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# Many Literacies: Reading Signs of the Times<sup>1</sup>

### Legacies for the Future

Unlike my distinguished colleagues in the Fulton Endowed Symposium lecture series, I am a historian, a comparative social and cultural historian who has studied the history of literacy along with the history of children and youth, and urban places in North America and Europe. I have resided in departments and programs of history, although lately of English (as Ohio Eminent Scholar in Literacy Studies and Professor of English and History), not as a professor of education or a member of a College of Education.

In ways that I illustrate, *history is different*. It provides perspective. It allows us to reach out for new and different and even multiple understandings of ourselves and of others, often in their interrelationships. History—dare I say historical literacy (itself a contested quality)—mandates polishing, focusing, and refocusing the lens of time, place, and alternative spaces. It probes and prompts us to comprehend what has been, what might have been, and what might be: choice, agency, and possibility, in their fullness and their limits. Its values and virtues are rooted in the power of comparison and the power of criticism, taken together. An underutilized font of needed criticism, history can also be a source of liberation freedom from the fetters of the present as well as the past.

As an interdisciplinary field, as I am working to develop it (as the founding Ohio Eminent Scholar in Literacy Studies) at The Ohio State University, the history of literacy, the discourse of literacy, the expectations, and the practices of literacy—always challenging—can also be sources of humor, meeting the need to laugh at ourselves. Reading and writing

are serious business but as crisis- and decline-mongers (for example, the recent NEA report on “reading at risk”) remind us, they can be taken *too* seriously, especially when taken out of historical and cultural context, like much else about literacy. We must try to indulge that too.

Revisioning/reimagining myself and my contributions professional and academic-institutional provides an opportunity to foster, promote, and even “institutionalize” a different and fresh, historically grounded but also expansive, critical, and comparative approach to literacy and its study. From the Department of English to the humanities and social sciences and beyond, I attempt to bring critical-historical perspectives and modes of understanding to new relationships institutionally and intellectually. This might be construed in terms of simultaneously deconstructing and reconstructing literacy studies differently, from historical ground(ing) upward and outward.<sup>2</sup>

### Slicing into Literacy’s Past and Future

Every now and then, I look up and out from the past (where, as a historian, I live more or less comfortably much of the time) to ask if matters relating to literacy, its condition, relationships to lives and to its lessons, and our understandings, have improved or changed? Have we learned from our own experience over time long and short? And if so, what have we learned?

In asking such questions, I try to read “*signs of the times*”—which typically tell me that the answer(s) is not much, not enough, not as much as we need. Many implications follow, well beyond this lecture, that we might theorize or historicize, or both<sup>3</sup>

Among the many relevant questions, consider these and others closely related:

- What is the state of play between *practices* of literacy and *talk* about them? How do matters of discourse and ideology shape practices? What are the *limits* of current conceptualizations?
- What are the *new literacy myths*? What is their relationship to social, cultural, economic, and political change ... and to historical change.<sup>4</sup>
- *Literacy or Literacies*? What’s wrong with these terms and the conceptualizations on which they stand?

Among a long roster of critical questions and issues: consider two subthemes that we will follow:

- literacy myths: exaggerated expectations for and from literacy. The literacy myth refers to the belief, articulated in educational, civic, religious,

and other settings, contemporary and historical, that the acquisition of literacy is a necessary precursor to and invariably results in economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and upward social mobility;<sup>5</sup> and

- Literacy's *place(s)* in American culture and society—ambiguous and contradictory, sometimes surprisingly so.

In a recent article, British historian David Vincent helps to frame the problem when he observes with reference to the progress made by historical students of literacy:

There remain, however, two reasons for retaining literacy as a historical problem in its own right. The first of these has to do with the present as with the past. Graff's *Literacy Myth* was engaged not just with the historiography of literacy but also with the educational politics of the late 1970s. He argued with every justification that the expectations invested in the contemporary school system required critical interrogation by historians as much as by other social scientists. But however great the impact of his work and that of other scholars, the effect on politicians and administrators appears negligible. The myths have proved remarkably resilient. Literacy lives in forms readily recognizable to the nineteenth-century pedagogues and administrators. [I]t is also a direct and immediate threat to the current generation of children, parents, and teachers."<sup>6</sup>

Examples from the recent past include new as well as old literacy myths, and questions about their relationships and connections, issues of change versus continuity, and their contradictory balance. Despite the foundationalism of literacy's coupling with change, the continuities may be at least as striking and at least as important. Their power is discursive and ideological as well as material<sup>7</sup> (see the figures).

"Signs of the time," to be "read," or epiphenomena of the long-term, *longue durée*, they are deeply routed in socio-cultural and political economic processes. However trivial or contradictory they may seem, a larger understanding, potential keys, ripples out from them individually and collectively. Consider, for example, Figures 2.1 and 2.2.<sup>8</sup>

### **Printing and Reading in Twenty-First Century American Market Culture**

When I asked about the status of my prepaid order for several books in April 2003, the customer service representative from Russell Sage Foundation responded: "These books still have not been published. Unfortunately the printing of the new Harry Potter book has pushed back the printing of our publications, among many other presses."

Is all reading material created or constructed equal(ly)? How do we read this ambiguous sign—is it no more than the march of the market-

Figure 2.1

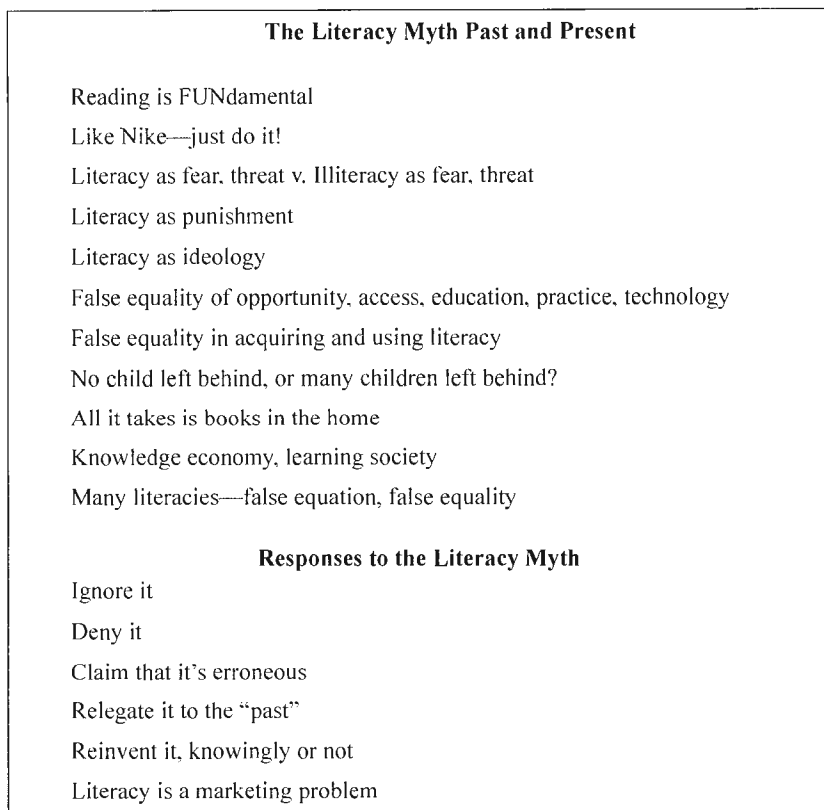


Figure 2.2

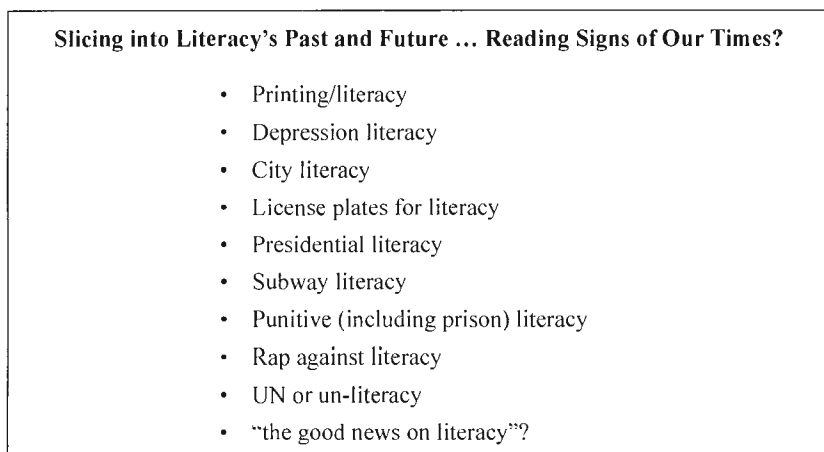


Figure 2.3

### Lessons from the History of Literacy

1. The historicity of literacy constitutes a first theme from which many other key imperatives and implications follow. Reading and writing take on their meaning and acquire their value only in concrete historical circumstances that mediate in specific terms whatever general or supposedly “universal” attributes or concomitant may be claimed for literacy.
2. That subjects such as literacy, learning, and schooling, and the uses of reading and writing are simple, unproblematic notions is a historical myth. Experience, historical and more recent, underscores their fundamental complexity—practically and theoretically, their enormously complicated conceptual and highly problematic nature.
3. Typical conceptions of literacy share not only assumptions about their unproblematic status, but also the presumption of the central value neutrality. Historical literacy studies demonstrate that no means or modes or learning is neutral—all incorporate the assumptions and expectations, biases or emphasis of production, association, prior use, transmission, maintenance and preservation.
4. Historical studies document the damages, human costs that follow from the domination of the practical and theoretical presumptions that elevate the literate, the written to the status of the dominant partner in what Jack Goody calls the “Great Dichotomy” and Ruth Finnegan the “Great Divide.”
5. Hand in hand with simplicity and superiority have gone presumed ease of learning and expectation of individual along with societal progress. Historical studies reiterate the difficulties experienced in gaining, practicing, and mastering the elements of alphabetic literacy—seldom easy; learning literacy and whatever lies beyond it, has always been hard work.
6. Multiple paths of learning literacy, employment of an extraordinary range of instructors, institutions, and environments and beginning texts, and diversity of conflicting or contradictory motivations pushing and pulling v. simple notions and images. Long transformation to 21st century notions that tie literacy acquisition to childhood.
7. Expectations and common practice of learning literacy as part of elementary education are themselves historical developments. The presumption holds that given the availability of written texts and elementary instruction, basic abilities of reading and writing are in themselves sufficient for further developing literacy and education. Failure reflects overwhelmingly on the individual.
8. Just as individuals followed different paths to literacy and learning, societies historically and more recently took different paths toward achieving rising levels of popular literacy; no one route to universal literacy and its associated “modern” concomitants.

place? Are at least some of our reactions little more than the ambivalence of academics, the peddlers of literacy (and now literacies)—certain privileged literacies, that is? Or something more?

Fears and fallacies rebounded with the predictably (repetitive) overwrought and fearful rhetoric of and responses to the release in July 2004 of the National Endowment for the Arts' (NEA) "Reading at Risk." Specific diction follows from "A Nation at Risk," the prominent 1983 report on American education from the National Commission on Excellence in Education. But the fear and fallacy are long-standing. With no awareness that the terms or the data were neither novel nor unproblematic, the NEA's "literacy myth" soared higher than Minerva's owl. The shadow was the putative finding that reading literary-fiction (novels, poems, plays)—not reading per se or reading non-fiction—had declined. The myth of declining literacy came out of the shadows, with force.

Venturing beyond the study findings, NEA chair Dana Gioia ominously and hyperbolistically declared, "This report documents a national crisis. Reading develops a capacity for focused attention and imaginative growth that enriches both private and public life. The decline in reading among every segment of the adult population reflects a general collapse in advanced literacy. To lose this human capacity—and all the diverse benefits it fosters—impoverishes both cultural and civic life."

Other, creative or innovative readings of these results are possible; they need to be pursued. That all is not as we might (or might not) prefer, does not necessarily make for crisis. In an op-ed in the *New York Times*, one commentator, Andrew Solomon, decreed that a decline in reading literature is a "crisis in reading [that] is a crisis in national health"—depression, even Alzheimer's Disease follow, for him. Crises in politics and education along with health are "brought on by the decline in reading."<sup>9</sup>

But is "not reading" bad for health or reading per se always good? Or is that not quite the point? Asking "Is Reading Really at Risk?," Joseph Epstein mundanely concludes, "serious reading, always a minority interest, isn't at stake here. Nothing more is going on, really, than the *crise du jour*, soon to be replaced by the report on eating disorders, the harmfulness of aspirin, or the drop in high-school math scores." If correct, is that another sign of crisis or of reassurance?<sup>10</sup>

To return to Russell Sage books and Harry Potter, we surprise ourselves so frequently in noting that the number of books published continues to rise. That books are a presence. And that people continue

to read—in one medium or another. The experts have long predicted the “death” of the book, along with those of “literature” and the “author” as well as the “reader.” But books haven’t vanished. In 2003, 175,000 books were published, an increase of 19 percent over 2002. Fiction books were published on an average of one every 30 minutes. “Books are the hot medium,” at least books about politics, newspapers report.<sup>11</sup> Too many books? Enough—or not enough—readers? People continue to read and to purchase books, with significant numbers shifting to listening to recorded books and reading electronic books on Sony readers or Amazon’s Kindle. That we know far too little about what they read, understand, and take with them, and with what effects, if any, marks another side of the literacy myth and collateral expectations of decline. Web surfers also read books; video gaming may be good for learning—for some at least.... My point is not to counsel contemporary comfort, but to exercise our own critical literacy in making diagnoses, prescribing treatments, and thinking flexibly about change. We should consider, for example:

- Asking if the issue is reading per se or what is (or should be) read?
- Locating different reading practices within the complex web of material and symbolic, experiential and proscribed reading in American culture, and its contradictions.

### **Depression Literacy: Literacy as Cure or Promise of Mental Health<sup>12</sup>**

According to the *Medical Journal of Australia*, *depression literacy* is defined as community awareness and understanding of depression. In this formulation, it is presumed to underpin successful implementation of prevention, early intervention, and treatment programs. “Improving” depression literacy is a major goal of “beyondblue: the Australian national depression initiative.” This is not, we underscore, practice in how to be depressed.

Scores, indeed hundreds of literacies—big and little—struggle to bloom and for recognition, often competing for attention and privilege in curricula, budgets, standards, tests, even law and policy—and for mention in print and other media. But is our gain of the “many” commensurate with the loss—distraction, dilution, and trivialization that accompanies it? What dangers inhere in the unceasing proliferation of many literacies (especially without an accompanying search for their points of connection or relationship)? Should we attend more to limits and boundaries—or are they no more than new hierarchies, built jointly on myths old and new? The notion of “many literacies” also mandates

scrutiny of what we mean by reference to “literacy”—a task too often left unexplored.

“*Many literacies*”—a conception I have long supported—sits precariously between an essential, and a necessary recognition, and the dangers of trivialization and debasement of literacy. Overuse of the word “literacy” and the concept empties it of value and useful meanings. As in other important ways: there are limits to literacy and to literacies; just as there are abuses as well as uses.

The old adage, elevated by philosophy and psychology, remains, that literacy, especially when the *wrong audience* (read women, children, the poor, or deficient groups) *reads the wrong texts* (novels, especially romantic fiction, comic books, ideological texts from the radically political to the radically religious) threatens the social order and damages the reader. In that formulation, reading stimulates psychic dis-ease, rather than eradicating it. Need we ask: is there a relationship between uses or practices of literacy and depression (among other mental ailments)? There has long been at least a rhetorical relationship assigned to the connections presumed to link literary romanticism with mental imbalance.

Does “depression literacy” threaten to become an abuse of literacy, of “reading,” as teachers and others are urged to “screen” for depression among their pupils from a frighteningly thin understanding and basis for observation and diagnosis? As elsewhere, there are dangers. Among them: more than reading and writing is at issue and at risk. From history, we take a mixed message.

### City Literacy/City Defining Literacy<sup>13</sup>

Chicago did it. So did Seattle. Even Austin is getting into the act. Should Dallas follow the trend toward collective reading to build community and a civic conscience? Book clubs have long been favored by the erudite who enjoy sharing their insights and discovering new ones. Now city libraries and mayors are joining the effort by encouraging citywide reading of a selected book.

So the *Dallas Morning News* enthused editorially under the headline “Defining Dallas: Citywide efforts to forge ties.” The movement to “forge ties” via reading in common across a city began in Seattle with underwriting from the Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund. Chicago chose *To Kill a Mockingbird*. But Dallas ought to stay away from controversial reading, counseled the *News*.

What is going on here? What expectations follow from a reinvented ritual of reading—noncontroversial reading—together? Is Bible read-



ing an analog? Is this a matter of ability or of content—knowledge gained—or group performance and collective experience? Does it matter? Or, is this civic literacy, a new or an old literacy myth?

Recent students of reading, sociologist Wendy Griswold and her colleagues, observe: “Cities’ and celebrities’ sponsorship of the public’s engagement with books reminds us of the extraordinary value that society attributes to reading. It is hard to imagine another medium being promoted so aggressively. The almost unquestioned assumption seems to be that reading and talking about reading is a social good,” reiterating the conclusions of my own historical work. Making that connection clear, they continue, “Historian Harvey Graff has worked to debunk the ‘literacy myth’ that links literacy, schooling, modernization, democracy, and individual social mobility, but such critical voices have had little impact on the public or its institutions. Regardless of whether people are actually spending much time reading, they honor and encourage it to a remarkable extent.”<sup>14</sup>

### **License Plates for Reading: Texas Literacy<sup>15</sup>**

State Rep Helen Giddings, D-Dallas, wants to add yet another bold plate to the catalogue of designs. These plates would bear the motto “READ TO SUCCEED.” They would cost \$15 above license plates’ normal price. The extra revenue would fund afterschool reading programs for Texas students in kindergarten through third grade. Texans couldn’t ask for more painless way to raise money for a worthy statewide cause.

The *Dallas Morning News* editorialized in 1996, in support of a new literacy policy and funding system, albeit a limited one. Returning to the topic a year later, the newspaper opined that “license plates could drive up literacy rates”<sup>16</sup>: “you could point that motto out to the Nintendo-obsessed youngsters squirming in the back seat. You could ponder that statement instead of the salacious billboards for local topless bars. The plates may also help raise public awareness about the need to improve Texas literacy rates.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Presidential Literacy/Illiteracy (a la President G. W. Bush),<sup>18</sup> A Discourse of Crisis Associated with Literacy**

On Mar. 28, 2000 in Manville, NJ, campaigning for the U.S. presidency, Gov. George W. Bush of Texas proposed a five-year, \$5 billion program to address what he termed a national literacy crisis among children. He declared that every child should know how to read by third grade, and vowed that states that failed to improve student performance

would lose federal aid, looking ahead to the damaging No Child Left Behind program.

“There is nothing more fundamental than teaching our children how to read,” Mr. Bush said. “America must confront a national emergency.... Too many of our children cannot read. In the highest poverty schools ... in America, 68 percent of fourth graders could not read at a basic level in 1998.... We will not tolerate illiteracy amongst the disadvantaged students in the great country called America.” He continued, “I know that this is something a little new. Others have proposed throwing money at the problem. But they have proposed resources without reform....”

In echo of language once used by the Kerner Commission to describe the country’s racial chasm, Mr. Bush struck a tone all his own: “More and more we are divided into two nations: one that reads and one that can’t, and therefore one that dreams and one that doesn’t. Reading is the basis for all learning, and it must be the foundation for all other education reforms.” Whether intentionally or not, Bush follows a long-standing semantic tradition in his use and abuse of the term “illiteracy” to label negatively, criticize, and condemn, explicitly and implicitly, by association, certain otherwise stereotyped groups who are associated with other negatively-charged characteristics. These include race, ethnicity, gender, class, geography. Illiteracy is a stigma; illiterates are stigmatized: Diseased, deficient, criminal, evil, excluded, marginalized, failing. “To be considered illiterate in contemporary America is not just to struggle with reading and writing—it is to be deemed unworthy, unproductive, a bad parent, and deserving of remarkably high levels of domestic intervention,”<sup>19</sup> St Clair and Sandlin observe.

Whether knowingly or not, Bush evokes Benjamin Disraeli’s “two nations”—certainly more than Michael Harrington’s “other America.” He evokes and repeats many literacy myths. The conclusion and the clincher for public policy is simply and starkly this: “You teach a child to read, and he or she will be able to pass a literacy test.”<sup>20</sup>

This new (if it is in fact new) presidential literacy suffers from the constraints and contradictions of the harmful No Child Left Behind program. But even more, turning the usual (and expected) relationships on their head, to the contrary, Bush’s presidential literacy betokens an inverted stress on the power, the importance of illiteracy, a gendered masculine illiteracy, not literacy, which by implication may be associated with others in the population. Those of course are women and children for whom reading might be **FUND**amental. But not for “real men,” the leaders.

Even among recent presidents, Bush appears to read remarkably little and values the reading of others little more. AirAmericaRadio.com print ads state “Because he doesn’t read.” The self-proclaimed “education president” may not be a “reading president.”<sup>21</sup>

Once more we are led to major questions about the ambiguous, ambivalent, conflicted, and contradictory place of literacy, and illiteracy, in American culture, today, yesterday, and tomorrow. They cry out for attention. I am struck by how little even the most acute of recent literacy studies probes this sphere, including the NEA and NAAL reading reports. Of course, this is treacherous territory. As Griswold observes, “Regardless of whether people are actually spending much time reading, they honor and encourage it to a remarkable extent....”

### **Subway Literacy,<sup>22</sup> Safe Literacy, and Civility? or How Would it Play in New York City?**

“Subway passengers here snatched up free books, the first day of a program aimed at turning the capital’s vast Metro into an underground library,” reported the Mexico City press in January 2004. “The city started handing out 250,000 books during the morning rush hour; when commuters relax and read a little on a ride that can require some jockeying for space and a sharp eye for pickpockets.

“The first sprinkling of paper-backs is part of a plan to distribute 7 million books in two years, while trusting subway riders to return them.” The idea emerged from discussions with Leoluca Orlando, former mayor of Palermo, Italy, and former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s consulting firm on cutting crime. “We were convinced that when people read, people change,” said the Metro’s director.

Literacy would lead to safety, civility, and honesty. Clashing with American expectations, reading and subway riding connected in the cause of individual transformation. Not surprisingly, there were doubts about the program’s value in preventing crime. “‘Now we’ll have an equal number of delinquents, but well educated,’ said Omar Raul Martinez, director of a book and magazine publishing company.”

Subway literacy raises countless problems of intuiting causes and consequences, among major complications of getting the causes and effects in correct order. What books? What kinds/levels/uses of reading? Such campaigns are clearly part of an attempt to influence at least in part what riders read. But what literacy myths are invoked? Who pays? Who benefits? Who reads? What are the uses of books and literacy? There

are also questions about political culture. One thing is certain: this will never play in New York City.

### **Punitive Literacy/Literacy as Punishment<sup>23</sup> or the Return of Nineteenth-Century Criminology**

“The province of Ontario is taking a tougher stance on welfare than has ever been tried before in Canada,” reported the *New York Times* in August, 2001. “It plans to make passing a literacy test mandatory for receiving public assistance and it will screen recipients for drug or alcohol problems, cutting off benefits to those who refuse treatment....” The *Times* continued, “In a country where government compassion toward the disadvantaged is widely considered a national trait, the strict new measures to be imposed this fall have been characterized as mean-spirited, overly harsh and possibly in violation of Canada’s human rights code.”

One recipient, beginning a class on how to operate a cash register, found a literacy test for receiving public assistance to be unfair: she never finished high school. Others, born outside Canada, worried that they would be disadvantaged because they lacked a sufficient level of English. And others noted that their need for childcare was not met by classes or even a job.<sup>24</sup>

What is going on here? What are the critical relationships? Is literacy a punishment? A drug? A therapy or a cure? A toxin or a tonic? A not so subtle prod or rhythmic accompaniment? A sign of homogenizing and sanitizing assimilation, and its lack a marker for discrimination? Why *this* discourse?

There are more general challenges: Problems of causation? Expectations of and from literacy? Expansive literacy or limiting restricted literacy? Along with a return to criminologies of the past also a return to other “old ways”: literacy tests and the battered hopes of literacy on the shoals of social class, race, gender, and ethnicity.<sup>25</sup>

### **Rap against Literacy/Rapping for Il- or Non-Literacy<sup>26</sup>**

“A petulant rapper and producer named Kanye West has created 2004’s first great hip-hop album. ‘The College Dropout’ ... is, among other things, a concept album about quitting school, a playful collection of party songs and a 76-minute orgy of nose-thumbing,” reports the *New York Times*.

A high school teacher asks Mr. West to deliver a graduation speech, the album begins, “‘something for the kids.’ So he starts into a slightly

unhinged (but totally addictive) singsong refrain: ‘All my people that’s drug dealing just to get by, stack your money till it gets sky-high/We wasn’t supposed to make it past 25, joke’s on you, we still alive.’ He uses his casual voice to describe a world of dope and dyslexia, and when he raps, ‘Hold up/hold fast/we make mo’ cash/Now tell my mamma I belong in that slow class,’ it is clear that he has been waiting for this moment for a long time.”

Both literacy and illiteracy are inseparable from persisting, challenging, long-lasting, and contradictory currents in American (and worldwide) culture. What does the rapper represent? Is the rapper completely wrong? Is his approach to literacy—a hands-on, practical, streetwise literacy with some primacy on numbers, calculations, and strategies—apparently relevant to the lives and situations of real young persons? How does his advice or, even worse, his status and appeal as a model reach out and claim value and would-be successors? What are the places for literacy in American culture?

In sharp contrast is another rap: one with different promises—unmeetable promises, we must understand, dishonest promises, likely to create unmet, if not unmeetable expectations, from the National Center for Family Literacy. With Toyota the “proud sponsor” of a full page ad in *The Atlantic* (Dec., 2005):

Because I can read,  
 I can understand, I can write a letter.  
 I can fill out a job application.  
 I can finally get off welfare,  
 Because I can read,  
 I can learn. I can help my daughter  
 With her homework,  
 I can inspire her to be better,  
 I can be a role model.  
 Because I can read,  
 I can succeed, I can  
 contribute. I can live  
 my life without fear,  
 without shame.  
 I can be whatever  
 I want to be.  
 Because I can read.

In the United States today, tragically, Kanye West speaks truer to life. The pretense that literacy by itself is transformative joins other political and cultural lies. It also thrusts responsibility on the individual.

### **UN or Un-Literacy: The Failure of a Rapprochement between Newer Literacy Research and Literacy as Ideology<sup>27</sup>**

Toward the end of 2003, almost by accident, I discovered that the United Nations had proclaimed another world Literacy Decade for 2003-2012, trumpeting in the best spirit of the Literacy Myth: Literacy as Freedom. UNESCO created EFA—Education for All—Global Monitoring of its goals for a period of years. As if a mathematical equation, Education for All was joined with Literacy for Life. Its rhetoric is dazzling (just as the graphics of the reports are sparkling).<sup>28</sup>

Curiously, UNESCO failed to tell many of us about this initiative. I felt much as I did in the International Literacy Year 1990 when I learned that despite more than two decades of scholarly criticism and recommendations to abandon it, “functional literacy”—as a discourse at least, but also as an undefined human right—was alive, if not well. I missed the new World Literacy Decade, because, in the words of one UN official: “in reality not much is happening and there is no independent secretariat in UNESCO as we had for ILY.”

Literacy as Freedom, UN Literacy Decade 2003-2012 declared:

With over 860 million adults worldwide who cannot read or write—one in five adults—and more than 113 million children out of school, the United Nations has launched the Literacy Decade under the theme “Literacy as Freedom.” Literacy efforts have so far failed to reach the poorest and most marginalized groups ... and priority attention will be given to the most disadvantaged groups, especially women and girls, ethnic and linguistic minorities, indigenous populations, migrants and refugees, disabled persons, and out-of-school children and youth....

The implementation of the Decade’s plan of action comprises five two-year periods, that is, a decade, structured around gender, poverty, health, peace and freedom.

Listen to UNESCO’s familiar word choices and reasoning: At the Literacy Decade launch ceremony at the UN in New York City, Deputy Secretary General Louise Frechette (13 Feb. 2003) stressed that “literacy remains part of the unfinished business of the 20th century. One of the success stories of the 21<sup>st</sup> century must be the extension of literacy to include all humankind.” Emphasizing that two-thirds of all illiterate adults were women, Frechette stated that literacy was a prerequisite for a “healthy, just and prosperous world,” noting that there is no tool for development more effective than the education of girls and women. For that reason, the focus of the first two years will be “Literacy and Gender.” “When women are educated and empowered, the benefits can be seen

immediately: families are healthier; they are better fed; their income, savings and reinvestments go up. And what is true of families is true of communities—ultimately, indeed, of whole countries.” QED: Literacy by itself=the literacy myth in action.

Unselfconsciously elaborating the themes of the literacy myth, UNESCO Director-General Koichiro Matsuura noted that the downtrodden could find their voice through literacy, the poor could learn how to learn, and the powerless how to empower themselves. The drive for universal literacy was inseparably linked to the human rights agenda. Blending discourses, he equivocated but did not reconsider: Literacy was not a universal panacea for all development problems but as a tool of development, it was both versatile and proven. The initiative, with its special emphasis on literacy as freedom, was designed to “free people from ignorance, incapacity and exclusion” and empower them for action, choices, and participation. Noting that the growth rate of world literacy had slowed in recent years, Mr. Matsuura recognized the enormity of the challenge. Nevertheless, the Decade was launched under the banner *Literacy for all: voice for all, learning for all*.

The EFA Global Monitoring Report 2006, *Education for All: Literacy for Life* asserts without qualification that literacy is a right. “Literacy should be understood within a rights-based approach and among principles of inclusion for human development.” The expected benefits of literacy—for life—include: human benefits—self-esteem, empowerment; political benefits—political participation, democracy, ethnic equality, post-conflict situations; cultural benefits—cultural change, preservation of cultural diversity; social benefits—health, reproductive behavior, education, gender equality; economic benefits—economic growth, returns to investment. That is a great deal for literacy—conceptually and materially—to carry.

Although I am not unsympathetic to this construction, I have reservations. This “right” is not conceptualized with respect to its necessary material underpinnings. Too often, it is more or less free floating, rather than integrated. Its powers are easily exaggerated. The dangers include disappointment. There is also the question of priorities. Literacy follows from sufficiencies of food, shelter, and security. It does not precede, replace, or directly cause them. The ability to read and write does not guarantee work, fair rewards, equality, or safety for self and family. These are hard-won lessons of social and economic development efforts in the second half of the twentieth century. As such, they must lead plans to complete “the unfinished business of the 20th century,” to borrow and bend Louise Frechette’s formulation.

The admirable great hopes for *Literacy as Freedom* and *Education for All: Literacy for Life* translate into a dream: locally sustainable literate environments that will give people opportunities to express their ideas and views, engage in effective learning, participate in the written communication which characterizes democratic societies, and exchange knowledge with others. This will include increasingly electronic media and information technologies, both for accessing and assessing the vast stores of knowledge available today.<sup>29</sup>

UNESCO claims that the latest schema for development will be different. This time policy, programs, capacity building, research, community participation; and monitoring and evaluation will all be different. “A key feature of the Decade will be the prominent role which learners take in the design of literacy strategies for their own situations.” In sum, “Efforts to promote literacy are not new, but the persistent scandal of around 860 million people without access to literacy in today’s world is both a chilling indictment and an urgent call for increased commitment.” But we search in vain for political economy or political will.

Really how different? The Literacy Myth remains hegemonic despite all we know to the contrary. There has been marginal revision, but not a lot of learning from experience, including history. The twenty-first century falls into place, following the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. The legacies of literacy and literacy myths, the latter narrow, causal, deceptive, remain ready for disappointment and damaged expectations.

### **“Will Anyone Accept the Good News on Literacy?”<sup>30</sup>**

University of Illinois English professor Dennis Baron asks: Will anyone accept the good news on literacy? Specifically, he refers to the downward revision of the extent of total illiteracy in the U.S. in 2001 to about 5 percent compared with the much higher level of almost 50 percent in a 1992 national survey. “An actual upturn in American literacy might be news, but an attempt to correct an earlier misreading of our literacy, even one that brings illiteracy down from 47 percent to 5 percent, runs the risk of drawing a big yawn from the public. An illiteracy rate of 5 percent or less would not warrant a radical revamping of our schools or our tests, nor would it result in more dollars being pumped into our admittedly needy educational system.” Nor great angst, talk of crisis and decline, and fear for the future.

Are we threatened by the possibility of “good news on literacy”? Would that be such a bad thing? Does literacy function ideologically as a great (if perhaps dull) cudgel with which to differentiate people from each other and also beat ourselves (some people harder than others) for



perceived failures sometimes individually and sometimes collectively? What is the place of literacy in American and western and global culture? Where do the contradictions lie and the chips fall? And who holds those chips? The uses of literacy—and the abuses—are many.<sup>31</sup>

### Fragmenting Knowledge and Fragmenting Literacy

Today's sometimes underappreciated good news has other dimensions. For example, despite the liberating and conceptually expanding powers of recent and current recognitions of "many" or "multiple literacies," there are contradictory qualities too.

Vartan Gregorian, president of the Carnegie Corporation, relates what he sees as the accelerating specialization and fragmentation of knowledge with a fragmenting of literacy(ies):

Nowhere is this trend better reflected than in our evolving concept of literacy. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "literacy" is the quality or state of being literate, or possessing education, especially the ability to read and write. Today, however, there is a profusion of required literacies; we have proponents of technological literacy, civic literacy, mathematical literacy, geographical literacy, scientific literacy, ethical literacy, artistic literacy, cultural literacy, analytical literacy, and so on. My favorite is "managerial literacy." That particular literacy includes 1,200 terms and concepts, according to the book *Managerial Literacy: What Today's Managers Must Know to Succeed*.<sup>32</sup>

For Gregorian, and for us, these literacies—and in a larger sense, these boundless conceptions of literacy, their cultures and ideologies, and their practices—are part of the problem, materially and metaphorically, not its resolution, as some say today. Mirroring the march of specialization and fragmentation, seeking to gain from their association with its advancement ("scientifically," for example), they exacerbate the very problems of learning and knowledge that—rhetorically, at least—they claim to confront. In doing that, the promise of both alphabetic literacy and its analogs, and of multiple literacies risks self-destruction with the loss of its own integrity and potential critical contribution.

To conclude, I return to a powerful statement by Johan Galtung that I first quoted in the 1970s: "What would happen if the whole world became literate? Answer: not so very much, for the world is by and large structured in such a way that it is capable of absorbing the impact. But if the whole world consisted of literate, autonomous, critical, constructive people, capable of translating ideas into action, individually or collectively—the world would change."<sup>33</sup>

Do we want the world to change?

## Notes

1. Presented as the Mary Lou Fulton Endowed Symposium Series Distinguished Lecture, College of Education, Arizona State University Feb. 16, 2006. Different versions presented at Ohio State University 2004, CCCC 2004, and Western States Rhetoric and Literacy Conference, 2005. I thank the College of Education of Arizona State University; Dean of the College Eugene Garcia, the Fulton Endowment Advisory Committee, and, in particular, Terri McCarty for inviting me.  
See also Graff, "Literacy, Myths, and Legacies: Lessons from the History of Literacy," in *The Labyrinths of Literacy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, Composition, Literacy, and Culture Series, 1995), 318-349.
2. See also Graff, "Literacy Studies and Interdisciplinary Studies," in *The Scope of Interdisciplinarity*, forthcoming. See also chapter 7 below.
3. Major examples include "functional literacy" in the early 1990s, UNESCO Education for All: Literacy for Life initiative, and the National Endowment for the Arts reading surveys.
4. See Graff and John Duffy, "Literacy Myths," *Encyclopedia of Language and Education*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Vol. 2 Literacy, ed. Brian V. Street and Nancy Hornberger (Berlin and New York: Springer, 2007), 41-52; chapter 3 below.
5. See Graff and Duffy, "Literacy Myths." See also Graff, *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth-Century City* (New York: Academic Press, 1979; New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publications, 1991), Graff, "The Literacy Myth at 30," *Journal of Social History*, 43 (2010), 635-661, Chapter 4, below.
6. "The Progress of Literacy," *Victorian Studies*, 45, 3 (Spring 2003), 418-19. See also Wendy Griswold, Terry McDonnell, and Nathan Wright, "Reading and the Reading Class in the Twenty-First Century," *Annual Reviews in Sociology*, 31 (2005), 127-141.
7. See the figures of myths and lessons.
8. A note: Forgive my Texas-ocentricity—but it comes from years of living there. Texas is not so different from much of the United States with respect to literacy.
9. Solomon, "The Closing of the American Book," *New York Times*, July 10, 2004. For an argument similar to my own, see Leah Price, "You Are What You Read," *New York Times Book Review*, Dec. 23, 2007. In 2007, the NEA followed the 2004 "Reading at Risk" with "To Read or Not to Read."
10. Epstein, "Is Reading Really at Risk?" *The Weekly Standard*, Aug 16/23, 2004. See "Reading at Risk" report and comments in response. It has a re-run—to a lesser extent—in the release of the National Assessment of Adult Literacy 2003 results in late 2005 "A First Look at the Literacy of America's Adults in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," a more mixed report, with gains for African and Asian Americans noted but not always emphasized in news reports. Few commentators seemed to connect the two surveys—a decline in literacy ability perhaps?
11. *New York Times*, Apr 25, 2004.
12. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 177 (7 Oct 2002), S117.
13. "Defining Dallas: Citywide efforts to forge ties," editorial, *Dallas Morning News*, Nov. 18, 2002.
14. Wendy Griswold, Terry McDonnell, and Nathan Wright, "Reading and the Reading Class in the Twenty-First Century," *Annual Reviews in Sociology* 31 (2005), 127-141. Question: is this really true or does it blur clear sight of ambiguity, ambivalence and contradiction? Does Griswold's own formulation implicitly endorse the notion of a "literacy myth"? But what is the place of books and of reading in American culture? Should the question be: reading or reading what? See also Price, "You Are What You Read"; Graff, *The Literacy Myth*.

15. *Dallas Morning News*, Aug 12, 1996. Note the dominance of the private over the public; the power presumed to ally with so little practice of literacy.
16. *Dallas Morning News*, Aug. 27, 1997.
17. There are other traditions having to do with license plates ... their making, that is. See below: for Ontario, Leah Price, "Read a Book, Get Out of Jail," *New York Time Book Reviews*, Mar. 2, 2009.
18. *New York Times*, Wed., 29 March 2000.
19. R. St Clair and J. Sandlin, "Incompetence and Intrusion: On the metaphoric use of illiteracy in US political discourse," *Adult Basic Education*, 14 (2004), 45-59.
20. George W. Bush, Townsend, Tenn., Feb. 21, 2001.
21. See Dennis Baron, "The President's Reading Lesson," *Education Week*, Sept. 8. 2004 for a critique of the outmoded reading pedagogy Bush is shown using in elementary school classrooms—"mindless drill that passes for reading instruction in too many American schools ... a class of children left behind." The image of Bush as a non-reader provoked a former presidential aide, Karl Rove, to publicize in the *Wall Street Journal*, an odd competition between Bush and Rove over who could read more books. Rove, "Bush is a Book Lover," *Wall Street Journal*. Nov. 26, 2008. Not surprisingly, a contrasting image of new president Barack Obama was promoted, including Obama "finding voice" in books. See Michiko Kakutani, "From Books, New President Found Voice," *New York Times*, Jan. 19, 2009.
22. "Mexico City subway now has riders and readers. But some have doubts about the program that aims to fight crime" *San Antonio Express News*, Jan. 24, 2004. The program was officially launched at a subway station named for Emiliano Zapata, hero of Mexico's 1910-1917 revolution.  
 Mexico City was not the first major city that tried to launch a literary underground. Tokyo has dozens of tiny paperback borrowing libraries at subway stations. The newspaper report went on to state, unpersuasively to me, at least: "The administration of Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrado, a potential presidential candidate in 2006, also may have voters in mind as it lends books to the city's poorer residents, who are more likely to use the Metro than wealthier Mexicans. The subway program comes amid a national push to increase literacy. President Vicente Fox is planning an expansion of the national library system and increased spending on textbooks." No much plan would be taken seriously in the United States, certainly not in New York City.
23. "Ontario's New Welfare Rule: Be Literate and Drug Free," *New York Times*, Aug. 9, 2001. For relevant observations, see Leah Price, "Read a Book, Get Out of Jail," *New York Times*, Mar. 1, 2009.
24. See also "Reading lessons added to sentence: Program tests teens in trouble and then helps them improve skills," *Dallas Morning News*, Sept 11, 2001; Price, "Read a Book, Get Out of Jail," *New York Times*, Mar. 1, 2009.
25. See Graff and Duffy, "Literacy Myths."
26. "No Reading And Writing, but Rapping Instead," *New York Times*, Feb. 9, 2004.
27. See also Nancy Hatch Dupree, "Rebuilding Afghanistan, One Book at a Time," op-ed, *New York Times*, July 19, 2008.
28. See *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2006. Education for All: Literacy for Life* (2005). It reads like a giant anachronism.
29. The report continues: Literacy is a plural concept, with diverse literacies shaped by their use in particular contexts. The Decade will work to promote literacies across the full range of purposes, contexts, languages, and modes of acquisition which communities of learners identify for themselves. Literacy is not only one of the six Education for All goals agreed at the World Education Forum held at Dakar, Senegal, in April 2000, but it is central to the other five goals.

### 34 Literacy Myths, Legacies, and Lessons

30. Dennis Baron, "Will anyone accept the good news on literacy?" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Feb. 1, 2002.
31. Not so different from Baron's point is the response—well within the terms of "the literacy myth"—to the NEA report "Reading at Risk." The results of that survey (with all the limits of that genre and trope) are no more surprising than the public response. That the results might prove not only less of a decline to be damned, but hint at more complicated relationships and changes was seldom admitted.

Regarding fears, myths, and—more rare—facts: See and compare for example: Andrew Solomon, "The Closing of the American Book" op-ed, *New York Times*, July 10, 2004, with Charles McGrath, "What Johnny Won't Read," op-ed, *New York Times*, July 11, 2004. McGrath tries to get at what people are reading, if not literary books; reading in the context of other cultural activities and media, especially periodicals. He also expresses the fear that we are "slowly turning into a nation of 'creative writers,' more interested in what we have to say ourselves than in reading or thinking about what anyone else has to say."

For another approach to and appropriation of literacy, see also Lani Guinier, "From Racial Liberalism to Racial Literacy: Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest-Divergence Dilemma," *Journal of American History*, 91 (2004), 92-118. See also her "Admissions Rituals as Political Acts: Guardians at the Gates of Our Democratic Values," *Harvard Law Review*, 117 (Nov 2003), 114.

32. (Dow Jones-Irwin, 1990) by Gary Shaw and Jack Weber. Gregorian continues, "We are told that if you are conversant with at least 80 percent of them you can confidently engage in 'meaningful conversations' with other experienced managers." Gregorian, "Colleges Must Reconstruct the Unity of Knowledge," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 4, 2004.  
I have a list of more than 500 "literacies" that I've seen mentioned in print. Although I support notions of "many literacies," I do not endorse the ceaseless, confusing, critically uncontrolled, and potentially dangerous proliferation of "literacies."
33. Johan Galtung, "Literacy, Education, and Schooling—For What?" (1976), reprinted in *Literacy and Social Development in the West*, ed. Graff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).