Literacy

MARK TURIN, *University of British Columbia*
ROBERT HANKS, *University of British Columbia*

Literacy is a linguistic innovation characterised by the encoding and decoding of language into a system of visual signs whose relevance to daily life in most societies cannot be overstated. Understood to be both a technology and a social practice, literacy has been the subject of anthropological inquiry since the late nineteenth century, with protracted debates about its effects on human consciousness and social life. This entry tracks the development of literacy as a concept.

Initially dominated by technologically deterministic assertions that literacy was a tool for sociocultural and cognitive development, anthropology would later embrace the more culturally relativistic perspective advanced by the New Literacy Studies movement of the 1980s and 1990s. This movement sought to understand how cultural logics and norms informed the development of localised literacy practices, thus creating variations of ‘literacies’ which were themselves embedded within ideologies and structures of power relations. Coming to recognise the marginalising power of standardised literacy, anthropology turned its attention to education.

Anthropologists and educators have become partners in research dedicated to developing pedagogical practices that draw upon the unique linguistic resources and practices that students bring with them into the classroom to cultivate inclusivity and empowerment. The increasing prevalence of digital technologies in all aspects of daily life have challenged earlier notions of literacy, inspiring anthropologists to investigate how people draw upon multiple modalities to encode and decode meaning, thereby fundamentally reshaping our understanding of what it means to ‘read and write’.

Introduction

Literacy is such a central part of most people’s everyday lives that its ubiquity can be taken for granted. Scholars have highlighted how, for many of us, literacy represents an essential pathway to development and personal liberation that has the power to cure almost any social ill (Bialostok & Whitman 2006: 382-3; Street 1997: 49; Ong 2012). Literacy is often presented as an ability with such transformative potential that becoming literate leads to a fundamental redefinition of an individual’s identity (Riemer 2008; Ahearn 2004). However, there are communities for whom literacy can be a less integral, sometimes even inappropriate, means for documenting and communicating language (Debenport 2015). In circumventing the constraints of the written word, such communities seek alternative ways of transmitting ideas, both orally and through other technologies (Finnegan 2012; Turin *et al.* 2013). Considering the perceived centrality of literacy to most contemporary human societies, and its continued absence from others, how has anthropology contributed to a cross-cultural understanding of literacy?

Broadly defined as both a technology and a social practice, literacy has been characterised as

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communication through an invented system of visually decoded signs, rather than by oral or gestural modes (Besnier 1999: 141). As an area of interest, literacy has figured prominently in anthropological inquiry since the discipline's inception, as scholars sought to make sense of what the ability to read and write *means* for us. While studies have included exploring the origins, use, and transmission of different writing systems, the central question remains: does giving a tangible form to the most fundamental aspect of humanity, namely our capacity for language, transform how we think about, perceive, and process the world around us? In essence, does literacy change who we are as humans? Understanding this has become all the more relevant as the rapid transition from analogue to digital technologies further complicates how people engage with the written word, and thus reshapes our sense of what it means to be literate (Jewitt 2006; Wolf 2017).

In this entry, we track the progression of literacy through different eras of anthropological theory. Early interpretations treated literacy as a lens for analyses at the societal level, a framework that saw writing systems as a means for differentiating between cultures and their imagined evolutionary, cognitive, and socioeconomic development, which thus helped to frame literacy as an autonomous technology independent of its social contexts (Morgan 1878: 3, 11). While this position has softened over the years, the crucial link between literacy and consciousness was maintained as scholars emphasised the intrinsic benefits that a literate mind offered individuals and the societies in which they lived (Goody & Watt 1963; Ong 2012).

Beginning in the 1980s, anthropologists began to reflect on the sociocultural underpinnings of literacy practices, with the scale of analysis narrowing to focus on local specificity and variation (Scribner & Cole 1981). Strict definitions of 'literacy' and what it meant to be 'literate' were shown to be implicated in the hegemonic ideologies that structure our societies and determine our values, and have given way to more nuanced understandings (Bialostok & Whitman 2006; Street 1997; Blommaert 2008). This newer movement in literacy studies situated literacy's power to marginalise and sought to re-evaluate the diversity of written language in ways that challenged normative assumptions prevalent in earlier models. Insights generated by a sociocultural approach to literacy have motivated anthropologists to work with educators to make pedagogical literacy practices more inclusive and empowering for students (Street 1997; Hornberger 2003). The increasing centrality of digital technologies in all aspects of daily life (Horst & Miller 2012) has led to a re-scoping of what it means to read and write, with traditional definitions of literacy becoming less relevant to understanding the emergent meaning-making processes of digital texts.

Literacy and pre-literature

In the discipline's early years, anthropologists took so-called 'primitive' peoples as their subjects of inquiry to expand their understandings of humanity (Mandelbaum 1955: 213; Hsu 1964: 169). Broadly applied to peoples living beyond the cultural and political 'West', the term 'primitive' invoked a Hobbesian image of

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primordial humanity that contrasted with the presumed cultural, historical, and linguistic sophistication of the societies from which anthropologists hailed (Faris 1925: 711; Hsu 1964: 169). While the term 'primitive' was used extensively by prominent anthropological theorists at the time, objections quickly arose due to its analytical ambiguity and racist implications of superiority and inferiority (Faris 1925: 711; Hsu 1964: 173). In response, and on account of their apparent objectivity and perceived greater scientific precision, the terms 'non-literate' or 'pre-literate' arose as alternatives to the 'primitive'/ 'civilised' opposition.

Unlike primitivity, 'literacy' was considered to carry less awkward baggage, being an attainable state of socioeconomic and cognitive development rather than an essential and inherent condition. Those who had not yet learned to read could be identified as 'non-literate' or 'pre-literate', only because written literature had not been introduced or developed in their societies (Faris 1925: 711-2; Hsu 1964: 169). However, the use of 'non-literate' or 'pre-literate' also assumed that literacy and orality were mutually exclusive (Dickinson 1994: 320) and presented literacy as the first step towards greater civilisation and sophistication (Faris 1925: 712). The essence of the connection between literacy and civilisation derived from a belief that written language had an inevitable impact on how people understood, interpreted, and made sense of the world around them.

As twentieth century scholars became increasingly interested in understanding how language might shape thought and culture (Whorf 1952; Lévi-Strauss 1966), the physical form of written language came to be seen as more than a simple representation of speech, and rather a unique form of language in its own right (Brockmeier & Olson 2009: 5, 8). While earlier assumptions ascribed a 'prelogical' cognitive state to 'primitive' peoples, a notion assuming that such communities were completely uninterested in abstract thinking and focused solely on ensuring their basic needs of survival (Lévy-Bruhl 2018; Brockmeier & Olson 2009: 10), Claude Lévi-Strauss demonstrated how both literate and oral peoples engage in the rational ordering of the world, albeit from quite different perspectives (1966: 269). Oral peoples were presented as reasoning with a 'mythical thought' pattern that was 'entangled in imagery', while literate peoples could reason at a 'concrete' level that was detached from perception and imagination (Lévi-Strauss 2001: 11-2; Lévi-Strauss 1966: 15, 20, 22).

Drawing from linguistic theory, Lévi-Strauss posited that the key difference between literate and oral thought processes was the capacity of the literate mind to distinguish between signs and the signified, thus being able to explore the relationship between images and the concepts they represent (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 18, 21). This perspective continues into the present with cognitive scientists like David Olson asserting that literacy leads to a meta-awareness of language that allows for an objectified and decontextualised understanding of concepts (2017: 239). Writing, having the capacity to lift words (signs and concepts) out of context, transforms them into objects that can be scrutinised and categorised on their own without attachment to a particular image or signification (Olson 2017: 241). In this way, the rationality of the

literate mind has been compared to that of an engineer looking for ways to think beyond cultural and categorical constraints by critically focusing on its constituent elements, whereas the oral mind was theorised as only capable of rearranging, and never thinking beyond, the categories it was given (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 19).

While 'literature' is generally used to refer only to cultural expressions with written form, there is no compelling reason to treat the verbal art of oral societies as fundamentally different to written traditions: oral literatures simply exist at one end of the spectrum of literary types (Finnegan 2012: 20, 27; Turin *et al*. 2013). A bias towards the written word combined with the tendency of anthropologists to record and transcode oral traditions into textual form (Turin 2014) has resulted in the misrepresentation of oral literatures as simply verbatim transmissions of narratives across generations, and further contributes to the belief that such traditions are cruder than written literature (Finnegan 2012: 15-6). In reality, the difference between written and oral literature is the mode of transmission: oral literatures are more dependent on live (and increasingly online) performances and are therefore characterised by greater variability as performers improvise and innovate, often in active dialogue with their audience (Finnegan 2012: 10-2). In contrast to the unchanging physical form of written texts which can be transmitted unaltered across time and space (albeit subject to much reinterpretation), the composition and dissemination of oral literature—much like music and dance—is dependent upon and inextricably linked to the performative context (Finnegan 2012: 4-5, 14). While this difference in tangibility has led to academic and popular assumptions regarding the supposed objectivity and verifiability of written historical narratives, Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2015) critiques such perspectives as holding a positivist bias that fails to account for how power enters into the process of constructing historical narratives. This results in conceptions of history that present a 'fixed past', whereas the 'truth' of history is actually intimately tied to the present even in the case of written records.

Working through the dichotomies: primitive/civilised and oral/literate

Early anthropologists like Lewis Henry Morgan (1878) suggested that writing gave a permanence to language that was fundamental for understanding a particular society's thought processes and its capacity for development. For late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century anthropologists, literacy represented a necessary precondition for a culture to be considered a 'Civilization' within the monodirectional and evolutionary logic that served to organise all societies (Morgan 1878: 3, 11; Hsu 1964: 169; Akinnaso 1981: 180). While scholars would later criticise their predecessors for assuming radical cognitive differences between literate and oral peoples, many anthropologists nevertheless felt comfortable asserting that written language had a deterministic influence on an individual's analytical processes and capacities (Goody & Watt 1963: 321; Ong 2012: 8-9).

This position is known as the 'universalist' or 'autonomous' model of literacy. It understands writing to be a

technology reliant on generalised skills and language practices that in turn impact an individual's linguistic, cultural, and cognitive potential (Collins 1995: 75; Akinnaso 1981: 187; Ong 2012: 77-8, 81). Some observers, like Walter Ong, travelled far with this perspective, asserting that writing is an inevitable, even 'absolutely necessary', technology for the development of science, history, and philosophy; a precondition for nuanced understandings of art and language without which humans will not achieve their full cognitive potential (2012: 14-5).

According to this logic, and given their lack of written records, oral societies were presumed to be homeostatic, that is, internally and perpetually stable, operating with a model of cultural transmission incapable of distinguishing between history and myth, past and present. Literate societies, on the other hand, could draw on written records and were thus positioned to make objective distinctions between 'what was and what is' (Goody & Watt 1963: 308, 310-1; Ong 2012: 8; Faris 1925: 712). In this conceptualisation, literacy was a means for expanding a society's capacity for rational and abstract thought (Langlois 2006: 18; Akinnaso 1981: 164; Ong 2012: 102) and if properly harnessed, could catalyse socioeconomic and cognitive development (Collin 2013: 29; Akinnaso 1981: 164, 169).

Research on oral literature has challenged the prevailing and myopic assumptions in the autonomous model of literacy. Comparative research shows that technologies like writing are better conceptualised as shaping, rather than determining, our collective and individual recollections (Martindale *et al.* 2018: 198; Scribner & Cole 1981). Archaeological evidence, for example, corroborates thousands of years of layered histories as recorded in the oral narratives of Tsimshian people in British Columbia, Canada, while members of the Thangmi community in Nepal disrupt the presumed path of orality to literacy by incorporating digital technologies as part of their techniques of recording oral history (Martindale *et al.* 2018: 199-200, 202). The centrality of oral performances to the recitation of origin myths by ritual practitioners is internalised by members of the Thangmi community who view orality as a source of strength and as essential to their ethnic identity (Shneiderman 2015: 64, 82-3). As a consequence, writing down the oral performances of Thangmi ritual practitioners can be seen as undermining the very feature that makes these narratives identifiably Thangmi (Shneiderman 2015: 83, 87). Alternative technologies, such as audio and video, present a more desirable means of documenting and transmitting oral narratives for practitioners who thereby retain control over the message, with multimedia helping to emphasise distinctiveness and variation, avoiding the pitfalls of standardisation through the mediation of the written word (Shneiderman 2015: 64, 87, 96).

Christine Helliwell's work in a Borneo Dayak community further demonstrates the diverse understandings encoded in oral literature by contrasting two distinct narrative genres, the *sensangan* and the *cerito Nosi* (2012: 52). Both of these genres are considered high prestige art forms of storytelling and recount epic poems of great heroes, often taking many hours to complete. Despite this general similarity, they differ in a number of significant ways: the *sensangan* are a corpus of tales about the culture-hero and trickster *Koling*

that are each narrated as a slow song with a drum accompaniment, whereas *cerito Nosi* are standalone stories chanted quickly without any accompanying instruments (Helliwell 2012: 54, 57). The different pacing and styles by which these two distinct genres are performed affect how the audience experiences and interprets their content. The slow pace of the *sensangan* allows for the content to be discussed by the audience as it is performed, while the rapid chanting of the *cerito Nosi* necessitates focussed attention. In contrast to theories that present oral societies as incapable of distinguishing between myth and history, the unique performative styles of these genres illustrate important differences in how their content is interpreted, impacting the level of truth attributed to the stories by the audiences (Helliwell 2012: 53, 60).

Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) challenges the assumed necessity of written language for scientific knowledge with a description of the Onondaga Nation's Thanksgiving Address. This ancient practice of expressing gratitude to the environment speaks to the relationship that the Onondaga Nation has to the natural world (Kimmerer 2013: 107-8, 111). As speakers name and thank each species in turn for their roles in sustaining the environment, the structure of the Thanksgiving Address serves as a scientific inventory of ecological information, 'a lesson in Native science' that unifies the speaker and audience in a collective reflection on the ethic of responsibility towards the land (Kimmerer 2013: 108, 110, 115). Crucially, much of the power of the Thanksgiving Address comes from its oral performance which, in contrast to a written document that may be skimmed, requires the audience to actively participate for the duration of its lengthy recitation and creates the space to contemplate one's relationship to the environment (Kimmerer 2013: 110). Kimmerer asserts that Indigenous knowledge practices like the Thanksgiving Address can complement Western science's focus on matter by interweaving Indigenous understandings of respect and gratitude, and by positioning ecological restoration as a return to reciprocal relations between humans and the environment (2013: 257, 263).

In short, while some communities may not have a long history of written texts, this does not imply that their histories and perspectives are solely confined to the present (Martindale *et al.* 2018: 205). Moreover, the assertion of the autonomous model that literacy results in improved rationality remains questionable when considering how real-time, *in vivo* oral performances allow for audience members to challenge and seek clarification from performers (Finnegan 2012: 14). This is no new realisation: Socrates himself identified that an inherent flaw of written language was its inflexibility. Seen in this light, the written word can hinder deeper understanding because a reader cannot challenge or seek clarification from a text. By definition, written words just keep repeating themselves (Wolf 2017: 76; Plato 2002).

Even though evolutionary theories of literacy fell out of fashion and remain unsupported by ethnographic evidence, literacy has continued to be used to distinguish between human cultures (Goody & Watt 1963: 321; Akinnaso 1981: 164). In particular, the imagined capacity for social organisation, socioeconomic growth, and cognitive development that some acquaint with literacy continue to situate the terms 'non-literate', 'pre-literate', or 'oral' alongside a reduced level of technological development in ways that are

unfortunate (Berndt 1960: 64; Akinnaso 1981: 164). While not connected to the earlier evolutionary theories, the technological determinism implicit in the autonomous model of literacy assumes negative consequences for both cognition and society in the absence of literacy. Furthermore, the standards by which certain language practices are recognised as constituting 'literacy' must be considered in light of the colonial histories that have informed those very standards.

As part of the colonial project, languages were historically equated with race, with non-European languages and their speakers categorised as inferior to Europeans and their language practices (Rosa & Flores 2017: 623-4). These racio-linguistic ideologies continue today in forms such as 'standardised languages' which can legitimate the language practices of White speakers by positioning their language practices as the 'norm' or 'ideal' to be used in written texts (Rosa 2016: 163, 165; Baker-Bell 2020), thus devaluing and discounting the diversity of reading and writing practices that exist outside of this narrow standard (Rosa 2019: 187-8). For this, the autonomous model of literacy has been critiqued as merely replacing one racist and evolutionary dichotomy (primitive/civilised) with another: preliterate/literate or oral/literate (Akinnaso 1981: 164; Langlois 2006: 16-7; Collin 2013: 29-30).

Literacy as a sociocultural practice

From the 1980s, anthropologists grew dissatisfied with the essentialising dichotomies that had characterised mid-twentieth century theories and that posited a 'great divide' between societies. Such simplistic binaries failed to explain the complexity and rationality present in oral societies (Collin 2013: 30; Bialostok & Whitman 2006: 382), not to mention the many varied ways in which oral and written language are used (Stephens 2000: 11; Dickinson 1994). In response, scholars shifted their inquiries from broad societal-level analyses to the local and granular, proposing a sociocultural model in which literacy was better understood as a collective activity with varied potentials dependent upon how a particular community incorporated writing into their processes (Collin 2013: 30; Street 2013: 54). Referred to as 'New Literacy Studies' (NLS), this movement made use of more ethnographic approaches and embraced a cultural understanding of literacy as a practice embedded within, and defined by, institutional settings and everyday life (Collins 1995: 80-1; Stephens 2000: 10).

In addition, NLS rejected the idea that writing was no more than a general skillset easily transposable onto different contexts. For example, the ubiquity of keyboard writing in certain societies has meant that 'computer literacy' has supplanted analogue forms of literacy practices to such an extent that being 'computer illiterate' is seen as equivalent to being illiterate (Blommaert 2008: 5). NLS proposes a relativistic, dynamic, and situated model that recognises diverse forms of 'literacies' embedded within particular cultural contexts, norms, and discourses. These vary across time and space and are tied to how individuals construct their identities (Collins 1995: 75-6; Street 1997: 48; Riemer 2008: 444).

NLS is therefore understood to advocate a culturally relativistic approach (Collin 2013: 32), with aligned research demonstrating how textual practices are influenced by cultural logics and beliefs (Riemer 2008), such as the use of magical writing in Ecuador as means of critiquing state power (Wogan 2004), or the strict norms regulating the creation and dissemination of textual documents to preserve community secrecy in a New Mexico Pueblo community (Debenport 2015). The NLS approach has encouraged anthropologists to reflect on how their own level of literacy in the 'texts' of the communities with whom they work may affect their interpretations. Researchers often 'normatively reorganize' texts, silencing the original author's voice (Blommaert 2008: 10-1), while in other cases have little or no reading ability in the predominant written language of the communities with whom they work, calling into question the kinds of knowledge represented in anthropologist's publications (Allen 1992; Ortner 1992).

A key element of NLS is the realisation that literacy functions as an ideology, and that the uses, meanings, definitions of, and efforts to control literacy policies are embedded within wider relations of power (Street 1997: 48; Wogan 2003: 66; Blommaert 2008: 6). Determinist assumptions inherent in the autonomous model of literacy cultivated a conviction within development organisations that literacy was a panacea for all social ills, leading to the entanglement of literacy programs with free-market neoliberal capitalism (Street 1997: 49; Bialostok & Whitman 2006: 384). Targeting Indigenous peoples and other marginalised populations, development-minded literacy programs remain tethered to earlier missionary activities which sought to 'civilise' non-Western peoples through education and religious conversion (Bialostok & Whitman 2006: 382-3; Wogan 2004: 62-4; Besnier 1995).

Literacy interventions across the Global South during the mid-twentieth century, while distinct from the ethnocentric drive of missionary literacy programs, nevertheless upheld colonial ideologies through a 'liberal paternalism' that identified literacy as the path to progress and modernity (Bialostok & Whitman 2006: 383). In such thinking, literacy was a mechanism for moral transformation, constituting new subjectivities in the context of modern capitalist states, with schools serving as key institutional sites for integrating individuals into the nation (Collins 1995: 82; Riemer 2008: 450). 'Schooled literacy', that is, standardised writing practices as transmitted in educational settings, replaced diverse literacies that were present in other social spheres (Collins 1995: 82). These diverse literacies might have included the reading of religious texts for ritual purposes, the use of books in children's play (such as word games and puzzles), or reading stories aloud in the home (De la Piedra 2009: 116, 121; O'Neil 2007: 172). María Teresa De la Piedra's research on the multiple forms of 'hybrid literacy practices' that coexist within the rural Urpipata community in Peru demonstrates that the replacement of alternative literacies with schooled literacy is not necessarily total; individuals continue to mix and appropriate Quechua and Spanish literacy for use in different contexts and to fulfil their own purposes (2009: 110, 112–3).

Jan Blommaert (2008) classifies alternative literacies under the umbrella term 'grassroots literacy', which he applies to a broad range of 'non-elite' literacy practices. These forms of writing deviate from

standardised norms of spelling and speech and can usually only be interpreted within a local context (Blommaert 2008: 7, 193). Graffiti is an example of a grassroots literacy in which reading and decoding a script is only accessible to other graffiti writers (Blommaert 2008: 193). Some scholars consider schooled literacy to be part of an elite-led movement against grassroots literacies, seeking to establish a particular literacy standard as foundational for citizenship and the moral order, contributing to the problematic use of the term 'officially literate' as a necessary requirement to access social standing (Collins 1995: 82-3; Erickson 1984: 525; Rosa 2019; Baker-Bell 2020).

Laura Ahearn (2004) and Frances Riemer (2008) examine the effects of development-minded literacy programs in Nepal and Botswana. In Junigau, Nepal, Ahearn studied women's newly acquired literacy skills in the 1990s in the context of the writing of love-letters and suggested that a growth in romantic elopements indicated that learning to write love-letters impacted how villagers conceptualised their agency (2004: 306). In Ahearn's analysis, the dominant discourses of Nepali society encouraged a moral connection between the acquisition of literacy skills and increased development, capitalism, independence, and agency (2004: 309, 311). However, in connecting literacy to a belief that romantic love was integral to modern life (Ahearn 2004: 308, 312), development-minded literacy education in Junigau may have inadvertently resulted in women's disempowerment, as those who chose to elope often lost the support of their natal families. Demonstrating how women who later faced difficulties in their marriage had few options, Ahearn challenges an instrumental view that positions literacy as a necessarily positive capacity that inevitably leads to greater empowerment (2004: 313).

Riemer's research into the meanings ascribed to literacy in Botswana demonstrates that while adult learners may frame their path to literacy as coming to see 'the light', the greater sense of personal empowerment they experience as a result also leads to their increased participation in the modern global capitalist system (2008: 449-50, 458). Riemer describes a cultural model in which strong associations exist between literacy, education, and moral transformation, and the acquisition of literacy skills through schooling involves reconstructing one's identity to be a full member of a modern community (2008: 451-2). Aside from the technical skills associated with literacy, the transformed sense of self produced through school-based literacy programs further situated these new readers in a nexus of discursive power relations constructed by ideologies of race, Christian morality, and political economy (Riemer 2008: 456-8). In this analysis, the desire for literacy—and the sense of personal empowerment that students feel—can be read as a 'discipline' in the Foucauldian sense in which literacy generates compliance and functions as a tool for assimilation (Riemer 2008: 458).

An anthropology of literacy education

The aversion to generalisation that informs NLS's descriptivist approach to literacy limits its effectiveness as a scalable educational model, running the risk of generating little more than collected anecdotes about

diverse forms of literacies (Besnier 1999: 141; Stephens 2000: 19). While acknowledging the importance of contextuality to literacy, Kate Stephens argues that some aspects of literacy skills development are not context-specific and can indeed be generalised, and that there is educational value in understanding how writing can be *re*contextualised and interpreted across time and space (2000: 12-3). Furthermore, while superior cognitive processing is not necessarily a consequence of being literate, there is increasing evidence indicating that literacy does support *cognitive potentialities* that cultivate skills like metalinguistic knowledge: that is, knowledge *about* language that may be impossible to harness without the linguistic objectification associated with literacy (Stephens 2000: 14, 16-7; Wolf 2017; Olson 1977; Olson 1994). A 'literacy for education' approach can balance the action-oriented concerns of educators with a greater anthropological recognition of context by offering language instruction for specific contexts and purposes (Stephens 2000: 20-1). So managed, the problem of shoehorning strict definitions of literacy into a narrow standard can be offset by expanding the range of practices that qualify as 'literate', thus diversifying the writing contexts for which students are prepared (Akinnaso 1981: 167; Street 2013: 60).

H. Samy Alim *et al.*'s (2011) examination of Hip Hop literacies offers an example of how the cultural relativism of NLS can mesh with the development of effective pedagogical models. While the Black English language used in Hip Hop has been criticised as 'illiterate', scholars point out that the grammatical prescriptivism of 'standard English' is itself artistically limiting and an example of linguistic racism that devalues the language and literacy practices of marginalised communities (Alim *et al*. 2011: 121; Baker-Bell 2020: 15-6). Recognising the normalising power of 'schooled literacy' in defining standards of educability (Collins 1995: 83; Erickson 1984: 531; Rosa & Flores 2017: 626-7), Alim *et al.* advocate for literacy education that locates its goals within the lived realities of its students by making it 'ILL', namely: *Intimate*, *Lived*, and *Liberatory* (2011: 134). Through Hip Hop, young people introduce their own cultural standards and prioritise 'ill-legitimate' artistic creativity, challenging dominant ideals of correctness by defining their textual practices as *ill*, or skilled (Alim *et al.* 2011: 122).

'Ill-literacy studies' helps to frame American educational institutions as *illiterate* on account of their inability to decode the culturally rich and linguistically complicated experiences of their students. This institutional illiteracy results in schools failing to take advantage of the range of opportunities for true learning (Alim *et al.* 2011: 122, 132). Drawing on NLS, which situates literacies within the politics of unequal power relations, identity formation, and state authority in modern capitalist nation-states (Alim *et al.* 2011: 133; Collins 1995: 81-2), ill-literacy studies redefines 'being literate' as a capacity to critique dominant ideologies and reclaim one's own voice from the constraints of institutional structures and practices (Alim *et al.* 2011: 133).

Pedagogical strategies such as Alim *et al.*'s (2011) ill-literacy studies align with what April Baker-Bell calls 'Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy', which provide students with the opportunity to learn about and through Black English, thereby educating them into a 'Black Linguistic Consciousness' that can heal the

traumas of 'Anti-Black Linguistic Racism' while simultaneously nurturing their language abilities (2020: 8, 34). Critical pedagogies of this type are crucial as they enable students and educators to see past the narrow-minded binary of the 'street' versus the 'school' that forces students' identities, communicative repertoires, and literacy skills into contradictory categories that reproduce problematic hierarchies (Rosa 2019: 207-8). In this re-framing, students are not marginalised minorities but rather complicated individuals capable of giving voice to their lived realities through the use of ill-literate texts, without necessarily shunning the acquisition of traditional literacy skills (Alim *et al*. 2011: 134, 136, 140). So viewed, ill-literate pedagogies help to nurture *metaliteracy* and greater awareness in learners, uplifting their social consciousness beyond dominant ideologies of language and identity (Alim *et al*. 2011: 140).

Multilingualism and literacy education

As processes associated with globalisation bring ever-greater numbers of multilingual students into schools, literacy researchers face the difficult task of making sense of the specific challenges and opportunities that multilingualism introduces into the classroom environment (Hornberger 2003: 4). Beginning in the late 1980s, researchers identified a glaring gap between the extensive literature on multilingualism and writings on literacy. In response, a theoretical approach was developed for understanding how these two aligned phenomena interact with and shape one another (Hornberger 2003: 4). The concept of 'biliteracy' is the result of these inquiries and offers an analytical framework applicable to any occurrence of reading or writing in which more than one language features (Hornberger 2003: 5).

The biliteracy model does not characterise multilingualism and literacy through a binary perspective that (re)produces oppositions like first language (L1) vs. second language (L2), monolingual vs. bilingual, or literate vs. oral. Instead, it understands any single biliterate practice to be entangled within each of these states simultaneously. In this way, the biliteracy model conceptualises states of language as multiple, intersecting, and nested continua that together constitute a complex whole (Hornberger 2003: 4-5; Hornberger & Link 2012: 264). Briefly, these continua describe the *media* through which different languages are used; the *contexts* in which language and literacy practices are enacted and evaluated; and the *content* expressed by language and literacy practices; that is, their styles, genres, and the perspectives they communicate. In contrast to the compartmentalising and decontextualising perspectives that typically inform educational policies and practices, the biliteracy model enables researchers and educators to delve into multilingual settings and unpack how the development of biliterate skills occurs so that novel solutions in support of literacy education for multilingual learners may be imagined (Hornberger & Link 2012: 265; Hornberger 2003: 25).

Nancy Hornberger and Holly Link describe a scenario in which bilingual first grade students read an English language text while discussing it with one another in Spanish, and then respond to their teacher's inquiries in English (2012: 269). The biliteracy model makes clear that, while the teacher's acceptance of

Spanish dialogue offsets obvious power dynamics and helps to validate students' voices, the use of English as the sole language of instruction limits the possibilities for biliteracy development as Spanish is only permitted for oral communication (Hornberger & Link 2012: 270). Similarly, Melisa Cahnmann's study of a grade nine Spanish-English classroom examines how correction and assessment strategies influence student resistance or acceptance of biliterate practices (2003: 191). During the research, Cahnmann learned that students would often draw upon their Spanish linguistic resources to aid them in the creation of English-language texts. For example, to assist herself in spelling the English word 'people', one student verbalised the Spanish phonemes of 'PE-O-PE-LE' [pronounced as 'pay-oh-pay-lay' in English] (Cahnmann 2003: 193). While some experts in second language acquisition believe that such inter-lingual transcoding should be discouraged, the biliteracy model considers any kind of transfer along the L1-L2 continuum to be an opportunity, because it reveals students' strengths and identifies areas where teachers can focus their energy to support positive and impactful learning (Cahnmann 2003: 192-3).

The key insight of biliteracy is that interrelatedness between continua ensures that literacy and language skills can develop across and between different languages and literacies, with contextual factors determining and shaping specific manifestations (Hornberger 2003: 25). Stronger biliteracy skills will therefore emerge in environments that encourage students to draw on all points of the continua (Hornberger & Link 2012: 265). Crucially, this analytical framework is capable of recognising and incorporating students' multilingual practices as part of a classroom's learning resources, critiquing standard literacy norms while also producing alternative outcomes (Hornberger & Link 2012: 274; Cahnmann 2003: 189).

Re-imagining literacy in a digital world

The circulation of fast-changing information technologies and media in the twenty-first century introduces new aspects to established questions about what it means to be 'literate' in an overwhelmingly digital era (Wolf 2017: 219-20). Does the immediate access to vast amounts of information through Internet technologies change how people critically engage with texts (Wolf 2017: 222-3)? There is growing concern among researchers and educators that the shift from physical to digital texts may result in a reduction in the ability of young readers to analyse and think beyond the words they read, thus failing to perceive deeper meanings. In response, literacy research is moving towards understanding how students can become 'multitextual', that is, proficient in reading and analysing different kinds of texts in adaptable ways to harness the benefits of both print and digital media (Wolf 2017: 223, 226-7).

Multimodality is a theoretical approach to meaning-making that stems from social semiotics: the study of the social life of signs and symbols (Jewitt 2006: 3). In this framework, 'signs' refer to the association of meaning to a form; 'modes' describe the different forms in which signs are constructed (for example, an image versus a written word); and 'media' applies to the ways in which modes disseminate their signs (for

example, ink on paper, computer screens, etc.) (Heydon 2007: 39). A social semiotic approach to the sociality of language recognises that linguistic meanings are constantly reproduced through people's sociocultural work and are not simply a pre-existing code waiting to be activated (Jewitt 2006: 3). Multimodality extends this theory to suggest that the production of meaning is further influenced by any modes through which signs are communicated (Jewitt 2006: 3). In reconceptualising literacy as 'multimodal design', the analytical lens offered by multimodal literacy takes the focus away from the written word and broadens the frame to examine how people make meaning through the many modes and media to which they have access (Heydon 2007: 38; Jewitt 2006: 8).

Applying the multimodal literacy framework to new digital technologies can illustrate how digital media are reconfiguring our understanding of writing in generative ways (Jewitt 2006: 107). In particular, the dominance of writing is being decentred through digital technologies that harness images, speech, music, and moving elements to communicate (Jewitt 2006: 108; Heydon 2007: 39). In the classroom, there is increasing reliance on forms of 'edutainment'; that is, games, computer applications, and videos used for educational purposes, in place of strictly textual resources (Jewitt 2006: 6-7, 108). The influence of the digital screen on the meaning of texts is so great that, even when it is used to render the written word, as in an e-book, it mediates how we encounter and interpret the text we read. For example, book layout is often restructured to fit a screen, altering how a textual narrative is represented on a page (Jewitt 2006: 108-9). Carey Jewitt asserts that new digital media are changing what literacy means so profoundly that it may soon no longer be possible to define reading solely as the act of interpreting the written word (2006: 123). Instead, readers will have to make sense of all the features that have been enabled by the capabilities of the digital screen as they navigate the meanings communicated by a screen's *multimodal design* (Jewitt 2006: 123). Effectively 'reading' a digital text, then, also requires understanding how the design of images and writing contribute to the realisation of the text's own meaning (Jewitt 2006: 136).

Conclusion

This entry offers a review of how literacy has been theorised in anthropology since the first days of the discipline. While perspectives have changed over the years, with definitions of literacy fluctuating between opposing frameworks of technological determinism and cultural relativism, the underlying theme remains unaltered: the development of literacy represents one of the most significant innovations of human history.

Despite more than a century's worth of research on literacy, questions about how humans shape literacy and how literacy shapes humans continue to be actively discussed. The rapid development of new information and media technologies has only accentuated the conversation. As new media invite novel possibilities for encoding and decoding meaning, which in turn result in changes in language practices, communication, and society, literacy will continue to be a prominent subject of anthropological research. If the history of anthropological theory is any indication of its future, the role of literacy in shaping the human

condition will be ardently debated as its function is productively reinterpreted.

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Note on contributors

Mark Turin is an Associate Professor at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, cross-appointed between the departments of Anthropology and the Institute of Critical Indigenous Studies. His research is situated in the fields of language documentation, reclamation, and revitalisation with regional focuses on the Himalaya and the Pacific Northwest of Canada. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2262-0986

Prof. Mark Turin, Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, University of British Columbia, 2104 – 6303 NW Marine Drive, Vancouver, BC Canada V6T 1Z1. mark.turin@ubc.ca

Robert Hanks is a graduate student in the department of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. His research examines language and literacy education in multilingual contexts and the decolonisation of pedagogy. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3788-321X

Robert Hanks, Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, University of British Columbia, 2104 – 6303 NW Marine Drive, Vancouver, BC Canada V6T 1Z1. rhanks@alumni.ubc.ca

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