Culture and literacy: situated social literacies

Mastin Prinsloo and Lara Krause

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An influential direction of research and development in Literacy Studies in recent decades has been around reading and writing activities as multiple and diverse when seen through a socio-cultural lens. Literacy, in this view, is not simply a mental phenomenon to do with processing skills but has social, cultural, historical and institutional dimensions as well. A socio-cultural perspective has the potential for enriching educators' view of what it is their students can and can't do and how to work productively with them in education. In elaborating on this approach here, we lay out the key arguments of the early influencers in this field and then go on to discuss how this approach has matured and divided in later work.

Great divides: literacy, culture and social development

The socio-cultural focus in Literacy Studies grew as a field of research in the 2nd half of the 20th century out of conflicting views on what literacy is, including claims and counter-claims about the role and importance of reading and writing in social development, industrialization and the rise of the West. The debates that gave rise to the field took place while modernization theory was influential, which viewed Western, and particularly US American capitalism and industrialization as the model of social development for everybody else (e.g., in Rostow 1960; McClelland 1967; Inkeles and Smith, 1974). Also implicated were human capital theories linking education to economic growth (Schultz 1961; Becker 1964). These theoretical perspectives emerging in the context of Cold War politics sought to identify key 'social variables' that could be manipulated to foster development towards modernization. One of the important theoretical questions relating to literacy and language raised by this literature was whether there existed a *literacy divide* which lay at the fault-line between 'developed' and 'backward' parts of the world and whether it accounted for that divide, to any extent. Literacy was often closely correlated in such research with income, wealth and health at an individual and a societal level. Richer and healthier regions of the world, wealthier nation states, and individuals were seen to have higher levels of literacy than their less prosperous or healthy counterparts. It was then widely concluded (and indeed still is often concluded) that literacy itself was the technology that made the difference. The socio-cultural orientation to literacy studies, also known as the New Literacy Studies (Gee, 1996), grew in critical reaction to these highly generalized and teleological views on literacy and development.

The sources for such 'great divide' theories of literacy and of society more generally were popularized in the mid-20th century through the writings, in particular, of anthropologist Jack Goody, social theorist Walter Ong, as well as the psychological arguments of David Olsson. Goody, Ong and Olsson all drew on historian Eric Havelock's work on the ancient Greeks and literacy, particularly on his *Preface to Plato* (1963). According to Havelock, the Greeks of around 650 to 550 BC took the pictographic, ideographic and syllabic writing systems that had been under development from around 3,000 BC on the part of the Egyptians, Sumerians and lastly the Phoenicians and transformed them into the alphabetical system of writing, adding letters for vowels to the consonant and syllable signs of earlier script forms. This move allowed, as he claimed, for written symbols to at last closely represent the meaningful sounds (phonemes) of (the Greek) language. He claimed this was a pivotal moment in the rise of the West, as it finally allowed language to be written down

clearly and unambiguously, transforming what literacy was and what effects it had, making possible philosophy, historical study and scientific thought for the first time.

Ong (1982), following this example, drew a sharp division between what he called literate cultures and oral cultures. He embraced the Havelockian idea that "writing restructures consciousness" (the title of Ong's fourth chapter) and is the very source of logic, while speech is transient and evanescent – no sooner is something said than its sounds fade away. Alphabetic writing, in contrast, he argued, provides a clear record that can be thought about and returned to, without it having changed in the interim. The effect on thought and consequently on social organization were profound, he claimed, resulting in a great divide at every level of social organisation between oral and literate cultures. Olson (1977) similarly argued that alphabetical literacy initiates a unique and pivotal development in human cognition, changing language from 'utterance' to 'text', where the uncertainties of speech are supplanted by the precision of writing, with language increasingly able to stand as an unambiguous or autonomous representation of meaning. Goody (1975) described literacy as 'the technology of the intellect' which set the human mind free from the constraints of the oral and which could only be held back ('restricted') from fostering universal enlightenment, reason and democracy by certain distorting features of non-western societies, such as social secrecy, caste-based restrictions, rote learning of literacy in religious schools and other "oral residues in a literate culture" (Goody, 1975, 14). In Goody's (1987) analysis, dynamic literate cultures could be distinguished from conservative oral ones, as well as from societies with what Goody called "restricted" versions of literacy (India, China and in Arab countries, for example): Such restricted literacy, where literacy activity was distorted by the dominance of pre-literate forms of social organisation, did not allow literacy's transformative social potential to do its work in producing modern, progressive and industrializing societies.

Brian Street (1984) identified this thesis on literacy put forward by these 'great divide' theorists, as he labelled them, as the 'autonomous model of literacy', due to these claims about the context-independent, or autonomous effects that literacy is said to have. He pointed out that such a sharp division between orality and literacy recycled discredited divisions that had been made in social theory between 'modern' and 'primitive' societies, placing western societies on the side of progress and other societies in the camp of backwardness and restriction. Indeed, these 'great divide' arguments included claims that the advent of alphabetical literacy in the West had marked the move from prehistory to history; from primitive or traditional to civilized or modern societies; from pre-logical to logical and analytical thinking; from aggregative, redundant and 'copious' spoken forms to abstract, concise and decontextualised uses of language.

These dichotomous and decontextualised claims by what Goody had called the 'literacy thesis' might appear one-sided and biased now but their influence was and remains considerable. Take for example the importance attached to contemporary large-scale standardized literacy testing that continues to be organized, nationally and internationally, or the UNESCO 'literacy league tables' still published annually, which claim to compare 'literacy levels' between countries, as if something precise, reliable, generalizable and of importance is displayed in this data, and upon which societal decisions can be made – including how investments should be made in education.

Collapsing the great divide

In *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (1984) Street argued that many of the characteristics which great divide scholars attributed to 'literate societies' alone were either part of the intellectual framework of any society or the outcomes of complex social processes – not simply effects of literacy in itself. He wrote that literacy was not so transparent and democratized a practice in early Greece as was being claimed. The Greek histories and philosophies were driven by sectional interest, rather than disinterested logic and clarity. The ostensibly 'politically neutral' model of literacy put forward by Goody and colleagues relied upon a rhetoric of individual and social developmentalism that celebrated certain western literacy practices as universally normative. Street's analysis of literacy joined a social analysis of power relations as well as language and literacy ideologies to an orientation to the cultural production of meaning and values in particular settings. Therefore, he argued, consequences that ensue from literacy are neither 'neutral' nor effects of literacy on its own but are instead variable. They depend on the nature of the myriad literacy activities that play out in social life and are integral components of larger social practices. The 'literacy bits', Street argued, cannot be studied as if they have effects of their own, separate from the larger social 'goings-on'. There were no empirical grounds for assuming an automatic, causal or universal relationship between literacy and social development of various kinds. Rather, different histories of exposure to certain ways of communicating, valuing, reading and writing yielded different forms of reading and writing as practice. The latter evolve and are enacted in contexts involving particular relations and structures of power, values and beliefs. His ideological model of literacy thus sees 'literacy' as a shorthand term for practices rooted in social, cultural and political contexts, such that the relationship of writing to language and to thought was different in different contexts. There could not therefore be any general arguments about the effects of the introduction or presence of writing. Theories about a 'great divide' between literacy and orality, and between literate and oral individuals and cultures, reduced the rich diversity of socio-cultural life-forms to a one-dimensional scale. It took one version of literacy to be the standard in an ideological and biased way. He explained that why he called this counter-position an ideological rather than a cultural model of literacy was that 'culture' had become too static a term and he wished to distinguish his approach from one that saw a world of independent one-language-one-literacy units. Using 'ideological' (rather than 'cultural') signaled precisely that there are always contests over the meaning and the use of literacy practices. He saw culture 'as a verb', "an active process of meaning-making and contest over definition, including its own meaning" (Street, 1993, 25).

The origins of Street's thoughts on literacy lay in the research that he conducted in the 1970s in North East Iran, in fruit-growing villages, especially in the village of Cheshmeh, near the city of Mashad on the border with Afghanistan. Unlike what he read in Goody and in the arguments of UNESCO and the Iranian government, who were campaigning to remove illiteracy in the villages, Street found various literacy activities in the village, despite outside assumptions about widespread illiteracy as characterizing such environments. He saw literacy being used in commercial activities on the part of farmers and traders, in the Islamic religious centre or Maktabs where the Koran was read and learnt, and in children's schooling. Literacy taught in schools thus turned out to be only one of the literacies that

people drew on in the village, and school literacy had a less than dominant role there, because the other literacies were part of the everyday social practices of influential villagers. The latter were not usually those who had attended school but older men who had attended the Maktab. Koranic literacy instruction is stereotyped for not providing proper literacy because it is simply memorization of passages, but Street found interesting variety and complexity instead. The texts were differently organized on the page compared to western linear writing, the writing was inserted in different forms, angles and in varying relationship with other units of text, so that students learnt that reading is not just about language written down, but that organization of text also carried meaning in particular ways.

Despite the complexity of the literacy practices that Street (1984) identified in Cheshmeh, outsiders, including literacy campaigners, assumed villagers were illiterate and living in the dark; and that without the literacy of standardized instruction, they would remain cognitively, socially and culturally deficient. Street instead noted that the people in the village might well have failed tests for literacy, developed with schooling models in mind. Yet, they were using reading and writing on a regular basis in situated and locally appropriate ways. Standards for literacy were a function of local practices, and a test run by outsiders would not reflect that. "If these complex variations in literacy which were happening in one small locale were characterized by outside agencies - State education, UNESCO, literacy campaigns - as 'illiterate', might this also be the case in other situations too?" Street (2001, 6) asked, concluding that the then dominant assumptions about literacy, both in development circles and in academia, were wrong. They treated literacy as unitary – an independent variable that could be applied with predictable effects across contexts with consequences for social and economic progress, cognitive development and democracy. For example, modernization economists attempting to quantify literacy's developmental capacity had claimed that a 40 per cent literacy level was necessary for economic take-off, and 80% for rapid industrialization (Street, 2001). Street identified the prevalence of what he called *scriptism* – a view of the influence of writing on the conceptualization of speech – a belief in the superiority in various respects of written over spoken languages and the view that some uses of language are more 'context-dependent' or 'objective' than others. He stressed the importance of going beyond a narrow focus on provision and instruction in literacy and language research and in developmental planning. Ignoring the situated and variable nature of language and literacy practices has led to a fundamentally flawed set of assumptions about language, literacy and society in much of the developmental literature, he insisted.

Varying 'ways with words'

A second strong impetus for conceptualizing literacy as variable socio-cultural practice in local settings came from Shirley Brice Heath's (1983) widely read study of south-eastern communities in the USA. Heath (1982; 1983) questioned why Black students were failing in the recently desegregated schools in Southern Carolina and carried out ethnographic research into the literacy, language and learning in three neighboring communities. She was informed by a socio-linguistic orientation to language, particularly by Dell Hymes' approach to researching language and communication through the ethnographic study of specific

speech communities. Hymes' work contrasted with Chomsky's (1975) focus on language competence as a biologically evolved capacity of humans, best studied in abstraction from social context and individual performance. Hymes, instead, emphasized the social and cultural dimensions of language, insisting that language should be studied with regard to how meaning was produced through social interaction in specific contexts, and how what counted as *communicative competence* was specific to particular speech communities. Intelligibility was for him not only a complex function of features of linguistic form (phonological, lexical, syntactic), but also of norms of interaction and conduct in conversation and in writing. He suggested that "one think of a community (or any group, or person) in terms, not of a single language, but of a repertoire", comprising a set of ways of speaking with "speech styles, on the one hand, and contexts of discourse, on the other, together with the relations of appropriateness obtaining between styles and contexts" (Hymes, 1996, 33). Membership in a speech community, he argued, consists in sharing one or more of its ways of speaking – that is, not in knowledge of a speech style (or any other purely linguistic entity, such as a language) alone, but in knowledge of appropriate use as well.

Heath (1983) shared Hymes' concern for the communicative dimensions of linguistic interaction. She wanted to understand the socio-historical context that shaped distinct communicative orientations, as well as to study how literacy was part of such communicative practices. She found that children in three socio-culturally divergent settings of the town (Roadville, Trackton and "the townspeople"), while being socialized within their local communities, were acquiring particular ways of using language and narrative in social communication which were incompatible with those of schooling in specific ways. As babies, children in Trackton (a working-class black community) were almost always held in their waking hours and were constantly in the midst of ongoing human communication, verbal and non-verbal. Adults did not engage children as conversational partners in 'baby talk', where they simplify their language, as was practice amongst the townspeople. Trackton adults did not sit and read to children or direct questions at pre-verbal children (such as 'Why are you crying?'). Adults chose verbally competent conversational partners (other adults or older children) and talked *about* the infant to them. Children were discouraged from answering the questions of outsiders and were rarely asked 'What is X?' questions (Heath, 2001, 320). Instead, they were asked analogical questions which called for non-specific comparisons of one item, event, or person with another (e.g., 'What's that like?') (Heath, 2001, 333). Though children could answer such questions, they rarely named the specific feature(s) which made two items or events alike. They learnt to tell stories by rendering a context and inviting the audience's participation to join in the imaginative creation of a story. Children were encouraged to draw attention to themselves and to entertain by way of the display of particular kinds of associative verbal dexterity. Group negotiation and participation was a prevalent feature of the narrative performances of adults and children.

Heath reported that in school, Trackton children commonly had trouble adapting to the social interactional rules for literacy events. They did not respond well to direct questions, as there was no precedence for this interactive pattern in their home settings. Their teachers ignored their developed abilities to metaphorically link events and situations and

recreate scenes. After the elementary years, when their imaginative skills and verbal dexterity could really pay off, they had often failed to gain the necessary written composition skills needed to translate their analogical skills into a channel teachers could accept.

The working-class white children in Roadville, whose families had been mill-workers in the region for several generations, were brought up into ways of knowing that were very different from those of the Trackton children, but also incompatible with the communicative forms and practices that school teachers took to be the norm. This was in spite of the abundance of reading materials in the neighborhood homes, in the form of magazines, newspapers and books. Roadville was a religiously conservative (Christian) community whose children reportedly struggled at school despite the high value attached to reading and writing. Heath traced in fine-grain ethnographic detail the communicative practices into which they were raised instead. Children were read to from books that emphasized nursery rhymes, alphabet learning and simplified bible stories. They were encouraged to find a clear moral message in each account they read or gave. They were discouraged from elaborating on accounts, giving perspectival or emotional readings, or fictionalizing real events, a practice associated with lying amongst parents who saw the Bible, for example, as containing literal meaning and guidance for every-day living. They were good at well-ordered practices, involving the keeping of time and space limits, and good at delivering factual recounts, as opposed to interactive and/or intertextual accounts. They struggled with the kinds of evaluative, decontextualizing and recontextualizing narrative practices valued in school, and therefore generally struggled to do well.

In contrast, Heath (1983) suggested that the way children of both White and Black "townspeople" grew up talking, communicating and relating to narrative and print in their middle-class homes matched the practices of school and the forms that literacy took there well. From an infant age the children encountered the question formats that characterize so much of school interactive discourse (those of initiation-reply-evaluation sequences, for example), labelling habits, fictionalizing practices, practices of relating book knowledge to real life experience, and such interactive behavior as learning to listen and wait in response to particular cues from their parents and carers. They learnt patterns of interaction in relation to texts which prepared them for those of schooling. They were encouraged to take up positions in relation to the texts they were responding to, to present 'accounts' rather than 'recounts'.

Heath concluded that what counted in effective communication was not a generalized competence (e.g., being able to 'speak English' or 'code and decode letters') but a situated, communicative competence embedded in acquired, 'deep' cultural knowledge and learnt models of using language and making meaning in specific ways. Heath's work made the same case as Street that there are multiple ways of taking and making meaning in reading and writing practices. The selection of but one way as normative in school and in formal institutions, meant that people whose ways were different to the norm had to continuously struggle to adapt to that standard. She criticized the 'great divide' distinction between literacy and orality because it placed undue importance on the medium of communication at the expense of its social purpose.

Heath (1983, 2001) suggested that teachers should learn more about the communicative practices and traditions that children from different socio-cultural, linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds brought to school contexts, and to treat children's language and social behavior as manifestations of the rules of communicative competence they had acquired successfully in their communities. She argued that dichotomization between oral and literate traditions was "a construct of researchers, not an accurate portrayal of reality across cultures" (Heath, 2001, 339). Her study instead showed the culturally diverse ways of acquiring knowledge and developing cognitive styles. Trackton and Roadville children were 'disabled' in the schooling context not because of any general, individualized cognitive deficit but because their practices of everyday life had initiated them into differing sets of expectations regarding intimates, non-intimates, and how they relate to one another – in speech acts as well as in reading and writing activities.

Literacy within socially organized practices

A third influence on the socio-cultural, or social practices model of literacy was Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole's ground-breaking research (1978; 1981) of literacy and cognition in the African state of Liberia, which found that cognitive skills associated with literacy varied dramatically in relation to the wider social practices within which literacy was embedded.

Scribner and Cole were among the co-editors of the influential English language version of Vygotsky's *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes* (Vygotsky, 1978). Concerned to elaborate on the social dimensions of cognition, they drew on Vygotsky's claims that interpersonal/inter-mental (or social) processes are the necessary condition for the emergence of individual/intra-mental (psychological) processes. Luria (1976), a contemporary and colleague of Vygotsky, had carried out a study of the cognitive effects of literacy acquisition by running tests amongst persons living in remote parts of Uzbekistan (Central Asia), some of whom had learnt to read and write and some who had not. Luria reported significant differences in response to tests of cognitive processes across the two samples and concluded that these differences were a direct outcome of whether or not the research subjects had learnt to read and write.

He did not, however, distinguish between the cognitive effects of literacy and other possible causes of cognitive change, such as participation in schooling practices. Scribner and Cole (1981), in contrast, were concerned to distinguish between the cognitive effects of literacy as distinct from the effects of schooling and other social practices. Their research team studied in detail the cognitive consequences of literacy in a different setting – Liberia in Africa – where three different scripts and literacy traditions were present: school literacy in English, a religious literacy in Arabic script and an indigenous script used by individuals for letter writing and record keeping in the local language. Some of the local Vai people were able to read and write in one, some in two of these scripts, and some were unable to read or write in any of them.

Over a period of four years and extended follow-up work, Scribner and Cole, with research assistants, gathered ethnographic and survey-based descriptions of language and literacy use and also ran a battery of tests of Vai persons' cognitive, perceptual and conceptual

processes, including tests for abstraction, memorization, categorization and verbal explanation skills, so as to study the uses and consequences of literacy in these three different scripts, languages and contexts. They were able to distinguish in their analysis between 'literacy effects' and 'school effects', and showed that the cognitive attributes previously associated with literacy (by Luria and others) were not products of literacy itself but variable outcomes of particular social practices like schooling or urban living.

The failure of literacy to yield consistent cognitive effects across all three scripts and literacies (and the inconsistency of schooling effects on measured cognitive outcomes) led Scribner and Cole to conclude that "schooling and literacy are not synonymous" and that "literacies are in fact highly differentiated" (1981: 132). This made them question the tendency by many writers to "discuss literacy and its social and psychological implications as though literacy entails the same knowledge and skills whenever [and wherever] people read and write" (1981: 132). They found that cognitive skills associated with literacy varied dramatically depending on whether people's literacy experiences were school, religious or community activities. Scribner and Cole made the case that there was nothing special about literacy in general as regards its consequences for cognitive skills. Rather, as had been argued by Vygtosky (1978), cognitive processes had a direct basis in socio-cultural activity.

They thus challenged 'great divide' claims that literacy acquisition produced certain cognitive changes, regardless of the context of learning. They made the important argument that literacy is not a general technology that is the same thing with the same consequences regardless of what the contexts of its acquisition might be. Instead, they claimed that literacy was always constituted within socially organized practices.

Methodologies and research constructs

James Gee (1990; 1996; 2003) provided detailed examples of what literacy and language looked like from a discourse-oriented socio-cultural perspective. His examples show that an interpretation of any utterance or text always involves an interplay of linguistic, semiotic and social frames of interpretation. The sources of meanings in a text then don't lie in the word itself but in the social matrix within which a piece of writing is produced and understood. He made clear that reading involves the making of meaning with available resources, and such meaning is not made or taken mechanically one word at a time, but rather with a sense of contextual specificity drawn from the wider text and context that is being produced, invoked or interpreted.

Take something so simple as the following sentence: "The guard dribbled down court, held up two fingers, and passed to the open man" (Gee, 2003, 29). While one might know every word in the sentence, you can't make sense of it without knowing in detail about basketball as a game, that is, as a particular sort of social practice. Gee showed that the same applies to any sentence or text. Gee's point is that what is important in understanding and meaning-making is not words (oral or written) themselves, but the larger and specific sociocultural coordinations in which they gain their significance.

Key terms in the study of literacy as situated, socio-cultural practice have been 'literacy event' and 'literacy practices'. Literacy events are moments when "written language is

integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes and strategies" (Heath, 1982, 93) and literacy practices are the more general sociocultural framing that gives significance to particular acts. Literacy events, in Heath's conception, included those moments when inscription or decoding of text featured – but not necessarily centrally. Central was instead the configuration of action, talk and text in multiple and socially varying ways. "Events are observable episodes which arise from practices and are shaped by them. The notion of events stresses the situated nature of literacy, that it always exists in a social context" (Barton and Hamilton, 2000, 8). The concept of literacy practices incorporates literacy events as empirical occasions to which literacy is integral and analyses them in terms of the models or preconceptions that make people decide who does what, where and when, as far as reading and writing is concerned. Epistemologically, the concept of literacy as a social practice provides the frame for an analysis of meaning making. Methodologically, the approach has been grounded in linguistic ethnography and has drawn on discourse analysis, socio-cultural models of cognition and various strands of sociolinguistics and social theory for its analytical work. Widely referred to as The New Literacy Studies (Gee, 1996) the approach has influenced at least four generations of researchers (Baynham and Prinsloo, 2009). Typically, researchers have observed or recorded particular literacy events at their site of research and then tried to understand the wider discursive framings and social practices that produce such events in their particular form and shape. This 'eventness' as a feature of literacy practices has partially been disturbed by later work, however, which has questioned its application to translocally-networked writing activities such as online, digital or virtual, literacy-linked communicative activity and other kinds of electronically enabled social activity. The construct of practices has similarly received critical attention (Baynham and Prinsloo, 2009) for being so all-encompassing that it lacks analytical precision as it is referring to both routinised social activities as well as reflexive adaptations, revisions and meshings of such routines and genres.

Second phase socio-cultural studies of literacy

The criticisms of 'great divide' theories of literacy in these early shaping studies described above, and in their development of an alternative focus on literacy as variable social practice, were supported by detailed research studies that accompanied and followed them, from various parts of the world. Such research included localized ethnographic studies, many of them of non-Western, non-middle-class communities and localities, as in Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Finnegan, 1977; Kulick and Stroud, 1993; Besnier, 1995; Prinsloo and Breier, 1996; and Barton and Hamilton, 1998, amongst others. Besnier described how letter writing amongst a group of South-Pacific islanders was culturally marked out as a genre resource for communicating intense and effusive emotional regard for often distant relatives, friends and intimates whereas such displays were not culturally appropriate in face-to-face spoken communication. Kulick and Stroud described how engagements with literacy in a Papua New Guinea village were shaped by the high social value given to humility and 'indirectness' in communication over explicitness, resulting in various kinds of novel uses for literacy. These uses would appear as unusual or perplexing to those without insider knowledge of how meanings were constructed from indirect clues as to the intent of individual writers, rather than from explicit statements. In both cases the established literacy practices of these communities contradicted the views of literacy as a 'technology of the intellect', in Goody's

(1975, 1) words, that operated as a culturally-neutral and transparent conduit of meaning and was displayed, at its best, in essay form, where the values of 'clarity, brevity and sincerity' held sway (Scollon and Scollon, 1981).

Taking a similar, localized, ethnographic research approach, Barton and Hamilton (1998) observed community members in Lancaster, England and asked them to reflect on their literacy practices. Echoing Heath's work, they showed that as important as family practices are for children's literacy development, these practices take place in larger community contexts that influence family activities. The researchers drew a distinction between dominant (institutionalized) and vernacular (self-generated, everyday) literacies. Vernacular knowledge was seen to be local, procedural and minutely detailed. Literacy was not an explicit focus of everyday activities but literacy elements were implicit in most activities and were used to get things done, including the learning of a martial art, paying the bills, organizing a musical event or finding out about local news. When questioned about them, people did not always regard their vernacular literacies as real reading or real writing as they were embedded in other activities, like shopping, writing to a relative, paying an invoice or applying for something. They therefore did not carry the same status as more conventionally recognised literacy activities like the reading of literature or 'school literacy' activity. Indeed, some vernacular literacies were deliberately hidden, because they were private or oppositional, including secret notes and love letters, comics and fanzines. The researchers concluded that much talk in everyday life that they studied was in fact talk about texts or shaped by documents or textual practices and that reading, writing and writing artefacts were very much part of the 'glue' of social life in these communities.

These and similar studies gave evidence of cross-cultural differences with regard to uses of literacy and also showed that reading and writing differed across different activities and contexts amongst the same groups of people. Even within the same site, at work or at the home, there can also be different meanings of reading, writing and literacy, because people participate in a range of contexts, or textually mediated social worlds, within that setting, that assume differing forms of social interaction.

Local literacies

In the wider research, such differences were made visible across various institutional contexts, including schools, workplaces, religious settings, prisons, and in a range of home, community and leisure contexts:

Schools. As regards literacy in educational settings, influenced by the earlier work, a wider number of studies examined the ways of being, knowing, valuing, acting, speaking and attitudes to writing that children developed in their home and other out-of-school environments and which met up with the discourses and practices of schooling (Street and Street, 1991; Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Gee, 1996; Dyson, 1993; Freebody and Welch, 1993; Wagner, 1993; Maybin, 1994; Street, 1995; Gregory, 1996; Lankshear, 1997, amongst many others). Drawing variously on Bakhtin, Bourdieu, Vygotsky, Hymes, Giddens and other social theorists, they pointed to the significant variety and cultural specificity of the early literacy practices of children across different social contexts. Those studies also showed that the ways meaning was shaped through text in school settings was more compatible with the

way some children had learnt to make meaning, and less compatible with the "ways of knowing" of children from other backgrounds. Schooling was also producing a narrow and rigid definition of literacy as severed from social dialogue, and as a "decontextualised knowledge validated through text performances", (Cook-Gumpertz, 1986, 27). Schools and adult literacy classes taught literacy as a skill which was primarily about coding and de-coding rather than teaching how to construct meaning through texts in those particular ways that were favored in schooling and other educational settings. Another central finding was that misinterpretations of what children were doing and misrecognition of what communicative resources they were bringing to schooling, on the part of administrators and teachers, tended to happen with reference to models of cultural deficit, where differences in children's ways were then automatically understood as lacks or absences.

Universities. A further direction of work developed under the rubric of 'academic literacies' in university and tertiary education contexts (e.g., Ivanic, 1998; Lea and Street, 1998, Canagarajah, 2002, Lillis, 2003, 2006, Thesen & van Pletzen, 2006, Jacobs, 2010). These scholars drew attention to power relations and identity processes around student writing in relation to institutional practices, highlighted the diversity of writing practices and genres across disciplines and recognised that students bring their histories, identifications, resources and commitments to writing. The academic literacies approach sees writing and text production as socially situated practices and activities of diverse kinds and looks at extending the range of semiotic resources - linguistic, rhetorical and technological – that are allowed and valued in contemporary universities. This orientation sees that the complexities shaping writing as an activity can be productively engaged with by university teachers rather than having them treat particular examples of student writing as evidence of some lack or deficiency. It also shows university practices to be malleable as they can be reshaped to include and capitalize on the particularities of local and regional contexts and the differences that students bring to institutions of higher learning.

Workplaces and adult- learning. Looking at workplace settings, other Literacy Studies researchers showed that workplace skills, including print-related skills, develop and flourish or remain undeveloped, as a result of social rather than purely technical processes (Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996; Farrell, 1997, 1999; Scheeres, 2007; Scholtz and Prinsloo, 2001). Learning is structured and defined by social relations and social practices taking place on shop floors, training sites, and other work contexts, whereas 'stand-alone' literacy classes that focused on coding and reading skills remained disconnected from the actual uses of reading and writing in work settings. Researchers showed that work-related literacy practices, for both low-level and high-level workers, required them to draw on repertoires of situated ways of using reading, writing, language and other semiotic resources in order to carry out a work-related activity. Hull (1997) noted in a list of observed 'literacy functions' in factory settings, that very few fell into the category of 'basic' (i.e., relatively simple self-contained tasks like copying, labelling, keyboarding, tallying). The continuum of literacy that can be observed expands to include categories in which the purposes of literacy are first more complex — using literacy to explain, taking part in discourse around texts, participating in the flow of information, problem solving — and then also more obviously connected with issues of power — using literacy in the exercise of critical judgement, using literacy to acknowledge, exercise or resist authority.

Prinsloo and Breier (1996) in several studies in South Africa on the social uses of literacy in situated community and work settings, found that the literacy taught in adult education classes that they observed was not related to the literacy practices that people engaged with outside of the classes. Accordingly, they questioned the value of a pedagogy which focused on the transfer of disembedded coding and decoding skills. The adult literacy night schools were seen to promote school-like pedagogical practices which were both new to the adult learners (since they had little experience of schooling) and had little connection to the actual literacy activities in their lives.

Prison, religion. Wilson's (2000) study of literacy in prisons similarly made the case that literacies were multiple and context-dependent. Literacy/ies in prison could not be comprehensively studied without taking into account the social circumstances of which they were a part. Her findings pushed towards a more contextualized and situated view of multiple literacies and away from prescriptive instructional models, such as the 'school' perspective, the 'training' perspective or the 'standards' perspective. She identified various distinct literacy activities that inmates were regularly engaging in, for example frequent signature writing, official bureaucracy on reception into and release from the jail, graffiti, letters to family and friends, subversive notes to acquaintances in the jail, reading court depositions, reading official prison documentation, commissary forms, complaints forms, visits requests, tattoos, appeals, poetry, educational pursuit, books and magazines.

Kapizske (1995) studied the textual politics and practices of a 7th day Adventist community in North Australia, focusing on processes of theological (church), familial (home) and educational (school) normalization of community members into regulated ways of hearing and speaking, reading and writing, being and believing, which constructed and constrained what could and could not be articulated and enacted by believers. Once again, the 'literacy bits' could not be sensibly studied or made sense of separately from the larger social 'goings-on' in which they were embedded.

Examples from a wider literature that accompanied and followed these studies include Papen's (2005) study of tourism, governmentality and literacy in Namibia; Robinson-Pant's (1997) account of literacy and development amongst women in Nepal which focuses on the processes by which women in Nepal acquire literacy and deploy its use for their own purposes; Kalman's (1999) study of mediated literacy practices in Mexico City; Maddox and Esposito's (2012) research around literacy inequalities and social distance in Nepal; Achen and Openjuru's (2012) research on language and literacy as globalized practices in the poorer residential areas of Kampala, Uganda; Pahl and Rowsell's application of these insights to classroom work (2012); Kell's (2008) study of literacy and housing disputes near Cape Town; and Prinsloo and Stein's studies of early literacy in homes and schools in Cape Town and Gauteng, South Africa (Stein & Slonimsky, 2006; Stein and Mamabalo, 2005; Prinsloo and Stein, 2004; Prinsloo, 2004).

These studies, show, amongst other things, that people labelled 'illiterate' within older models of literacy may, from a more culturally sensitive viewpoint, be seen to make significant use of literacy practices for specific purposes and in specific contexts. Accordingly, the boundary between literate/ non literate is less obvious than individual 'measures' of literacy and testing might suggest.

Unsettling the local: Mobility, migration, multilingualism

Though it is not a new phenomenon by any means, migration or the movement of people between regions and localities has attracted considerable attention since the 1980s due to social, technological, and geopolitical developments around 'globalization' phenomena. People and literacy resources, along with languages and other semiotic resources are more frequently seen as border-crossing phenomena than in the past, signaled by the visibility of large-scale migrations and the increasingly multi-ethnic and multilingual nature of urban communities in major centers around the world. Such mobilities contributed to raising the question of literacy in relation to language and particularly to multilingualism that was taken up in a number of early studies and has become a topic of growing importance and attention.

Baynham (1995) examined the way that Moroccan migrants in London shifted between the communicative modes of text and talk in social interaction amongst each other, while assisting each other with language and literacy challenges. Bilingual talk around monolingual text in school and community settings is, indeed, characteristic of most multilingual social contexts, as was seen in Gregory and Williams (2000), a study of literacy based on long term ethnographic engagement within the Bangladeshi settlement in East London, UK. Martin-Jones & Jones (2000) presented multiple studies of ways in which languages and literacies shaped, and at times perpetuated, asymmetrical power relations, especially between minority language groups and dominant language and literacy practices for migrants in in host countries. The studies ranged from local life worlds to formal education and from community based to institutionalized literacy practices, providing systematic descriptions of literacy and language practices across local language groups in schools, institutional and bureaucratic settings, homes and local communities. The authors called these practices multi-lingual, rather than bilingual, to draw attention to the multiple social languages and the range of repertoires, communicative purposes, paths, and ways in which people acquired and developed literacies in these settings. While these studies often centred around the experiences of migrants, they retained a territorialised focus on local communities. But the heightening awareness of movement inevitably raised questions for the local character of studies of literacy as socio-cultural practices.

Importantly, in earlier days both Street and Hymes had already strongly rejected a notion of discrete cultural communities with stable languages and literacies. They were highly critical of "a 'Herderian' conception, from 19th Century Europe, of the world as composed of individual language-and-culture units" (Hymes, 1974, 59). Street's study of village literacies in Iran was indeed provoked by an awareness of the tensions produced by the interface of more localized and everyday literacies, on the one hand and national and more bureaucratized literacies, on the other. So criticisms of an excessively local focus in earlier socio-cultural studies can certainly be overstated, but they did help in drawing more widespread attention to fluid and changing ways with texts and language. Brandt and Clinton, 2002 for example, in a paper titled 'The Limits of the Local', criticized the 'local-community' focus in earlier literacy studies. Baynham and Prinsloo (2009) argued for considering "the transcontextualized and transcontextualizing potentials of literacy" (Baynham & Prinsloo, 2009, 4), suggesting that researchers focus on locally situated literacy

and language practices "with a sense of how remote sites and remote literate practices shape and constrain local literacy practices", but also of how wider practices and routines were expressed and refigured in more local contexts. Blommaert (2010, 2008) and Kell (2015, 2011) discussed processes of recontextualization where texts move out of settings of situated practices into broader, more bureaucratic or formalized settings, with particular and varying effects. Warriner (2007); Lam and Warriner (2012) and North (2018) amongst others examined the transnational nature of migrant workers' lives and the complex ways in which literacy is threaded through their social and material practices.

These studies point to a more complex conceptualization of context and of the relationship between the local and less-local (or global) within literacy research. Such re-conceptualization draws on Massey's (2005) idea of context as both locally and socially produced and simultaneously and complexly connected, involving processes of cultural production shaped by social actors from disparate locations and where standardized practices from larger and more bureaucratic spheres encounter localized social practices that reshape these more global forms. In socio- and applied linguistics language is being rethought of more as social, material and multimodal practices (Heller, 2007) and not just as sets of disembedded 'linguistic resources'. This development draws inspiration from the way that literacy has been rethought as practices since the 1980s.

Krause and Prinsloo (Krause and Prinsloo, 2016; Prinsloo and Krause, 2019) examine the notion of fluid languaging in classroom talk that is neither Standard English nor Standard Xhosa – the two official languages formally expected in the primary school in Khayelitsha, the biggest black township in Cape Town, South Africa. Here, everyday languaging practices are heterogeneous and often fluid. Speakers assemble linguistic resources without restrictions by the limits of one or more named language. Despite their fluid linguistic skills, purified, standardized Xhosa or English is mostly not a comfortable element in their repertoire and is not a local community resource in Khayelitsha. Because their fluid urban languaging resourcefulness does not help students when they encounter writing practices through standard monolingual English, they are at a disadvantage when they test for all their subjects in Standard English examinations. Teachers in turn are under pressure from the department to produce high pass rates and adopt strategies to help students by coaching them on the specifics of the test. The arrival of this centrally distributed paper at the school thus induces a series of creative, localized re-shaping processes, involving translating and exam practice activities, aimed at making it (barely) manageable for most learners to pass and by extension to not get their teachers into trouble with educational authorities, who do not see the linguistic complexities they have to handle in their classrooms.

Studies like these manage to show how language and literacy practices are always nested within other socio-cultural and material practices, some new and some old, forming a nexus of practices (Scollon and Scollon, 2007), a configuration or assemblage of tools and actions with various conventions and histories associated with them which come together to form recognizable sequences of actions. To facilitate the study of such complex nexuses or assemblages, much methodological and conceptual work is under way. One innovative idea has been what Bartlett and Vavrus (2014) called a "vertical case study approach". In this approach, a localized focus is replaced or accompanied by attention to the wider activities,

practices and 'goings-on' that shape the local. It still remains, however, a socio-cultural approach, committed to understanding literacy and language practices, and the social policies which shape them in institutions like schools, as "a deeply political process of cultural production engaged in and shaped by social actors in disparate locations who exert incongruent amounts of influence" (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2014:132). It involves a translocal methodology that rejects the selection of clearly bounded research and treats aspects of school literacy practices that are shaped by wider socio-political dynamics, including the activities of curriculum boards, examination units and other units, as sites of shifting cultural production by actors through social practices.

The turn to multiple modalities and digital literacies

Under conditions of increasing online writing practices since the later 1980s researchers started to note how (moving) images and sound accompanied written texts to a degree seldom focused on before. A group of British, Australian, and U.S.-based scholars known as the New London Group developed the concept of *multiliteracies* to indicate two facets of contemporary social studies of literacy: "the multiplicity of communication channels" related to literacy; and the "increasing salience of cultural and linguistic diversity" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, 5). Multimodality became a central topic in Literacy Studies from the 1990s, shaped particularly by Gunther Kress's work. He started from the point that while language was widely taken to be the dominant mode of communication, the linguistic focus had served to maintain the dominant view of learning as primarily linguistic accomplishment and particularly so in contexts of learning and teaching. The increasing prevalence of multi-modal texts made it clear that representation and communication always drew on a multiplicity of modes (actional, visual, linguistic) all of which contribute to meaning. Kress extended Halliday's theory of language as social semiotic to these other modes, making the case that all modes have developed as networks of interlocking options for making signs. Choices made within these networks of modalities and meanings by a sign-maker were then *traces* of a sign maker's decision-making about the expression of the meaning that she or he wishes to make in a given context. Kress (1997) thought that material media were shaped over time to become culturally variable meaning-making resources for individuals in particular social settings and under particular circumstances. Such modes and resources are contingent in their functions, constantly transformed by other users in responses to social communicative needs, and thus Kress's attention was on multi-modal meaning-making as evidence of the design intentions of particular communicators, or sign-makers. Elaborating on this approach, Gee (2001) described what was involved in learning to be fluent in "a semiotic domain". He saw semiotic domains as incorporating multiple modalities (e.g., oral or written languages, images, equations, symbols, sounds, gestures, graphs, artefacts, and so forth) to communicate distinctive types of messages. His examples of semiotic domains included a diverse array of institutional and everyday contexts, from cellular biology; to postmodern literary criticism; to first person-shooter-video games. Also included were advertisements, Roman Catholic theology, modernist painting and midwifery. Gee argued that a person must know - consciously or unconsciously - the design grammar of a particular semiotic domain. In order to understand or produce messages appropriately, they must know how meanings are made in that domain. Each domain is associated with a group of people who have differentially mastered it, but who share norms, values and knowledge about what constitutes degrees of mastery and what sorts of people are more or less outsiders and

insiders. They share a set of practices, a set of common goals or endeavors, and a set of values and norms, however much each of the individuals may also have their own individual styles and goals, as well as other affiliations. Within a domain, words, symbols, images, and/or artefacts have meanings and combine together via the design grammar to take on complex meanings. But these meanings are *situated meanings*, not general meanings that can be defined once and for all. Each different domain recruits a different style of language and ways with images, sounds and other semiotic resources, and each has its own distinctive vocabulary and its own distinctive syntactic, pragmatic, and discourse resources for situating complex meanings in the domain. Gee, following Kress, thus provides a revised sociocultural approach to literacy as multimodal, where cultural groups are variably sized, multiple, professional, generational and informal – including digital, online and virtual groupings.

Studies of digital or electronic literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Gillen & Barton 2010; Warschauer, 2003) focus on the impact of the introduction of new technologies on literacy practices. Kress (2010:6) argues for four dimensions involved in this impact: i) an increase in the multimodality of communication ii) a shift from page to screen iii) changes in social structures and social relations, in particular changes in authority and gender structures and iv) transformation of the medium of the book and print as the mode of writing to the screen as medium and the image as a dominant mode, along with written language. Added to these are implications for transnationalism. Lam's research (e.g. Lam 2006) shows how on-line chatrooms create an environment for multilingual on-line communication that redraws the boundaries between spoken and written language as well as between language/national boundaries). It is thus becoming increasingly unviable to conceptualize literacy without taking into account the dynamic changes in the means of communication, their impact on literacy practices, indeed the blurring of boundaries between spoken and written language that are involved. Warschauer et al (2002) investigate this through the on-line communication practices of young Egyptian professionals, finding a preference for English in web-browsing and formal e-mails, but with switching between the use of English of colloquial Egyptian dialect in Romanized script in informal e-mail communication.

New opportunities afforded by interactive Web2.0 environments such as social-networking and blogging sites (Davies and Merchant 2007) are greatly increasing the opportunities for authoring on-line, albeit within the constraints of the particular platform, greatly increasing as well the amount of visual material that is available, with some sites being built around the sharing and tagging of photographs and videos.

Posthumanism, materiality and networks of literacy

Amongst the most recent developments in the socio-cultural study of literacy have been the influences of 'new materialism' and post-humanist studies. These are responses to what have been identified as further 'great divides' to those of literacy/orality, literate culture/oral culture as analyzed and deconstructed in the earlier days of the socio-cultural approach to the study of literacy (Street, 1984). Latour (2005) identifies these further and perhaps deeper divides as those between nature and society and between human and non-human. Questioning the validity of these long-held dualisms, contemporary theories also

attempt to undo other linked divides, between meaning and materiality, macro and micro, social and technical, along with nature and culture (Law, 2009, 147). Rather than seeing nature and human activity as distinct, these theories stress their relationality, so that where nature was previously studied by scientists as ruled by immutable laws that were nonsocial by definition, the attention moves to nature-culture phenomena that are the outcome of social practices. Climate change related to social activity is an obvious first example. Novel viruses that emerge among human populations, following the marketing of innovative food sources are another. Also, the socio-material organisation of research laboratories that impacts upon the science produced there; and the digital technologies that are meshing with human bodies and behavior in ways that only science-fiction literature could previously imagine, are now on the radar of new materialist and post-humanist scholars. Haraway (1991; 2008) for example invokes a techno-scientific world that has replaced the traditional natural order with a nature–culture compound. Bennett (2010, 10) advocates that we "begin to *experience* the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally", where agency gets thought of as "distributed across a wider range of ontological types" so that "things, like food and minerals, can be reconceived as having the ability to produce effects".

A helpful and widely used notion to conceptualize such horizontally distributed agency and its effects is that of assemblage in Latour and in Deleuze and Guatari's work. In Latour's work, assemblage refers to a heterogeneous bringing together of multiple interrelations of the human and the nonhuman into a relatively coherent and stable entity. For Latour everything has agency, that is, the ability, when assembled into a network, of influencing the character of that network. It does not, however, bring that agency from the outside to the network, except in the form of an interpretive flexibility. It (human or non-human) has a 'functional blankness' until it takes on a meaning and an agency which suits the network. As Brown and Capdevilla (1999:41) put it, "the identity of an actor must be formally indexed when it becomes part of a network of relations in order for the network to experience relative stability" and the "various performativities of an object or subject must be managed in strategic ways to ensure some level of stability in a network". In place of an analysis of macro and micro dimensions Latour suggests that there are longer and shorter networks, of people and things, which are always at risk of being translated into actors (or actants) in competing networks.

A related but in some respects different posthumanist strand of thought is inspired by Karen Barad (2003; 2010), herself both a theoretical physicist and feminist scholar by profession and training. While the notion of assemblage trains the spotlight on the coming together of heterogeneous elements into networks in which these elements gain their agency, Barad looks at how, within given phenomena, things become individualized things in the first place. Things, in her view, do not preexist their relations. Therefore, as an alternative to an individualistic ontology where separate entities are taken for granted and questions are asked about their coming together, Barad takes a different metaphysical starting point. She assumes an ontology where relations are primary. These primary relations she calls 'phenomena', following Niels Bohr and his philosophy of physics. The new question to be asked now is how individual entities are produced within phenomena. Phenomena – "relations without preexisting relata" (Barad 2007, p. 139) – only become distinguishable by

means of material-discursive boundary making practices that Barad describes with the term 'apparatus'. It is the apparatus – in Quantum Mechanics experiments for example "the specific configuration of barriers, slits, particle sources, and screens" (Barad 2007, p. 176) but also the gendered, classed, racialized etc. performances of the scientists involved – that produces a distinct phenomenon. Within that phenomenon that is enfolded in the apparatus, intra-action happens. Barad (2007, 33) sees intra-action in place of interaction, writing that

> in contrast to the usual "interaction" which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action.

In this intra-action within a phenomenon, the material-discursive apparatus gives meaning to specific objects to the exclusion of other meanings. Thus the apparatus enacts cuts between 'objects' and 'subjects', humans and non-humans, observer and observed, cause and effect. Such cuts are momentary and local separations, that are only real and objectively observable from within the given phenomenon. It is also these cuts that make human observers emerge momentarily, producing "exteriority-within-phenomena" (Barad 2007, p. 175) and thereby the possibility of observation in the first place. In Barad's radically posthumanist account, humans do not preexist intra-action. They, like concepts, but also like, boundaries and properties of objects, are determinate only as inseparable parts of a phenomenon, constantly emerging and reconfiguring in intra-action.

Bringing this back to literacy studies, Barad sees that there is "an intimate relationship between discourse and materiality that goes beyond the frequently repeated refrain that writing and speaking are material practices" in that "the co-constitution of determinately bounded and propertied entities results from specific intra-actions" (Barad, 2010, 253). This move disrupts the presumption that meaning is created through an exchange (an *inter*action) between pre-existing things. This inseparability of 'object' and 'agencies of observation', means that situated socio-cultural/discursive practices are reconceptualized as inseparable from the materials and matter of which they are a part, while those practices effect specific cuts that produce concepts, boundaries and properties of objects that appear determinate, but are of a provisional and local nature. "Boundaries do not sit still" (Barad 2007, 171), but only last where and while particular cuts endure.

These arguments resonate quite strongly, we suggest, with decades of Literacy Studies research that talks of literacies, rather than literacy as a unified concept that does not change. Literacies are contextualized and situated 'social practices'. 'School literacy', 'night-school literacy', 'vernacular literacies', 'dominant literacies' are phenomena that are constantly produced through particular, situated boundary making practices in specific local contexts. The 'new materialism' and posthuman studies help to direct attention to the other actors (or actants) in these settings and how they shape what literacy and people become in those settings. The socio-cultural approach to Literacy Studies has indeed been good at seeing what gets left out in institutionalized literacy practices, but 'doesn't quite go away', as the apparatus (or the network in ANT speak) includes some meanings and actants' potentials to the exclusion of others so as to ensure some level of stability for itself.

What counts as school literacy is a key example: Cook-Gumperz' (1986, 27) description of 'school literacy' as "decontextualised knowledge validated through text performances" echoes various other observations about these networked socio-material practices (Heath, 1984), similar to Freebody and Freiberg's (2008) description of literacy in schools and in workplace training programmes as a compacted construct, streamlined for administration and for measurement. This literacy is a stabilized phenomenon that can now be marketed and sold globally through materials, training programs and experts, through national departments of Education and through global agencies like UNESCO. It is accompanied by, and takes shape with, standard language ideologies and hierarchies of skills to be learnt that involve normative and relational ways for people to see through objects towards messages, towards text and towards practices. These ways of seeing have the effect of shaping these actants while they participate in these networked practices.

The posthumanist influence encourages particular attention to the specific technologies that track and shape humans in schools (Niesche and Gowlett, 2019): forms of school organisation and technologies (in Barad's terminology: apparatuses) that generate ideas about busyness and productivity, teacher evaluation scorings that produce good teaching (and bad teaching), student assessment practices that produce divides between winners and losers. Returning to Barad, whose arguments we suggest resonate strongly here, one could say that out of intra-action in these phenomena emerge particular kinds of humans and particular local meanings, as cuts are enacted between high and low quality teaching, well and poorly performing students, etc.

Despite the potential of new materialism and posthumanism to produce illuminating and complex accounts, amongst a still relatively small but growing number of literacy studies that work with these conceptual resources, there is, at this point, a rather concerning disappearance of the socio-political dimensions of literacy practices. Lindgren (2019, 6) examines children's learning and development by "paying attention to the myriad of relationships going on between children, materials and environments in preschool". She finds that children constantly seem to be preoccupied with establishing relationships with their environment, as well with other people, with books, pens, paints, clay, water and paper. Light, sound, cold, heat, rain and sunshine are also involved in learning. Things like leaves, sticks, and sand, do something with the children, making them want to look carefully at, feel and explore phenomena. She describes children as emergent in a relational field, where non-human forces are equally at play in constituting children's becomings and for her "the child figures as the embodiment of flexibility and transformation through its multiple becomings with the world". Hackett and Somerville (2017) focus on literacy, bodies and materiality, focusing on how children engage with text on a sensual level, foregrounding 'non-representational aspects of language and communication'. They focus on movement and sound in their study "as more-than-human practices through which the world forms itself, and young children's sounding and movement happen in relation to this" (2017, 377). Young children's literacies are seen not only as embodied sensory experiences but embedded in and inseparable from their entanglement with the world. Zapata et al (2018) start from the perspective that knowing, being, becoming, and doing are co-constituted" in a world of lively relations between humans and nonhumans. They focus on (a) writing as intra-activity; (b) writing as trans-corporeal, porous, and lively; and (c) writing as translingual

assemblages of humans and non-humans, attending to "the entanglements of writing and its multiple productions rather than focusing on human pursuits alone" (2018, 479). They see this rethinking of writing as a matter of ethics, echoing Bennett (2004; 2010) and drawing on (Braidotti, 2018) to recast subjectivities, where the "subject does not exist ahead of or outside language [and materials] but is a dynamic, unstable effect of language/discourse and cultural practice". Ethics, here, is about "a matter of questioning what is being made to matter and how that mattering affects what it is possible to do and think" (Zapata et al, 2018, 482).

Leander and Burris (2020) focus on how people's lives are entwined with computers and computational systems. They present a world where technologies such as embedded algorithms in computer and smartphone software are active agents, recruiting and enrolling humans and where subjectivity and agency are not merely given in advance, but are relational achievements involving people and things. Zapata et al (2018) articulate spatialized repertoires as relations between language, space, objects, and activities to suggest that languaging must be understood as emergent and as intra-acting with vibrant ecological matter, rather than as solely originating from, or mediated by, the human. They find that reimagining writing in relation to a wider spatial repertoire, and as not residing solely in the human, "helps us re-envision both writing and the teaching of writing as a constellation of resources at play rather than a set of discrete skills to secure".

Leander and Boldt (2013) follow a 10-year-old boy through one day as he engages in reading and playing with text from Japanese manga, focusing on the sensations and movements of the body in the moment-by-moment unfolding or emergence of activity. This nonrepresentational approach describes literacy-related activity not as projected toward some textual end point but as living its life in the ongoing present, forming relations and connections across signs, objects, and bodies. They see such activity as saturated with affect and emotion and contrast the child's animated literacy-filled play with his disinterested underperformance in school literacy, where his engagement is not invoked. Leander and Burriss (2020) are concerned how human lives are entwined with computers and computational systems. They quote a study of student reading and how integral algorithms are to modern texts and to constructing readers: "What we read and how we read, and, more importantly, how we are conditioned to imagine ourselves as readers, is increasing determined by algorithms that operate underneath of the surface of texts". They invoke the image of a world where "technologies are active agents, recruiting and enrolling humans and where subjectivity and agency are not merely given in advance, but are relational achievements involving people and things".

These studies describe themselves as being energized by the ethical orientation at the heart of the materialist shift. There is indeed a very strong ethical focus coming from the work of Bennett and others but in the work done so far ethics comes to replace socio-cultural and political analysis, with a result that the politics involved get obscured. This is a worry that Kuby and Rowsell (2017, 288) encounter in responses to their work: ''What about power?'' or ''What about social justice and issues of race and/or economic inequities?'' They respond by seeing "much hopefulness in posthumanism and are energized by the ethical orientation at the heart of this work".

The problem though seems to have to do with how the focus on human/material loses sight of the diversity of humans that are involved in – or rather: produced within – the phenomena in question. If we remember what we have learnt from the earlier Literacy Studies about the importance of social differences in accounting for different literacy practices, then the socio-cultural and the political should not disappear from the analysis. The reappraisal of matter intended by the new materialism and post-humanism aims to provide a different account of agency and ontology, that fundamentally affects socio-cultural and political categories and concepts. But if in its application it loses its hold and attention to situated socio-cultural and political specificity, it loses a very important edge. While laudably critical of the anthropocentrism of preceding approaches, the human-material focus also needs to ask how *particular versions of the human* come into being within phenomena, rather than assuming a generic construct of 'the human' in sensuous engagement with vibrant material. It needs to continue asking questions about causes and consequences of socio-economic and political inequalities, questions, as Lemke (2018 page no) puts it, "about the making of humanity as a category of practice – across lines of race, coloniality, migrants and borders, war, humanitarianism and commodification", to name just some forms of boundary-making and discrimination, attention to which is at risk of being lost, at least in the first wave of posthumanist research. The Literacy Studies focus on situated socio-cultural practices points to a route back to those concerns but also needs to update.

The first wave of new materialist research in Literacy Studies is inclined to portray children as pre-social beings or actants who engage performatively and sensuously with materials and objects and to portray human bodies fusing with technologies without regard to the varying background social contexts of their engagement. In contrast, earlier research of digital literacies has shown the significant variances in these engagements by children in differing class, race, gender and geographic backgrounds (Lemphane and Prinsloo, 2014; Prinsloo and Baynham, 2013). Intra-actions continue to produce other, no less important cuts, while the focus tends to get stuck on those between human and non-human, or between people and things. We see, for example, the continuous cutting apart of economy and polity in institutionalized social orders. This is a cut that, in Fraser's (2014, 67) description, "expels matters defined as 'economic' from the political agenda of territorial states, while freeing capital to roam in a transnational no-man's land where it reaps the benefits of hegemonic ordering while escaping political control". The international marketing of literacy is certainly coproduced by this cut that continues to be enacted. Also, the cuts between economic production and social reproduction processes, divisions of labor and exploitative and expropriative relations, amongst groups of people, as well as with nature, in historically specific ways that demarcate economy from polity, production from reproduction and human from non-human nature continue to be enacted. The ecological, the social and the political are sites of distinct boundary struggles, over the separations of society, polity and nature from economy, and the posthuman turn and new materialist turn also needs to keep track of the social and the political, along with the institutionalized literacy practices that are struggled over and disputed at these sites. In intra-action, neither boundaries nor possibilities sit still (Barad 2007). And for us as intra-actors this means that we can seize opportunities to influence which cuts will remain or become (im)possible.

Ethical research then means to keep a keen eye on the cuts that continue to reinstate or worsen inequalities.

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