

Chapter 7. Interlude: In Exile at the Newberry Library and Chicago, 1979–1981

Following the disheartening debacle of my early tenure denial, Vicki and I distanced ourselves from the University of Texas near Dallas. The clash with the speedy acceptance and publication of *The Literacy Myth* (1979c) and award of both a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship to the Newberry Library in Chicago to research and write *The Legacies of Literacy* (1987b) and a Spencer Fellowship from the National Academy of Education was too great.

We were also tired of living on North Central Expressway in the middle of nowhere and Vicki's moves from preschool to one private elementary school after another as several went out of business (one still owes her back pay). We subleased our townhouse to a visiting professor and rented a U-Haul trailer to tow the possessions we needed for what we expected to be one year in exile (or retreat) in Chicago. The interlude from Dallas and full-time teaching turned into two years.

En route to Chicago in August 1979, we stopped first in Columbia, Missouri, to see my brother Gary. He was a second-year journalism student writing for the school newspaper and also contributing as a stringer to national dailies. From there we stopped briefly in Peoria, Illinois, to see our old friend from Northwestern and co-author of "The Great American Novel," Laurie, now deceased, who was then a public defense attorney.

Arrival in Chicago and at The Newberry Library brought optimism and energy. Settling into new spaces, even if temporary, away from UTD and Dallas was liberating. Those spaces extended far beyond the physical. Both the Newberry and our small apartment were within walking distance of restaurants and shopping, Lincoln Park, the Loop and downtown, even Old Town. In contrast to Dallas, we did not use the car often. Of course, the Chicago area was our own "second city."

My goals were threefold: to gain a much-needed personal and professional respite from UTD and Big D, to search for another academic position, and to write my general history of literacy *The Legacies of Literacy* (1987b).

The Newberry was a welcoming professional and personal environment. I had several professional acquaintances from SSHA meetings and the 1973 summer institute, especially Daniel Scott Smith and Richard Jensen, both of the University of Illinois at Chicago. Jensen also served as director of the Newberry's Family and Community History Center. Soon after our arrival, he offered Vicki a position as a typist—for a higher salary than she had earned as a full-time teacher in Dallas. After one year she was promoted to administrative assistant, working closely

with Jan Reiff, the center's associate director. For Vicki, this position marked the beginning of her transition from teaching to office administration, architectural marketing and promotion, and manager of editorial services for the American Heart Association.

The heads and assistant directors of the Renaissance Center and the Cartography Center center at the Newberry were also welcoming and supportive of my research and writing. Harriet Lightman of the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, a historian of European women, and her husband George Huppert, an early modern Europeanist at the University of Illinois at Chicago, continue as our close friends. We watched their daughter grow up, ice skate, earn her Ph.D., and in 2022 give birth to her first child.

Other colleagues teaching in the area, Newberry-affiliated researchers, and instructors in the summer program included Robert Church at Northwestern; John Craig at the University of Chicago; Sue Hirsch and Lewis Ehrenberg at Loyola University; at the summer institute Marge Murphey, Bill Cronon, and Walter Licht; and Jon Butler at the University of Illinois Chicago.

My fellow fellows were friendly, supportive, and collegial. The distinguished medieval social historian and historian of children and families Barbara Hanawalt occupied the neighboring carrel in the book stacks reserved for those of us who typed our manuscripts (in the pre-personal computer, pre-laptop, and pre-iPad era). Barbara was a fellow SSHA founding member and early president (and future Ohio State colleague). With Barbara's philosopher of science husband Ron Giere, we shared a love of good food, wine, and jazz. Barbara and Ron were also excellent cooks and Ron a wine connoisseur. (We resumed those connections in Columbus in 2004.) Along with Barbara and Ron, Ellen Dwyer, an American historian from Indiana University, became our lifelong friend.

An old and new colleague, Jan Reiff, a fellow student in a British history course my second year at Northwestern and now a fellow urban social historian, prepared a celebration dinner when *The Literacy Myth* (1979c) arrived. She had an apartment in the same building as ours where we often cooked dinners together. As a graduate student at the University of Washington, she learned the art of Asian cooking. We also watched major sports events together including the memorable gold medal victory of the U.S. men's hockey team in the 1980 Winter Olympics. As well as Vicki's boss and my urban social history colleague, Jan quickly became one of our closest friends until her sudden death in 2021. (See my "Celebrating Jan Reiff," UCLA history department tribute page, May 24, 2021.)

With these friends and other fellows, we enjoyed the spaces and the haunts of Lincoln Park, Old Town, the Near North, downtown and the Loop, Grant Park, and Evanston. We savored the tastes of restaurants like Greek Town's The Acropolis, Diana's, several French spots around town, Chicago deep-dish pizza—especially at Gino's on Rush Street, Michelina's, and several Thai and Vietnamese places. Vicki and Jan marched in a historic Women's Day March in downtown Chicago in 1980.

I played indoor tennis on Sundays in Evanston with one local fellow and his friends. Chicago's denser, more defined, and connected urban form was such a welcome change from Dallas' not "new" and not quite "Sunbelt City." Dallas, in fact, is an overgrown, southern Midwestern—not Southwestern or Sun Belt—town (see my *The Dallas Myth*, 2008a.)

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After settling in, I began to prepare my fellowship-sponsored history of literacy in the western world. My goals were ambitious; my scope was encompassing. Not only was there no general history of literacy in the western world, but the sum of the existing parts also drew much on what was becoming accepted to many scholars as what I termed "the literacy myth." That is: reading, writing, and especially movable typographic printing as "agents of change," in Eisenstein's (1979/1980) words, or in anthropologist Jack Goody's, "the cultural significance literacy" (1968, p. X). Each was viewed, with little direct primary evidence, as an independent variable irrespective of historical social, cultural, political, or economic contexts, from the invention of alphabets, to forms of schooling, to reading and practice in writing, to the aftermath of Johannes Gutenberg.

I proposed to synthesize interpretively, chronologically, and geographically disconnected research in new terms that greatly extended and adapted my perspectives on the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For this study, published as *The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society* (1987b), time and space were critical concerns. My dialectical approach with its emphasis on complexity and contradictions was underscored in the words of the subtitle. I offered an alternative to the conventional, traditionally reflexive emphasis on change and simplistic causal connections. I devoted unusual attention to the origins of writing, alphabets, and communication systems, the interrelationships of reading and writing, and the pre-Gutenberg eras. Changes cannot be understood without understanding origins and continuities. Human actors are key variables in my narratives.

Acknowledging the strengths and the limitations of my sources and arguments, I presented my synthetic reinterpretation in four parts:

- Part I: Setting the Stage—The origins of literacy, from writing to literacy, and from Athens to Rome and beyond
- Part II: Before the Printing Press—"The light of literacy in the 'Dark Ages'" (5<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> centuries); New lights of literacy and learning (11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries); Ends and beginnings (14<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries) including humanism, Italian Renaissance, and England
- Part III: An Old World and a New World—Print, protests, and the people—printing, revisiting Renaissances, and Reformations; Toward Enlightenment, toward modernity
- Part IV: Toward the Present and the Future—19<sup>th</sup>-century origins of our own times; Today and tomorrow—revising literacy

The Newberry had many of the sources I needed. Its interlibrary loan specialist helped to secure the rest, and I made a few excursions to Northwestern's and the University of Chicago's excellent libraries in Evanston and Hyde Park, respectively. In that environment, with interested and supportive colleagues, my writing went well. *The Legacies of Literacy* (1987b) put my reinterpretation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century's transformative experiences of literacy and illiteracy into a new and unprecedentedly factual, comprehensive, and comparative framework.

My later book *Searching for Literacy: The Social and Intellectual Origins of Literacy Studies* (2022e) completed my almost half-century-long project across disciplines and interdisciplines. My edited collection of essays, *Literacy and Historical Development: A Reader* (2007b) collected the most important secondary sources (see also Arnove and Graff, 1987/2008, and Graff, *Literacy Myths, Legacies, and Lessons*, 2011/2023c).

Reading and writing six days each week, I completed an overly long draft of a two-volume manuscript by the time we returned to Dallas in August 1981. Revised with editorial assistance into one long volume, it was published in 1987 by Indiana University Press. Sections were translated into several languages. It appeared in its entirety in Italian in three volumes as *Storia dell'Alfabetizzazione Occidentale* (1989). Chapters continue to be reprinted. The few negative reviewers clearly did not read the entire text.

*The Legacies of Literacy* (1987b) was discussed at a session of the SSHA in 1987. It was awarded the American Educational Studies Association Critics Choice Award in 1987, received a *Society* magazine book-of-the-month designation, and was nominated for several book awards. Excerpts are included in textbooks. It remains unique among the literature.

As I conceived this project, which I then shortsightedly expected to complete “my life with literacy,” I viewed it as the centerpiece of a trio of inseparable projects. While at the Newberry, I also prepared two companion, edited books. With *Legacies*, they constitute their own reference shelf.

I envisioned the project of *Legacies* as a multilayered whole for scholars, students, and other interested parties including librarians and educators. Forming the core of a course syllabus was among my goals. These books are *Literacy in History: An Interdisciplinary Research Bibliography* (1981a) and *Literacy and Social Development in the West* (1981c), a collection of the major secondary studies (see my 1986a for the Italian edition). This was superseded by *Literacy and Historical Development* (2007b).

With the freedom of the full-time fellowship and no other writing obligations—and the supportive collegiality of others in my community of scholars and friends—I also published articles. Some focused on literacy; others explored more general historiographical, methodological, and theoretical issues. On literacy, they were “Literacy, Jobs, and Industrialization” (1981b), “Scrivendo un libro sulla storia dell’alfabetismo occidentale” (1980c), and “Reflections on the History

of Literacy” (1981d; the Portuguese translation, “O mito do alfabetismo” was published in 1990). On more general but related topics, I wrote a review of *Historical Studies of Changing Fertility* (1980a) and a review of *Theoretical methods in social history* (1980b).

I wisely and profitably decided not to spend my fellowship year(s) in professional isolation. I was escaping UTD, after all, not my profession, intellectual interests, or friends and colleagues. I remained an untenured assistant professor, so I needed to “sell my wares” and build my curriculum vitae. Maintaining my commitment and involvement was in itself liberating.

On invitation, I presented lectures and seminars about the history of literacy at the University of Chicago (1979 and 1980), the Newberry Library (1979 and 1980), the University of Toronto and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (1980), and, while a visiting professor in July 1981, at Simon Fraser University and the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

I also spoke about the history of literacy at the SSHA (1979 and 1980), by invitation at the University of Pennsylvania (1980), the Conference on Literacy in Post-Reformation Europe at the University of Leicester in England (1980), the Library of Congress Center for the Book and the National Institute of Education’s History of Literacy Conference (1980), the American Antiquarian Society’s Conference on Printing and Society in Early America (1980), the Bard College Conference on Crisis in Literacy: Cultural Hard Times (1981), and Simon Fraser University’s SITE Program on Literacy (1981).

My service to scholarly publishing expanded with membership on the editorial boards of the *History of Education Quarterly* (1979–1983) and *Historical Methods* (1987–1989). I also assisted the State University of New York Press (1979–1985) and Garland Publishing (1979–1981) as a consultant.

Conversations with a fellow graduate student, colleague, and friend from Toronto Bob Mandel (later university press editor and director) led to my launching the first of two book series that I edited. This was the Interdisciplinary Perspectives in Social History series of the State University of New York Press, for which I served as general editor (1979–1985). It ended in 1985 with only a few titles in print. Our next effort at Indiana University Press had much greater success and impact.

Staying busy, I also served as a consultant to the “It Made a Difference”: Women in Texas History Project (1979–1982); on the advisory board of scholars for Potomac Educational Resources, Inc., a research and consulting group for educational policy and public history (1979–1987); and on the Newberry Library Renaissance Conference’s advisory committee (1981–1982). Also at the Newberry Library, I contributed as fellow, research associate, member of the fellowship committee and later fellowship reviewer and associate of the Family and Community History Center (1979–1981). Unlike at UTD, my collegial service was appreciated.

On the national and international level, I advised the *Historical Atlas of Canada* (1979–1982), the U.S. President’s Commission for a National Agenda for the

Eighties (1980), and the National Institute of Education (1980). I was also a judge for the Chicago Metro History Fair (1980) and a consultant for the Illinois Humanities Council (1980–1981). Intersectionality continued despite the constraints of my temporary fellowship standing in Chicago.

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Enjoying our self-imposed exile from UTD and Dallas, Vicki and I spent a splendid week before Christmas 1979 on the beautiful French and Dutch island of St. Maarten in the Caribbean. This was our first West Indian trip together. We returned to spend Christmas and the New Year with our Chicago friends.

Fighting residual anxiety and signs of depression, I found a competent psychiatrist in the northern suburb of Wilmette. Vicki and I coped off and on with marital difficulties but never considered counseling or separation. Over our 55-plus years together, we have successfully confronted our share of struggles, learning and growing together along the journeys.

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Among the most pressing tasks of 1979–1980, and then 1980–1981, was the challenge to find another academic position. We did not want to return to UTD for another biased and illegitimate tenure review. Or to live in Big D. I immediately launched an intensive job search. As in 1974–1975, the market remained bare. I applied as widely as possible for tenure track and continuing tenured and untenured associate and assistant professorships in history, education, relatively undefined forms of “general studies,” and administrative positions for which I met the basic qualifications. In 1979–1980, I had several interviews for history and education positions but received no offers. One minor university in New Jersey’s search for an almost completely undefined position was so confused and chaotic that they invited me to visit and present seminars to faculty and graduate students twice. I am still waiting for their decision after 45 years.

As we reached the middle of spring 1980, Vicki and I decided that we could not return to Dallas. My Spencer Fellowship from the National Institute of Education provided some funding; Vicki was promoted to administrative assistant with a raise; and I was offered a visiting adjunct professorship in history to teach a graduate seminar at Loyola University of Chicago’s downtown center, just a few blocks from the Newberry. That was a fine experience. More than one student commented that the course was “more like a real grad seminar” than other classes they had taken. A limited return to the classroom benefitted me as well.

I wrote to UTD, requesting a second year’s leave. The dean of Arts and Humanities did not hesitate to grant my request. We found a first-floor apartment on quiet Armitage Avenue near North Avenue in the culturally rich and historic Old Town neighborhood. Moving most of our furniture, we put other contents of our Dallas townhouse, including my books, into storage and returned from Dallas to Chicago in August 1980.



*Figure 7.1. Harvey and Vicki moving to Chicago for second year at Newberry Library, 1980.*

Vicki's job, my writing, the graduate seminar, and my job search continued in the 1980–1981 academic year. Vicki took guitar lessons at the nearby Old Town School of Folk Music. I had more interviews in several fields including for an assistant deanship at a distinguished private university. I visited a few institutions that seemed even less appealing than the University of Texas near Dallas.

For some positions, I was too productive and advanced a scholar. For others, my qualifications exceeded guidelines for untenured faculty, but the universities were not able to appoint with tenure. For some schools of education, I was too much of a historian.

Finally, in spring 1981, a major public university in Boston offered me a very desirable position. It was a cross-appointment in American studies and history that also carried the role of program head for the former. Everyone was excited.

As I drafted my strongly worded letter of resignation for UTD, the Massachusetts university's administration informed me that the state of Massachusetts had gone bankrupt. It was a great shock. University officials and the faculty were disappointed and deeply apologetic. The position disappeared and the offer vanished. We had no choice but to return to UTD and Dallas. As we faced that unpleasant reality together, we vowed to redesign my relationship with the university as well as our connections to the city in as many ways as possible.

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I had one final respite before we made the return drive. During the preceding winter, a professor and program director from Simon Fraser University (SFU) in

Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, tracked me to the Newberry. As program head of English and liberal studies at SFU, Jerry Zaslove read *The Literacy Myth* (1979c) shortly after publication. He wrote to share his enthusiasm for the book and also to invite me to teach a special, interdisciplinary summer school seminar and present a lecture on the history of literacy.

UTD informed him that I was no longer affiliated with them, despite the fact that I was on regular fellowship leave. Fortunately, Zaslove persevered. He contacted my publisher, who led him to me in Chicago. I gladly accepted his offers, and a splendid three weeks in beautiful Vancouver followed. Jerry became my friend and tennis partner on my semi-regular visits for decades, until his 2021 death. I also lectured at the University of British Columbia. On both campuses, I saw a few colleague friends and met others. This eased the strain of my return from exile.

In August, we drove back to Texas. Oklahoma's state roads had been upgraded between 1975 and 1981. We began to plan our reorientation and to reorganize our approach to and lives in Dallas.