Series Editor’s Foreword

This book by Martha H. Bigelow is seventh in the Language Learning Monograph Series. The volumes in the series are intended to serve as benchmarks for interdisciplinary research in the language sciences in the years to come, and Mogadishu on the Mississippi sets itself as a benchmark for future research on the relationships among racialization, identity, literacy, and education, exploring in novel ways how multiple-language learning and use are at the heart of these relationships, mediating them and being mediated by them.

Since the beginning of the Somali Civil War in the Horn of Africa in 1991, and all the way to the continuing conflict of the present day, the Somali diaspora has grown large and diverse across many parts of the world: in Eastern Africa (Ethiopia and Kenya), the Middle East (Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates), and the Western world, particularly the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, and northern Europe. Close to half of all Somalis live outside Somalia today. In her book, Bigelow recounts her 5-year-long research engagement with the Somali community of the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul in Minnesota, the largest population of Somalis living in any given area of the U.S. geography. In a truly interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary spirit, Bigelow mobilizes knowledge across a dauntingly diverse number of areas inside and outside applied linguistics in order to do justice to her complex object of inquiry: poststructuralist theories of identity (chapter 1), psycholinguistic research on adults without alphabetic print literacy (chapter 2), critical theories of multiliteracy (chapter 3), sociology of minoritized identities (chapter 4), and educational research on English language learners with limited prior formal schooling capital (chapter 5). Remarkably, each of the six chapters could be read on its own, and in any order. Yet, each chapter carefully builds on one another and offers a needed piece of the rich, complete landscape that is host to the main argument of the book, which is indeed powerful and simple at the same time. Namely, highly contested racialized, religious, and gendered identities are intermeshed with in-flux oral and literate identities, and these processes of hybrid and multiple identity construction among vulnerable youth offer educators and researchers a central site for both understanding and supporting the struggle for access to equitable education by Somali and other refugee and immigrant youth in our societies.
I anticipate at least three ways in which the research that Bigelow reports in this book can influence the direction of future research undertaken by applied linguists, second language acquisition scholars, and educational researchers. First, her research on psycholinguistic processing by Somali youth with low print literacy points at the staggering gap in our disciplinary knowledge regarding how literacy and orality contribute to the psycholinguistic mechanisms of language learning. This question has attracted little empirical effort to date. Yet, the application of this new lens of literacy versus orality to old second language research problems would shed novel knowledge on constructs that have always been central in second language acquisition research, most particularly in ongoing debates regarding the theoretical status of implicit, explicit, and metalinguistic knowledge, which are relevant to most approaches to second language research. Second, in the notion of (in)educability, Bigelow’s research offers an astute account for the social construction of blame when education fails. Through minoritization, racialization, and other oppressive ideological processes, powerful players in key institutions of our society, such as officers of the court (judges, attorneys, experts) and school leaders (teachers, administrators), place the responsibility on allegedly inherent characteristics of the youth whom we all fail. The construction of ineducability makes it possible for our institutions and their actors to continue their business as usual and to make themselves impervious to change. Much can be achieved if educational researchers and applied linguists are willing to engage in future studies designed to illuminate the inner workings of these ideological processes and help us see productive ways in which they can be subverted. Third, Bigelow’s research will provide a model for other researchers who wonder how to balance the demands of academia and advocacy, because at a meta-level, the book is destined to be a guide to advocacy-integral research. The scholarly journey across multiple fronts that this book chronicles—the school and after-school life of Somali youth, their neighborhoods and community organizations, and the law enforcement and courts that interact with them—is fueled by Bigelow’s determination to generate usable and useful research that helps “dismantle structural barriers in schooling, document the struggles and strengths of youth and their families, and help educators be more effective both within and beyond the walls of academia” (chapter 1, p. 2). She does not purport to hold definitive answers in this regard. Much to the contrary, she lets her book transpire vulnerability and honesty in her willingness to engage with the painful contradictions that characterize advocacy-integral research; nevertheless, the value and success of the integration will be undeniable to readers. Bigelow’s research articulates and analyzes the abysses of experience that arise between literate educators and
oral students (chapters 2 and 3) and the power-laden misconstructions of other and self that undermine our social structures, our scholarly disciplines, and our futures (chapters 4 and 5). Additionally, it documents agentive and affirming sources of strength among Somali youth and identifies transformational opportunities for action-oriented scholarship.

The Language Learning Monograph Series aims to advance knowledge in the language sciences with authoritative volumes that review recent findings and current theoretical positions, present new data and interpretations, and sketch interdisciplinary research programs. It began in 1998 under the editorship of Richard Young of the University of Wisconsin–Madison, who spearheaded it to the highest levels of scholarship by commissioning titles that have attracted repeated international recognition, including the Sage/International Language Testing Association award for best work in language testing and assessment, which went to McNamara and Roever’s monograph in 2006, and the Kenneth W. Mildenberger Prize from the Modern Language Association to the outstanding scholarly book of the year, which went to Seedhouse’s monograph in 2004. It has been a great pleasure for me to serve as editor for the past 4 years and two volumes. Mary Schleppegrell of The University of Michigan succeeds me as new Series Editor, and I know she will enjoy as much as I have the charge to identify innovative lines of interdisciplinary research in the diverse language sciences and invite leading scholars to craft volumes that are authoritative statements of the given domain.

It has been humbling and exhilarating for me to have played a small part in making Bigelow’s Mogadishu on the Mississippi happen. I leave my role as editor of the Language Learning Monograph Series by offering readers her book, with pride and admiration. Few scholarly works can be read not only for their sheer research value but also for their intense moral and aesthetic enjoyment, and I commend this book to readers as one of such rare cases.

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References
