteer for the World Council of Churches, for Interchurch Refugee, and for Immigration Ministries. His role became more official as the Romanian Church of which he was a member delegated Eugen as a legal representative to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). Eventually, Eugen started working as a paralegal for various immigration attorneys.

This shift of positions—from being a volunteer with non-profit organizations to being a church legal representative and then a paralegal—marks, on the one hand, the process of institutionalization of the broker’s profile. On the other hand, it signals a shift in the roles of mediation. In previous studies of language brokering, the broker seems to be situated between institutions (Orellana, Meza, and Pietsch; Perry), but the relation between the broker and other constituents, particularly institutions, is somewhat unclear. While sometimes brokers are viewed as having specialized knowledge and representing an institutional perspective, they are often perceived as informally offering assistance (Perry). From my analysis of the broker’s work, the broker almost always assumes collaboration with or works under the patronage of some type of institutional authority: as a volunteer working with human rights organizations, a legal representative working with local churches, a paralegal functioning under legal institutions such as immigration law firms. Certainly, some of these institutions are more or less hierarchical or structured, yet even when brokering takes place in rather flexible contexts, a logic of power and representation is still in place, even in such settings as an immigrant community. Since religious or ethnic persecution was the main reason invoked by Romanian refugees in leaving Romania and requesting asylum, non-profit and religious organizations and institutions such as Romanian churches in the US became central sites of support for families arriving from Romania. Various leaders in the immigrant community—Steven Bonica, the owner of the Romanian newspaper; Octavian Cojan, founding member of the Illinois Romanian-American Community organization; and Reverend Valentin Popovici, pastor at a Romanian Baptist Church—offered multiple examples of ways in which churches were actively involved in supporting immigrants, including airport pick-up, help with finding an apartment or job, or help with enrolling children in school. Whenever brokers work with institutions, they receive additional support that

endorses the broker's authority to fulfill his or her purpose of mediation. This collaboration of the broker with other institutions—humanitarian organizations and churches—points to good models of civic and public engagement. This means that brokering takes place through collaboration and joined actions. As Judy Kalman writes, writing practices that are situated locally and culturally often point to larger spaces of communication and knowledge. As brokers partner with others, they create webs of support often based on commonality of experience and quite frequently on ethnic ties. In their position of mediation, brokers harness various types of affiliations—civic, ethnic, local, or global—and channel them to accomplish goals for those individuals who need their assistance.

When Eugen and his family left Romania, his citizenship was revoked; prior to departure, he had been expelled from school and all family possessions seized by the Romanian state. Yet through these changes and shifts of identity, Eugen learned new roles and perspectives. His success in accumulating knowledge, adapting his literate skills, and establishing partnerships came from personal interactions with bureaucratic structures. His knowledge started small. It started with his personal experience and knowledge of the institutions familiar to him, which at the beginning included his family, the local ethnic community, and the church; and all of these were tied together to the Romanian state that controlled all these social groups before his departure. But from being an expatriate, Eugen became a middleman. In the refugee camp in Italy, Eugen started to translate for his family and for other Romanians refugees. After his arrival in the US, despite limited English, Eugen gradually accumulated useful knowledge and brokered partnerships with multiple stakeholders for other asylum seekers. People would ask for his advice on immigration issues at church and then inquire about his business office—which he did not have at the time—to further solicit his assistance.

In “Accumulating Literacy,” Brandt explains that with changes of literacy expectations and conditions, past literate practices may resurface in current sites of literacy learning (659-660). Although Brandt's analysis refers to transformations and changes in literacy between generations, Eugen's case shows an ability to adapt his past literacy to new contexts. In addition to accumulating various literacies, such as the learning of new languages—Italian in a refugee camp in Rome or English in the US—Eugen also acquired knowledge about the languages of nation-states, about governing state powers, and about mediation. This accumulated knowledge from various roles as a literacy broker enabled Eugen to assist others with writing their own story of persecution, to help people with documents, and to work with various organizations on behalf of the refugees themselves:

I would sit with clients just like you're sitting with me now and I would ask, I had a form, and I would ask all the questions pertaining to their situations and . . . then I would translate it in English. . . . I've become an expert in writing umm . . . writing people's stories and writing . . . umm affidavits, declarations, statements, whatever you wanna call it.

Because of his own personal experience and interactions with larger socio-political structures, Eugen has gained credibility in the Romanian community. People entrust him with their personal stories in hope of obtaining legal papers, just like Eugen did. His accumulated knowledge builds his credentials, but it also connects him to people, to their stories of oppression. Through this

accumulation of experiences, webs of knowledge are shared and used in the service of others.

### *Shifting Roles and Increased Institutional Constraints*

As the broker accumulates knowledge from multiple contexts, interactions between brokers and institutions change, and so does the nature of these interactions. This shift is more noticeable when the same literacy broker conducts similar text-related practices—translating /interpreting, filling out forms, researching information, interviewing people, documenting stories—in various contexts, such as in the immigrant community (less structured, less bureaucratic) and in court settings or an immigration agency (highly controlled). In previous studies on literacy brokers, translators and interpreters have been consistently identified as important language brokers (Martinez et al.; Morales et al.; Tse). Yet few studies have explored how these translators may operate in multiple settings. From the beginning of my interview with Claudiu, he explained that a community interpreter is very different from an official translator/ interpreter. Claudiu, a Romanian-American citizen, owns his own translation and interpretation business, but he also serves regularly as an official translator/ interpreter in court settings as well as an informal community translator/ interpreter. In a nutshell, he clarifies that while the official jobs “pay the bills,” the other one, in the community, is “the most rewarding.” The reward comes, as Claudiu explains, from the ability to help. In a case implicating a community response to elderly abuse, Claudiu volunteered his service as a language interpreter because he too wanted to support this initiative as a member of the community: “I went in voluntarily and in the end, and all the way at the very end, I was offered money. I had a hard time accepting it, but I did. But that was one of those cases when I went in voluntarily, and I went in helping other people help people.”

By emphasizing the constraints of the official job—the translation and interpreting in the contexts of institutions such as court settings—Claudiu also managed to capture the shifting position from working in the community to working in the confinements of an institution. In reference to his work in institutional settings, he repeatedly described his role as a “tool” and as an “instrument.” Claudiu accepts his role as a “tool,” although it may seem deprived of any personal or emotional dimension. The person is there to fulfill a clearly established function—in the case of interpreting in a court setting, to transmit the message exactly as is from one interlocutor to another. Based on Claudiu’s account, the position of a translator or interpreter is limited to the mere rendition of the interaction “to the best of his abilities.” Claudiu explained that “helping” a defendant in official interactions such as court proceedings is neither possible nor his “job.” Since the broker has been framed as the one who assists, who mediates partnerships, the “help” offered by the translator/interpreter is constrained when situated in a regulated setting such as a court, particularly in immigration cases. Conceiving the literacy broker as an instrument or tool at first glance shifts agency from the broker to a model of agency embedded in systemic structures. Yet given the assumed multi-positionality of a broker, I argue that if agency is limited in one context, it can be potentially exerted in other settings. For instance, even if Claudiu cannot help someone in the context of a court setting, his knowledge

of this institutional discourse can be transferred easily to his role as a community translator. Such an understanding of brokering has not been possible in studies of brokering performed by children of immigrants, since they were studied only in the language mediation between their parents and school officials, parents and bank representatives, and others. In these studies, attention has been placed on the type of interaction or type of brokering occurring, rather than on a possible transfer of accumulated knowledge from one setting to another. While speaking multiple languages, as in the case of the interpreting/translation, is crucial in such cross-cultural interactions, in this mobility of positions I emphasize the formation of what I call a bi-institutional perspective. I define a bi-institutional perspective<sup>7</sup> as a way of thinking and acting not solely from “within” institutions, but “across” institutions also. I use the term “bi-institutional” rather than multi-institutional perspective<sup>8</sup> because often times, the prefix multi- seems to suggest an addition that increases in value with the number. My goal is to suggest that a bi-institutional perspective adds depth rather than just range. Learning and knowing the discourse of institutions—with its procedures, specialized languages, and practices—contributes to an agentic literacy broker who can manage not only multiple languages but also specialized discourses of bureaucratic structures. And since this learning and knowing includes more than one institution, the literacy broker gains multiple perspectives visible not only in actual texts, but implicit in practices and ways of thinking *across* institutions. In the example mentioned earlier when Claudiu participated as a community member in the elderly abuse case, he shifted his role to that of an interpreter and translator. He says, “I was there as both [community member and interpreter]. That’s another very unique thing about the work that I do, that I can have multiple hats depending on the circumstances.”

Taking on “multiple hats” allows the broker to adopt multiple roles even though they may involve unequal responsibility or degree of flexibility. Within the institution, procedures take priority over individual actions. Institutional constraint is built into these procedures, operating on multiple levels. First of all, the translator/ interpreter must take an oath. The oath in itself is a formal verbal circumscription of one’s identity into the institutional context where s/he operates. To ensure accuracy of translation/interpretation, a security measure is in place when the court, especially in immigration cases, provides a second remote translator selected only from approved language service providers. In such situations, the dynamics between various parties is evidently different. The hierarchy of control is well established, and the interaction is scripted. Claudiu likened this scripted procedure to “a train, once it starts, it goes at a certain pace and unless something major happens, the train keeps rolling.” This analogy with train tracks is quite potent, especially that it is language and linguistic procedures that keep the “train” going. Set on their tracks, institutions shape language and discourses especially as their role is to “keep going” and to stop only at established points of destination. Inevitably, these prescribed discursive practices constrain individual choices and actions.

In the case of the paralegal who works in an immigration office, institutional constraints are similar. At the beginning of my interview with Manuela, she described her job in terms of dos and don’ts, what is allowed and what is not:

A paralegal cannot give legal advice; you are allowed to fill out papers, but you cannot give legal advice... [A paralegal] can write letters to immigration, can call to ask about cases that are represented by the attorney. Basically preparing many legal documents, but not any document.

When I asked whether there is flexibility in certain cases or multiple approaches, Manuela answered, “the law is the law.” As a literacy broker dealing with scripted texts, particularly working with documents and official applications for immigration, Manuela confirms that the process of filling out papers is a highly regulated practice. In dealing with institutional constraints, both Claudiu and Manuela adopt the perspective of

the institution that they represent. To be more specific, they adopt an institutional voice—a concept that Brandt (“Writing”) identified in her study of workplace writers. The institutional voice is not reflected

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solely in the production of a document, but also in how these brokers speak about their jobs. Manuela is clearly emphasizing that “the law is the law” and that there is little or no room for changes or additions. Claudiu apparently functions as a tool, as one piece in the larger machinery that follows established moves and structures. However, despite the brokers’ assumed institutional identity within the institution, they act as more than tools, and their mediation is more than instrumental.

#### *Language of Affinity and Empathetic Work*

In both situations, that of a translator/ interpreter and that of a paralegal, the issue lies, as Claudiu well explained, with *who* hires you and under whose authority you work. Institutional control, particularly in the case of immigration, leaves little to no room for mediation as help, as was the case with the translator/ interpreter in the community. However, even in these cases of rigid or prescriptive mediation, the emotional work of mediation comes to surface. After Claudiu explained the constraints that were part of his job as a legal translator and that “help” and “assistance” had to be within the legal proceedings, he elaborated further:

Sometimes, you feel bad for someone . . . and it's actually not my job [to help]. And sometimes, I see people, they spend two hours building a case and then they say something in like 3 seconds, and they . . . tsss ruin everything. But it's not my job to censor anything. I'm there actually as an instrument.

Besides the fact that Claudiu seems himself as a mere instrument who solely reports on the language exchange in a court setting, his follow-up comment—“Sometimes you *feel bad*” (emphasis mine)—reveals his affective involvement. I see this as a moment of interruption; it is not marked by an external gesture or an actual intervention of help, yet it represents a significant point of institutional critique. Generally and most of the times, there is no room for “help” in a court proceeding. But

sometimes there are moments of empathy similar to Claudiu feeling (bad) for and with his clients. While these moments do not dismantle the institutional structure, they do offer points of critique. They also profess that brokers are more than instruments, even in an institutional context that regiments people's discursive practices through patterns of communication.

Similar to Claudiu's empathetic regret, Manuela shared a moment of empathetic joy based on commonality of experience. In response to my question about the reasons for liking her job, she replied:

Every case is specific . . . very individualized and you see the result right away. And when we receive the approval for a green card, I feel as I did when I received my own green card. Seriously. That's how I feel.

One can only assume that the moment when she got her own green card was an exhilarating experience, and thus she relives that joy through the experience of her clients. Even George, the literacy broker who offered the least details about his interaction with his clients, used language of affinity during the interview. In reference to his clients and immigration procedures, George repeatedly used the phrase "*our* Romanian" (italics mine). When discussing immigration categories based on profession, George explained that "*our* Romanian" can apply for this or that type of visa only if there are no US citizens or residents qualified for this position. If Manuela's moment of affinity is based on personal experience, George's affective language "*our* Romanian" indexes an affinity based on ethnic and community connectedness. Instead of referring to his clients as applicants or immigrants, George adds the possessive "*our*" to denote shared ethnic ties with his clients. Although a possessive adjectival phrase could be used with a neutral connotation or with sarcasm or derision, in this case the context and the experience of the utterance indicate the affective underlining layer. George is after all an immigrant himself, mingling with community members, while also working formally as an attorney of immigration. It is precisely in this context of immigration discourse that he uses a language of identification and empathy with his fellow Romanians. In performing this language of affinity, literacy brokers re-instill a lost sense of affiliation in the process of immigration. They perform emotional work that matters even if it is not always highly perceptible.

These moments of identification established on the basis of personal experience, community ties, or simply human understanding shape the profile of a broker as someone who has knowledge and experience both within systems and across institutional structures. As brokers, even those working within state or bureaucratic institutions, show affinity with the disadvantaged, with those outside of the system, they manage to humanize and soften rigid boundaries for those whose interests they represent. I argue that although unexpressed in particular actions, these affinities count as interruptions of the system. Bureaucratic systems of control are not oppressive only to the extent that they manifest in action. They are also oppressive in the way they regiment structures of feeling as well as ways of thinking. One may suggest that by choosing to work in these institutions, these individuals are in reality doing the feeling work—even if it is repressed emotions—for the oppressive structures. I argue that while they do this work from "within institutions," following institutional

rules of practices, their ability to think and act *across* institutions unlocks them from one particular role. If structures of feelings are regimented in one context, they are redistributed in other contexts, institutional or non-institutional. For instance, even if Claudiu cannot help in one particular case in a court setting, when he is privately hired by a community member he can use his experience and feelings of affiliation to engender a better outcome for that person.

One relevant example about regimented structures of feeling comes from another participant in my study, Horea, as he witnessed lack of mediation, of literacy brokering. As Horea interacted with the US bank clerks, he shared his frustrations. He explained that he was not upset that his application for opening a bank account was denied. Rather, he was outraged that several bank clerks could not *understand* or *conceive* that a man in his mid-thirties like him had not previously owned a bank account. This inability to envision a different alternative to the rules or regulations that operate in one system marks rigid thinking and rigid structures that suppress identification of any sort. It creates a gap between those in the system and those outside of the system or those familiar with a different system, reinforcing the fact that those marginalized must be kept outside. Brokers often come in and bridge these gaps. Depending on setting, they can build bridges of understanding that unlock perceptions of rigid social structures. Points of affinity are constructed through an accumulation of knowledge from multiple viewpoints, including those of institutional communication and interactions.

These points of affinity, which I conceive as moments of identification, afford an understanding of language brokering as more than just action. Language and literacy, if conceptualized as socio-cultural constructs deeply involved in the lives of people, must engage the entire personhood, not just discrete elements. This means that people do not just participate in language and literacy interactions with knowledge or particular languages but bring with them feelings, attitudes, thoughts, and often preconceptions about a particular literacy, a language event, or specific literacy contexts, such as courtrooms, banks, government agencies, and so on. In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Kenneth Burke explains the formative effect rhetoric can have on one's attitude in situations when one's action is conscribed. Burke gives the example of a criminal who might be moved into repentance by a priest's sermon (rhetoric) even if he cannot take any particular action (50). Making this fine distinction between action and attitude, wherein attitude is defined as "an incipient act, a leaning" or predisposition, illuminates more cogently the role of attitudes, feelings, and predispositions in literacy events. Even if action may be limited or constrained by various social structures or bureaucratic formations as seen with Claudiu's train analogy, literacy brokers can effect change through attitudes of empathy and identification, albeit momentarily.

In this section I tried to show that developing a bi-institutional perspective entails mobility through various social spaces, which present themselves as somewhat rigid structures. As literacy brokers shift through various roles as volunteers or members of the community, as Eugen's examples show, they take on more institutionally-controlled roles, and in doing so they accumulate experiences, languages, cultures along the way. But they also gain different perspectives depending

on the context of their work. For example, Claudiu as a language broker and certified translator in an immigration court accumulates particular knowledge, such as familiarity with the legal system, glossary of legal terms, and procedures. Since Claudiu is also a member of the Romanian ethnic community, people from the community sometimes ask for language assistance with papers and with various other documents. And, importantly he also has experience as an immigrant himself, having gone through the naturalization process. All these multiple roles enable Claudiu to position himself as a powerful agent of mediation among multiple stakeholders. Literacy brokers also learn to sift through these perspectives, to select rhetorically useful literacy practices and recontextualize them in new contexts for themselves or for others going through similar circumstances. Through this mobility across contexts, literacy brokers develop a bi-institutional perspective that involves ways of thinking across institutions and ways of feeling across institutions. This bi-institutional perspective allows one to detach from a particular institution and to adopt a critical stance. In doing so, literacy brokers not only learn various institutional discourses and ways of thinking; they can offer an institutional critique. Although this critique is not explicit, I argue that it becomes visible in the emotional work that these brokers provide in addition to their typical mediation tasks—assistance with papers, legal advice, consulting. Through moments of affinity and language of empathy, brokers intervene between the individual and larger bureaucratic structures, precisely because they have adopted bi-institutional perspectives.

## LITERACY BROKERING AND PERSONAL STORIES AS ADVOCACY

The work of literacy brokers expands beyond local or transnational communities to occasions for advocacy. From being the “go-to” person in the immigrant community, Eugen often moved on to being a “go-between.” In his interactions with INS and human rights organizations such as the World Council of Churches and the International Rescue Committee, Eugen was the voice of the larger immigrant community and even of those who were still in refugee camps. In this middle position, Eugen became an advocate for the cause of refugees, pleading with non-profit organization to extend their sponsorship to other soliciting asylum seekers. After signing for the 50<sup>th</sup> person, Eugen remembers being called for a special interview with the leadership of the non-profit organizations that acted as official sponsors. “You already have fifty people. You gotta stop,” was their message. But Eugen did not give up. As exemplified at the beginning of the essay, Eugen took action and advocated for more sponsorship with the help of written stories and letters from the refugees themselves:

And we pleaded our case. And I read a few stories, I read a few letters that I received from people in the refugee camps. And I said, “Look, these are stories from our people from the refugee camps. They escaped from Communist Romania. If we do not do the papers for them to come to the United States, they’ll be sent back to Romania and they’ll be imprisoned.”

In this situation, literacy brokers like Eugen employ personal stories to evoke emotions for the cause of marginalized groups, asylees in this case. Although not in a courtroom, Eugen takes on the task of “pleading a case,” and in doing so he identifies with those for whom he advocates; in Eugen’s appeal, asylees become “our people,” and their plight in turn becomes “our case.” In the Romanian language, the word for attorney, *avocat*, has the same root as the English word, *advocate*. The Latin root for

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both Romanian and English terms is *advocatus* (Latin), “one called to aid” (“Advocate”). In his position as an advocate, Eugen indeed was *aiding* other organizations in understanding the cause of Romanian asylum seekers he was representing.

In another situation, serving as a liaison for the INS, Eugen took on the advocate’s role again, but this time it involved documenting and doing research abroad. His task was to document ongoing religious persecution in Romania in 1992, after the official fall of the Communist regime in 1989. Eugen’s research and documentation took the shape of a report for the US Department of Justice as a way to provide evidence as to whether certain political asylum requests on the roll were still valid cases for asylum. The legitimacy of these cases was established based on evidence of religious oppression that was still taking place in Romania, even after the official socialist regime was overthrown. In preparation for this report,

Eugen went back to Romania and talked to people. Concealing the real purpose of his visit, Eugen interacted with people in the streets, videotaping and audiotaping their stories:

I documented everything, all my stories and even while walking in the streets, we were videotaping and we were audiotaping and all the stories were documented and then, when I came home, I wrote each individual story . . . and I published a booklet about 160 pages . . . [of] stories of persecution that went on in Romania even in ‘92.

Such a document is similar to various other texts that were presented in the House of Representatives when the Most Favored Nation<sup>9</sup> (MFN) trade status was frequently negotiated or under review. As in Eugen’s report for the INS, several House representatives made use of personal stories to demonstrate Romania’s need for the MFN status, which was directly tied to emigration from Romania (United States Congress). It was not just in the discourse of human rights organizations but also in governmental branches that the emotional work of personal stories represented an intervention with powerful economic and political implications. While the MFN affected trade benefits between Romania and the US, it also put pressure on the Romanian government to release hundreds of religious and ethnic minorities. This interconnected relationship between immigrants’ personal stories of persecution

and larger governmental agencies demonstrates the need for and the centrality of literacy brokers in bridging communication between individuals and larger structures. It also shows that emotional work and the personal can be tied intimately to issues of economics and politics.

This latter example of Eugen's work of advocacy marks a change in scale and audience. It involved a larger process of documentation including audio and video evidence to support the case for Romanian families seeking asylum in the US. With Eugen not having any particular training either in writing or in research practices, one might ask what the motivational tool is for this kind of work. There is no apparent gain unless we speak of *emotional* benefits. At first glance, this rhetoric of "help" inside and outside of the community through advocacy seemingly contradicts the economic frame of a broker. Help, particularly in ethnic communities, is rarely conceived in financial terms and often means doing a service, giving a ride, assisting with documents and papers, or aiding someone in finding a job. Yet this "help" is not necessarily without pay-offs. Indeed, if the broker is perceived in a reciprocal relationship with different parties at the same time, the payoff is invisible. However, if this brokering activity comes in exchange for having been helped in the past, for having experienced it, then the exchange happens diachronically. In doing so, the broker can certainly mediate current transactions, but often the motivation comes from identification with his or her past experiences.

In many ways, the broker embodies a Bakhtinian discursive identity, oriented both towards future actions and past experiences, and always carrying traces of the sociohistorical contexts s/he has inhabited. Eugen has certainly oriented his resources towards future actions, brokering not only the local immigrants' legal papers, but advocating for future engagement concerning unresolved cases of refugees. In discussing social knowledge that surrounds the texts drafted by scribes on the plaza, Kalman shows that these texts are connected to knowledge about future consequences of these texts and their circulation to various audiences. Similarly, Eugen is aware of the power of brokered texts. These texts serve multiple functions as stories of persecution of asylum seekers whose immediate purpose was to obtain legal passage into the US, but they also address a larger purpose—to bring awareness about the refugee situation and human rights violation in Romania.

To be engaged in such actions of advocacy requires more than knowledge of macrodiscourses, that is languages of countries and institutions; it requires intimate knowledge of those whose interests the literacy broker represents. The broker then holds a strategic position combining knowledge of small, particular details with larger discourses and structures. In this position, brokers can potentially leverage their experience, their emotional investments, and sometimes their official roles to compensate for unequal power relations particularly in transnational settings. A literacy broker in the context of immigration must have knowledge of larger discourses, the languages of religious institutions and political ideologies exercised by nation-states, and must learn to use this knowledge strategically. Such accumulated knowledge implicates the personal, the national, and the transnational. The personal, particularly in the case of refugees, is crucial, since one's own personal story of oppression constitutes the grounds for seeking asylum in the first place. But the personal must be framed relative to the national and transnational. Eugen, for instance, left Romania with

great difficulty after going through a painstaking process to obtain a passport to leave the country. The first step—filling out the application to request a passport—was in itself considered a form of subversion of the state. As mentioned earlier, Eugen was revoked citizenship and left the country with a brown passport—for shitheads, as Eugen relates in the interview; the Romanian state issued brown passports, passports of no citizenship, to people with whom it sought to sever all relations. Others were less fortunate. In a news report from 1983, Tamara Jones explains the distressful situation of several Romanians who against all odds were released passports, gave up Romanian citizenship, and were waiting to receive approval from the US immigration. In such situations, the personal intersects the national and transnational, and it is not only understood to be an expression of one's individual experience. Rather, it becomes political and inherently rhetorical. Micciche suggests that “the political turn in composition . . . has been slow to address the emotional contexts of teaching and learning” (“More” 435). In this study, the intersection of the political and the emotional become evident in the broker's engagement in advocacy but also in work with immigration forms and immigration agencies. This advocacy work by the broker breaks down dichotomies between emotional and rational and other forms of emotional exclusion in institutional contexts.

## CONCLUSION

As the field of Literacy and Composition studies becomes more engaged in taking “the global turn” (Donahue; Hesford and Schell), the concept of literacy broker affords a significant analytical lens into questions of access and communication across borders, engaging differentially situated subjects. Literacy brokers as active agents of mediation work across difference in languages, cultures, and socio-political systems and structures. Understanding literacy brokers in more than one context provides a complex view of their dynamic roles and accumulated literacy practices. Most importantly, literacy brokers as shown in this study act not just in local communities, but in transnational communities, communicating within and across larger institutions, organizations, and nation-states. In doing so, as explained earlier, the personal matters as much as the national and transnational in shaping the literate experience. Questions about whether personal experience or personal-centered genres should or should not be included in the writing classroom are superfluous. A more appropriate approach to writing would underline the complexity of writing situations in real-world contexts and the rhetorical use of personal, national, and/or transnational experiences.

In this study, I have shown that as literacy brokers move from context to context, they acquire a bi-institutional perspective. It is this bi-institutional perspective that enables brokers to bridge literacy gaps through emotion work. This emotional work, or literacy as affinity, encompassing personal narratives, language of empathy, relations and partnerships built to support the literacy experience, intervenes in people's lives in memorable ways. In the process of transnational mobility and recontextualization, people experience loss—loss of familiar social contexts where one's literacy has developed, loss of language, or loss of culture. In this context, literacy as affinity can potentially

alleviate or even restore such dispossessions. A similar function is accomplished in institutional contexts that constrain the individual and manage feelings. In “More Than a Feeling,” Micciche explains that “emotion has figured only minimally in accounts of student and teacher subject formation or classroom dynamics because it has not been thought of as having a social and political identity” (436). Literacy brokers’ work of affinity shows that emotions have social and political dimensions, and I would add economic purchase as well. Thus, the brokers’ emotional work in this study permeates all aspects of the social context, including the economic and political, and all of these challenge us to rethink ways in which individual literacies intersect larger socio-economic and political formations.<sup>10</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I refer to languages of nation-states and institutions in the same way that John Duffy uses the term *rhetorics* to denote “languages of governments, schools, media”—general frames of language and discourse wherein the individual operates. The plural form of rhetorics is used to suggest more than “a single, coherent, all-unifying ‘rhetoric’” (Duffy 15).

<sup>2</sup> Most Favored Nation (MFN) was an economic treatment given by the US to a particular state. The benefits emerging from this special status included special trade rates, with Romania exporting goods worth almost one billion dollars and importing about \$300 million of American goods (Gwertzman).

<sup>3</sup> Participants in the study and archival documents, specifically newspapers clippings from the Gabanyi Collection (National Archives of Romania, see footnote 5), confirmed that the US was among the top choices for Romanian refugees. Many asylum seekers had either a distant relative or some connection in the US. Other destinations included Germany and Israel, where German and Jewish minorities chose to resettle.

<sup>4</sup> The change of name, from INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) to CIS (Citizenship and Immigration Services), occurred in 2003 with the new restructuring of various offices and departments. Currently, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)—established formally with the enactment of the Homeland Security Act in November 2002—includes three refashioned divisions: the CIS or USCIS, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and US Customs and Border Protection (CBP). Some of these units were formally included under INS.

<sup>5</sup> All the primary documents used in this essay are part of the Gabanyi collection, a special collection found at the National Archives in Bucharest, Romania, where I conducted archival work in the summer of 2011. Anneli Ute Gabanyi, a Romanian of German heritage, was a radio news editor for Radio Free Europe.

<sup>6</sup> “File self” is Julie Chu’s term in reference to immigration documents that Chinese applicants compiled to build their cases for the US Consulate (132).

<sup>7</sup> In his book *On Institutional Thinking*, Hugh Heclo defines institutional thinking as “thinking from inside its thinking, living it from the inside out” (4). To say it more directly, thinking institutionally means “thinking within’ institutions.”

<sup>8</sup> An anonymous reviewer of this manuscript has prompted me to make this clarification, for which I am thankful. S/he asked whether other terms—multi-institutional or trans-institutional could be equally used. I find these suggestions equally valuable, yet I found that using multi- rather than bi-institutional might detract from the depth of experience that the latter term suggests. Trans-institutional, in my opinion, captures the mobility between institutions fairly well, but the broker—as I conceive him/ her—already connotes a dynamic dimension.

<sup>9</sup> Archival documents from Radio Free Europe attest to the fact that the United States often pressured Romania to release a number of Jewish people, German minorities, and religiously-persecuted groups in exchange for a renewal of “Most Favored Nation” (MFN) status (Gwertzman).

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