

Critical literacies for globalizing times

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Abstract

This paper asks what might constitute enabling conditions for productive cross-cultural exchange in the current conjuncture. To explore this question, it reviews the global context in which revised attention to literacy has become a focus of educational concern. Debates between education as a service and education as a public good frame alternative definitions of literacy and its functions in current times. This paper argues that education should be seen as a public good while recognizing that among people who share this position, there may still be significant disagreement about what constitutes the good and who constitutes the public, especially in global times, when container theories of the national public sphere are seen to be increasingly leaky. Our times are critical in part because Western-defined knowledge production still claims ownership of objectivity and universality for its own ways of knowing and judging. Critical literacies ask with postcolonial critique how the framing rules of engagement might be re-grounded so as to operate more equitably across contested ways of understanding difference. There are decisions about curriculum, pedagogy, and policy directions to be made. Who will make these decisions? What will be the framework guiding them? To what extent is literacy in English becoming a requirement for global participation and how should teachers of English respond? This paper argues that to answer such questions, the current move toward reorganizing Comparative Literary Studies and English Studies into units addressing World Literature needs to be complemented and sometimes challenged by postcolonial critique. The argument concludes with a call for those working within critical and multimodal literacies to think about how best to place this work in closer dialogue with postcolonial, development, and globalization studies across the disciplines, the better to address the theoretical, pedagogical and social implications of these developments.

Introduction

This paper asks what might constitute enabling conditions for productive cross-cultural exchange in the current conjuncture.¹ To explore this question, I provide a brief survey of how I understand some of the debates that anyone working with critical literacies in cross-cultural and globalizing contexts will need to negotiate, before turning to the need for specific local approaches and translocal dialogues if productive critical literacies are to be developed for globalizing times. There are decisions about curriculum, pedagogy, and policy directions to be made. Who will make these decisions? What will be the framework guiding them? The World Trade Organization describes education as a service. This view is in conflict with definitions of education as a public good, the position adopted by the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education in Paris in July 2009. Each view of education shapes how literacy is understood and the kinds of literacy deemed necessary for a thriving society today. In this paper, I advocate the view that education is a public good while recognizing that among people who share this position, there may still be significant disagreement about who constitutes the public, especially in global times, when container theories of the national public sphere are seen to be increasingly leaky.

Debates about what constitutes the good and how a good society can be achieved are even more contentious, even among those who agree that education has never been more important for dealing with the contemporary world. As Richardson and Abbott (2009) argue, educational policy today faces conflicting views of the public to be served. While some advocate education for global citizenship, others wonder whether there can be a global citizenship without a global state, and others question whether it is even possible to speak of a global community or global public sphere. These debates about the constitution of the public to be served are relatively recent, while debates about the nature of the good have a long history. Both debates are tied into arguments about disciplinary epistemology, ontology and claims to universality that postcolonial critique seeks to re-ground. In an earlier paper, "Globalization and Higher Education: Working toward cognitive justice" (Brydon, 2010), I made related arguments about postcolonial approaches to interdisciplinarity but without discussing critical literacy directly.² This paper seeks to fill that gap. Our times are critical in part because Western-defined knowledge production still claims ownership of objectivity and universality for its own ways of knowing and judging. Critical literacies ask with postcolonial critique how the framing rules of engagement might be re-grounded so as to operate more equitably across contested ways of understanding difference.

I begin with a brief review of the global social context in which revised attention to literacy has become a focus of educational concern. This is followed by a brief discussion of two recent UNESCO documents to support my point that academic analysis must push policy recommendations beyond the guiding assumptions of the status quo: assumptions that literacy promotion can be a neutral project that does not necessitate more far-reaching institutional and philosophical changes. The next section discusses the necessity of thinking about cross-cultural contexts in terms of disciplinary as well as geopolitical and national cultures. Recent "turns" toward interdisciplinarity, internationalization, indigenization, and global thinking, as I argue more fully in the previously cited article, are necessitating a recognition of overlapping concerns and interdependencies across disciplines.

The choices made in how to engage these challenges carry implications for their political impact. A brief discussion of the current move toward reorganizing Comparative Literary Studies and English Studies into units addressing World Literature toward the end of this paper will demonstrate some of these issues. My argument concludes with a call for those working within critical and multimodal literacies to think about how best to place this work in closer dialogue with postcolonial, development, and globalization studies across the disciplines, the better to address the theoretical, pedagogical and social implications of these developments.

The Context and Some Definitions: Globalization, Global English, Literacy

A report prepared for the UNESCO 2009 World Conference on Higher Education, "Trends in Global Higher Education: Tracking an Academic Revolution," defines globalization as "the reality shaped by an increasingly integrated world economy, new information and communications technology (ICT), the emergence of an international knowledge network, the role of the English language, and other forces beyond the control of academic institutions" (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009, p. ii). They point out further that "21st century realities have magnified the importance of the global context. The rise of English as the dominant language of scientific communication is unprecedented since Latin dominated the academy in medieval Europe. Information and communications technologies have created a universal means of instantaneous contact and simplified scientific communication. At the same time, these changes have helped to concentrate the ownership of publishers, databases, and other key resources in the hands of the

strongest universities and some multinational companies, located almost exclusively in the developed world” (ibid, p. ii).

These developments pose serious problems of access for epistemological and ontological perspectives deriving from the global South and the internal south within developed nations. I am following current usage in employing the geographical term “south” metaphorically to indicate a condition of subalternity or marginality within the current world system. At least two kinds of attention need to be brought to the teaching of English: one recognizing its use-value to different constituencies in current conditions and the other critical of the assumptions and values built into the language and into easy acceptance of its global hegemony.

English enables entry into a global dialogue that is crossing many kinds of boundaries to create a global public sphere enabling a global conversation to develop –among some groups--about global issues. But if knowing English provides entry for some, not knowing English creates barriers for others. Knowing English is becoming a new kind of literacy, where the ability to write and read in one’s own language is no longer sufficient for many to become successful in their chosen work areas, even within the confines of their own non-anglophone country’s borders. Insofar as much of the university business in Australia has depended heavily on foreign students hoping to win visas as skilled migrants, English provides cultural capital enabling global migrations. While the demand for English may concern the elite more than others, it involves ripple effects beyond elite spheres of employment, mobility, and public engagement. The teaching of English has become one of the sites where competing views of education more generally are in conflict (Ives, 2009; Snyder, 2008). Teaching English as a foreign or second language has become big business in ways that support neoliberal views of education as a service. Can it be remobilized in service of public goods?³

The changing status of global English is one concrete example of the ways in which globalization is bringing changes to what people need to know to do their jobs and live their lives in rapidly changing circumstances in which spatial distances seem to be lessening, time seems to be speeding up, and technology is changing how people communicate, how people perceive themselves and their place in their local, national and global habitations, and how they understand their agency: what they can and cannot do, both individually and at collective levels. While from some perspectives the world seems to be shrinking and flattening, other perspectives stress the ways in which it is also fragmenting and deepening divisions between rich and poor, men and women, North and South, and East and West. The contemporary cultural turn has heightened divisions between those who see cultures as bounded and incommensurate entities and those who see them as fluid, interactional and in process. For those of us who teach English, whether in native speaker or second language learner contexts, the dramatic rise of global English and the new englishes further complicates this picture. Teaching English cannot involve attention to the language alone because English is embedded in historical, cultural and social contexts that require attention to the stories it tells and the genres it works through. English hails its readers and interlocuters into specific forms of subjectivity that shape the ways in which the world can be seen and understood.

Debates about literacy, reading and interpretation have been contentious in educational fields since at least the 1960s, when challenges to traditional canons and their pedagogies were launched by feminism and decolonizing movements. These groups suggested that literacy has always been closely tied to projects of domination and control. English is linked to hierarchies of gender and colonial power. It carries assumptions about the primacy of forms of alphabetic literacy that misunderstood and denigrated oral cultures and non-alphabetic forms of visual literacy. Recognizing that the successful practice of the rights and obligations of citizenship have

always required a certain level of literacy within dominant definitions of the term, these movements began to question the assumptions built into traditional measures used to define and evaluate literacy. They favour expanded definitions of literacy that recognize the skills and values each cultural formation brings to their communicative strategies.

Conventionally understood, literacy has been used to designate the ability to read, write, and understand a textualized, usually written, language for purposes of communication and interaction. Wells (2008) distinguishes four escalating levels of literacy that he terms performative, functional, informational, and epistemic. The most basic level, which provides a foundation for the others, is the performative: the ability to understand that marks on the paper convey a meaning. As Contenta describes it, the next level up is the functional level, which “uses texts as a means for action” (1993, p. 136). The informational level gathers information but does not question its validity. According to Wells and Contenta, who published his book about Ontario schools in 1993, this level is “the dominant mode of schooling” (1993, p. 137). It is a mode they wish to question because they favour the epistemic level of literacy. The epistemic mode approaches the text in a questioning spirit and makes sense of it in relation to the reader’s own experience.

Recent trends have emphasized the necessity of advancing epistemic literacy. Epistemic literacy recognizes that literacy always exists in a context, involves interpretive skills, and may not be restricted to written language alone. Descriptions of the various competencies associated with literacy have expanded to include cultural, numerical and visual forms of understanding and the kinds of technical skills associated with computer usage. With increased use of the internet, study of multimedial literacies is rapidly changing how literacy education is understood. What some call transliteracy encompasses the ability to read, write, and interact across a range of platforms, tools and media from signing and orality through handwriting, print, TV, radio and film to digital social networks.

While literacy remains a matter of concern at each scale of communal involvement, approaches to literacy are assuming distinctively regional forms beyond the nation-states (or sub-units within them) which remain responsible for educational systems. The idea that in some contexts education can promote a “continental identity” is congruent with the rise in importance of regional identities as a sphere of involvement above the nation-state but below the fully global. The European Union is usually seen as a model for such shifts in scale. What role literacy in English can play in meeting or frustrating national and regional needs within contexts of globalization requires greater attention. English will play a different role in Brazil than that it plays in Canada, for example, but perhaps these two countries can learn more about the distinctiveness of each through the dialogue between teachers and students in both constituencies.

The UNESCO position paper, “The Plurality of Literacy and its implications for Policies and Programmes,” put out in 2004, argues that “what is needed most of all are new approaches to literacy work at the local, national and international levels” (UNESCO, 2004, p. 5). Such a statement does not validate the new for its own sake so much as recognize that past practices have not been working and that changing times require changed approaches. In the view of this document, “the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012) represents a new opportunity to give special emphasis to the goal of universal literacy under the motto ‘Literacy as Freedom’” (ibid., p. 6). Despite stressing the plurality of literacy, however, their definition restricts its usage to basic competency in dealing with written texts. They write: “Although the term ‘literacy’ is often used metaphorically to designate basic competencies in domains other than those immediately concerned with written texts, such skills as ‘computer literacy’, ‘media literacy’, ‘health literacy’,

'eco-literacy', 'emotional literacy' and the like do not form part of the plural notion of literacy at issue here" (ibid., p. 7). While this limitation may seem to make sense for their mandate, in recognizing how few still have access to the most basic forms of reading and writing competency, I will not employ it here, since it assumes an impoverished view of literacy as merely the acquisition of technical skills, which may be modified by application within different contexts without a fundamental change in definition. In contrast, I suggest, along with critical literacy theorists, that literacy itself needs to be reconceived as incorporating an ability to assess and challenge, and not merely decipher, whatever one reads. New literacies requires a fundamental redefinition of literacy itself, shifting away from thinking in terms of skills- based forms of communication toward understanding literacy as a social practice (Street, 2003, p. 77; Morgan & Ramanathan, 2005).

A definition of literacy as involving "a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society" (UNESCO, 2004, p.13) was developed during an international expert meeting in June 2003 at UNESCO. This broader definition moves closer toward acknowledging the power relations built into literacy practices by situating them within collective contexts but remains instrumentalist and fails to recognize that learning may also involve unlearning if education is to realize its full democratic potential.

The Plurality of Literacy position paper (UNESCO, 2004) concludes with the suggestion that "it is not merely individuals who must be targeted; for what is required is fundamentally changing the attitudes of entire societies towards reading, writing, and calculation. In moving away from the consideration of what literacy does to people towards the consideration of what people do or can do with literacy, we must face the challenge of creating literate societies, not just making individuals literate" (ibid., p. 30). A literate society, they imply, will be able to direct social change more effectively to its advantage. Insofar as the internet and new information and communication technology "has revolutionized how knowledge is communicated" and "exacerbated the division between the 'haves' and 'have-nots'" (Altbach et al., 2009, p. xv), the more recent UNESCO document sees a need to expand the scope of literacy training to negotiate new media, while still implying that the "knowledge" communicated is not produced through interaction but remains a neutral product to be accessed and employed.

Although the earlier UNESCO position paper includes Street's 2003 article, "What's 'new' in New Literary Studies?" in its Works Cited, his analysis insufficiently shapes its discussion. Both UNESCO papers still work within what Street calls the "autonomous model" of literacy. This model is standard "in many fields, from schooling to development programs." It "works from the assumption that literacy in itself—autonomously—will have effects on other social and cognitive practices" (Street, 2003, p. 77). In presenting itself as "neutral and universal," this view risks imposing western values onto other cultures or those of a dominant class or group within a country onto marginalized or subjugated groups. It also becomes vulnerable to narrowly instrumentalist views. In contrast, the New Literacy Studies start from the premise that "literacy is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill" (ibid., p. 77). That recognition seems to inform the privileging of the local that runs through the policy recommendations of the UNESCO position paper but in too simplistic a manner. According to Sylvester (1999), while the local is important, over-valuing the local may create new sets of difficulties. An over-valuing of the local, she suggests, also characterizes the work of postdevelopment theorists such as Escobar (1995) and their social movement followers. Like Street, she prefers the recognitions of more hybrid and complex mixings of local and global as reciprocally reconstituting, such as those built into postcolonial theory. Although Street does not specifically mention postcolonial work, his recognition of the ways in which local and global interact to form hybrid forms of

literacy practices is insufficiently recognized in the UNESCO position paper's recommendations. For analysis of local and global interactions in literacy practices, postcolonial and globalization theories can be helpful even when these fields have not specifically addressed questions of literacy education or global English very often.

As a literary critic, my own work has developed out of the critical literacy studies concerned with relations of power involved in the teaching of reading and writing more than it has with the kind of local ethnographies dealing with situated literacies described by Street (2003) as central to the New Literacies movement. But clearly there are overlaps in thinking between the two approaches. These may be summarized as a concern with ideological critique that rejects the assumptions behind autonomous literacy; a rejection of positivist epistemologies insensitive to cultural nuance; and an interest in understanding the relations linking literacy to theorizations of community, culture and power. What postcolonial theory adds to this approach is a recognition that education uses literacy to construct illiteracy as its abject opposite. This process creates what Spivak (1999, p. 279, 337) calls "sanctioned ignorance"—categories of experience it is not necessary to know. Ignorance, in other words, is actively produced along with valued forms of knowing called "knowledge." Ignorance then is not always a deficit. It can also be used to designate subordinated forms of knowledge, redefining them as ignorance. That process in turn legitimates the corresponding ignorance of the powerful. What hegemonic forms of knowing do not know is defined as not worth knowing. To counter such views on the global level, Spivak calls for the development of "transnational literacy" (Spivak, 1999, p. 357, 377, 399; 2003, p. 81).

Spivak never clearly defines this term but leaves it for her readers to work to understand it through reading the various texts she has produced. Rothberg (2006) suggests that transnational literacy reverses the assumed power relations of the dominant order to locate the need for literacy "in the educated first world reader: at the very moment Spivak seeks to instruct 'dominant' readers in the pitfalls of turning subalternity into exploitable resources for 'information retrieval,' she also suggests the necessity for those same readers to develop ethical reading practices or 'literacy' with which to reapproach the spaces of subalternity" (Rothberg, 2006, p. 123). This is the form of literacy that dominant cultures need to learn. It is a revised form of literacy that recognizes the power relations built into knowledge production in cross-cultural contexts. It requires in learners an ability for self-critique, vigilance, and openness to challenge. In Spivak's formulation, it requires multilingualism and a special attentiveness to what she terms the precapitalist cultures of the world, developed through a process of mutual interruption between the multidisciplinary of comparative literature and Area Studies as practiced within the United States (Spivak, 2003). Transnational literacy as a concept needs to be developed beyond Spivak's initial theorizings and requires much more attention than I can give it here.

It offers one alternative to the positivist quest for more "scientific" and replicable modes of experimentation for testing, validating and ensuring results in educational policy, which are shifting the culture of university work world-wide. These pressures work against the insights and prescriptions of the new literacies, critical literacy and transnational literacy alike. In reaction to these pressures, all disciplines need to become "less insular" (Street, 2003, p. 87) in how they understand their work and its contributions to knowledge. One of the under-explored new areas of investigation relevant to all disciplines is the study of what Proctor (2008) calls "agnotology": "the study of ignorance making, the lost and forgotten" (p. vii). He describes this study as addressing "knowledge that could have been but wasn't, or should be but isn't." His rationale for the study of ignorance is "that a great deal of attention has been given to epistemology (the study of how we know) when 'how or why we don't know' is often just as important, usually far more scandalous, and remarkably undertheorized" (ibid. p. vii). While Proctor's approach also considers power relations, it differs from Spivak's identification of socially acceptable forms of

ignorance, and from Alcoff's (2007) identification of three types of epistemologies of ignorance. Critical literacies need to attend to each form these produced ignorances may take.

As Alcoff explains, in what we can see as a corrective to Proctor, even though her work was published first: "Even in mainstream epistemology, the topic of ignorance as a species of bad epistemic practice is not new, but what is new is the idea of explaining ignorance not as a feature of *neglectful* epistemic practice but as a *substantive* epistemic practice in itself" (Alcoff, 2007, p. 39). This revised position and its three types derive from work on positional, gendered, and racialized differences developed by the postcolonial field. As Alcoff explains, the first argument, "drawn mainly out of Lorraine Code's work, is an argument that ignorance follows from the general fact of our situatedness as knowers. The second argument, drawn mainly from Sandra Harding's work, relates ignorance to specific aspects of group identities. The third argument, drawn from Charles Mill's work, develops a structural analysis of the ways in which oppressive systems produce ignorance as one of their effects" (ibid., p. 40). Alcoff argues that these positions need to be brought into closer dialogue with "Horkheimer's critiques of rationality under capitalism" because he "provides us with a cognitive norm—a substantive epistemic practice rather than merely a lack—that explains systemic ignorance" in a manner compatible with Edward Said's (1995) analysis of Orientalism as an ignorance-producing system (ibid., p. 56). She concludes that it will be essential to "move beyond postmodern refusals of reference, reason, or truth" to develop "reconstructive projects on reason" because "we can do better epistemically than these frameworks allow. Doing better will require making epistemology reflexively aware and critical of its location within an economic system" (ibid., p. 57). Critical, new and transnational literacies are part of this project. What I derive from Alcoff's work is the necessity for developing a closer dialogue within literacy studies about the implications of this kind of philosophical work for literacy studies as well as the need for more cross-disciplinary contact among scholars working on these related dimensions of knowledge construction and revision.

In a forthcoming paper, I suggest that internationalization and interdisciplinarity need to be developed together (Brydon, in press). Jacobs and Townsley (2008) distinguish between "a *globalizing logic* that imagines a unitary global space that organizes sociological debate" and a *transnational logic* that "envisions a series of overlapping sociological debates, often organized within a national context that is in the process of cosmopolitan, global, and transnational transformation" (Jacobs & Townsley, 2008, p. 497; italics in original). This useful distinction helps nuance understanding of what cross-cultural designates today, since these two logics incorporate different approaches to cross-cultural engagement. In line with the impetus of a globalizing logic, critics such as Rizvi (2009) argue for moving towards "cosmopolitan learning." In line with the thinking behind a transnational logic, critics such as Gorski (2008) argue for "decolonizing intercultural education." Can these approaches be reconciled? Do they need to be, or do choices need to be made?

Cross-cultural contexts, increasingly invoked in globalization discussions, refer to at least two different uses of culture: the first, to describe communal, linguistic, or national cultures, and the second, to describe disciplinary cultures. Dialogues linking development, globalization and postcolonial studies tend to focus on what we might think of as politics proper. Dialogues linking postcolonial studies with critical literacy and critical pedagogy tend to focus on cultural politics and theory. However, disciplinary boundaries remain strong. Moves toward interdisciplinary dialogue often take place with little regard for the work within sociological studies on "symbolic boundaries and how these interact with social boundaries" (Pachuki, Pendergrass, & Lamont, 2007, p. 331).

Boundary Processes, Interdisciplinary Approaches and Transdisciplinary Literacy

Lamont's analysis in *How Professors Think* (2009) is helpful in providing the broader perspective necessary to counter "disciplinary tunnel vision" (Lamont, 2009, p. 12) and understand the contexts that enable "the creation and evaluation of shared interdisciplinary cognitive platforms" (ibid., p. 211) for advancing and judging interdisciplinary research. The "norm of cognitive contextualization" (ibid., p.257) that she observes operating within multidisciplinary research adjudication committees in the United States emerges from group negotiation across disciplinary and personal boundaries. In suggesting that "Panel deliberations follow principles analogous to those that some theorists prescribe for deliberative democracy" (ibid., p. 116), she recognizes the potential for "alternative framings" (ibid., p. 117) of each proposal, and the need for developing a sophisticated inter- or trans-disciplinary literacy in choosing among or adapting these frames. Her book reflects her interest in boundary processes more generally and in the ways in which the conceptual distinctions individuals makes in the course of their everyday lives reflect and influence "more durable and institutionalized social differences" (Pachuki et al., 2007, p. 331). With Pachuki and Pendergrass, she provides a useful survey of recent work in cultural sociology on boundary processes, with the conclusion that more work needs to be done in "synthesizing structural and cultural approaches to inequality," and understanding how patterns of association and segregation "connect to representations of 'us' and 'them' that exist at the level of the taken-for-granted" (ibid., p. 345). While sociologists have focused on the structural approaches and postcolonial theory has addressed the cultural, there has been little dialogue as yet across these particular disciplinary boundaries.

The synthesizing work Pachuki et al. (2007) call for also carries implications for how literacy is theorized as well as for the ways in which different disciplines understand the work that distinguishes and links them. I am suggesting that more work is needed to theorize and practice interdisciplinary forms of literacy, so that researcher-teachers may develop more productive ways of speaking and learning across our differences. For example, Manathunga (2009) argues, and I agree, that all future researchers will need to become "multilingual" in the sense of learning how to interact within the kinds of interdisciplinary, cross-cultural and geopolitical "contact zones" that are being created and that we are creating through globalization (Manathunga, 2009, p. 170). Metaphorical multilingualism, however, cannot replace literal multilingualism, which remains a condition for transnational literacy.

The Politics of Cross-Cultural Contexts

Although Lamont works in an ethnographic manner with selected groups in a case-study format, gathering material through observation, interviews, and qualitative analysis, she extrapolates from such work to theorize at a high level of generality, as is typical of her discipline. Those of us trained within disciplines suspicious of such a high level of generalizing can learn through interdisciplinary engagement to counter our disciplinary weaknesses through reference to the strengths of others. While my own discipline of English has always privileged depth over breadth, certain literary theorists, most notably Moretti (2007), have begun to argue the need for breadth, suggesting that our privileging of "close reading" needs to be balanced by an equal attention to what he calls "distant reading." He advocates a new vision of "what comparative literature could be, if it took itself seriously as *world literature*, on the one hand, and as *comparative morphology*, on the other" (Moretti, 2007, p. 90). Moretti advocates working across languages and national traditions in a manner more attentive to differences of scale, from the local to the global, and taking a more "pragmatic view of theoretical knowledge" that assesses

theories on the basis of “how they *concretely change the way we work*; for how they allow us to enlarge the literary field, and re-design it in a better way, replacing the old, useless distinctions (high and low; canon and archive; this or that national literature...)”—as he puts it—“with new temporal, spatial, and morphological distinctions” (ibid., p. 91). The common denominator for describing the “new conceptual possibilities” he raises is that of “*a materialist conception of form*” (ibid., p. 92).

Moretti’s work fits within an emergent approach to cross-cultural reading that is reviving and reorienting Goethe’s notion of “world literature.” The Modern Language Association of America’s guide, *Teaching World Literature* (Damrosch, 2009b) presents the debates that currently energize this field in a volume that covers much important ground while also revealing the many ways in which the language of cross-cultural engagement can downplay attention to the power relations that make certain questions about history, inequality, and the production of sanctioned ignorance fade into the background of attention.

One such question is usefully raised by Damrosch (2009a) in an article not included in this volume, titled “How American is World Literature?” He argues that “shadowing the debates over Eurocentrism is a largely unacknowledged Americentrism, a factor that is at once repressed and pervasive in American comparatism” (Damrosch, 2009a, p. 13). One of the problems with the MLA volume, *Teaching World Literature*, which Damrosch edited, as he seems to recognize in this article, is that of projecting US multiculturalism out on to the postcolonial and globalized world, gutting it of its politics and its specificity.

Michael Palencia-Roth’s essay, for example, sees colonization as a theme that unites rather than divides, quoting approvingly the remark that “the history of colonization is the history of humanity itself” and suggesting that instead of using the term colonization, today one might ask instead “What is the history of humanity if not the history of cross-cultural encounters?” (Palencia-Roth, 2009, p. 149). That innocuous word, encounter, however can mask injustice and smooth over frictions. To him, the choice of whether to use “*colonization* or the more general term *encounter*” makes little difference in framing the questions he wishes to ask in his world literature courses, since these pose as neutral and objective investigations into how “the other” is viewed by “the one,” and how both are “changed by the encounter and by continued contact” (ibid., p. 150). Palencia-Roth’s approach guts history of its politics, blurs power differentials, and enables the complacency of the powerful to continue unchallenged. This is the kind of interpretation that critical literacy is designed to interrogate.

The value of the book in which his essay appears lies partly in the way it stages conflicts between Palencia-Roth’s view of comparison and that of others who do employ postcolonial approaches in their work. Its most important contribution, however, is to reveal the enormous variety of US classrooms with their independent variables of demography, region, institutional mission, and level of instruction, each of which requires adjusted pedagogical and curricular choices, even as together they present a picture of how the US is constructing world literature in its image and to meet its changing needs.

The view from the US marginalizes postcolonial perspectives. The few essays that do present a postcolonial view are very selective in the acknowledgements they make to earlier work. To someone who has read this work, many of the views presented in this anthology can appear like a reinventing of the wheel.⁴ While the collection excels in its historical depth and geopolitical and linguistic range, its presentation of postcolonial and indigenous cultures is limited. In these respects, some aspects of the volume seem consonant with the pushback against postcolonial analysis observed in works by Hopkins and Todorov, which are situated and critiqued by Siba

Grovogui (2004)⁵. It seems especially odd that the indigenous cultures of North America, Australia and New Zealand have been assigned to a critic whose work has been denounced by many leading indigenous critics.⁶ The heated rejections of Pulitano's (2003) assessment of indigenous cultures and projects articulated by these North American indigenous critics, unrecognized in the MLA volume, are exactly the difficult terrain with which transnational literacy—and US studies-- needs to engage.

A few of the essays take the important first step of no longer referring to the literature of the United States as American. Even in critiquing what he calls "Americentrism," Damrosch appropriates a term that properly embraces all of North and South America, to refer instead to a view solely produced within the limitations of the United States. Similarly, the book, *Teaching World Literature*, would more properly be named, "Teaching World Literature in the United States." Despite the continuing arrogance of assuming that the US sets the standard for the world, Damrosch's book marks an important turning point in U.S.-based scholarship.⁷ The challenge his essay poses is one for those of us working in other parts of the world to take up. He suggests: "It would be well worth while to undertake a comparative study of world literature as it is construed in differing locations around the globe" (Damrosch, 2009b, p.18). To that I would add, not just world literature, but also Cultural Studies, English studies and their respective attendant literacies, as understood and produced within differently constituted spaces of instruction. Significant work is now being done in the field of multimedial and visual literacies. These involve attending to a range of cultural practices, the study of which carries implications, not just for language teachers but also for other disciplines interested in assessing "the perceived bandwidth of political possibility" that may be discovered within this expanding terrain of exchange (See, for example, Grayson, Davies, & Philpott, 2009). Those of us teaching English in different contexts around the world need to experiment and document how we are meeting the needs and inspiring the agency of our students in these contexts. We need to begin much more concentrated and continuous sharing of our struggles, discomforts, and rewards as we develop critical literacies appropriate to the ways in which our local environments are increasingly cross-cultural and questioning of the advice that comes to us from the established centres of our worlds.

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² Forthcoming in Raphael Forshay and Derek Briton, Eds. *The Scope of Interdisciplinarity*. Edmonton: University of Athabaska Press, 2010.

³ This question is being addressed in the National Curriculum Project organized by Dr. Walkyria Monte Mor and Dr. Lynn Mario Menezes de Souza of the University of Sao Paulo, their students and their colleagues. For a description of this project, see Brydon, Monte Mor and Souza, 2010.

⁴ See for example, Helen Tiffin's "Teaching Post-Colonial Literary Theory," which deserves much more attention than it has received. See also Ingrid Johnston, *Re-mapping Literary Worlds*, Yatta Kanu's *Curriculum as Cultural Practice*, Gaile S. Cannella & Radhika Viruru's *Childhood and Postcolonization*, and Andrea A. Lunsford and Lahoucine Ouzgane's *Crossing Borderlands* for further work on postcolonial studies in education.

⁵ Grovogui's analysis of metropolitan resistance to postcolonial sarcasm, irony and satire is especially interesting for teachers of English.

⁶ See Janice Acoose et al., *Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collective*. 41, 43, 61, 73, 75, 203, 206, 377-82, 396

⁷ I engaged the implications of this book more fully with a group of graduate students in a course in fall 2009, where I placed it in dialogue with Dohra Ahmad's anthology *Rotten English*, which "celebrates the stunningly unanticipated ways in which English has changed as it grew into a global language" (16).

References

A note on method: Where possible, I cite overview synthesizing articles on a literacy approach rather than the entire field. For example, see Street for new literacy studies, Morgan and Ramanathan for critical literacies and language education, and Ives for global English politics.

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