

# Nomadic Thinking and Vagabond Research: Identifying and Exploring Ecological Literacies

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*The author conducted a seven-month ethnography of literacy practices in Mexico in 2003–2004 and returned in 2013 to conduct a follow-up inquiry. This essay traces both the researcher’s disillusionment with traditional, school-based literacy programs, curricula, and assessment consortiums as practiced in many postcolonial countries, and her growing interest in what she calls “ecological literacy.” The study narrates the lives of two Mexican students’ engagements with ecological literacy to argue that literacy as tested and valued in international organizations (PISA, UNESCO, etc.) is highly overrated; indeed, it is a “literacy myth” that success in autonomous literacy has any redeeming effect on the majority of material lives in countries such as Mexico, who suffer from uneven effects of the global economy. In ecological literacy, students have opportunities for action—affordances that alter lives if perceived and utilized. The author argues for a new narrative about literacy, one that understands literacy as ecological by tracing the embodied and experienced literacies of two students, ultimately elaborating on what literacy might look like if we open ourselves to the multiple literacies of most of the world. This essay also argues that traditional literacy assessments neglect to consider how individuals use literacy to navigate an environment impacted by certain global economic policies.*

**KEYWORDS:** *literacy, global literacies, ecological literacy, affordances, literacy myth, economic policies, vagabond research*

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In 2003–2004, I lived in southern Mexico while conducting ethnography on literacy practices in Mexican schools (Hall). In 2013, I returned for 3 months to see how things had changed in 10 years. While I had visited informally on other occasions, this was my first formal investigation in 10 years. Aside from the constant *manifestaciones* (protests) and the viral politics of the teachers' union(s), there was also a new national curriculum that I wanted to understand, particularly in comparison to the new Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) in the United States. I quickly got sidetracked on multiple levels. Much had changed in 10 years – the teachers, the political situation, the curriculum – but most salient for this study was that I returned from this most recent trip more disillusioned than ever about the value of “school-based” literacies in the global economy.

## COMPETING VIEWS OF LITERACY AND THEIR EFFECTS

Lesley Bartlett in *The Word and the World*, critiques the ubiquitous “literacy myth” – that “narrative of the redeeming effects of literacy” – as highly overrated. Her ethnographic research in Brazil – a context that can be understood as similar to Mexico, particularly for purposes of my study<sup>1</sup> – supports that of other researchers who differentiate between autonomous literacy programs (sometimes called alphabetic literacy) and openly ideological literacy programs. The former supports the idea that becoming literate is the “simple acquisition of a technical ability (the ability to de/code a script)” as Gregorio Hernandez-Zamora explains it (9). This view holds that literacy acquisition is technical, noncontroversial, and value neutral. A more openly ideological literacy would view literacy as a complex process of appropriating “socially available meaning and discourse practices indispensable to understanding and shaping one’s place in the world” (9). This latter more complex notion of literacy is one where people do not just de/code texts but “use texts to decode the world and speak for themselves” (9).

Autonomous literacy programs and assessment, by contrast, tend to value what can be measured more than looking at what people actually do with reading and writing. They are also highly ideological though they claim otherwise as they assume a universal acceptance of what literacy can do, regardless of the facts. Explicitly stated or

not, the powerful engine with all literacy programs is assessment, which focuses almost exclusively on the measurement of decoding skills. And these massive assessments determine what gets funded, how programs are designed, and who gets targeted for remediation and additional resources.<sup>2</sup>

When the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2012 scores were released last fall, the results representing 65 participating countries testing 15-year olds in reading, mathematics, and science caused the usual stir.<sup>3</sup> Mexico ranked 53 having improved only negligibly resulting in lots of angst and finger pointing among Mexican educators. They began what linguistic human rights activist Tove Skutnabb-Kangas calls “literacy genocide” in which the literacies of students were delegitimized and invalidated, labeled deficient, all because of questionable tests of decontextualized skills.<sup>4</sup> Of course it is easy to despise illiteracy in the abstract, removed from the anonymous masses, but in its concrete intimate flesh, it becomes something else altogether.

Literacy education is always a political struggle – its work is presumably to create more egalitarian relations in the classroom and the world beyond between students and teachers. International and national literacy assessments maintain the power to dictate curriculum and pedagogy as well as determine which countries or literacy projects (or cities, villages, schools, programs) receive funding. It is a closed circle of “do this” to receive “that.” Furthermore, as Bartlett has shown, improved literacy as defined in such “closed circles” does not readily translate into improved economic opportunities. It is reasonable to assume that literacy has the potential to make us all “less unequal.” However, school-based notions of what counts as literacy do not necessarily translate into empowerment for students (and it is empowerment that counts as literacy in the world beyond the classroom). Bartlett’s research on literacy practices showed that literacy per se had no predictable effect on Brazilian students’ lives because the students applied literacy to such divergent ends. Nor did students become more economically mobile because of some measurable gain in alphabetic literacy. The links between literacy schooling and improved employment were – indeed - weak (*The Word and the World*).

Let me pause here to qualify this. There is no doubt that the influence of reading and writing literacy skills are a necessary condition to a broader definition of literacy. I am merely arguing that financing literacy programs and then measuring their success only in terms of alphabetic skills is short sighted at best and dangerous at worst as the effects of this practice is to label students (and countries) deficient in myriad demeaning ways rather than value their home knowledges and recognize what literacy really means and can do.

## NOMADIC THINKING AND VAGABOND RESEARCH - PROCEEDING BY WHIM AND INTENT

Arriving in Oaxaca to face a tumultuous educational situation pushed me to alter my own research methods – to *vagabond* a bit, as Edmund de Waal describes it in his memoir *The Hare with the Amber Eyes*. Vagabond research in his words, gets “the pleasure of the searching right, the way you lose your sense of time when you are researching, are pulled on by whims as much as by intent” (72).

Another way of describing my experiences living and conducting research in a culture distinct from my own is to invoke Rosi Braidotti’s notion of nomadic subjects. In her theory, nomadism is an “existential condition.” It also becomes a style of thinking in which you “learn to think differently about the subject, to invent new frameworks, new images, new modes of thought” (1). What I particularly like about this idea of nomadic thinking is that it freed me from those frames and schemes of thought that I knew and had been most comfortable with. Thus mobility became not just moving around a physical place freely, but it also enabled a new space of intellectual exploration and creativity, or to cite Braidotti, the “freedom to invent new ways of conducting our lives, new schemes of representations of ourselves” (256).<sup>5</sup>

When I arrived in Oaxaca, the head of the teachers union was in jail, tens of thousands of Oaxacan teachers were on strike, demonstrating in Mexico City, shutting 1.3 million children in Oaxaca out of school.<sup>6</sup> Schools did not open until October 14, a serious impediment to an ethnographic study of literacy in schools. I began to believe the provocative and controversial documentary film on Mexican

education, *De Panzazo!* (Barely Passing) was ominously prescient. I was forced to proceed with a blend of intent and whim, taking up the challenge of nomadic wandering.

My **intent** was to look at changes over 10 years in how literacy was being taught in Mexican schools. My own research – my pre-whim ideas about literacy – had suggested that this was more complicated than I first thought. I began studying literacy in terms of schools – how is literacy taught? valued? experienced? written about? assessed? I saw “good” students who got top marks in reading and writing, who always did their homework, and who seemed to follow traditional notions of literacy as “excellence in reading and writing in school contexts.” But I also saw teachers who were bewildered by creativity. I saw students who were articulate and engaged in the world around them but not successful in school.<sup>7</sup> I saw the struggle for many families to simply permit their children to attend school since they were needed to help the family (babysit, work in a store, etc.). In short, I began to think that real world literacy was not to be found in “schools” at all (Hall). What I saw suggested this version of literacy – as measured by consortiums like PISA and fought over by many educators and policy advocates – was not telling the whole story as it is always alphabetic literacy that is tested and touted – and that signals failure on so many levels. My **whims** said literacy was something else altogether – more ecological. By ecological, I mean the way literacy manifests itself in the relationships between groups of human beings living their lives in specific contexts or environments. It is often practical and it might be more complicated to measure.

## A VERY BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO ECOLOGICAL LITERACY

I must clarify that I am specifically not talking about ecological literacy – often called ecoliteracy – as it is understood in environmental science, meaning the ability to understand the natural environment, though my ideas about ecological literacy do rely on understandings of ecology, which I will elaborate on shortly. And I realize that others, particularly John Barton, have written about ecology of literacies. What Barton argues is that the term literacy calls to mind a set of skills that must be learned and assessed. He suggested the metaphor of ecology was a better one and argued that literacy is a social activity, an ecology that “aims to understand how literacy is embedded in other

human activity...in social life and thought, and its position in history, in language and in learning” (32). Thus literacy is interconnected to the activities and social practices surrounding it. I would like to apply Barton’s notion of ecology of literacies to a specific domain that contrasts autonomous literacy with an ecological way of knowing one’s world, examining the literacies of two Mexican students.

Using ecology is also helpful as a way to frame certain analyses or descriptions of systems, as philosopher John T. Sanders explains:

An ecological approach acknowledges that some domains of inquiry are best tackled by understanding them not solely as collections of discrete and autonomous objects interacting in clean, singular exchanges of causes and effects, but as full-fledged systems, within which influences are continuous and reciprocal, and within which the lines that distinguish objects from one another – and even objects from the observer – are not solely a matter of objective fact, but are rather – at least partially – a function of the purposes of whoever describes the situation. (127)

I would argue that this is an explicit acknowledgement that human learning (as in literacy development) is particular – in locale, constraints, and purposes.

## **ECOLOGICAL LITERACIES OF MARCOS AND HUGO**

My nomadic wanderings – moving by both whim and intent – brought me to see two stories of very different students as illustrative both of different aspects of the literacy myth and of ecological literacies. In particular, these students practiced literacy in ways not intended (that is, as taught and assessed in formal schools). I hope to tell their stories in a way that puts a human face on literacy and in a way that will elaborate on what I mean by ecological literacy.

I first met Marcos as a 14-year old 6<sup>th</sup> grader in 2003–2004; he would be required to pass 6<sup>th</sup> grade or leave school at the end of the year. He was small, wiry, constantly in motion, and eminently confident. He almost never wore the school uniform, and his name was featured on the various charts pasted to the classroom walls documenting the

delinquencies of students – from missing homework to owing money for the school band – none of which apparently bothered him in the least. The other students seemed drawn to him, yet the attitudes of the teachers and Director were openly hostile – Marcos was “not a responsible student.” In fact, as the oldest student in the school and one who was not “responsible,” he was an easy target for the label of “least likely to succeed.”

A common activity for all subject areas in 6<sup>th</sup> grade was the group project and report. Over a period of several weeks, I listened to dozens of presentations on diverse topics, read student papers, and studied their posters. The group reports were always graded on neatness and correctness and rarely on content, which was a good thing, since they were all rote memorization and copied from textbooks. The particular lesson that I recall most was on land reform and the creation of the *ejidos* – a system that began with the Mexican Revolution and continued for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, redistributing land from the elite ruling class to the peasants, thus permitting most peasants to own their own land rather than work as indentured slaves for the landowners. Marcos raised his hand and stood to speak; he gave one of the most thorough explanations of the *ejido* system and what it means to both peasant families as well as to agriculture in the pueblos of southern Mexico. His was deep and firsthand knowledge – not just memorized facts. What he talked about was not in the textbook either: Marcos talked about corn production, water rights and how they are decided among the pueblos; how white corn is planted in February and harvested in December in high altitude regions; how families use the roofs of their houses to dry and shuck the corn prior to grinding it, selling or storing it. He knew who had the best prices for corn and how many hectares a family of four needed to sustain themselves and to sell corn for a profit. And he understood the particulars of the effects of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) on the *ejido* system.

At the end of this “group” recitation, Ysela, the teacher asked me if I had questions. So I asked Marcos more about land reform. His responses were articulate and unrehearsed. After several months in this classroom and school, I remember Marcos as the only student who could extemporaneously explain anything in the curriculum.

His grasp of the Mexican Constitution and the effects of land reform on local food supplies in rural Mexico were stellar. By now I also knew that Marcos was frequently absent from school because he had to help with the farming of his family's land. He was essential to their livelihood – his youth, strength, and knowledge of crops was a critical part of the survival of his family. None of this was considered legitimate in the school he attended; rather Marcos was seen as semi-delinquent and a bad example, someone who would probably fail 6<sup>th</sup> grade.

In 2007 I returned for a short visit to this rural school. All six teachers and the Director were still there, and they were eager to tell me that Marcos recently turned 18 years old, had married a lawyer 10 years older than him, while most of his classmates were still in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Today Marcos is 25 years old, living in Oaxaca City. He is a successful businessman, though he returns to his pueblo during key times of the year to continue to help his family with their small *ejido*. The Director and teachers of that school are rather bemused and frankly entertained by what they see as a turn of events. Marcos completed 6 years of formal schooling.

Marcos' story illustrates one aspect of what I mean by ecological literacy in that he occupies a *niche* in the environment. Niche is different from a habitat – *where* an animal lives – as it refers to “*how* an animal lives.” James Gibson, a psychologist of visual perception, suggests a niche is a set of what he calls affordances. He argues that affordances (as in ecology) are what the environment

*offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill. The verb *to afford* is found in the dictionary, but the noun *affordance* is not. I have made it up. I mean by it something that refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term does. It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment. (127)

What is significant in the case of Marcos is that different aspects of his environment have different affordances for him to “manipulate.” As Gibson explains, “what other persons afford, comprises the whole realm of social significance for human beings” (127). Marcos

understands the land, the law of *ejidos*, and who he is in relation to that land. What he invited into his life or what threatened him was critical. He understood economics, geography, weather, marketing, law, and agriculture as demonstrated by his leadership with his family's *ejido* and his ability to network and channel that understanding into a career in business and a successful marriage to a lawyer. He depended on this information in his environment, but his environment did not depend on him for its existence. He was skilled at what psychologists call "place learning," finding his way to a significant place (Gibson 129).

The other student who illustrates what I call ecological literacy is a boy I will call Hugo. In November 2013, I learned about Hugo, an 8-year old boy who lives in a small pueblo high in the Sierra Norte outside Oaxaca City. Once a week, this child carries a 10 kilo sack of marijuana, strapped to his back, 9 miles from his village to a designated spot where he sells it to someone from one of the cartels. It takes him one day to walk in rugged terrain to his point of sale, one day to return. He rarely attends school. When asked why he would take such risks – imprisonment, death – to do something so dangerous, he replied "But what will my family eat if I don't do this? This is all we have. Growing and selling marijuana is good – there is always a market."

Hugo's family used to grow corn, which fed their family and provided income when sold. As a result of NAFTA, passed January 1, 1994, many existing agricultural tariffs were abolished and small corn producers were devastated throughout Mexico. Millions of people in agriculture lost their jobs and Mexico, the birthplace of corn, became a net importer of corn. Hugo's family – and many others like them – could not compete in the global market place for corn trade. That meant they could not generate the income for this particular indigenous crop to be one that could sustain the needs of his family and families like this. As Jeffrey Kay writes in *Moving Millions*:

Corn cultivation originated in Mexico over 5000 years ago. In Mexico, corn is not just a food staple and cultural icon, it is also a source of income for some two million farmers. The Mexican government promised free trade would lower prices for

consumers, and it pledged to provide assistance to the farming industry. About 40 percent of the country's agricultural land is used for producing corn – most by subsistence farmers growing on twelve acres or less. (49)

It goes without saying that US corn producers wanted a deal to penetrate the Mexican market – and US growers had “achieved remarkable efficiency using heavy machinery, chemicals, high-yield corn varieties, large-scale irrigation” (Kay 49). Mexican farmers, on the other hand, rely almost exclusively on rain to water their crops and plant on rugged and steep terrain while only “35 percent of Mexican farmers have tractors” (Kay 49). At the end of the day, Mexican farmers could not compete, and within six years, US corn exports to Mexico doubled. US subsidies remain while what Mexico provides its farmers is dwarfed by comparison (NAFTA Truth and Consequences).

Today, one-fourth of corn consumption in Mexico is grown in the US, corn prices tumbled over 70 percent in Mexico, and farm jobs disappeared. The impact was particularly hard in southern Mexico where hundreds of thousands of Mexican peasants were no longer able to live off the land due to the uneven effects of NAFTA and globalization. Finally, though NAFTA proponents argued the agreement would lead to a decrease in illegal immigration, the actual rate increased post 1994 (Kay 49).<sup>8</sup>

Hugo's ecological literacy has to do with knowing how to survive, a type of literacy I would argue is a direct response to the manipulations in and of a globalized economy. He represents one poignant example of coyote capitalism, whereas Jeffrey Kay argues “coyote” is no longer about the lone pirate smuggling a migrant across the border – it has gone corporate and represents a billion dollar business involving nearly 90 million people according to the United Nations. If you think of the world as a giant chessboard, writes Kay, then there will be on a global level an increasing need for both brains and brawn. And mobility is the key – the ability to migrate in order to meet demands (239–40). Whether you are a destination country or a sending nation, the struggle is to both create “sustainable economies” yet maintain family and community structures. While my example is of a young

boy caught up in smuggling goods rather than people, there are many other examples of this type of cheap labor that feed the worldwide economy and the interdependency between countries like Mexico and the US. Supporting these massive operations are millions of dollars moving through the hands of small-time smugglers to heads of government agencies.

Hugo's literacies are also ecological – a set of skills and knowledge that allows him to make informed decisions – albeit ones with huge risks and some rewards – based on the resources available to him. Coyote capitalism is really Hugo's sponsor of literacy – that agent who enables or underwrites his family's occasion of literacy learning and use, as Deborah Brandt would say (19).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, it may not be much longer before Hugo is not just moving goods but moving himself right across the border, particularly if the economic possibilities for him and his family are threatened in a way that prevents him from working for a living. As Jeffrey Kay argues, "Often, migrants' decisions are influenced by policies that originate in the world's trade offices, executive mansions, government buildings, and financial centers" (43). And one might add to that list the cartel, who controls the drug routes of the high Sierras.

Affordances are in the world. In Hugo's case, they are opportunities for action in the world in which he lives. Recognizing these affordances – for Hugo and Marcos – is the result of what Sanders would call a "fairly high-level perceptual process, requiring recognition and evaluation mechanisms that work with data provided by sensory mechanisms" (132). Some of us are better than others at perceiving the multiplicity of affordances in our environments. Hugo and Marcos are successful at this kind of agency within their environments, thus they are embodiments of high functioning ecological literacy.

## **A CAVEAT: WHEN CAN WE SPEAK FOR OTHERS?**

I do not mean to romanticize lives and contexts impoverished by the uneven risks and rewards of globalization here as "rich learning environments." Linda Alcoff warns academics of the ethical dilemma of "speaking for others" or "about others" (8, 9). Or as Trinh T. Minh-ha describes it in anthropology, a "conversation of 'us' with 'us' about 'them'" (65, 67). I understand the importance of location

and that in many ways, as an academic researcher, I am authorized to develop theories that may represent the ideas and needs of others. I do think there are times when speaking for an “other” by someone as privileged as myself is acceptable. I also understand that theories are not neutral, and that what I am about to say has a certain value, because I am saying it here in this context. In other words, meaning is plural and shifting and this text and these stories have multiple meanings and possible interpretations across different contexts. At the same time, it bears saying that both of these students’ stories represent aspects of a failed educational system measured only by autonomous literacies. Marcos clearly has ecological literacies that have done much for him, perhaps more than literacies valued and tested in schools. For Hugo, the emphasis of a traditional educational system is highly overrated and seemingly irrelevant when his life is **confined** by survival, **defined** by global economies.

## TOWARD A GROUNDED UNDERSTANDING OF ECOLOGICAL LITERACY

What I want to argue then is that the kinds of literacy practices that have the most effects on economic mobility are ecological literacies. When examining relationships between groups of human beings and their environments— as in the case of Marcos and Hugo – a much more complex social network and a series of relationships that have a real effect on economic mobility emerges. Marcos’ way of knowing is also a way of being, as bell hooks would say. His work ethic, his ability to meet other people, his self-esteem – all contributed to his empowerment. Motivation and confidence are huge noncognitive factors in both Marcos’ and Hugo’s successes. The affordances that literacy writ large offer someone like Marcos are not about reaching a higher level of alphabetic literacy. Rather, what Marcos inhabits – as does Hugo – is a space of radical knowledge that simply does not fit into the official *secretaría de educación pública s* (SEP) version of literacy. Nor does it fit into what most first world countries consider worthy. Marcos’ and Hugo’s worlds have been made rather than found, in that they engage and are engaged by the world. They have defined the world as an opportunity or necessity for particular action, of affordances perceived and utilized.

Literacy, like power, circulates in these communities where Marcos and Hugo live in ways that support a different end game. Literacy

practices are directly tied to their local contexts, where surviving on a daily basis is far more important than engaging in universally defined literacy pursuits or acing exams. It bears saying that there are ways of knowing that are highly skilled and that do not involve “official” constructions of literacy – as demonstrated by these two stories. It also bears repeating that the basic literacy skills (reading and writing) are a necessary condition for most people to be successful, particularly in first world countries. Imagine what might be if Marcos and Hugo could aggregate alphabetic literacies and numeracies to their ecological learning. Marcos and Hugo actually share much with others in the world: material circumstances for literacy as well as the structuring effects of world economic practices and structures.

I am arguing, then, for recognition of multiple literacies, for an **openness to learning other ways of knowing and being in the world**. I am interested in talking about sponsors of literacy that are, as Brandt would say, far more “prolific, diffused, and heterogeneous” (197) when viewed through a new frame, one which accepts the diversification of work needs and opportunities, the insinuation of market forces and economic structures into how literacy is learned and the failure of potentially democratic institutions like schools to offset imbalances in literacy opportunities.

Returning to the notion of vagabonding, whims, and nomadic wanderings that I introduced before, I want to take a minute to consider a tension that I identified on a whim – that might otherwise have been lost to me. This is the tension between autonomous literacy versus ecological literacy as systemic (and not just in Mexico but across most formal educational contexts). When I think of Hugo, I see how the lack of options to be the agent of his own life is far more confining than accessing literacy or obtaining a “good” education. In Hernandez-Zamora’s study of literacy politics in Mexico, he argues that “limited literacy skills” are not the main barrier to full participation in society. Rather, it is the “systematic lack of the freedom to speak, act and make choices about their lives” that prevent marginalized Mexicans from participating fully in the world (179). With Marcos, fuller access to powerful discourses – since he was marginalized in school – involved contact with an assortment of social groups (and hybrid literacies). The haves and have nots – Hugo and in some ways

Marcos – continue to speak of this divide. At issue is who has access – and what kind of access do they have? – to the global economy and technologies? Hugo’s story reveals what Bartlett calls the “limited interactions and intellectual resources available to the majority of the world population today” (183). Marcos’ story shows me that new forms of interdependence in a post-NAFTA world have consequences that stretch well beyond the individual and the classroom. And both stories show me how knowledge is constructed in ordinary sites.

These two students’ literacy lives, quickly sketched here, are powerful embodied literacy experiences and expressions that go way beyond the official versions of literacy, which conservatively define and regulate it as consisting of basic decoding skills or functional reading/writing. Marcos understands what words say and what they mean – be they about *ejidos*, commerce, or the law. He is clearly deeply conversant in the lived histories and material experiences of the *ejidos* and how they are both structured and structure economic exchanges, opportunities, and exclusions. As such, he has written a place for himself in the world, so to speak.

In Spanish, there is a word that evokes a space that is beyond mere survival – *la facultad* – the ability to know something through experience and intuition. Gloria Anzaldúa calls it the “capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface.” She argues that those who are outcasts —“pushed out of the tribe”— are more sensitized to this capability, this “acute awareness” that we acquire without conscious reasoning (60-1). *La facultad* means developing a particular angle of vision that is an awareness, as L. Esthela Bañuelos explains “developed as a survival tactic that people, caught between two worlds, unknowingly cultivate” (97). In the case of ecological literacy, recognizing affordances in one’s environment is already a high level perceptual process. Some people are better at this than others, as we know of Marcos and Hugo. Both students also experienced marginalization and hardship, thus enhancing the potential for developing *la facultad*.

While Marcos and Hugo have functional literacy (Marcos passed 6<sup>th</sup> grade, Hugo has some literacy skills, but it is unknown at what level he is proficient) as measured by international assessment tests,

such “functional literacy” is not primarily what helps them survive in the world. And that is literacy opportunity. It pays to be crystal clear that literacy skills, learning, and development are separate from **literacy opportunities** – as we see with Hugo. Literacy opportunity encompasses people’s relationships to economic and social structures that condition changes for learning and development. We can’t focus only on test scores when the economic opportunities are so limited for most of the world. And when we have so much to learn about and from the human face of literacy.

I want to return to affordances and what they might mean specifically with literacy and literacy opportunities. Gestalt psychologists argue that “each thing says what it is” (Koffka 7). For example, if you see a piece of fruit, it says “eat me.” If you see water, it says “drink me.” If you see a handle on a door and need to enter, the handle says “grab me.” If you do not need to enter the room, you may not even see the handle (7).

Now applying this to ecological literacy, if I see a book it says what? To me it says “read me and your life may change and improve.” To Marcos it may say “I don’t see myself or my history in books.” If I see a school, it says to me “this is a place where **all** children come to learn to read and to write, to socialize, to learn what an educated person means in this culture.” To Marcos it might say, “you know nothing important.” To Hugo, perhaps it says, “you don’t have time for this.” Or maybe “what good will book learning do you?” If I see a field of corn, it says “lush farmland, corn on the cob, childhood memories of rural Wisconsin.” To Marcos it says “subsistence farming, *ejido* rights for my family, NAFTA injustices in southern Mexico.” If I see a stash of marijuana or a joint, to me it says “illegal” or maybe “whose looking?” To Hugo it says “my only option” and “heavy load.” Thus the meanings or values of things depend on their affordances and how things are perceived. What we see tells us what to do with things – with all their benefits, risks, dangers, positive and negative affordances. And the values of these things change depending on what we see and what we need to see. Opportunities beckon.

A more transformative approach to defining literacy would be to take into consideration the multiple literacies that are informing

everyday practices outside of the classroom – a return, if you will, to a consideration of home knowledges, together with an emphasis on asset-driven understanding of lived knowledges as relevant. Literacy needs to be reconceived outside the boundaries of traditionally framed notions of reading, writing, and arithmetic. It involves more than “knowing” – it is about being, how we live in the world. A multi-dimensional understanding might account for contexts, bodies, local histories, ongoing urgencies. It would be relevant to a particular time and location. Literacy should mean putting the world into students’ minds, not simply testing 15-year olds on alphabetic skills, then committing literacy genocide on students because they do not measure up. Literacy should mean acknowledging – perhaps drawing from – the worlds that exist and are at play in students’ minds already. This approach would, as Hernandez-Zamora argues, empower people to transform themselves, their communities, and larger society – to engage in projects designed collaboratively between socially committed think tanks, grassroots organizations, local participants. Literacy and education, he argues, “are not seen as **goals** in themselves, but as necessary **components** of broader projects for democracy, sustainability and empowerment” (emphasis added, 197).

## OPENING UP THE CONVERSATION: EMBRACING THE MULTIPLE LITERACIES OF THE WORLD

So how is this notion of ecological literacy as lived by Marco and Hugo relevant to educators in the US? I think of Eli Goldblatt’s vision of literacy as “ethical relations.” His literacy story, *Writing Home: A Literacy Autobiography*, clearly shows that literacy is more than mastering writing and reading. Indeed, literacy pertains to the very structures of the symbolic that we all navigate and that shape our sense of self. Yes language can be an intellectual challenge, but it can be a “particular channel for immediate human interaction” as well. Think of young students in college classrooms who act and claim to be “bored.” They are often disengaged from the stilted versions of literacy that dominate college corridors. Others write of how identity and literacy are inextricably linked (see Richard Rodriguez’ *Hunger for Memory* or Reginald Dwayne Betts’ *A Question of Freedom*). Linda Flower advocates for a model of community literacy that works on “how we might construct a community that supports dialogue across

difference” (21). In the Community Literacy Center she directs, youth in Pittsburgh come together in a community that offers a sort of counter-public, one that challenges dominant metanarratives, engages the alternative, considers suppressed endeavors and situated literacies. Finally, one of the more inclusive definitions of literacy today is that of the *Community Literacy Journal*:

For us, literacy is defined as the realm where attention is paid not just to content or to knowledge but to the symbolic means by which it is represented and used. Thus, literacy makes reference not just to letters and to texts but to other multimodal and technological representations as well.

[www.communityliteracy.org](http://www.communityliteracy.org)

Schools have a tendency (or maybe it is an inability or unwillingness or even disinterest) to devalue lived and experiential knowledges that so many students embody and express. Examples are everywhere: LGBT students, students who are socio-economically disadvantaged, students who look or act different in any way due to non-dominant, non-conforming behaviors. Synthesizing our single-minded focus on alphabetic literacy with a more ecological literacy would benefit us all.

So how is literacy to be considered? I would argue it must be defined more broadly, in terms of real opportunities afforded by literacies, and certainly more or less pragmatically, a definition that can emerge from the vagabonding inquiry and experience I had – and surrendered to – during this recent trip to Mexico. Not in the narrow ways the conservative agency UNESCO (who has broad regulatory influence over the meaning of literacy education in most of the world) defines literacy or claims it to be the magic passport to everything. It is time to recognize that literacy as some kind of “passport to equality” remains one of the greatest colonizing myths of our time. It is time to see literacy as dynamic, multiple – and yes, sublimely and desperately human as embodied, expressed, and experienced – in the stories of Marcos and Hugo. It is time to evaluate and assess literacies differently and in ways that validate the home knowledges, the local contexts and global economic impacts, the widely different lives lived in a global world. It is time to accept and embrace the change that could be if we open ourselves to learning and teaching the multiple literacies of the world.

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## NOTES

- 1 According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Mexico and Brazil both spend about 1/3 less on education than the average for the other 65 countries participating in the Program for International Assessment (PISA). Other similarities: reading, science, and math scores for 15 year olds are below average; teacher-student ratios are high particularly in rural and disadvantaged communities; grade repetition is higher than the average resulting in high dropout rates; allocation of resources is below average and inequities between schools is higher than average.
- 2 Autonomous as discussed by Bartlett looks at literacies as bundles of common sense beliefs and assumptions about literacy independent of social context. They are usually in causal chains of “if/then” reasoning whereby if you do/teach this, students will acquire “this” and it will have this effect – usually enabling social and economic change. Autonomous literacy programs and assessments define literacy by what can be measured more than by what people DO with reading and writing. They tend to treat literacy as a panacea or cure-all solution to development problems. This in turn affects all kinds of policy decisions about who to target and what to fund. Ideological views of literacy are more linked to cultural and power structures and consider sociocultural situations and context.
- 3 The next PISA is in 2018. Of Latin American countries, Chile scored highest (52) followed by Mexico, Uruguay (55), Costa Rica (56), Brazil (58), Argentina (59), Columbia (62), and Peru in last place (65). The US is 26 overall (reading is 17, math is 34, and science is 21) in spite of spending more money on education than most of the other 65 countries.
- 4 Gloria Anzaldúa describes a similar concept to literacy genocide, which she names “linguistic terrorism,” a situation in which ethnic identity is a “twin skin to linguistic identity.” She writes “I am my language.” For a full elaboration on this, see *Borderlands*

*La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999: 80-1.

- 5 Another useful frame and metaphor for approaching research in an unfamiliar culture is María Lugones work on pilgrimages or the notion of research as traveling. This is particularly helpful in resisting oppression and understanding liberatory possibilities. How far you move, and how you move juxtaposed with the complexities of the histories and local meanings of the places you work are all methods of exploring the logic of resistance. I find her work elegant, complex, and a wonderful way to thicken meaning in new environments in a thoughtful way. See *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003.
- 6 From “Radical Teachers Union CNTE Gives Mexico a Harsh Lesson.” *Wall Street Journal Online* (9 December 2013). 5 February 2014.
- 7 In my ethnographic research in 2003-2004 (“Keeping La Llorona Alive in the Shadow of Cortés”), I examined various aspects of the literacy curriculum in 2 Mexican schools over a 5-month period. My research suggested that though Mexico mandates progressive educational theories, in practice, the national curriculum reinforced the Spanish colonialist views of indigenous languages and beliefs. In addition, there was a powerful intimate culture of children and families who interact with this curriculum. This article documents what happens when the ideas and practices of the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* collide with indigenous traditions, and what US educators can learn from this.
- 8 In addition, Mexico was defaulting on a loan of billions of dollars; Alan Greenspan, Robert Rubin, Lawrence Summers intervened when the peso was devalued and Mexico was defaulting; they offered a loan guarantee package of 40 billion with stiff conditions including very high interest rates (resulting in Mexico repaying early) and loosening of foreign ownership of banks (thus Citigroup took over Banamex). US made \$560 million in interest alone.... but the repayment plan and conditions resulted in a significantly

diminished economy, loss of employment, and a huge increase in migration to the US (Kay 50).

- 9 To Deborah Brandt, sponsors of literacy are “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy – and gain advantage by it in some way. Just as the ages of radio and television accustomed us to having programs brought to us by various commercial sponsors, it is useful to think about who or what underwrites occasions of literacy learning and use” (19).

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