LITERACY AND LITERACIES

Literacy and Literacies offers a unique, comprehensive survey of both classical and current (mainly anthropological) literature in the field of literacy studies, combined with in-depth critical discussion of particular cases. It explores questions of power, cultural form, and historical process as they are raised by and developed in studies of literacy, and draws on the history of literacy, critical education studies, and the anthropology of literacy, to develop a new synthesis. James Collins and Richard K. Blot argue that neither the generalizing, universalist claims of the "consequences of literacy" thesis, nor the contextualizing, situated studies of the "New Literacy" offer satisfactory approaches to the phenomenon of literacy. Through their analysis of two domains – that of literacies and power and that of literacies and subjectivity – Collins and Blot reveal important historical processes associated with literacy practices while also challenging received assumptions about literacy, intellectual development, and social progress.

JAMES COLLINS is Professor of Anthropology and of Reading at the University at Albany, State University of New York. He is the author of *Understanding Tolowa Histories: Western Hegemonies and Native American Responses* (1988), and has contributed to a number of books and journals.

RICHARD BLOT is Assistant Professor at the Graduate Program in Literacy Studies, Lehman College, City University of New York. He has published in a number of journals, including *TESOL Quarterly, Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, and *Latin American Anthropology Review*.

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LITERACY AND LITERACIES

TEXTS, POWER, AND IDENTITY

JAMES COLLINS
University at Albany/State University of New York

RICHARD BLOT
Lehman College/City University of New York

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For
Fiona, Jocebed, and Rosa
and for
Aida, Chenoa, and Denis

"Another damned, thick, square book! Always scribble, scribble, scribble, eh, Mr. Gibbon?" (The Duke of Gloucester, upon hearing of a *second* volume of Edmund Gibbons' *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*)

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FOREWORD

The title of this path-breaking book is a good clue to its intentions. The first term signals a focus on the importance of literacy in contemporary society: "a key word in our culture [that] has a status in the current era rather like that of 'science' in the nineteenth" (p. 3). The plural "literacies" signals the authors' attention to a key shift in academic approaches to the field, a shift of focus from a single thing called literacy, seen as a set of "autonomous" skills with far-reaching almost determinist consequences, to a recognition that there are multiple literacies; unravelling what practices might be validly and helpfully termed literacies, what should be included, where the boundaries should be drawn, and what it means to develop a theory of multiple literacies is a major focus of the book. The shift to plural approaches in the 1980s came to be called the "New Literacy Studies" (NLS) (Gee, 1991; Street, 1993; Collins, 1995) and since its path-breaking challenge to the dominance of the autonomous model, scholars in this field have provided a rich array of carefully documented accounts of how literacy practices vary from one cultural and historical context to another. Introducing the concepts of literacy events (Heath, 1983) and literacy practices (Street, 1984; 2000; Barton and Hamilton, 1998), NLS provided a lens, a methodology, and a literature based on them that enabled us to "see" behind the surface appearance of reading and writing to the underlying social and cultural meanings.

However, Collins and Blot argue that this field is itself now in need of revision (as Brandt and Clinton [in press] suggest in a recent seminal article, there are "limits to the local"). The provision of more and more ethnographies of literacy, whilst itself necessary and productive at a time when educational institutions are reverting to a narrower, decontextualized, culturally insensitive, and often ethnocentric view of literacy, does not of itself answer that case. Policy makers in the development field, bringing the "light" of literacy to the "darkness" of the "illiterate," and educationalists in countries like the USA and the UK similarly arguing for the economic and social benefits of a narrowly defined and disciplined "literacy" can simply argue that all of those counter-examples of the complexity and meanings of literacy in people's everyday lives are not relevant to their agenda. Local, everyday, home literacies are seen within that frame as failed attempts at the real thing, as inferior versions of the "literacy" demanded

by the economy, by educational institutions, by the politics of centralizing and homogenizing tendencies. Critics of NLS, then, accuse it of "relativism" and argue that its attention to the local will exclude children from varying backgrounds from access to the language and literacy of power.

MacCabe (1998), for instance, is happy for researchers in the NLS tradition to adopt an intellectual relativism that allows them to see the variety of literacy practices in their chosen sites of study, an approach which "does indeed fit very well with the imperatives of anthropological fieldwork." But, he argues, "it does not follow in any way that the teacher can take the same attitude . . . the teacher tries to inculcate the values that are the very purpose of a school." From the policy perspective, this argument can be seen to privilege a particular view of the "values of the school" and is thereby inappropriate in a plural and multicultural society. But what is appropriate? On the one hand, the appropriate tends to be defined by dominant interests that privilege their own narrow cultural standards, under the guise of representing universal values. But on the other, as Delpit (1986) points out, there has been a danger that a more liberal position that validates the variety of literacies children bring to school, in practice privileges those children who already have the cultural capital associated with dominant groups in society and continues to exclude the children whose home literacy practices vary from the mainstream. These policy debates, according to NLS scholars, need to be linked to sound theoretical principles: how do we construe literacy; what is the relation between the acquisition of literacy – usually in formal educational settings – and the uses of literacy in everyday life, between literacy "in and out of school" (Schultz and Hull, 2002)? For the theoretical position to be able to speak to such policy issues it is important not simply to concede MacCabe's view of researchers as relativists, as though they were contemporary archaeologists digging up evidence of exotic cultural practices that belong to a different world than that which our children are entering through the school system. This archaeological view of research runs the danger of romanticizing such local practice against that of the dominant culture. It is here, perhaps, that NLS has hit an impasse: how to account for the local whilst recognizing also the general – or the global. It is here that Collins and Blot offer a way forward: it is at this level that the present book provides a shift for literacy studies equivalent perhaps to that evident in the first big shift from the autonomous to the ideological model some twenty years ago.

The clue to the new position being mapped out by Collins and Blot is, again, in the title line: the subtitle "Texts, Power, and Identity" signals the key themes that can lift the account of local literacies towards a more general, theoretically comparative set of terms whilst not losing the specificity that NLS has brought to the field. The first imperative is to track and explain the peculiar persistence of the earlier "autonomous" model of literacy particularly in Western societies in the recent past: why "flawed perspectives have such a hold." In order to answer this question "historical and ethnographic perspectives are necessary

but insufficient." The first step, Collins and Blot suggest, is to consider more closely "what is a text?" This question is particularly relevant at the current time as new modes of computerized and digital representation become widespread. At the same time, new theoretical perspectives on modes of representation are also emerging; Kress and van Leeuwen (1986; 2001), for instance, have argued for a shift of emphasis away from language as the major focus of communicative practices towards a range of "modalities" – visual, gestural, and oral as well as written – and they have offered both a theoretical framework for analyzing these practices and the beginnings of practical applications, as in Kress and colleagues' (2001) work on the "rhetorics of the science classroom." "Text" then, should be a major focus of attention and offers a way of moving the New Literacy Studies on from its particularistic impasse.

In order to address the question "what is text?" we are immediately confronted with issues of power – the second term in Collins and Blot's title schema. NLS from its outset addressed issues of power, counterpoising the autonomous model with an "ideological" model of literacy. What this meant, at that time, was that not only were uses of literacy to be seen as a way in which groups in society might exercise power and dominance over other groups, withholding or providing access to literacy for instance to chosen groups, but more subtly that the very assumptions about literacy – the models that people held underpinning their uses of literacy – were also sources of power relations. If agencies and educational institutions could convince others that the only model of literacy was theirs – for instance, that literacy was an autonomous, neutral, and universal set of skills – then the particular cultural values that underpinned this surface neutrality could be sustained whilst not appearing to be so. In this disguised sense the autonomous model was an extreme example of the ideological model, although more explicit models of the "proper" literacy such as religious literacies or Hirsch's notion of "cultural literacy" were also prevalent. It was, then, in this sense that NLS moved towards analysis of literacy in terms of an ideological model. What Collins and Blot add is a further French intellectual tradition, to complement the mainly Anglo perspective of many NLS scholars. They add Derrida, de Certeau, Foucault, and Bourdieu in ways that lift the debates about literacy beyond the Anglophone concern with educational policy, as in the "Reading Wars," and towards broader philosophical and theoretical issues.

Finally, they link the two key terms, text and power, with a third: identity. Again NLS scholars have sometimes addressed issues of identity, notably recently in the work around the literacies of the academy (cf. Ivanič, 1998; Jones et al., 2001), but also in some of the ethnographic accounts of local resistance to colonial literacies (Besnier, 1995). What Collins and Blot bring to these debates is a more integrated account of how text, power, and identity are linked plus a fully rounded-up development of the theoretical roots of such concepts. They return to the debates of the early phases of NLS concerning a "great divide"

in the work of Goody, Olson, and others but give it a more thorough working over in the light of these theoretical traditions. They apply these broader perspectives to practical issues in education and schooling, using amongst other sources Collins' own field material amongst the Tolowa people (Collins, 1998) and others in North and South America and the Caribbean defining themselves in the early and mature stages of American history broadly conceived. What they offer, then, is a kind of intellectual map for pursuing some of the insights developed by scholars who have recognized the limitations of the autonomous model of literacy but broadening the horizon and deepening the intellectual roots of such an endeavor. Careful attention to each of the key terms in the title "Literacy, Literacies, Texts, Power, and Identity" can provide us with a framework for addressing key issues that face both researchers and practitioners in our present encounters with literacy. It will itself become a key text in that endeavor.

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PREFACE

There is a useful phrase in Spanish to describe the development of this book, and probably many other significant research and writing projects: *Se hace el camino al andar* "One makes the road by walking." The field of literacy studies is large and heterogeneous, and the debates are longstanding and contentious. When we first conceived this book project, our aim was to achieve a synthesis of the main debates – roughly, a contrast between universalizing and decontextualized views of "the" consequences of literacy and situated, particularizing arguments for a plurality of literacy practices. We intended to organize such a synthesis by attending closely to questions of political economy: how the forms and dynamics of social development identified by Marxian analyses of power, inequality, and subjectivity were implicated in the forms, practices, and evaluations of literacy. In drafting our initial chapters, however, we discovered the value of arguments made by post-structuralists and practice theorists for moving beyond the usual "universalist" versus "relativist" terms of the literacy debate. In particular, we learned from such sources to appreciate the historical depth and conceptual ubiquity of dichotomies such as "oral" and "literate." What follows is, therefore, less a "grand synthesis" than a series of synthesizing moves, in which we explore debates and materials concerning the issues of text, power, and identity via historical and case-oriented arguments and analyses. We think we provide *a* synthesis, though certainly not *the* synthesis of this diverse and fast-changing field. We have found the work of this book demanding, engaging, and ultimately very worthwhile.

Literacy and Literacies is anthropological in conception. For us that means that it provides a broad picture of the human endeavor, in this case, accounts of literacy that range from Ancient Sumer to contemporary information technologies. It also explores how the social and historical and the cultural and cognitive interpenetrate – for example, how practices of nationalism create and are created by literate subjects; how post- or anti-colonial religious movements involve a prophet's inscribed visions. We assume that historical perspective matters greatly for how we understand an object of study, as does ethnographic detail and, more basically, the orientation to ordinary life that ethnography implies. Our book is not, however, organized as a single historical account, nor is it focused solely on how ethnographic situation shapes literacy. Instead we present

a series of sustained arguments about texts, power, and identity, demonstrating that these concepts are each and together significant for our understanding of literacy. In developing our argument, we proceed by developing historical perspectives on our topics of analysis while also, across the book, examining a range of case studies of literacy practices.

In the chapters which follow, one line of argument is that literacy practices such as reading and writing are integrally connected with the dynamics of identity, with the construction of selves. That is partly what the much-decried crises of literacy in the United States are about. The last two US presidents have tried to fashion themselves as "education presidents" by promoting their own reading programs. That literacy has become overtly political is in part because education is increasingly central in the creation of a workforce and citizenry, and this, of course, is a globalized phenomenon. From an elite perspective, an important part of the "problem" with the general population is either deficiencies in education (labeled "illiteracy") or transgressions of official literacy (e.g. "pornography").

That literacy practices are integral to senses of self is clearly the case in our personal situations as authors. We are drawn to the field in part because of our own histories. Collins did not read in school-appropriate ways until the age of nine, and because that is very late in US educational scheduling, he was slated for Special Education exclusion at the end of the third grade. Unforeseen family events prevented this from happening, but the experience left him with a lifelong skepticism about education. Blot reads voraciously but writes only with great difficulty and much prodding, for the need to know, through reading, can easily overwhelm the authority to speak, through writing. The "damaged identity" from schooling, the sense of inadequacy before the text-to-be: such things are common enough in the contemporary world. In our case, however, they specifically contribute to senses of the self defined in tension with authorized literacies and hence to an abiding interest in mundane as well as official literacy, in subversive as well as approved literacy practices. Our point, developed at length throughout the various chapters of this book, is that literacies as communicative practices are inseparable from values, senses of self, and forms of regulation and power.

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