

LITERACY AND LITERACIES

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ABSTRACT

This review explores questions of power, epistemology, cultural form, and historical process, as they are raised by and developed in studies of literacy. It begins by reviewing arguments for universalist vs situated accounts of literacy and literacies. Having discussed universalist claims and evidence, and having shown that they cannot withstand criticism, the review develops generalizations about the implications of plural literacies. It explores the relationship between modern state formation, educational systems, and official vs popular literacies, by drawing on poststructuralist arguments about the role of writing in social formations and on recent historical and ethnographic research on literacy. It analyzes the role of literacies in the formation of class, gender, and racial-ethnic identities, by focusing on the role of education in class stratification, the debate about public vs private in gender dynamics, and the volatile relations between oppressed nationalities and official literacies.

INTRODUCTION

The study of literacy has often presumed dichotomies such as literate vs illiterate, written vs spoken, educated vs uneducated, and modern vs traditional. The title of this review itself presents a dichotomy, which the following discussion initially develops, then complicates and reformulates. More particularly, this review develops the distinction between a universalist or autonomous literacy, seen as a general, uniform set of techniques and uses of language, with identifiable stages and clear consequences for culture and cognition, and relativist or situated literacies, seen as diverse, historically and

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culturally variable practices with texts. The former concern with unitary literacy is associated with the early work of historians on the technology of printing (72, 73), with the work of anthropologists on the evolutionary consequences of literacy as a "technology of the intellect" (87-90), and with the work of comparative and historically inclined psychologists on the cognitive divide between literates and nonliterates (96, 133, 148, 149, 153, 199). This concern with literacy has tended to assume a clear, cumulative distinction between literacy and orality and, as formulated initially, that the literacy of the West was somehow exceptional to all other literacies.

The concern with multiple literacies has focused on the diversity and social embeddedness of those ways with text we call literacy, emphasizing the ways as much as the texts. It is associated with comparative anthropological criticism of claims made for a unitary or autonomous literacy, questioning literacy's causal consequences in social development (91) or cognitive development (49, 190); with detailed ethnographic studies of inscription and discourse, undermining the notion of separable domains of orality and literacy (20, 38, 103, 191); and with revisionist historical scholarship, reperiodizing and reframing the debate about literacy and social development in the West (47, 93, 95).

The arguments about literacy have been important politically because they involve claims about "Great Divides," that is, about essential differences in humankind, in particular in the cultural and cognitive development of literates and nonliterates. Correlatively, there have been long debates about the formal differences and similarities between spoken and written language that are supposed to underlie many educational problems, and about the role of literacy in economic betterment, whether of marginalized populations within developed economies or of underdeveloped and developing nations within the post-World War II economic order. This review examines in detail the cultural-cognitive Great Divide. Readers interested in the spoken vs written language issue are referred to some influential articles and collections (4, 153, 193, 194, 206) and a recent monograph systematically undercutting the spoken vs written contrast (28). Those interested in the literacy and economic development controversies are referred to influential historical claims (46), original UNESCO formulations (197, 198), US National policy documents (10, 53a), and a brisk critical literature (79, 92, 147, 190, 200).

THE GREAT DIVIDE REANIMATED: THE CONSEQUENCES OF LITERACY

It is an old argument that there are fundamental differences in human intellect and cognition, differences tied to stages of civilization, grammatical elaboration, or racial order (124, 189), and the criticisms of such views are well

known (33, 43, 123, 172). Concern with human difference remains, and in the post-World War II era, Great Divide theories were reformulated: Fundamental differences in human cognition and human cultural conditions were attributed not to differences in human nature or stages of civilization but rather to literacy, conceived as a "technology of the intellect." In this more recent account, literacy introduces a nonrelativistic tendency into human history, a profound change in the nature of knowledge and of cultural forms.

Proponents of the Literacy Thesis: The Consequences of Literacy

Goody & Watt's classic essay (90) argues that momentous consequences derived from the alphabetic literacy that first flowered in Greece (102) and subsequently developed in medieval and modern Europe. Among the so-called consequences of literacy they depict are basic transformations in the nature of knowledge and cultural tradition, in particular (a) a distinction between myth and history, (b) a distinction between opinion and truth (formalizable inquiry or logic), and (c) a distinction between acceptance of received tradition and a skepticism about tradition, which leads to individuation and democratic social forms. Briefly, whereas oral accounts of the past (i.e. myth) are inherently perspectival, history depends on and emerges from a critical synthesis of differing accounts, a synthesis relying on written accounts and transcending perspectives. Whereas opinion and common sense are tied to intersubjective group membership, formalizable inquiry and truth-seeking depends on its detachability from particular circumstances or memberships, a detachability aided by written procedures for reasoning and argument. Finally, whereas socialization through (oral) language makes us human by binding us to groups, it also inclines us to adherence to authority, received wisdom and common sense, but literacy, by providing alternate accounts, provokes and sustains a skeptical attitude to authority and a greater individuality.

These claims have come under considerable scrutiny and criticism in the past three decades, and they have been variously modified, but the literacy thesis resonated with American and Canadian scholarship preoccupied with communicative modalities and cognitive processes. Prominent have been the writings of classicists such as Havelock (102) and Ong (154, 155). They sought in scholarship about the Homeric traditions, medieval monastic learning, the history of print, and the nature of electronic media to ground an account of primarily oral and primarily literate thinking. In the oral column go characteristics such as memory-based, empathetic and participatory, situational, and aggregative; in the literate column go the counterparts, such as record-based, objectively distanced, abstract, and analytic (102, 155). Although the details differ, shared with Goody is a central argument: Writing is a technology that transforms human thinking, relationships to language, and

relationships to and representations of tradition. These themes have also been argued by psychologists throughout the 1970s and 1980s. For example, Olson (149) has argued that literacy, specifically alphabetic literacy, permits a novel and fundamental clarification of language and meaning; that with the Protestant Reformation, literacy established a novel textual autonomy, a detaching of meaning from context; and that the modern essayist tradition establishes the procedure for inquiry that underpins modern science. In later works, he proposed a specific means of cognitive revamping in the literate tradition: the development of metalinguistic vocabulary about thought (e.g. words such as *assume*, *state*, *claim*, *believe*, and *infer*), which leads to a modern, disenchanting separation of language and world (150, 152).

Some of Goody's, Ong's, and Olson's claims are intriguing, and they have an initial plausibility. Try teaching these claims to undergraduates, and you will discover how deeply a literate bias is part of our academic common sense. But their plausibility depends on how the dichotomy of oral vs literate is presented and secured. Although the literacy thesis is essentially about semiotic means, about a communicative modality supposedly reshaping cognitive and social processes, it depends on various bracketing operations to establish comparability and provide historical trajectory. Goody, Ong, and Olson have been forced to draw distinctions between full, genuine, alphabetic literacy, and all other uses of script, so-called restricted literacies, which fail to show the predicted consequences (85, 149, 155). Their arguments also require historical periodizing, setting off Classical Greek culture from all literate precursors or contemporaries, or establishing the uniqueness of Protestant Reformation ideas about textual interpretation (100, 101).

Critics of the Literacy Thesis: For Situated Accounts of Literacies

The large critical literature responding to the literacy thesis has questioned the central assumption that literacy can be treated as a thing-in-itself, as an autonomous technology. Critics have asked whether literacy is not essentially embedded, its nature and meaning shaped by rather than determinate of broad cultural-historical frameworks and specific cultural practices. In an early and important critique, Gough (91) drew on material from Ancient India and China, supposedly restricted literacy traditions, to challenge the literacy thesis on numerous grounds. In particular, claims about the superior spread of alphabetic literacy do not hold, as both India and China had a similar scale of (nonalphabetic) literacy to Ancient Greece; claims about literacy causing historiography do not hold, for China has a historiographic tradition, while India does not; claims about Western literacy, the concern with systematic truth, and the development of science do not hold, for China developed impressive

traditions of systematic science, without alphabetic literacy or a Protestant Reformation.

The distinction between full and restricted literacy was supposed to capture a difference between the unfettered literacy of the modern West and the socially constrained scriptal traditions of much of the traditional (i.e. non-Western) world (85, 86). However, in practice, the distinction between full and restricted literacy provided a broad escape clause that allowed Goody, Ong, and Olson to construct ideal types of genuine literacy against a background of teleological history. The contrast has been called into question regarding the supposed autonomy of Western literacy, whether its technical basis in print (201:1-33), the alleged autonomy of the essay (190:19-43), or the supposed priority of writing over speaking in literate culture (100, 101, 103). The contrast has also been called into question in a range of works arguing that within an apparently restricted literacy tradition, the restrictions and limitations do not hold as conceived. Either restricted traditions are part of wide-scale institutional and secular practices and struggles, not simple elite tradition and social conservation (139, 143, 190:132-157), or the supposed closedness of restricted literacy and openness of full literacy is called into doubt (29-31).

Against Goody & Watt's proposals regarding literacy and history, orality and myth, critics have argued that the contrast involves a misreading of Greek historians' use of oral sources (101), an overestimate of the neutrality of Greek historians (190, 211), or a serious underestimate of the role of social interest in the reconstruction of the past, whether oral or written, whether in Classical Greece (211), Medieval England (47), twentieth-century Iran (190:132-157) or Madagascar (31), or colonial and contemporary Columbia (68).

A long series of arguments (49, 77, 100, 101, 190) have challenged the claims that literate thinking is essentially abstract, generalizing, and context free, whereas oral thinking is essentially concrete, particularizing, and context bound. Serious attempts to explore extant oral traditions suggest that nonliterate peoples can not only have richly developed philosophies of language but also systematic awareness of language as form, richly developed metalinguistic discourse (77, 127), and systematic formal procedures of inquiry (3, 4). This suggestion goes against the arguments of Ong, Olson, and collaborators and against Goody's early work on literacy and metalinguistic awareness, relation to language in oral vs written discourse, and the greater formality of written vs oral inquiry.

The claims about the cognitive consequences of literacy have often rested on shaky assumptions about comparable genres and experimental findings. Attempts to contrast a context-free academic essay with a highly context-presupposing conversation either involve a bad comparison (4, 77, 100) or fail to analyze the contextual presuppositions of essays and publishing (190). Experimental attempts to demonstrate the particularizing reasoning of individual

nonliterates vs the generalizing reasoning of individual literates, whether fairly recent (96) or from earlier in the century (133, 199), have foundered, either by a priori ignoring evidence of nonliterate abstraction (190) or by failing to separate effects of schooling from effects of literacy (49). This last point is quite important, for the institutions of modern schooling often seem to produce the consequences attributed to literacy, as is now widely acknowledged (29, 54, 88, 89, 100, 101, 151, 165, 192).

ANALYZING THE IMPLICATIONS OF LITERACIES

The literacy thesis is untenable on numerous grounds. Goody has steadily weakened his claims about literacy and logic (87, 89, 101), turning instead to arguments about literacy and social organization (88). Olson's latest treatment of the subject concedes that alphabetic literacy is not inherently superior to other scripts, and literacy does not by itself cause cognitive or cultural development, including the development of metalinguistic awareness. His new arguments focus instead on literate practices, for example, acts of reading (151). Yet if the situated arguments about multiple literacies have carried the debate, there remains the question of how to go forward, how to analyze the implications of literacies without buying into discredited teleologies or dichotomies.

The numerous critics of the literacy thesis were directly contesting particular claims of the consequences hypothesis; they were also arguing indirectly against the assumptions about progress, unilinear cultural development, and the superiority of Western rationality and literacy, which were implied in the thesis. Street (190, 191), a prominent and steadfast critic of autonomous conceptions of literacy, has argued instead for an ideological model of literacy, a view of literacy as always embedded in and defined by institutional circumstances and cultural practices. Drawing upon exemplary ethnographic work (e.g. 20, 103, 104, 176), this argument has inspired a range of studies concerned with the embedding of literate practices in wider communicative repertoires (26, 29, 31, 117), with the role of literacy traditions in religious or ethnic formations and conflicts (125, 159, 165), and with literacy events in non-schooled urban settings (21, 42, 180, 204). These studies are examples of the so-called "New Literacy Studies," avowedly ethnographic in orientation, which attempt to grapple with the power relations that pervade literacy practices (209); to find new ways of linking the linguistic, the cognitive, and the social (81, 82); and to confront the meanings of schooling and literacy in circumstances of worldwide economic downturn (2, 40, 130, 131, 205). It remains to be seen whether the diverse work under the New Literacy banner will consolidate into a shared research program or whether it will continue to be channeled by the numerous disciplines and professions—anthropology, linguistics, psychology, education—that train and employ its practitioners.

Let me suggest the potential of these new approaches by addressing two general dimensions of literacies in the modern world. If we assume, following New Literacy arguments, that literacy may be implicated in the operations of social power, though not necessarily leading to social progress, and not as an autonomous historical force (22, 93, 130, 205), we may be led to new questions about general historical processes and particular cultural forms. Similarly, if we assume that literacy may be implicated deeply in the forming of identities and subjectivities, although not necessarily leading to profound cognitive changes (81, 82, 129), we may gain entree to interesting questions about mind, self, and society, about institutions, consciousness, and representations (94, 95, 151).

Literacies and Power in Modern Nation States

Because French social theory views power as residing in the structures, texts, and accumulated knowledge of society, structuralist and poststructuralist scholars have most directly addressed the role of inscription in forming and consolidating centralized power. Questioning whether literacy leads to cognitive or social development, Levi-Strauss argued:

Writing is a strange thing.... The one phenomenon which has invariably accompanied it is the formation of cities and empires: the integration into a political system, that is to say, of a considerable number of individuals, and the distribution of those individuals into a hierarchy of castes and classes.... It seems to favor rather the exploitation than the enlightenment of mankind. (122:291-292)

This casual view is the debated issue in a substantial historical literature celebrating the liberating, enlightening effects of literacy (46), especially North American literacy (58), or conversely, pointing out the often conservative organization of reading and writing in the class-stratified states of Europe (41, 61, 93, 135) and North America (92; 95:73-94; 187)

Derrida, the contemporary philosopher most preoccupied with writing, has criticized Levi-Strauss's views of orality, writing and power as romanticism, but he has argued that literacy changes the conditions of truth. He describes the "violence of the letter" as an institutionally based change in the grounds of argument and the procedures of supporting claims, an expropriation of oral bases for argument, analogous to the colonial violence and expropriation that accompanied the spread of European scripts over much of the globe (65; see also 74). This view finds support in careful historical studies of the moral transformations accompanying transitions to writing in medieval England (47), of African Christian revivalist movements (159), and of colonial and postcolonial political conflicts in Africa (75) and Latin America (68, 163).

Foucault analyzed the rise of a new power, associated with the development of modern capitalist states, using a "network of writing" (78), a "society of the file" (88), to observe, measure, and constitute new subjectivities under a therapeutic ethos, stipulating new scripted, documented selves in a social formation based on a modern belief in truth. In this new order, authority extended and changed itself by amassing statistics about the health, wealth, and intelligence of subject populations (57, 78), and the school became a crucial institution in a tutelary system that integrated individuals into centralized states while "distributing them into hierarchies of castes and classes" (35, 36, 118, 166).

The importance of mass schooling and universal literacy in crafting national identities and allegiances has been noted often (62, 83, 166, 187), as has the role of students and academics in new nationalist movements (6, 106). More recently, schooling has been viewed as part of a more pervasive reworking of the cultural conditions of nationhood and state formation, a so-called cultural revolution (57) resulting in new spatial and temporal conditions for imagining groupness and identity (6). Central to this cultural revolution are complex, multifaceted processes of standardization, including the often-described processes of language standardization (32, 51, 153, 173, 184, 208) as well as more general processes of standardizing units of weight, measurement, and notation (7, 119, 120, 213). As Eisenstein (72, 73) has rightly argued, we should not underestimate the role of print in this cultural transformation. But like literacy, print itself must be situated (a) within the matrix of specific capitalist market relations, begetting print capitalism (6) and (b) within specific national or regional contexts of religious- and gender-inflected traditions of reading, writing, and political discourse (99, 112, 201).

At the level of ideology we find some of the most fascinating interplays between literacy, education, and new forms of state power. As far as can be told from social histories, diverse common or popular literacies were found in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, England, and the United States (69, 95, 195). Schooling did not replace illiteracy with literacy, but rather these heterogeneous domestic, religious, and workplace literacies were replaced with that particular shaping and standardizing of scriptal practices we can call schooled literacy (54), which was not confined to school walls but was part of a general, elite-led promotion of literacy as the basis of citizenship and moral order (92, 187). A moral transformation was afoot, a remaking of the conditions of subjectivity, of the conditions under which selves would constitute themselves in relation to civil societies. Whereas at the turn of the nineteenth century, mass literacy was often seen as a social danger, an implement if not a mark of lower-class turbulence and disorder (54, 69, 111), by the end of that century illiteracy was the new problem, a lack or deviance, now located in individuals who departed from new textual norms. Simultaneously, literacy

and illiteracy are objects of state-led strategies and of exhortations to individual remediation and renewal (95). As Rockhill (168) has argued, literacy has become an emblem of normality, illiteracy a sign of individual and social dis-ease. Whether or not one is officially literate in a standard national language becomes a fundamental criterion of worth and standing. In Foucault's sense, literacy becomes a crucial part of a normalizing power, whereby deviations from the norms are defined as deficiencies and disabilities, as medical problems (78, 168, 169); and crises, especially literacy crises, are continually evoked and deployed to constrain and call to order subjectivities rubbed raw by economic and political harshness (148, 170, 188, 205). As schooled literacy becomes a basic skill, establishing itself as the criterion of educatability, identities are not just shaped but are radically constituted by the literate vs illiterate dichotomy. How literacy is defined (142, 147, 168) and who controls the content of and access to bureaucratic files (97, 137, 169, 170) shapes the possible subjectivities of individuals and groups.

Literacies and Identity Formation: Class, Gender, and Race-Ethnicity

If literacy practices have been integral to large-scale enterprises such as state formation and nation building in the modern world, it is important to remember that these are always uneven, contradictory, conflict-filled undertakings. The conflictual subjectivities of Western political economies, our focus here, tell only part of the story. Many peoples of the world still remain effectively outside the scope of this textual-institution subject forming (25, 117, 175, 212), and several recent efforts at Latin American socialism have tried to place literacy in a context of widespread social transformation, breaking with the usual forms of schooling, nationalism, and citizenship (11, 115).

Literacy, like language, embeds social relations of conflict as well as cooperation between classes, races, and sexes. Literacy concerns a language modality, and as such it marks a difference in language, a difference that provides indexes of difference and identity. Writing, like speaking, marks and differentiates, tying language to its social circumstances (52, 66, 182). The cleavages and hierarchies of social organization are reflected in indexical structures, durable social articulations of language form, spoken and especially written (35, 51, 182-184). Although it is widely recognized that the dichotomies of oral vs literate have been stultifying, it can be a productive challenge to think about the role of inscriptions in the articulation of subjectivities, in the inclusions and exclusions of identity formation. As argued earlier, literacy in the modern era has been associated with profound ideological promises (i.e. enlightenment and social progress) as well as with ideological dangers, for illiteracy signifies economic stagnation, political decay, and cultural disorder.

It is often reported that modern educational systems produce stratified literacies: Elites are socialized to an interpretive relation to texts, and nonelites are socialized to a submissive relation to texts (8, 135, 142, 166). Schooling reflects and reproduces a stratified social system, in which national bourgeoisies have been defined by reading, especially book reading (6, 59). American clerical intellectuals were set off from wealthy landed intellectuals by the size, composition, and meanings of personal libraries (201:34–73); and the working or popular classes in Europe, England, and North America engaged in reading and writing that from elite perspectives was local in its orientation (107:86–110; 207), politically suspect or oppositional (69, 207), and usually culturally profane (41, 99, 107, 112). As mentioned earlier, the development of schooled literacy has been a hegemonic project, involving the displacement of nonstandard varieties of language and a shunting aside or discrediting of alternative literacies (51, 69, 111, 135). One result of modern schooling has been a profound discrediting of the practical knowledge and out-of-school literacies of nonelites (36, 42, 84, 121, 142), and an enduring working-class ambivalence about schooled literacy as impractical and unrelated to life and its struggles (34; 40; 94:214–232; 107:86–110; 210), combined with an embracing of a realist, dramatic aesthetic in literature (34, 40, 64, 202).

If class has been a central division in modern societies, gender has been equally profound. If schooling is a central mechanism for containing class dynamics, public vs private has been a gendered dichotomy central to modern political order. Historically, public and private spheres have been discursive spaces, in which publication and literate discourse were constitutive of political and domestic subjectivities (98, 201). The public vs private distinction has organized gender in modern politics by marking an area of equality—the public—and of natural inequality—the patriarchal private (158, 171). The enduring historical representation of masculine reading and writing as public and feminine reading and writing as private links literacy practices with the gendered political order (126), a dialectical link in which the critical-rational literate discourse of men in the public is understood as requiring the affective-moral literacies of women in the private or domestic realm (18, 98, 201). Survey-oriented histories of reading confirm the existence of clear gender differences in kinds of reading (59, 99, 112, 196). There has been attention to women's constitution of gender identities through writing, both in the well-known field of literature (141) and in the more specific, nonliterary genre of autobiography, published and unpublished (19, 56, 178, 196). An influential cultural study (161) has used reader-response and psychoanalytic theory, as well as ethnographic interviewing, to explore how adult women's reading of popular romances mediates the contradictions of domesticity under capitalist patriarchy, a theme also explored for adolescent girls (44).

The important point is that socially embedded literacies establish subject positions through relations to texts, whether by categorical female exclusion from a variety of religious practices (17, 29, 39, 155) or by effective male (self)-exclusion in the literacy-learning activities of young children, as caretakers (48, 105, 140) or as teachers (9, 15). Kinds of text respond to and articulate gendered subjectivities: Literary texts (23, 24) as well as pedagogical texts and pedagogical practices (128, 129, 132, 167) signify, and so symbolically establish, relations to the body, to social grouping, and to ideas of the self.

It is a truism of current social thinking that one cannot separate considerations of race or ethnicity from considerations of class and gender. Having made such a separation for purposes of exposition, let me emphasize that the nationalisms of the modern period assumed gender hierarchies and racial domination, as did the schooling systems and literatures that were one part of their discursive wherewithal (9, 24, 146, 201); the gendered dichotomy of public vs private also presumed a class hierarchy (98, 134) with vastly different implications for women of color (19, 23, 53, 168).

As with class and gender formations, we should expect ethnic identities to be shaped in social exchanges involving literacy. The famously enduring, multinational and multiracial Jewish identity is arguably linked to a relation to a sacred Book, the Torah or Talmudic tradition, and an ethos of sociality-in-argument arising therefrom (39, 67, 113). In the United States, the literacy practices and traditions of oppressed national minorities are typified by paradox and contradiction. Characterized as the quintessential at-risk social group, whose males in particular face the scourge of illiteracy (110, 146), African-Americans are also inheritors of a tradition of social struggle in which literacy is the signifier of liberation (14, 19, 70, 108) and literary endeavor is one aspect of a multifaceted cultural achievement that combines oral and literate traditions (13, 16, 80). Sustained Native American encounters with European scripts and literate traditions are now more than three and a half centuries old (12). For various native peoples and polities, that encounter has been marked by the painful awareness that literacy and schooling bring cultural genocide and self-loss (14; 45; 174; 177:53-55; 181); that literacy can provide essential tools for cultural documentation and preservation (60; 63; 114:51-69; 116; 157; 185); and that contemporary Indian circumstances make necessary a reworking and transcending of the oral vs literate, tradition vs assimilation dichotomies (109, 156, 162, 174).

CONCLUSION

Literacy has extremely diverse meanings, suggesting deeply ideological dimensions. An emblem of modernity and progress, it is also a recurrent site of

concern about cultural discord and social decline (93, 112, 148, 170, 179, 180). As a focus of research it has been shaped by dichotomous assumptions that are highly questionable and yet difficult to abandon (27). The dichotomies of literacy research are tenacious in part because they are in some sense foundational: If literacy has no clear, cumulative consequences, why study it so avidly? One way of developing that question, as I have tried to do in this review, is to argue that rather than study literacy as an autonomous historical process, there must be studies of literacies, including the dynamic social formations these literacies enable and by which they are shaped. But this only pushes the question so far. Situated accounts of literacies themselves embed the dichotomies, because they typically focus on uses of text and inscription, even if they question the assumptions of the literacy thesis. It is difficult to move from the relativist formulation that literacy is doing things with scripts to more general questions of what those things are.

If alphabetic literacy has not turned out to be a "technology of the intellect," if the scriptal practices and traditions that shape and are shaped by the historical projects of the West have turned out to be neither unitary, unique, nor progressive in any straightforward sense, nonetheless, the massive "factum of phonetic writing" (65:30-31) demands consideration, implicated as it is in culture, science, and politics. This review has attempted such a consideration. There are numerous dynamic fields of literacy-related inquiry that this review has indicated only obliquely or not at all. There is a massive interdisciplinary literature concerned with literacy as educational goal and problem, examining the relations, historical and contemporary, between pedagogies and literacy processes (1, 5, 53a, 136, 145, 203) and between social backgrounds and textual traditions in and out of school (50, 55, 76, 104, 186, 206). It has been a conceit of the twentieth century that religion was fading away in the emerging modern world, but in the last decade of this century, religious sentiments, movements, and institutions clearly are protean forces in ongoing human history. Some sense of their dynamic role can be gained from the intriguing literature on literacy practices, religious histories, and current intellectual problematics (37, 144); on the role of religious literacy in processes of social reproduction (29, 67, 71); and on religious literacies, cultural hybridization and cultural resistance (17, 138, 159, 160, 165).

Caught up in the promises and betrayals of modernity—classical liberal assumptions about intellectual and economic progress, nationalist politics, and capitalist economies—literacy will remain a social problem, a site of now-decentered research, seeking to discover cultural, political, and historical generalities in situated accounts. How to attain situated generalities that move beyond the terms of the debates, the oral vs literate framing, is the recurring difficulty. The only answer, and it is too general but will have to do, is that study of literacies must engage the problems of general social theory. There

are various exemplary studies that ground accounts of literacy in historical or ethnographic settings yet also explore broad intellectual questions. Two should be mentioned in closing. Boyarin's (37) study of Ancient Israeli reading practices manages to reconstruct an historical ethnography of communicative practices and values, shedding light not just on the historical period but also on questions of faith as distinct from historical reason, on religious narrative as distinct from literary narrative. Shuman's (179) ethnography of adolescent uses of written and spoken text raises and develops profound questions of authorship and authority, standards and conventions, cross-cutting any notion of written vs spoken, while exploring how interactional contexts and institutional processes shape lives as well as texts. I have tried to suggest ways of thinking about the role of literacies in long-term historical projects and their interactional underpinnings—of the distinctive subject-creating powers of nation-states, of the situated formation of classes, genders, and races. Beyond such cases and partial syntheses, it seems to me there can be no general program for research into literacies.

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