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**Literacy(ies), Culture(s) and Development(s):
The Ethnographic Challenge**

A multi-volume book review essay

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Illegal Alphabets and Adult Biliteracy: Latino Migrants Crossing the Linguistic Border.

Tomas Mario Kalmar. 2001. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. 129 pps.
ISBN 0-8058-3626-8 US\$16.50. Hardcover. ISBN 0-8058-3627-6 US\$29.95.
Softcover.

Literacy and Development: Ethnographic Perspectives. Edited by Brian Street. 2001.

London: Routledge. 228 pp. ISBN 0-415-23450-6 US\$105.00. Hardcover. ISBN 0-415-23451-4 US\$33.95. Softcover.

Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community. David Barton and Mary

Hamilton. 1998. London: Routledge. 283 pp. ISBN 0-415-17149-0 US\$100.00.
Hardcover. ISBN 0-415-17150-4 US\$34.95. Softcover.

The Making of Literate Societies. Edited by David R. Olson and Nancy Torrance. 2001.

Oxford: Blackwell. 349 pp. ISBN 0-631-22742-3 US\$36.95. Softcover.

Multilingual Literacies: Reading and Writing in Different Worlds. By Marilyn Martin-Jones

and Kathryn Jones. 2000. Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 377pp. ISBN 1-55619-748-9
US\$109.00. Hardcover. ISBN 1-58811-025-7 US\$37.95. Softcover.

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Literacy studies, whether focused on children, youth or adults, have been around for a long, long time. Comprehensive reviews of the field from both general and specific perspectives may be seen, for example, in the various volumes of the *Handbook of Reading Research* published since 1984. While cultural and even ethnographic perspectives have increasingly appeared in the *Handbook*, these large volumes remain embedded overwhelmingly in the cognitive tradition. The on-going debate between advocates of cognitive and social approaches to learning in particular, and to education more generally, is still real and present in journals like the *RRQ* and others. But a major new layer of research with direct bearing on current ways of both thinking about -- and acting upon -- literacy is now more than a decade in the making. This research combines what may be seen as social and political approaches to reading and literacy.

Research on adult reading -- called more often by the term *adult literacy* or *adult basic education* by its policy makers, specialists and practitioners -- has a relatively rich and growing body of literature. For a variety of historical reasons, adult literacy has been, and still is, viewed by many to be chiefly a political issue. This point was first made most prominently by Paulo Friere (1970/81), and was made at least partly in reaction to literacy campaigns conducted over the centuries (Arnové & Graff, 1988) and up to the present. The campaign mode is evident in the recently launched UN Decade for Literacy, which was declared on February 2003, and in some not too distant national campaign efforts in Nicaragua (Miller, 1985).

While the campaign mode has been somewhat discredited (see Wagner, 1989, 1992; Olson & Torrance, reviewed herein), adult literacy clearly is a political issue in many if not most countries today where estimated (real or politicized) illiteracy rates have become part of the strategic process by which a government or its opposition seek to gain an advantage. For example, on a personal level, I was recently involved in discussions with officials in an African country in which the governing leadership confided that so much public press was sent out on its national literacy efforts that they might lose an upcoming election if they did not succeed in making a discernable difference in lowering illiteracy rates by election date! I was asked: Is there anything that we outsiders could do to help?

How do (should/could) social scientists react to such challenges? Many might shrug their shoulders and say this belongs in the arena of policy or politics; but if we do wish to respond, how do we do so? Do we suggest a longitudinal research study to determine which pedagogy would work best (a rather typical academic response), indicating that little can be done quickly? Do we become gadflies and question the assumption that policy questions can be researched and solved in the near term? Do we apply further iterations of the previous (largely Western) literature on skill learning? Do we focus on socio-political issues such as first and second language learning? Do we suggest carrying out empirical household surveys that try to accurately measure the skills that are (or aren't) learned by various populations so that governmental estimates can be supported by trustworthy data? Do we endorse the government's belief that literacy programs will help solve their economic and/or social problems? Do we suggest making a short documentary portraying what could be considered a successful learner? All the above, and more, have been suggested as logical responses to government policy makers -- not only in Africa, and not only in developing countries.

Indeed, one of the most startling aspects of literacy research addressing all ages of learners is its staying power in both the public and academic discourses. With the new UN Decade for Literacy, the intensity of interest in this research is likely to increase. Thus, this is a timely moment to consider one of the fastest growing research domains for addressing how both policy makers and research practitioners can productively consider the multi-varied dimensions of literacy – what is termed here the ethnographic challenge.

Definitional and conceptual issues not only foster effective debates on matters of substance, but they also cause well-meaning specialists and activists to miscommunicate and misunderstand one another. The pluralization of the key words in the initial title of this review suggests the potential for confusion of terms, or at least the multiplicity of their meanings, which seem to be more understandable in the singular than in the plural. It also suggests what is at stake when ethnographic perspectives are taken into account in literacy research.

Literacy and Literacies

Literacy was once thought to be reading and writing, but it was expanded by UNESCO (1957) to include basic mathematics. Further, according to UNESCO, literacy is a set of tools that need to function in the everyday lives of people (for a review of literacy definitions, see Venezky, Wagner, & Ciliberti, 1990). Under the leadership of UNESCO and in a number of mainly socialist countries, national programs and campaigns were undertaken under various banners to improve overall literacy. However, these met with limited success (Gillette, 1999).

Since the mid 1970s, a number of social scientists began to take a fresh look at national literacy programs and at the singular concept of literacy. Some researchers were psychologists with a cross-cultural perspective. For example, Scribner and Cole (1981) working in Liberia, Heath (1983) in the United States, and others, suggested that researchers should resist making broad statements about literacy and its consequences (social or cognitive), since there exist a variety of literacy practices as well as literacy events (respectively) that are crucial in understanding both the inputs made into promoting literacy and the outcomes of literacy programs and activities (a compendium on such issues may be seen in Wagner, Venezky, & Street, 1999).

Among the first to take a perspective of multiple literacies and formalize it through ethnographic research into a coherent and comprehensive approach was Brian Street (1984), a British-trained anthropologist. Street developed bi-modal distinction for conceptualizing literacy: one that considered literacy as a tool (or technology) for producing and understanding written text, which he called the *autonomous* model of literacy, and one that considered literacy in its fullest cultural context, which he called the *ideological* model of literacy. Based on his initial field work in pre-revolutionary Iran in the 1970s, Street found that the official Farsi literacy used in the Iranian government campaign and in formal schooling conformed to the autonomous model, while the Arabic-language literacy learned in Islamic schools, and that was used for a variety of everyday tasks, including small-business enterprises, conformed to the ideological model. Because Arabic and Farsi literacy differed from each other, Street claimed that they should be called different literacies², as distinct

² It may also be worth mentioning that I used a similar approach to the term literacies in the same year, with research in a remarkably similar setting (also on Islamic education) in Morocco (Wagner, 1983; Wagner, et al., 1986). However, Street went on to elaborate the term literacies in a way that pushed into a number of different directions. My concerns with these directions are elaborated on in the conclusion of this review.

from, but related to, the practice and event perspectives forwarded earlier by Scribner/Cole and Heath.

Street's prolific work in this area has led to a number of important research publications and to a coterie of collaborators who have largely adopted his ethnographic approach. The term *literacies* has been picked up and adapted by many who have been previously frustrated by the singular notion of literacy as a unique 'tool' that is or isn't possessed by individuals to varying degrees. From the perspective of many anthropologists and ethnographers – akin to their earlier views on intelligence and intelligence testing – literacy in the singular is something appropriated by cognitivists, school pedagogues, and reading specialists whose principal goal seems to be the purveyance of efficient formal schooling on the one hand and formalized adult literacy programs on the other. Further, many (if not most) individuals whose literacy falls below par in terms of statistical standards are from ethno-linguistic minority groups. Anthropologists and ethnographers often attribute this description to a lack of cultural sensitivity by those pursuing the autonomous model.

Either directly or indirectly, the five books reviewed here owe their intellectual origins to the ethnographic challenge and a cultural conception of literacies. The perspective of these books contrasts with universalistic psychometrically-driven models of reading and writing that are thought to be 'culture free.'

Pluralizing Literacy, Culture, and Development

Street introduces his edited volume, *Literacy and Development*, with a seminal description and overview of his nearly two decades of work fostering the notion that literacy can no longer be seen as a singular concept that can be applied across contexts with similar impact. To quote:

Literacy is not just a set of uniform 'technical skills' to be imparted to those lacking them – the 'autonomous' model – but rather there are multiple literacies in communities and ... literacy practices are socially embedded (p. 2)

The alternative, ideological model ... offers a more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices as they vary from one context to another; it posits instead that

literacy is a social practice... It is about knowledge: the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity and being. (p. 7).

According to Street, the meanings and practices of literacy are always contested; particular versions and interpretations of literacy are “always rooted in a particular world-view and a desire for that view to dominate and to marginalize others” (p. 8). This perspective opens the concept of literacy to a range of interpretations just as Gardner (1983) did with intelligence. Nearly anyone with local knowledge or anecdotal information now is permitted, indeed encouraged, to challenge efforts that appear to impose literacy hegemonically upon any group. The literacies movement (or New Literacy Studies, as some call it) challenges not only the cognitive tradition, but even more directly it challenges those doing literacy work in developing countries where issues of dominance, hierarchy, and power are apparent to most observers.

The most obvious example of the ideological dimension of literacy at work appears when developing countries’ officials oblige both in-school and out-of-school learners to use non-indigenous languages that are national and often colonial. Nearly every chapter in Street’s *Literacy and Development*, and especially those by Dyer/Choksi, Papen, Wright, Aikman, Herbert/Robinson, and Zubair, takes exception to the notion of a single autonomous literacy. Rather, they explore a variety of languages and literacies (multiple languages, scripts, practices) as a way of interpreting what they perceive as the failure of both school-based and adult literacy programs. For example, Aikman (in Street) states:

For the entire course of its existence, formal schooling has been synonymous with Spanish language education and, moreover, ‘knowing Spanish’ whether written and/or spoken has continued to be synonymous with being ‘civilized,’ ‘developed,’ ‘modern,’ and Peruvian. (p. 110)

(Thus), the (local) Harakmbut language – a key to knowledge, the spirit world, and reproduction – is the cornerstone of (their) self-development agenda. (p. 117).

Numerous chapters in this volume make the point that local indigenous languages must be reinforced and used by government literacy providers. This point is not an unknown or unexplored issue, however. Few literacy specialists or government officials working in

these societies (mainly developing countries) are unaware of the difficulties posed by choosing the language of instruction in a multi-lingual society – especially where resources (in developing countries in particular) constrain government’s capability in providing adequate resources (materials and human) to teach in all the languages needed. At the same time, they must balance other (competing) needs for national homogeneity and economic growth, which is believed to be tied to national (colonial) language commerce.

For example, the chapter by Herbert/Robinson provides a helpful and nuanced approach to the particular relationships that can and do exist between spoken languages and their written equivalents in Ghana. As they say:

(E)ach literacy is practiced in different languages, and is somewhat different in each case. Do differences depend on (specific) languages? Probably not, at least not on language alone. Along with language differences go cultural patterns, made up of ancestral customs, historical antecedents, external influences, and political forces ... Local people are using literacies for their own purposes and in the languages they want to use – a hopeful sign in a continent where other people’s agendas have dominated for too long. (p. 134)

What seems clear from the Herbert/Robinson chapter on Ghana and from several others is that talking about a single culture is not appropriate, especially when there are overlapping languages, scripts, religions, and ethnicities at play. From an outsider’s perspective, one might be able to try to speak about a ‘national’ language or a national ‘literacy’ policy, but the closer one looks, the more one sees that there exists no single Ghanaian culture, but rather cultures, languages (and dialects within languages), ethnicities, tribal authorities, and so forth. It is no wonder, then, that the simplistic notions of eradicating illiteracy that were popular in UN statements after WWII gave way to more nuanced approaches regarding who is who in a society and who might want literacy. When viewed this way, literacy can be seen more terms of a question than a predetermined need or value.

In a compelling *Afterword to Literacy and Development* Rogers questions what he calls the “traditional picture of the relationship between literacy and (international) development...(namely) that there is a *direct* relationship between the two” (p. 205; emphasis is in the original). Rogers goes on to suggest, as do most authors in the volume, that knowing what literacy and illiteracy actually mean in most societies is so context dependent

that determining causality is a dubious task. He recommends problematizing development in a way parallel to literacy. In his words, “whose development” (p. 211) is it anyway? He suggests “multiple developments” and states “like literacies, these various developments are often in contest one with another” (p. 213). More concretely, this might mean that a government minister’s interest in lowering illiteracy rates may, in the end, have little bearing on rural poor people’s needs to have more jobs or safer drinking water.

In sum, Street’s *Literacy and Development* succeeds more than any other recent volume in opening up – indeed pluralizing – terms that many thought could be dealt with in the singular without risk of misinterpretation. Each of the four remaining volumes considered in this review supports such a problematization of the single term, *literacy*.

Concepts and Policies

An important book from a policy perspective is the one edited by Olson and Torance, *The Making of Literate Societies*. This volume presents a series of conceptual and historical perspectives on literacy across time, with a special focus on developing countries. Perhaps the most impressive chapter is the introductory one by the editors that seeks a way to balance the seemingly contrasting poles of literacy as a personal skill that can have consequences for the person and his or her options in life with that of literacy as a social practice that cannot be disembedded from societal contexts. The authors note the importance of literacy, affirming that it can have real consequences (though not ones aligned with simplistic metaphors like turning on a person’s ‘cognitive lightbulb’). At the same time, Olson and Torance say that literacy is “not the solution to a host of social ills including poverty, malnutrition and unemployment. It is not, in most cases, even relevant to the solution of those problems” (p. 13). In a finely balanced way, they go on to say that “(it) does not follow that literacy should play no role in social development and cultural change,” and they conclude that real pedagogies exist for real people that can and will make a difference in “institutional contexts ... in which reading and writing can play a role of perceived significance”,... and in situations where “communities and institutions to which access is given by virtue of being literate so that learners are socially empowered by their participation” (p. 15).

A number of chapters in *The Making of Literate Societies* remind us of the Street volume, as they focus on the importance of local context and the need to consider multilingualism as a key factor in literacy development. For example, Akoha points out that in Benin and Burkina-Faso local languages are not just important for improving literacy among poor people, they also (recalling Freire's work) will help to "decolonize our minds" (p. 149). The author suggests that indigenous languages are the only way forward, even though national policy in both countries appears opposed to such an approach. Akoha concludes that national policy makers lack the political will to challenge the African French-speaking elite.

Fagerberg-Diallo makes a similar point, on a more optimistic note, in her chapter on the significant progress made in literacy development among the Pulaar ethnic group in Senegal. While French is still the predominant national language, Pulaar literacy is growing rapidly in perhaps one of the best programs of indigenous literacy in Africa. Indeed, Fagerberg-Diallo states that the newly literate Pulaar call themselves "literacy militants" on a "crusade to see that each community sets up and participates in local Pulaar literacy classes" (p. 156). Whether as a cause or a consequence of this program, the Senegalese government actually set up a special ministry for literacy and national languages, which is certainly one of the few of its kind in the world. From Fagerberg-Diallo's perspective, the Pulaar experience represents a blend of both autonomous and ideological models, as "(n)ew literates can very clearly identify both the cognitive and the social gains they have made through becoming literate. Furthermore, these gains are realized both on a personal level and on the level of the entire community" (p. 173). In a later chapter on the Philippines, Doronila echoes the same integrative approach, suggesting that the "relationship ... between literacy and the eradication of poverty is not simple and straightforward" (p. 254). Doronila claims that gains will require improvement in teaching skills, more of a focus on livelihood and income generation, and an integration of literacy with other life activities.

Towards the end of *The Making of Literate Societies*, with chapters on Japan, Mexico and Germany, C. J. Daswani presents some interesting insights on the relationship between literacy and power in India, some of it which he calls paradoxically negative. One is in reference to the Hindi word for *literate*, which can be written as "*raakshas*, mean a 'demon'" (p. 290). By this, Daswani suggests that literate persons, perhaps the Indian educated elites,

are sometimes seen as becoming demon-like, being able to control others. This thought certainly must have occurred to many unschooled peoples in many countries around the world over the centuries.

In the final chapter, which is on development policy formation, Jung and Ouane argue, like many who have appeared already in this review, that literacy “is not a magic wand that will transform poverty into wealth”..., but may enable “persons and groups to achieve their own rights and goals” (p. 333). The first comment fits well with preceding ethnographic accounts, while the latter seems still to be problematic based on the findings presented in the Olson/Torrance volume.

Languages and Literacies

Is the pluralization of *literacy* to *literacies* equivalent to that of pluralizing *language* to *languages*? Are *multiple literacies* the same as *multiliteracies*? In *Multilingual Literacies* Martin-Jones and Jones address this issue in 16 chapters that deal principally with literacy (and literacies) in multilingual societies. As the editors state:

Focusing on the plurality of literacies means recognising the diversity of reading and writing practices and the different genres, styles and types of texts associated with various activities, domains or social identities. ... In multilingual contexts, different languages, language varieties and scripts add other dimensions to the diversity and complexity of literacies” (p. 5).

In the first chapter of this volume, Street provides his response to the above question. He states that *multiple literacies* and *multi-literacies* should not be used interchangeably; indeed, with both terms, there is what he terms a “danger of reification” (p. 19), in the sense that these terms might become seen outside or divorced from context and practice. Rather, Street suggests that the plurality of literacy should be centered on the *social practices* to which languages and literacies are put. He concludes with his own helpful challenge to the ethnographers, namely to “move beyond simply theoretical critiques of the autonomous model and to develop positive proposals for interventions in curriculum, measurement criteria and teacher education” (p. 29).

In the diverse chapters that follow in *Multilingual Literacies*— which embrace groups ranging from East London to Chinese and Gujarati immigrants – researchers elaborate on this point by describing in detail the various uses where written languages are employed. For instance, written language uses are described among British Creole as well as expert writing mediators (Baynham & Masing). Still, whether this volume validates Street’s earlier comment about multiple and multi-literacies is unclear. By showing that literacy practices are tightly woven into particular ethnolinguistic contexts, one wonders (or is it wanders?) among the variegated landscape of multiple languages and multiple literacies and questions whether or not any ground has been gained.

Is language fundamentally a single entity that is played out in many, many different ways around the world, and, as such, is it largely or nearly synonymous with literacy? This question can be studied in a quasi-infinite variation across time and space, as Hornberger implies in her *Afterword* to this volume. The fundamental difference seems to stem from the obvious fact that language learning seemingly is natural for nearly all humans, while literacy seemingly is not. Or is literacy learning natural? If all parents in the world were literate in their mother tongues, and if all children were as surrounded by print material as they are by oral language, would so many remain illiterate? If children were engaged with print materials that were equivalent to their oral language environments, would they naturally grow up as proficient with reading and writing as they would with listening and speaking? One is left wondering.

In the two final books of this review, similar conceptual issues are raised, but in much more detailed ethnographic case studies. Barton and Hamilton’s *Local Literacies*, for example, provides a rich and comprehensive portrait of literacy practices in a single mid-sized town in contemporary Britain. Coining a term that reinforces a strong language-based conceptualization of literacies, the authors focus on what they call *vernacular literacy practices* – those that are “rooted in everyday experience and serve everyday purposes” (p. 251). In addition to several categories of observed literacy practices that seem obvious (e.g., organizing life, personal communication, and private leisure), Barton/Hamilton describe three rather subtle everyday literacy practices that emerged from their ethnographic research (documenting life, sense making, and social participation). Taken together, these six forms of

literacy practices can, as the authors say, be contrasted with *dominant* literacy practices that follow from formal education, religion, and the workplace.

According to Barton/Hamilton, an important point is that dominant practices tend to “require experts and teachers through whom access to knowledge is controlled” (p. 22), while vernacular literacy is acquired mainly through active use and practice with those who simply know more than oneself. This should come as no surprise. Nevertheless, the implication is that by reifying the non-formal dimension of literacy learning and production, Barton/Hamilton seem to be supporting the notion that vernacular literacy plays an essential, indeed crucial, role in people’s lives -- one that could enhance people’s motivation for learning the written form.

Kalmar’s *Illegal Alphabets and Adult Biliteracy* presents a finely-detailed ethnography of Mexican migrants who have settled in a small rural community in Southern Illinois. It depicts the struggle of adult immigrants to learn and use English as a second language in the real world, not just a world dominated by teacher, text and, learner. This small volume is an ethnography in the classic mode, with participant observations, captured notes and clippings, interviews fully laid out, and occasional interpretations by the author. However, the text is somewhat difficult to follow when the migrants are portrayed using what is termed *illegal* Spanish language and literacy skills on English, akin to what the author calls illegal chess moves in grammar.

Illegal Alphabets and Adult Biliteracy looks much like what was termed *socio-literacy* above, a written version of socio-linguistic discourse and analyses, with considerable emphasis placed on transcriptions of the oral and written record. Emphasis is placed on how the migrants create ‘hybrid’ speech and alphabets out of their daily conjoint use of Spanish and English.

Kalmar’s data transcriptions feel real, something that is one of the strengths of the ethnographic challenge to the more quantified approaches of educational research. Readers can readily believe these data, and thus see that there is more to literacy in this setting than simply learning either Spanish or English linguistic systems. As Gee writes in a thoughtful *Foreword* to the Kalmar volume:

(L)iteracy is not first and foremost a mental possession of individuals. Rather it is first and foremost a social relationship among people, their ways with words, deeds, and things and their institutions. Literacy is primarily and fundamentally out in the social, historical, cultural and political world. It is only secondarily a set of cognitive skills, skills which subserve literacies as social acts in quite diverse ways in different contexts” (p. iv).

Both Barton/Hamilton and Kalman show a world of literacy, reading, writing and speaking that blends with one another and is not easily disentangled. Their work contrasts with psychometric research that tries to channel data into convenient categories. These ethnographies represent the New Literacy Studies wherein the term *literacies* most comfortably resides.

Conclusions: The Ethnographic Challenge

Several decades ago the sociolinguistic domain in the social sciences made good on its challenge to formal linguistics, and psycholinguistics, on how individuals learn language. The volumes briefly reviewed here indicate that the ethnographic challenge in literacy studies also is here to stay. This seems so even in the face of continuing political efforts, at least in the U.S., to reinforce the need for strictly quantitative experimental studies of how selected and stratified samples of subjects learn to read. The ethnographic approach is a challenge to those who would seek to summarize data using statistical averages and approximative coding schemes.

In a not very scientific way of speaking: you get what you pay for. Neither extreme – qualitative or quantitative – is likely to give the full picture of literacy(ies) learning and uses in society. Are there problems with the ethnographic approach beyond those exemplified by the above volumes? No doubt; reservations abound. Most importantly, the research audience often lacks a frame of reference for integrating subjective data such as that reported for Kalman’s Mexican migrants. Some ethnographies also read more like case studies with weak conceptual bases (in contrast to most of what is in the volumes reviewed herein). Further, researchers must be cautious when new terms are coined that may obscure or confuse

meaning, especially among practitioners. And, *literacies* may be such a case, since policy makers will (and already do) wonder what this means after years of using the singular.³ Naturally, this opens up many avenues for further investigation.

As the UN Decade for Literacy begins, a renewed thrust on global challenges and an increased focus on reaching the poorest of the poor is inevitable. What success may be achieved in the coming 10 years will surely depend on research that considers closely the behavior of real people in real time in varied cultural worlds. The field of literacy, especially when focused on those most marginalized, will need to address the hybrid situations of people often caught between two or more worlds, worlds that do not lend themselves to prior categories of reference. The kinds of research reported in these volumes – each of which takes literacy, culture, and development in its most pluralized form – will necessarily become a greater and more vocal part of the on-going discussion of how to promote a more literate world.

³ It is not entirely by chance that I wrote a book entitled *Literacy, culture and development* (the singular title of this review) over a decade ago (Wagner, 1993), at a time when I thought it reasonably safe to assume that the terms would stay singular.

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