

Book Review

Researching Global Outcast Literacy: A Review of *Decolonizing Literacy: Mexican Lives in the Era of Global Capitalism*

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Hernandez-Zamora, G. (2010). *Decolonizing literacy: Mexican lives in the era of global capitalism*. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters. [223 pp. US\$35.04 (paperback)]

Literacy scholars across the disciplines are acutely aware of the ideological implications of literacy practices, particularly how literacy can be used to mask power imbalances and social injustices within the dominant social structure. This concern, in particular, has been compellingly articulated by New Literacy Studies theorists (Street, 1996; Gee, 1996). However, scholars in critical literacy studies and applied linguistics—including Allan Luke (2004), Alastair Pennycook (2007), and Bonny Norton (2000)—have argued that scholarship in New Literacy Studies too often subscribes to an idealized version of what literacy can achieve: The marginalized will be able to bring about social change and challenge the *status quo* if they become familiar with the dominant literacy practices. On the global scale, this belief, which arises from what Harvey Graff (1979) has coined the “literacy myth,” is perpetuated by international development agencies in Third World countries, but is frequently overlooked by ethnographers who struggle to analyze the marginalized literacy practices in developing countries while attending to the underlying oppressive sociopolitical forces.

Gregorio Hernandez-Zamora’s (2010)

Decolonizing Literacy: Mexican Lives in the Era of Global Capitalism serves as an intervention in the ongoing conversations about conducting ethnographic literacy research in developing countries, and the efficacy of international literacy programs. Arguing against the New Literacy Studies perspective, Hernandez-Zamora’s work also demonstrates that there is no immediate tie between the acquisition of mainstream literacy and sociopolitical empowerment. Growing up on the margins of Mexico City and teaching at the National University of Mexico currently, Hernandez-Zamora is simultaneously researcher and informant in this study. His positionality allows him to more fully contextualize the narratives of the study participants, supplementing their stories with his personal experience and affective responses. In other words, *Decolonizing Literacy* should be read not only as an academic study of the literacy practices among marginalized Mexicans, but should also be seen as an ethically grounded form of political advocacy that calls for policy changes at the local, national, and global level.

Defining literacy as “a tool for self-authoring one’s place in the world” and being literate as “the appropriation of the

socially available meaning and discourse practices indispensable to understanding and shaping one’s place in the world” (p. 9), Hernandez-Zamora (2010) provides ethnographies of eight individuals from Mexico who, in various sociopolitical contexts, “use texts to decode the world and speak for themselves” (p. 9). These research participants come from diverse social backgrounds, including successful factory managers, battered housewives, and illegal immigrants to the United States. None of the participants has completed more than ten years of formal schooling, yet each has developed a sense of agency through their non-mainstream literacy practices. Through interviews with these individuals, Hernandez-Zamora argues that, for the marginalized population who are not full citizens of any nation-state because they have been silenced by both the Mexican and American governments, literacy is a way of self-authoring and self-positioning—a way for them to claim their rights as citizens by voicing what matters to them against the dominant power structure.

Given recent debates on immigration and citizenship between Mexico and the United States, Hernandez-Zamora (2010) cogently questions the phenomenon of

“transnational silencing” (p. 137) in a particularly compelling interview with Pablo, a construction worker in the United States who has resigned his prestigious position in the Mexican military. In Pablo’s case, he was silenced by the literacy practices endorsed by the Mexican military, which required him to carry out duties against his will that violated the human rights of other Mexicans. Thus, by participating in the military, Pablo relinquished his right as a citizen to voice his concerns in the public arena. In the States, Pablo loses all claims of citizenship, and also most of his rights—Pablo jokingly says that the only right illegal immigrants enjoy is “the right to remain silent” (cited in Hernandez-Zamora, p. 129). Based on this context of lost citizenship among transnationals, Hernandez-Zamora argues that literacy and citizenship are constantly locked in a stalemate: individuals cannot claim their rights as citizens without literacy; at the same time, they are legally or politically prohibited from engaging in public discourse with their literacy practices. The circumstances within which these “global outcasts” (p. 137) are trapped challenge the common conception that critical literacy is a form of empowerment for the marginalized in the public arena.

Through these detailed ethnographies, Hernandez-Zamora (2010) also seeks to challenge the literacy myth at an international level: the belief that the socioeconomic conditions in developing countries would improve if they can achieve a higher national literacy rate, which is widely held among international development agencies. In fact, one of Hernandez-Zamora’s main goals as an ethnographic researcher is to critique literacy programs implemented by UNESCO, OECD, and the World Bank in formerly colonized countries. He argues that national and international literacy programs function under a deficit model that posits individuals in former colonies as lacking in basic literacy skills. These programs thus perpetuate a larger myth that, with the eradication of literacy, peripheral countries will be able to fully

enter the global economy.

Hernandez-Zamora’s ethnographies reveal how marginalized individuals are prohibited by either political or economic forces to acquire literacy. Although some participants are able to achieve “critical consciousness” (Freire, 1970/1993), or “a voice and self-authoring [of] their lives, in spite of and even against governments and institutions” (Hernandez-Zamora, p. 190-191), the lived trajectories of these individuals allows for the critique of top-down national and international literacy programs, while demonstrating the value of grassroots initiatives that enable individuals to claim their place with critical literacy practices.

While grassroots and non-mainstream literacy practices have been a constant interest among literacy ethnographers, Hernandez-Zamora (2010) argues that researchers are prone to romanticize poverty by focusing only on the complexity and sophistication of those practices without viewing them as symptoms of social inequities, writing that: “Mostly affluent and White researchers tend to interpret nearly any experience in the oppressive lives of subordinated people as ‘learning’” (p. 193). Hernandez-Zamora asserts that the systematic academic failure of marginalized groups cannot be explained away by the incompatibility between their home literacy practices and the mainstream literacy, as that mode of inquiry downplays the underlying social and historical injustices that can cause such differences between those literacy practices. Referencing the participants’ stories, Hernandez-Zamora compellingly concludes that while they are able to develop an understanding of the social injustice in the sociopolitical system and a sense of agency in particular contexts with non-mainstream literacy practices, they are still denied access to resources, institutions, and literacy practices beyond their immediate social surroundings. Thus, Hernandez-Zamora argues that the focus of ethnographic literacy research should not only highlight the complexity of non-mainstream literacy practices

among the marginalized population, but should also more actively address the socioeconomic and political structures and policy issues that perpetuate inequalities in education.

As an informant-researcher in this study, Hernandez-Zamora deftly weaves together ethnographic accounts, personal experience, and research from the fields of applied linguistics, education, and literacy studies to demonstrate how dominant literacy practices endorsed by state governments and international development agencies disempower global outcasts. His study reminds ethnographers to focus not only on the complexities of non-mainstream literacy practices in a global context, but to also expose the injustices that can exacerbate the cultural differences between mainstream and marginalized practices. In so doing, Hernandez-Zamora’s work importantly exposes the global sociopolitical injustices manifested through literacy programs and policies in former colonies, while urging his readers to engage in more ethical and socioeconomically aware methods for conducting literacy research.

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