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The “West” in Literacy

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Abstract

This paper analyzes a construct that, while pervasive, is not often questioned or defined in literacy studies: the “West.” Through a review of pertinent literature, I explore the ways in which problematical assumptions have undergirded its unqualified use in literacy theory. What is the “West,” who is it, in literacy research? I argue against the assumption of “unmarkedness” of the “West” and some derived terms along three axes: by bringing attention to the geographical-spatial dimension of the construct, through the problematization of the alphabet, and by highlighting the colonial inheritance of the construct. My analysis explores some fundamental biases in the notion of “West,” and invites its reassessment to arrive at a more particular and critically rigorous stance in literacy scholarship.

Keywords: Literacy, West, Colonialism, Alphabet

“Western yardsticks are relevant everywhere because all men must become Western or perish” (Musgrove, 1982, p. 42).

This paper analyzes a construct that, while pervasive, is not often questioned or defined in literacy studies: the “West.” It responds to this gap in literacy scholarship, asking: How did a onetime geographical referent for Europe come to denote a standardized culture of literacy, a way of thinking about literacy, and even a way of being literate? What or who is the “West” in literacy research? Which attributes of literacy practices are welded together in the notion of “Western” literacy? Given the vast socio-cultural, geographical, and ideological constituency of the “West” as it is loosely understood, what do we gain or lose in persisting in its use? There are no clear-cut answers to these questions: however, they are important questions that merit investigation. I argue here that there is a pressing need for literacy scholars to interrogate the term, its vague theoretical applications, and the loaded histories it brings with it.

Literacy scholars have routinely referenced the “West” in their work. The term abounds in its various derivations: “Western literacy” (e.g., Akinnaso, 1992, p. 102; Graff, 1987, p. 8; Hickling-Hudson, 2003, p. 395; Mignolo, 1992, p. 813; Olson, 2009, p. 51; Peat, 1994, p. 273; Prah, 2008, p. 37; Thomas, 2009, p. 13); “Western literacy tradition” (Kataoka, 2003, p. 23; Peltier, 2010, p.10); “Western practice of literacy” (e.g., Frake, 1983, p. 369); “Euro-Western conceptualization and practices of literacy” (e.g., Romero-Little, 2006, p. 400); “Western concept of literacy” (e.g., Harris, 2000, p. 5; Mignolo, 1992, p. 303); “Western literates” (e.g., Harris, 2000, p. 231); “Western culture” (e.g., Gee, 1986, p. 731; Goody & Watt, 1963, p. 331; Olson, 1977, p.176); “first-world western cultures” (e.g., Willis, 1990, p. 7); “Western thought” (e.g., Goody

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& Watt, 1963, p. 320; Wood, 2007, p. 45); “western ideas and concepts” (e.g., Street, 1984, p. 134); “western ideology” (e.g., Street, 1984, p. 129); “Western alphabetic scripts” (Harris, 2000, p. 173); “Western tradition” (e.g., Harris, 2000, p. 233; Olson, 2009, p. 60); “Western-type schools” (e.g., Akinnaso, 1992, p. 70; Daun, 2010, p. 410; Frake, 1983, p. 369); “Western-style schools” (e.g., Scribner, 1984, p. 15); and “non-Western writing systems” (Graff & Duffy, 2008, p. 46).

The above list indicates that scholars subscribing both to the *autonomous* and *ideological* models of literacy (Street, 1984) have, at some point or another, employed the term² in its various manifestations, though the term itself has escaped any real scrutiny. According to Street (1993), the autonomous model conceptualized literacy as “independent of social context, an autonomous variable whose consequences for society and cognition can be derived from its intrinsic character” (p. 5). The 1980s witnessed the development of the ideological model rooted in socio-cultural accounts of literacy, which recognized *multiple* literacies differing through time and space, and implicated within power relations (Gee, 1996; Street, 2003). However great this departure from earlier autonomous approaches, the reductive construct, the “West,” endured, and continues to circulate in literacy scholarship (see e.g., Graff & Duffy, 2008; Luke, Iyer, & Doherty, 2010; Street, 2005). I argue here that the “West” functions much in the same way as the discredited autonomous model of literacy, which, while initially viewed as neutral, came to be widely panned as ethnocentric and insensitive to socio-cultural differences. The “West” is, like many other labels, “saturated with meanings” (Said, 1985, p. 93); nonetheless, in literacy research, it is the unmarked category, a quiet heir to literacy scholarship’s essentializing and reductive past (see Duffy, 2000). In a now ideologically configured field of literacy, I contend, the “West” persists as an autonomous construct, bleached of context, and only seemingly neutral.

The “West,” even as it is treated as an autonomous construct, does not circulate *independently* in the field: It defines itself in opposition to its perceived other, the “non-West,” also rendered conceptually as the “Other,” “East,” “the rest,” or, more infrequently now, the “Orient,” among others. Binaries are theoretical mainstays in literacy scholarship, a fact that has been heavily criticized by scholars (e.g., Collins, 1995; Collins & Blot, 2003; Duffy, 2000; Gee, 1986; Graff, 1986; Graff & Duffy, 2008). Graff (1987), for example, criticized the tyrannical sway of “conceptual dichotomies” such as “literate and illiterate, written and oral, print and script” (p. 69) that plague literacy studies. The “West” in literacy research is often set off against an “East,” which, while it is meant to index *otherness*, is variously configured as: Asia; East Asia; or, the broadest category of them all, the non-“West.” The evocation of these two mutually exclusive yet fuzzy categories hinders macro- and micro- level analyses. I posit that within the still divided and divisive field of literacy studies, the “West”/“non-West” division is arbitrary and tyrannical, sustained by violent institutional forces that enforce and regenerate them (Foucault, 1981). Literacy scholarship, at least to some extent, has been embedded within just such a system of institutions, enforcing—and policing—an

² Scholars sometimes use quotation marks to underscore the complexity of the term “West” in their work; however, this is not a consistent practice, and their reasons for thus marking the complexity remain unarticulated.

imaginary bisection, renewing these categories with every iteration. While this paper focuses principally on the use of one half of the binary (the “West”), my analysis will also underscore the asymmetrical power dynamic between the two. This argument will: first, identify the purely vestigial value of the construct as a geographical marker; second, problematize the “Western” alphabet; and, finally, illuminate how the term is colored by a colonial past. In unfolding the argument along these axes, I illuminate how the construct functions in the same way as the discredited *autonomous* model of literacy, and press for a reconsideration of the term’s usage in literacy research.

Literacy in Space

“The West is at once both an equivocal and an ethnocentric definition. Apparently it refers to geography, but its essence is much more political” (Quintavall, 2004-2005, p. 4).

The “West” is often treated as if it has “a geographic territory with an affiliated population” (Sakai, 2005, p. 180). Coronil (1996) argued that this illusion has been internalized through the naturalizing force of geographic mapping (pp. 52-53). In literacy theory, however, this arbitrary demarcation of space sketches out fictive boundaries with real consequences.

Because the construct derives from a variety of different disciplines, it is important to situate it within cross-discursive conversations. The “West” is generally conceived as a single grouping of a set of countries, but with no across-the-board consensus on *which* countries should be included. For instance, according to economist Stolnitz (1953), the “West” is made up of “the nations of Northwestern and Central Europe, Scandinavia, the Low Countries, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Jews in Israel, and the white populations of the Union of South Africa and Southern Rhodesia” (p. 3). Education scholars Tamir & Cohen (1980) defined “Western” countries as including the U.S., U.K., South Africa, and Australia (p. 70). Sociologist Frankenberg (2000), on the other hand, noted that the “West,” “*in the West*” is seen to comprise of “the capitalist European countries, North America, Australia, New Zealand, and, on occasion, Japan(!)” (p. 458). Another example of the grouping is provided by the *European Sociological Association*, which provides the following text in the registration section for its 8th conference (Become a member of ESA, 2007):

Western countries include the fifteen (pre 2004) member states of the European Union: France, Italy, Germany, Austria, Luxembourg, Great Britain, Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Sweden; Norway, Switzerland and Israel, as well as Canada, US, Australia, Japan, Singapore and Hong Kong. Eastern countries are all the others.

While this is just a brief sampling of how the construct is employed across discourses, it gives us a sense of the arbitrary manner in which the “West” is imagined.

Appadurai (2000) has noted that traditionally, *areas* are imagined to have a “geographical, civilisational, and cultural coherence” based on “immobile aggregates” of particular qualities (p. 7). As I argue, however, it is problematic to theorize literacy using a construct built on these loosely defined areas that homogenize the heterogeneity within.

The silence about who gets included, according to what benchmarks, and why, is not only a critical problem when it comes to the “West” in literacy analysis, but also for any broadly conceived term.

In considering the “West” as a kind of geographical cluster, for example, one concern is that not everyone residing in a “Western” nation is included: as Hall (2002) has pointed out, “internal others” are ignored (p. 59). Historically marginalized groups are generally excluded from the count: e.g., Native Americans in the U.S., and the Aborigines in Australia (see section, “*Colonizing Literacy*”). McCaffery’s (2009) exploration of the literacy practices of the “Gypsies” and “Travellers” in England and Ireland, for example, is a study of the consequences of this kind of selective exclusion. Another example of a marginalized group is that of immigrants. Gogolin (2002) noted that immigrants (primarily from what are labeled non-“Western” countries) form a third of the population under 35 years in Europe (p. 123). Nevertheless, their voices—like those of other marginalized communities—are muted in the larger imagining of the continent, and, by theoretical extension, the “West” (Sakai, 2005). In this way, the “West” of the scholarly imagination, more often than not, indexes tacit privilege, effectively bracketing populations on the basis of race, linguistic background, and socio-economic status. This aspect remains under-addressed in scholarship.

In literacy scholarship, the “West” is frequently substituted for “Europe”: e.g., Brokaw (2002) refers to “European alphabetic literacy” in his work (p. 276). However, differences and divergences are glossed over in treating “European”/“Western” literacy as if it is embedded within homogeneous social and cultural contexts. Europe, like the “West,” is a functional abstraction,³ and it is misguided to conceptualize a homogenous culture of *anything* in Europe given the pluralities that are part of its essential make-up. As Smith (1992) has noted, Europeans as a group diverge in terms of language, space, religious beliefs, law, political affiliations, and financial systems: “they constitute not a ‘unity in diversity’ ...but a ‘family of cultures’ made up of a syndrome of partially shaped historical traditions and cultural heritages” (p. 242).

In the new millennium, as the European Union is shaping a more politically unified aggregate of countries, there is also a greater recognition of the pluralities within it (Herrmann & Brewer, 2004). A homogenized notion of “Eurocultural” literacy, for example, blanches out what could be significant differences for the purpose of theoretical simplicity. What of the multiple languages and cultures co-existing within the physical boundaries of Europe, where borders have historically been in a perpetual state of displacement (Leontidou, 2004), crafting what are complex literacy practices? Rather than applying reductive labels that raise defenses against “threats to conceptual coherence” (Meacham, 2000-2001, p. 181), scholars should mine the complexities arising from such linguistic and cultural “border crossing[s]” (Gogolin, 2002, p. 126).

One salient layover in this discussion: Japan, a geographically “Eastern” anomaly. Chomsky (1991) once famously conferred on Japan the title of “honorary European [i.e., “Western”]” (brackets in the original) (p. 13). Other scholars have also incorporated it into the list of “Western” countries (see, e.g., Coronil, 1996; Hall, 2002). Such

³ While they are both theoretical abstractions, Europe has clear political boundaries, even if they may be negotiated.

“endorsements” are consequential for literacy analysis, since “Western” literacy, as a theoretical variable, has also been used interchangeably with *alphabetic* literacy. If Japan is included in the list of “Western” nations, *alphabetic* literacy cannot be equated with “Western” literacy, since the Japanese use syllabaries (Birch, 2002, p. 17). Japan’s inclusion is tricky at another level: as Nakamura (2002) has noted, the “modernization” of Japan “is not intrinsically a matter of *westernization* [emphasis added]” (p. 66) This points to another questionable scholarly tendency to collapse the terms “Western” and “modern.”⁴

Thus, even as “culturally embedded” (Street, 1984, p. 2) accounts of literacy have been a growing trend in the last few decades, the internal multiculturalism of what is imagined as the “West” remains under-explored. The assumption of “Western” cultural homogeneity silences marginalized internal Others within theory, running counter to the foundational aims of the ideological modeling of literacy. Literacy practices among minority linguistic and ethnic communities in the “West,” then, should be carefully attended to, in a spirit of scholarly inclusiveness that elucidates, and not erases, the differences within. My analysis suggests that literacy scholars need to acknowledge that the construct “West” is geographically unstable, arbitrary, and shifting. While, as Hall (2002) noted, notions about “West” have not “*primarily* [been] ideas about place and geography [emphasis added]” (p. 56), there remain political and geographical underpinnings to the term. The “West,” embedded within a problematically reductive frame, should be reevaluated to assess its continuing viability as an organizing construct in literacy research.

A Script for Literacy

“...[T]he history of the human mind, as of the human language, falls into roughly two epochs, the pre-alphabetic and the post-alphabetic” (Havelock, 1980, p. 96).

In this section I explore one of the focal points of literacy scholarship, the alphabet. First, I begin with the “Western alphabet,” a technology marked by internal pluralities that are oftentimes overlooked in literacy studies. Then, I turn to the Greek alphabet, celebrated as the originator of the “Western alphabet.” A complex discursive realm privileges the “Western” alphabet and the Greek alphabet, often silent on the power differentials that undergird it.

The *script* has been a site of prolific theorizing in literacy studies (see, e.g., Goody & Watt, 1963; Havelock, 1980; Olson, 1977, 1987; Ong, 1982; Shlain, 2005; Street, 1984). Since the “alphabetic” script has been framed as a singularly “Western” device, it has been pivotal in the imagining of “Western literacy” as a coherent construct. In addition, its properties have been widely used to suggest “Western” ascendancy in literacy research and elsewhere (see, e.g., Collins & Blot, 2003; Derrida, 1998). Van Toorn (2001), for example, noted:

For over 200 years, Western understandings of the development of writing and literacy have been dominated by a narrative of evolutionary progress. This

⁴ This is another term that tends to be reductively reified in theory; a problematization of what is “modern” is beyond the scope of this paper.

narrative locates the primitive beginnings of writing in a pictographic stage, which advances to an ideographic stage before crossing the final threshold into “writing proper” epitomised by the alphabet, a phonographic script or code for spoken words. Different cultures were located at different stages in a universal human journey towards “writing proper.” While indigenous peoples were fixed at the primitive pictographic stage, and Oriental cultures at the ideographic stage, Europeans led the way forward by inventing the alphabet. (p. 209)

In literacy scholarship, the work of the *Great Divide* scholars⁵ crystallized this line of thinking. While their most crucial texts were penned decades ago, their work is pivotal for this analysis because the “West” as a construct became entrenched precisely in that formative moment for literacy studies. Moreover, by interrogating the historical conditions that first enabled and shaped its use, we can better situate the “West” within contemporary literacy scholarship. For the *Great Divide* theorists, so-called alphabetic cultures were headed inexorably toward alphabetization, the teleological endpoint of literacy.⁶ In this manner, older scholarship about the alphabet has helped to perpetuate the notion of “Western” literacy as advanced, in contrast with the perceived “backwardness” of “Other”/“Oriental”/“Eastern” literacies (see, for example, Stubbs, 1980). In addition, the notion of “Western” literacy worked to create a distinct identity for the “West,” as Harbsmeier (1985) noted: “Only early modern European civilisation came to make its own ability properly to describe and understand the other, its own proper literacy, into the very definition of its own identity as against the rest of the world” (p. 72). Thus, the alphabet came to stand not only for “Western” ascendancy, but also played a critical role in the formation of its self-identity as (un)markedly distinct from its Other.

The “Western Alphabet”

“The depicting of objects is appropriate to a savage people, signs of words and of propositions, to a barbaric people, and the alphabet to a civilized people” (Rousseau, 1966, p. 17).

In recent years, literacy scholars have criticized the ethnocentric scriptism of *Great Divide* theorists (e.g., Collins, 1995; Street, 1984), but the alphabet itself has not been sufficiently problematized. Goody and Watt’s (1963) discussion of what makes the “Western” alphabet unique and successful is pertinent to reproduce here:

The number of sounds which the human breath can produce is vast; but nearly all languages are based on the formal recognition by the society of only forty or so of these sounds. The success of the alphabet...comes from the fact that its system of graphic representation takes advantage of this socially-conventionalized pattern of sound in all language systems; by symbolizing in letters these selected

⁵ The Great Divide scholars are principally comprised of Eric Havelock, Walter Ong, Jack Goody, Ian Watt, and David Olson (see reference list for representative works), for whom literacy was a “neutral” technology, shorn of context, having direct consequences on cognitive ability. See Street (1984) and Gee (1990) for a comprehensive overview of *Great Divide* scholarship.

⁶ See also Derrida (1976).

phonemic units the alphabet makes it possible to write easily and read unambiguously about anything which the society can talk about. (p. 316)

There are several problems that stand out here and in related aspects of their argument about the alphabet. First, the Latin or Roman alphabet, which grew out of the Greek alphabetic system, comprises both logographic and alphabetic symbols (Mazama, 1998; Strauss & Altwerger, p. 2007). Crucially, however, Goody and Watt lumped logographic and pictographic systems together (p. 314), contrasting them with what they viewed as the unalloyed phoneticism of the alphabet (p. 315). Second, the "European"/"Western" alphabet comprises hundreds of characters, more than literacy scholars traditionally take into account (Böcker, von Niman, & Larsson, 2006, p. 32). It is unclear to what extent these divergences are encompassed by Goody and Watt's focus on the "forty or so" sounds of the "Western alphabet." Third, Goody and Watt are silent on how the "socially-conventionalized" sound patterns are negotiated through different alphabetic orthographic systems. Orthographic conventions vary significantly across "alphabetic" languages (e.g. Aro & Wimmer, 2003; Mann & Wimmer, 2002); the knowledge of orthographic conventions in one alphabetic language, for example, does not necessarily afford the knowledge of another.

Though Goody and Watt (1963) were writing decades ago, terms such as "Western letters" (Benton, 2000, p. xvi; Coulmas, 2008, p. 212; Hannas, 2005, p. 57) or "Western alphabetic scripts" (Harris, 2000, p. 173) or "Western alphabet" (Askew, 2005, p. 163; Jiehong, 2005, p. 102;) contain residues of literacy's ethnocentric past, and help prop up an unqualified construct that enjoys currency even in the new millennium. The field today prides itself on its attention to context: It is important, then, for us to situate the alphabet within the historical context from which we receive our strongest notions about it. Context is not merely the here and now; it carries the marks of history.

The Greek Alphabet

"Alphabetic script is in itself and for itself the most intelligent" (Hegel, as cited in Derrida, p. 3, 1998).

The *Great Divide* theorists held non-alphabetic literacy as inferior, while they simultaneously crafted an ostensibly unified, delimited "Western" literacy in perpetual opposition to it. In this section, I advance the idea that the *Great Divide* theorists' privileging of "Western alphabetic literacy" was a manifestation of, not only what Harris (2000) criticized as *scriptism*, but also *barbarographism*, a term I coin to describe the marginalization of non-Greek-derived alphabetic and analphabetic literacy practices. The term is inspired by Sherratt's (2003) discussion of ancient Greece, whose citizens gave the world the concepts of the *barbarian* and *barbarophonism*, the latter meaning "speaking barbarian [non-Greek] languages." Analphabetic scripts were not simply considered inferior, but *barbaric* in contrast to the vaunted alphabet.

"Greek alphabetic literacy" has been touted as leading to the emergence of "Western" rational thought, historical consciousness, and the spirit of individualism. Goody and Watt's (1963) central argument was that the revolution of widespread alphabetic literacy, which flourished in ancient Greece, not only facilitated, but made possible the very development of "Western civilization." They substantiated their case by calling special

attention to literacy as enabled by the Greek alphabetic system, which achieved supremacy as a culturally and cognitively transformative⁷ agent:

some crucial features of Western culture came into being in Greece soon after the existence, for the first time, of a rich urban society in which a substantial portion of the population was able to read and write; and that, consequently, the overwhelming debt of the whole of contemporary civilization to classical Greece must be regarded as in some measure the result, not so much of the Greek genius, as of the intrinsic differences between non-literate (or proto-literate) and literate societies; the latter being mainly represented by those societies using the Greek alphabet and its derivatives. (p. 332)

It is clear in their argument that the “West” is synonymized with “civilization,” and the “West”/“non-West” dichotomy parallels the “literate”/“non-literate” divide. These overbroad generalizations, while popular, are untenable arguments in a field that locates literacy within context-bound practices.

Great Divide theorists also praised the *intrinsic* cognitive effects of the alphabet, which, it was implied, were not triggered by non-alphabetic systems. “Western” abstraction, logic, analysis, and classification were enabled by alphabetic technology, while they did not develop in the “East” due to the constraints of “cumbersome” writing systems (see also Logan, 1986). Of course, a starting point would be to question how it was at all possible to generalize across such diverse scripts within an undefined “East,” a category as fluid as the “West” itself. For instance, not all “Eastern” writing systems are ideogrammatic⁸ or logographic (if one conceives of the “East” as Asia). Indic scripts, for example, are alphasyllaberic (Gough, 1967, p. 73). In addition, these broad claims were largely founded upon ethnocentric speculations, rather than empirical evidence (see Street, 1984). Gough’s (1968) response to Goody & Watt’s (1963) thesis, for example, found that there was systematization of science (one of the cognitive effects outlined by them) in both ancient India and China without “alphabetic” literacy. Goody and Watt’s arguments were representative but not unique, conceived and entrenched within a paradigm that upheld the alphabet as a beacon of “Western civilization.” And while Goody (1968) subsequently revised his position and nuanced his arguments, by introducing the concept of “restricted” literacy, for example, the fundamental thrust of his argument remained unchanged.

We find echoes of Goody and Watt’s (1963) notions about alphabetic literacy in Olson’s (1977) work. His central thesis was that “the invention of the alphabetic writing system gave to Western culture many of its predominant features” (p. 176). A decade later, he reiterated “the importance of [alphabetic] literacy to Western culture and hence to ‘modernity’” (1987, p. 7). Havelock (1980), another proponent of the transformative potential of the Greek alphabet, claimed that the phonetic properties of the alphabet had significant consequences on “the history of Western culture” (p. 93). A highly influential school of thought in literacy studies, then, assumed a strong causal link between the

⁷ Scribner and Cole’s (1981) work among the Vai people of Liberia provided an important rejoinder to this thesis.

⁸ Ideogrammatic scripts comprise of symbols that correspond to words.

emergence of the Greek alphabet and “Western civilization.” The belief in the existence of a homogenous “Western culture” and a “discourse of Europe” (Havelock, 1980), as if they were uniform, stable, and bounded entities, undergirded this assumption.

Many scholars have mounted a challenge against the *Great Divide* theorists’ characterization of alphabetic literacy as superior (see, e.g., Baron, 2000; Street, 1984). The “West”/“non-West” binary, as well as the equation: civilization = “West,” are unsustainable in this age of rapid social and cultural transformations, immigration, ethnic and cultural “browning” (see Rodriguez, 2002), collapsing and reconstitution of national boundaries, and unprecedented economic growth and technological revolutions in what have been traditionally considered non-Western societies (e.g., China, India). Although the field of literacy has broadened its scope and embraced such developments in recent decades, continued reliance on the “West” as a working construct indicates an enduring blindness to its homogenizing power, and, most importantly, its embeddedness within an ethnocentric past in literacy studies. It is not enough to reference the “alphabet,” or “alphabetic literacy,” or “alphabetic literacy practices” without attending to the complexities that are contained within such a conceptualization. It is not enough to assume that everyone using alphabetic scripts has similar literacy practices. To take one example, while learners of both Bahasa Indonesia and English employ the alphabet, literacy practices associated with them would be different. The questions that need to be thus urgently addressed include: Who do we bring together in conceptualizing the practice of “alphabetic literacy”? Who do we leave out? Why?

Colonizing Literacy

“I have no knowledge of either Sanscrit or Arabic. But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value. I have read translations of the most celebrated Arabic and Sanscrit works. I have conversed, both here and at home, with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. I am quite ready to take the oriental learning at the valuation of the orientalist themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is indeed fully admitted by those members of the committee who support the oriental plan of education” (Macaulay, 1835/1972).

“Alphabetic literacy,” if such a principle may be broadly applied, unified the major colonial players (i.e., the French, British, Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch). The alphabet was no bit player in the colonial context; scholars have argued that it served as a crucial facet of colonial subjugation (see, e.g., Grossman, 2006, §2). As noted in the previous section, its putatively superior affordances were used to assert “Western” exceptionalism in ways that portrayed members of analphabetic cultures (specifically colonial subjects) as less developed, if not entirely barbaric (see, e.g., Rousseau, 1966). Beyond helping to craft a differentiated literacy landscape, the “Western” alphabet was also instrumental in the *process* of colonization. Mignolo (1992), for example, noted that the process of alphabetization of Native American hieroglyphic texts was a part of some of the earliest attempts at subjugating the languages and memories of those cultures (p. 312). Indigenous groups in Mexico had a similar experience during the Spanish colonial period as a result of the imposition of the alphabet (Hamel, 2008; López-Gopar, 2007). In India,

to cite another example, English literacy policies were fashioned to create a specific type of British subjectivity (Bhabha, 1984, 1985; Viswanathan, 1989).

Regardless, as Donaldson (1998) pointed out, the role of the alphabet as a colonial technology has been largely overlooked. Alphabetic literacy, according to Donaldson, functioned as a “mobile technology” of subjugation, transforming indigenous cultures to better serve colonial interests (pp. 47-48). Donaldson further claimed that the (English/“Western”) alphabet played a critical role in the transformation of the very *habitus*⁹ of Native Americans and in the supplanting of indigenous “symbolic literacy” with the Western “sequential” form (p. 50). The imposition of the alphabet, then, would seem to have entailed fundamental epistemological and ideological transformations. However, there are problems with Donaldson’s claim: The alphabetic/non-alphabetic cultural dichotomy is too easily equated with the “West”/non-“West” dichotomy, and the reductive characterization of “Western” literacy as “sequential” and “Native” literacy as “symbolic” is also disputable. In addition, the claim that *habitus* may be easily reconfigured through the alphabet is a theoretical overreach, for *habitus* is characterized by systemic inertia and, by definition, resistant to change.

Scholars looking at the Australian and African colonial contexts have made similar claims about alphabetic literacy as an instrument of colonization. According to Grossman (2006), the colonial introduction of alphabetic literacy “was not innocent, neutral or ‘natural’” (§2). It was imposed on Australian Aboriginal communities with the aim of “transform[ing] Aboriginal consciousness both through suppressing and marginalising its previously *analphabète* systems of meaning *and* by re-shaping the ways in which Aboriginal peoples come to know and relate to themselves, to each other and to settler colonialism.” Wyrod (2003) made similar claims on the imposition of French literacy practices within the colonial context in West Africa. However, while alphabetic literacy may have been forcibly imposed, it often faced resistance from locals and invariably went through some modifications under indigenous cultural practices. Prinsloo (2005), for example, noted that alphabetic literacy underwent transformation when appropriated by colonial subjects. In South Africa, he observed that alphabetic literacy

practices and commitments were imported from a European context where they had deep roots in established practices, social networks and material relations. But once transported, they very soon encountered different contexts, histories and practices, and underwent changes that sometimes took by surprise those who had brought them. (p. 81)

Scholars focusing on the North American context have also illuminated adaptive modifications in the acquisition of alphabetic literacy (e.g., De La Piedra, 2009; Lopenzina, 2006; Rockwell, 2005). The implication here is a crucial one: the imposition of “Western alphabetic literacy,” however it is understood, is not unilinear. Its appropriation entails adaptations, and there are critical—and agentive—transformations that occurred in the adoption and employment of “alphabetic” scripts.

An important aspect of the colonial literacy narrative, embedded partly within the “West”/“East” dichotomy, held that the introduction of (alphabetic) literacy helped

⁹ See Bourdieu (1977).

“civilize”¹⁰ “Others.” *Great Divide* scholars made this claim quite overtly: as Olson (1988) put it, “literacy makes us civilized” (p. 87). Hodgens (1999) provided an example of how this played out in Australia, where, up to the 1960s, national literacy policy was governed “by the ideology of British subjectivity based on the Victorian notion of ‘civilisation’” (p. 4) (see also Hickling-Hudson, 2003). Members of the Aboriginal “analphabetic” cultures were presented as “‘savages,’ or pathetic creatures who would die out because of an inability to adapt to Western civilization” (Hodgens, 1999, p. 4). Note here that the outcome for those who could not adapt to “Western” culture was death. Adaptation to “Western” civilization was possible, but only through alphabetic literacy. Unfortunately, the belief that the best kind of literacy is *alphabetic* literacy, as Goody & Watt (1963) and others have claimed, has also helped *create* the category of people branded as “illiterate” or “preliterate” over the years (see Duffy, 2000).

The colonial practice of disparaging or invalidating alphabetic literacy continues to resonate in literacy policy-making in parts of the post-colonial world (Muspratt, Luke, & Freebody, 1997; Prinsloo & Breier, 1996). In *The Sociolinguistics of Development in Africa*, Djité (2008) has argued that the promotion of “Western” languages poses an obstacle to African development. When only dominant literacy practices in select languages are valued in post-colonial contexts, it lays the groundwork for systemic *linguicism*¹¹ (see Luke & Dooley, 2011; Pütz, 1995; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Perry (2005) called attention to the bastardization of “non-Western literacy practices” in her work on Sudanese refugees (p. 3). In a similar vein, Omoniyi (2003) observed that local governments continue to privilege “Western models of literacy” at the cost of literacy education in local languages in Africa (p. 134). Wyrod (2003) provided a typical example of this in West Africa, where:

official literacy means the ability to read and write in a colonial European language using the Latin alphabet. West African countries categorized as anglophone, francophone, or lusophone measure literacy in their respective colonial languages. Yet, some scholars have rightly noted that the Africans living in these countries are overwhelmingly “africanophone,” with little knowledge of official, ex-colonial languages. This leaves many uncounted people in West Africa who are literate in indigenous languages using modified or wholly unique writing systems, yet who are deemed officially illiterate. (p. 2)

The fact that literacy in vernacular languages is officially discounted has serious repercussions on how local cultures are viewed within and without post-colonial nations. Phillips, Lampert, and Healy (2004) provided a compelling critique of the pressures on

¹⁰ The “civilizing” goals of colonizers were intertwined with missionary activities in many contexts. The dissemination of Christianity was, moreover, often complicated by language and literacy issues. While an examination of the relationship between missionary activity and literacy is beyond the scope of this paper, the link is important to bear in mind when exploring literacy intervention in colonial contexts (see Akinaso, 1993; Besnier, 1991; Bhabha, 1985; Chege, 2006; Schieffelin, 2000; Wyrod, 2003).

¹¹ *Linguicism* may be defined as: “ideologies and structures that are used to legitimate, effectuate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources between groups which are defined on the basis of language” (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988, p. 13).

indigenous students in Australia to forsake native literacy practices. In a review of that work, Exley (2006) referred to the system that the indigenous students are forced to adopt as a “white Western literacy system” (p. 3). This is the only occurrence of this phrase I found in my research, but it reveals what is so often left unsaid: that the term “West” is also part of a greater, racialized discourse. The “West,” as it is imagined, is actually the unmarked white.

Conclusion

“Our ideas of ‘East’ and ‘West’ have never been free of myth and fantasy...” (Hall, 2002, p. 56).

A “mythic construct” (Sakai, 2005), the “West” has become hypostatized in literacy scholarship. In this paper, I explored the term along three lines, by: first, highlighting its arbitrary and shifting spatial boundaries; second, relating it to enduring notions about the ascendancy of the alphabet; and, finally, bringing its colonial antecedents into sharp relief. In the process, I showed that the construct is conceived in the same way as *Great Divide* scholars subscribing to the autonomous model conceptualized literacy, as if it were neutral and could be understood divested of its context. In order to move towards a more truly ideological model, the historical traces of terms such as the “West” need to face examination. As Graff (2010) has noted,

present day conceptions, arrangements, and practices of literacy as well as schooling and learning are historically founded and grounded. They are also strong and powerfully resistant to change. Ignorance of the circumstances in which crucial concepts, arrangements, and expectations were fashioned, the means by which they have been maintained, and their consequences together limit severely if not contradict directly contemporary analysis, diagnosis, and prescription. (p. 248)

The “West” as a construct derives from a particular historical context, and indexes a space of privilege, prestige, and power. It acts as code for “elite” (and also, less obviously, “whiteness”). While other terms have faced scrutiny in literacy studies (e.g., “literate,” “illiterate,” “preliterate”), the “West” has somehow slipped under the radar. Notwithstanding recent scholars’ attention to cross-cultural plurality, plasticity, and porosity, it remains an unmarked presence in literacy research. Residues of the old autonomous model clearly endure today (Bartlett, 2008; Collins & Blott, 2003); and the “West” is one of the constructs that enable its survival.

Because it has become naturalized within literacy discourse, scholars tend to treat it as if it were an objective term, neglectful of its shifting and historically drawn contours. Duffy’s (2000) problematization of the term “preliterate,” as applied to the Hmong people of Laos, offers insight into such practices in literacy research. Duffy uses the concept of “terministic screen” (Burke, 1966) to explain a deliberately bounded scope of literacy analyses. “Terministic screen” refers to language that privileges or selects a particular view of reality, while blocking off other potential conceptualizations of the world. Duffy finds, for example, that the term “preliterate,” when applied to the Hmong, employs the force of discourse (or “rhetoric”) in devaluing their culture, while also

rendering invisible troubling questions of asymmetry of power in the development of literacy. The “West” *as essence* is used to exercise a similar discursive hegemony over literacy studies, by enabling the construction of a particular kind of socio-cultural narrative that silences a symphony of marginalized voices, while concealing troubling questions of power.

In persisting with the “West” as a construct, we as scholars lose analytical nuance and depth in addition to injecting biases into literacy theory. The problem does not just lie in the “West”: the field is rife with *global* categories that operate as if they index an objective reality, when in fact they simply limit our ability to develop rich theories of literacy. Other examples of such terms include “developed,” “developing,” “underdeveloped,” “first world,” “third world,” “global North,” and “global South”; they are constructs that have become reified through repeated iterations in scholarly discourses. We need to ask: Why do these terms circulate so often without qualifications? Why are they viewed as “obvious” categories that do not need to be unpacked? While it is implicit that *all* constructs are by definition reductive, scholars need to qualify such constructs as they are received from and play into old, ethnocentric narratives ensconced within imbalanced systems of power.

Is “qualification” a sufficient move for scholars? Are there alternative frames we may consider? In my opinion, qualifying a construct like the “West” is a necessary but not sufficient move in literacy scholarship. We have to ask: Whose practices are invoked in the term “Western literacy”? Whose notions are represented in thinking of a “Western concept of literacy”? Whose culture do we index with “Western culture”? Who thinks “Western thought[s]”? What, or whose, is “Western ideology”? What is this mega-category of “Western alphabetic scripts”? How many systems do we generalize in calling something a “non-Western writing system”? What is the theoretical value of subsuming so much difference into a single category? What are the consequences for literacy policy-makers in making such generalizations?

If the construct has theoretical value as a heuristic, its use nevertheless must be recognized as a motivated decision that inadvertently or by design mobilizes past and present exercises of power. And, if the “West” indexes privilege, and stands aligned with “whiteness,” our attempts to grapple with ideas of equity and diversity become more difficult in our persistent use of a construct that washes out difference. In fact, the question is not limited to how we scholars receive and employ this term. Importantly, it filters down into the classroom, where the “West” (like “preliterate”) is one of many “imposed and inherited words that shape the ways in which students and teachers think, talk, and write” (Duffy, 2000, p. 251). Earlier, for instance, I provided examples of contexts in which literacy practices aligned with specific (European) languages were imposed at the cost of local practices because of received notions about the superiority of the “West” or what is perceived as “its” literacy; these kinds of divisions have real implications about who is even *recognized* as literate. While the construct is tied to an older, colonial era, and part of a specific Euro-American historical narrative, the constructs “West,” “East,” and their derivatives are those that not only circulate freely in scholarship, they reinforce ethnocentric worldviews and have had and continue to have profound implications for literacy policy across the globe. The term refers to dominant groups, scripts, and, ultimately, literacies; in excavating what these are, we would bring

to surface some of the latent power differentials that underscore literacy theory. Instead of persisting with fossilized constructs for the sake of expediency rather than for their analytic value, our focus should shift to a systematic interrogation and evaluation of the *particular* in literacy studies.

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