

On the Social Consequences of Literacy

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I have sympathy for the bold, and currently unpopular, question that anthropologist Jack Goody and literary critic Ian Watt posed in 1963: What are the consequences of literacy? Goody and Watt argued that literacy's technical affordances allowed the objective recording of historical facts. Without the confusing subjectivity of face-to-face communication, culture could be passed on more or less accurately, distinguishing literate civilizations from oral ones. Writing within the contested field of anthropology from the 60s to the 80s, Goody feared cultural relativism had confused the bread and butter of anthropology, the study of "talking man," with the object of sociology, "reading and writing man" (Goody and Watt 304). Goody and Watt were trying to make some distinctions, based not on the newly politically embarrassing terms "primitive" and "civilized," but instead on concepts that were, in their view, less culturally biased but still worthy of attention: literate and nonliterate. They wanted to transcend the ethnocentrism that characterized nineteenth-century anthropology but were suspicious of what they called the "sentimental egalitarianism" that caused anthropologists to ignore crucial differences between civilizations (344).

The counterarguments to their claims are too numerous to rehearse here. Briefly, though, along with others, Brian Street (also an anthropologist) called attention to the variety of uses of literacy and orality in particular cultural contexts (namely Iran in the late 1970's, where he conducted fieldwork). To extrapolate about a society's capabilities from literacy's technical potential was, in Street's view, reductive, "technicist" (*Literacy in Theory and Practice*). For Goody and Watt, it was the central question of anthropology. In the ensuing decades, Goody qualified some of the terms of his argument and defended others. And scholars of New Literacy Studies, within and outside of anthropology, have produced careful studies of literacy's varied relationships to social contexts and to power. Literacy can index race, culture, age, gender, class, capitalism, identity; it leeches the meanings that organize our lives. In short, Goody and Watt's "autonomous" theory of literacy has been rebutted. And a scholarly field of inquiry has developed in its place.

Yet Goody and Watt's ambitious research question remains compelling: What are the consequences of literacy? I would like to know the answer. And I believe Composition Studies is an ideal disciplinary space from which to approach it. Some of us may make use of ethnographic methodologies, but we are not shackled to anthropological debates. Our unit of analysis is not culture, at least not centrally, but *writing*—how it happens, what it means, where it circulates, how it accomplishes its goals, whom it advances, whom it leaves behind, what it is worth and why. These processes entail the social, but do not require us to pin it down and watch it wriggle. Our attention can be more centrally trained on literacy.

There are consequences to literacy—large ones and, my own fieldwork suggests, often troubling ones. Can we explore them without dividing the world into oral and literate, without having to take

on debates that are not of our moment, and without sacrificing the crucial insights of New Literacy Studies? Are there new answers to old questions?

Brandt and Clinton, in an influential 2002 article, posed similar questions and answered affirmatively. They argued that literacy is not only a social product, but that it is also an object that actively constitutes the social. Seen in this Latourian vein, literacy's materiality is brought into bright relief. Viewed materially, literacy is a tool (though not a neutral one) that has particular potentials to be put to certain uses. This context-sensitive appeal to literacy's materiality avoids what Street condemns as "technicism" and also transcends what Brandt and Clinton term "the limits of the local." A focus on literacy's materiality is also timely: It resonates with contemporary scholarship on the affordances of new media (e.g. Haas; Kress) and of "old" media, such as paper (e.g. Hull; Kafka; Mortensen; Prendergast and Ličko). Brandt and Clinton encourage us to look *at* literacy instead of *through* it—precisely the work that compositionists' disciplinary training encourages, and perhaps a method of analysis that can yield new answers to questions that remain urgent.

What follows is a brief, and I hope suggestive, crack at such an analysis. My interests lie in the transnational, in the ways that literacy and people travel across borders, and in the ways that these trajectories are intertwined. Based on my recent ethnographic research with immigrant communities and their families, I am beginning to see literacy as a navigational technology that opens up some paths and closes off others, that orients and disorients, that routes and often reroutes.

NAVIGATION

Here, then, are three attempts.

1. In my ongoing ethnography of a U.S. immigrant community, a young undocumented Brazilian man, Rafael, told me the following:

I'm in a public place, looking for something, or on the road, and I see a written sign in English, and I read it and manage to understand. . . this helps me when this happens. . .

And a similar excerpt: A middle aged Portuguese immigrant, Cristina, told me the following about her efforts to get to Boston to take the literacy test to get her citizenship papers:

I'm very smart, because if you give me an address to go to Boston or to go anywhere, I'll go. You gotta give me the address. You write it down. You say I want you to go to the city of Boston, take your citizen papers. I told the city hall, I told the lady, I've never been there, but if you write it to me, I'll believe it. . . . See, I know how to read, but not like you . . . That's why I lost [failed] three times on the citizen papers.

Here there is a curious connection between movement and literacy. Individual literacy allows Rafael and Cristina to orient themselves in unfamiliar surroundings, to read the world in a more literal sense than Freire had envisioned with his phrase. To chart a route to Boston on a map. To decipher a street sign in English through the windshield of a moving car. To go in a particular direction.

But Cristina's and Rafael's experiences suggest that literacy is not simply an

individual navigational skill. It is also an infrastructure that regulates movement. Cristina, having lived in the U.S. for 34 years, wanted to naturalize. Literacy, for her, is an *obstacle* to overcome as she seeks to write herself into the nation. Even worse, Rafael has no papers. He cannot legally drive or work: “I’d like a paper, to live here legally,” he told me. “Pretty soon they’ll prohibit us from walking.” The bureaucracy of immigration services has written him out. For Cristina and Rafael, literate infrastructures do not simply facilitate their movement. They also stall it.

The textual regulation of Cristina and Rafael is, to echo much work on literacy’s social history, a sign of history in the present. European nation-states came into being, in part, by wresting the authority to control people’s movement from religious institutions (Torpey). They consolidated their power in part through the passport—a textual apparatus that attempts to regulate the unwieldy movement of bodies. In our particular historical moment, many of these moving bodies are seen as problematically brown. Can migrants revise the narratives that write them in oppressive ways, as, for example, Morris Young’s or Juan Guerra’s or Tomás Mario Kalmar’s work suggests? Sometimes, yes. Literacy can sometimes empower, but often it oppresses, disenfranchises, regulates. These are some of its consequences.

2. If literacy regulates us, it also moves us. I am fascinated by pages 65 to 69 in Harvey Graff’s *Literacy Myth*. These pages offer evidence that in the late 19th century, migrants to Ontario were highly literate compared to others in their birthplaces. One scholar has suggested that migrants were recruited through personal letters sent from family members abroad (Foner). Through these letters, moreover, people were taught how to use the postal system (Gerber), a transnational literacy institution. This brings me briefly away from papers to our current moment of mass migration and digital writing technology. Is there a cross-border literacy pedagogy at work in these environments? I have recently been trying to answer this question by interviewing immigrants’ family members in Brazil, the ones who didn’t migrate, the ones who stayed home. They receive what I call “writing remittances”—the letters, emails, and computers that facilitate communication with their family members abroad. Writing remittances travel into their lives; and they participate in changing them.

Consider the experiences of two women I interviewed in a mid-sized town in Brazil: One woman, Maria, whose son migrated to Japan, was only able to complete the second grade and has difficulty writing and reading. She works as a domestic in other people’s houses. The other woman, Eliana, whose brother migrated to the U.S., completed a college degree in accounting. She worked as an accountant before her children were born and then worked at home raising them. While Maria is not impoverished, and Eliana is not extraordinarily wealthy, they represent opposite ends of Brazil’s entrenched class system.

But one social fact unites them: both women received computers from their family members abroad. Maria, with less formal education, can sign in, send photos, can Skype. Eliana, with more education, said that she only touches the computer to dust it. “I’m becoming illiterate,” she told me twice in the space of our 90-minute interview. Eliana, once an

accountant, cleans the computer sent from her brother in the U.S. In contrast, Maria, who cleans for a living, logs on. Writing technologies from abroad have facilitated a change in each woman's sense of her own literacy and of her social value. Their very places in the world seem to have shifted. They have been rerouted.

3. For many migrants, the goal is to get ahead, *ir para frente*, as Simone puts it to me, as we sip bottled water in her family's tidy kitchen. She is a college student, a Brazilian immigrant to the U.S., whose undocumented status has dogged her efforts to leverage education for upward mobility.

In the required course for her major, she encountered her toughest professor, who demanded essays that, in her words, one could not "B.S.":

If he doesn't see what he wants, or if he sees what he doesn't want, he'll take off points. . . . You write *na na na*, he will "minus 2." It has to be exactly what he wants.

Because of Simone's subordinate position as an undergraduate in an academic hierarchy, her words need to be corrected, deleted, revised or face the consequences ("minus 2"). This is a view of college writing as a checkpoint: "*Passei na marra*," Simone said of the required writing course, a phrase that roughly translates as "I passed by the sweat of my brow." She added, "But I passed. Everything turned out alright."

While writing to "pass" may be a common orientation to literacy among undergraduates, Simone's anxiety is accentuated by other moments in which she needed writing to pass, namely at points in her college education when her documents were demanded. Here she describes her anxiety about being able to complete a required internship for her major:

When classes finish, there is a day in your junior year. You make a line there, and everyone shows their ID. I showed my [Brazilian] passport to her. She said, "You have a passport. That's okay." And I was worried, not for the fact that I had a criminal record. I don't have anything, you know, but um, I don't know, you know. The check turned out okay, I don't know what. And then, there was another: the paper that was to apply, you had to put your social security number. So there was something else that I didn't have. So it was like that.

Simone's pressing textual anxieties seeped into her orientation to academic literacy. The punishing realities of her lived experiences with textuality could not be extricated from the literate site of the classroom, could not be extricated from her writing itself. To pass a college class, to pass a checkpoint, to pass for a white American—passing speaks to an assimilationist logic that continues to haunt U.S. literacy history.

New Literacy Studies scholars have demonstrated literacy's profound connection to social identities (e.g. Dyson; Gee; Heath; Royster; Sarroub), insights that we often put directly to use in the composition classroom. But understanding literacy materially, in the lives of undocumented migrants, shifts the focus from *identity* to *identification*. For many, writing becomes associated not centrally with expression or culture, but with a national tracking system that can lead to deportation, the separation of families, and sometimes death. Texts, in this context, are strong.

STRONG TEXTS?

In *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*, Goody argues that bureaucracies in the ancient near east depended on “the capacity for writing to communicate at a distance, to store information in files . . .” (89-90). The material affordances of particular kinds of literacies, in other words, buttressed ancient social institutions, including the post and the state. Such conclusions are specific to Goody’s field site, but they also resonate across contexts. It is remarkable, isn’t it, that writing’s roles in the ancient near east and in the contemporary migrant communities I have sketched here are so similar? Developing such comparisons may point another way forward for literacy studies. Researchers at the University of British Columbia, for example, are building a database that houses qualitative studies of literacy practices, so that scholars can work across grounded case studies to advance more robust theories (Purcell-Gates, Perry, and Briseño). To return to Goody, where he fails to persuade is in his distinctions between oral and literate societies. What is compelling about his work, and what helps me as I progress with my own, is not what orality supposedly cannot do, but what writing *can*.

To be clear: To track the consequences of literacies’ material affordances is not to uncritically rehabilitate strong text views of literacy, in which texts autonomously accomplish magnificent feats independent of the social. Instead, it is a radically social view of literacy—literacy understood from the perspective, in these cases, of migrants and their families—that brings me up against literacy’s consequences. When viewed from my field sites, the theoretical distinctions between strong text and context-sensitive theories of literacy begin to collapse. From this emic perspective, if nation states, with armies and laws, agree that papers have the power to regulate movement, then they do. Texts are as strong as the strongest make them. Sure, there are subversions and forgeries and creative misuses of literacy. But there is also mass compliance exacted through fear and through habit. For many participants in my research—and perhaps for others in highly bureaucratic societies—literacy is a potent object that enters their lives, that makes things happen.

No field site, of course, is representative. As I understand it, the value of ethnography as a methodology is in its specificity. Ethnographers attend to lived experiences and practices, and we proceed with the belief that such practices have something to teach our theories. What my research reveals is the entanglement of literacy with the movement of people—with their upward or downward social mobility and with their physical mobility across transnational borders or through hostile city streets. Literacy, experienced in these communities materially, is a navigational technology. It places and displaces. It orients and disorients. It includes and it alienates. These are not metaphors for literacy. They are active verbs that correspond with the development of the nation state, the transnational post, and systems of social inequality. Literacy’s material affordances have social origins, yes. And they are taken up as part of other social practices, yes. That literacy is shaped by its social context has been irrefutably established. These claims lead us back, or perhaps forward, to its far-reaching consequences.

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NOTES

¹ Parts of this article were first presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in St. Louis, MO, 2012.

² Here is the relevant quote: “It has seemed worthwhile to enquire whether there may not be, even from the most empirical and relativist standpoint, genuine illumination to be derived from a further consideration of some of the historical and analytic problems connected with the traditional dichotomy between non-literate and literate societies” (305).

³ See the introduction to *The Power of the Written Tradition*.

⁴ In his 2003 response, Street argued that Brandt and Clinton risked making the global forces that acted on literacy seem “autonomous.” New Literacy Studies, he suggested, already had the conceptual heft to deal with the connection between the global and local through “literacy practices,” a category of analysis in which both local and global forces are visible.

⁵ Historian Ben Kafka describes how a clerk rescued people from the Terror during the French Revolution by soaking lists of future victims in pails of water and dumping the pulp in nearby baths: “While everyone else was looking *through* the files for orders or for information, he looked *at* them, and recognized them for what they really were: ink and paper” (14).

⁶ Young’s term for this is “minor revisions”; Guerra’s is “transcultural repositioning”; Kalmar’s research participants develop a subversive “wetback dictionary” to learn English on their own terms.

⁷ In the early days of New Literacy Studies, Deborah Brandt popularized the term “strong text,” to represent what was wrong with previous theories: They were decontextualized and product-centered (*Literacy as Involvement*).

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