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An Interview with Tomás Mario Kalmar, Author of *Illegal Alphabets and Adult Biliteracy*

Rebecca Lorimer Leonard

University of Massachusetts - Amherst, rlorimer@english.umass.edu

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An Interview with Tomás Mario Kalmar, Author of *Illegal Alphabets and Adult Biliteracy*

Rebecca Lorimer Leonard

In January 2019, Tomás Mario Kalmar and Rebecca Lorimer Leonard met for a video conference to discuss the second edition of *Illegal Alphabets*. Below are excerpts from their exchange, edited for clarity and length. Their conversation focused on the book's origins and the context of the scholarly commentaries that appear in the second edition. Kalmar and Leonard also discuss the book's contributions to literacy studies, teaching the book, and its lasting relevance to notions of migration, borders, discrimination, identity, language, and legality. Leonard's review of the second edition of the book follows her interview with Kalmar and frames its relevance to community literacy researchers, practitioners, and teachers.

Rebecca: Tell me the story of the book. How it came to be.

Tomás: How the book came to be. There was an incident at the camp. Now when I say the camp I'm referring to what in the area was known as the Union Jackson labor camp. . . This labor camp was where, oh I think something like 120 local farmworkers were lodgers and had little rooms. And I spent all my time there at those. So, the story of where the book began is in the incident that prompted it. It began because I first started working at the camp, which is the story of four years. This was probably in my third year in the area, and I guess I should make it clear that when I arrived in Cobden, Illinois, in 1978, it's a small town and the folks there told me, "There is a thousand people here and two thousand Mexicans." Now, the people spoke no Spanish and the Mexicans spoke no English. And so the only people in the area who could communicate with both sides were about half of a dozen of us who were bilingual and we were a motley crew. We did a lot of work on anti-alcoholism, someone from Puerto Rico. There was a very aristocratic lady from Mexico, who was connected to the church, and there was *moi*. So, I spent a lot of time getting to know people on both sides of the language border, as they liked to call it there.

But things had come to a climax at the camp in the summer of 1981. I had stopped working for the various publicly funded organizations that provided help for the migrants, there were about half a dozen of them. There was the daycare which I helped to start, a Head Start daycare. The previous year I had driven the school bus because it gave me access to the grower's property so I could meet the parents. So, I had lots of friends among the migrant workers—the Mexicans there. And I got a phone call because there had been an incident at the camp. Raúl who was one of the leaders, a very fine person, was celebrating the confirmation of his daughter at the church or some such family celebration. He had little tables outside his rooms and he had invited some friends and they

were drinking beer. The camp had got a new camp manager, but he was an anglo guy, and he told Raúl that he was not allowed to drink beer in public. Raúl said basically, give me a break you know, but it escalated and the guy pulled out his gun and shot into the ground and said they had to go back inside to have their beer. Something of that sort. So, things got pretty intense and this was the first time I'd heard anything like an uprising in the camp.

I arrived and I said I would only do the interpreting if it was understood that I would interpret both sides. I wasn't just going to translate into Spanish what the people in authority wanted me to tell the Mexicans. But they were going to have to listen to what the Mexicans had to say. "Okay, that's fine, that's fine." Raul was a leader, and he was already bilingual in Tarascan—there were eight hundred of the people in the area who were Tarascans—and Spanish, but he knew much more English than anyone gave him credit for. Anyway, we all got together in the big building which was the daycare center, and he told me basically, *en español*, "Go home we don't need you here." I said, "Okay, but they called me." He said, "You work for them." I said, "No I don't, not any longer." He said, "Well how can you help us?" I suggested one way or another. He said, "Look, you write, you're a writer. Why don't you write something about what is going on here?" I said, "*si quieres*." I said to him, "Look, many people think that you guys don't want folks to know you're here. I've never felt that way, but if you want me to write about it. . ." He said, "No no, tell what's going on here! This is important, this is serious stuff." I said, "Okay, I'll write a little column in the newspaper." He said, "Forget that, just write a book!"

It meant a lot to me. It's great to be telling you this story. Because I said, "Okay, if you tell me to, I'll write a book!" . . . When I was writing the book for the public, cause my advisor understood I wanted to publish this dissertation, you're meant to say that I had permission from these subjects, but I felt I had the moral equivalent. I mean I had been told by them to write it at this meeting. So, I think I might even have put something about that in the foreword, but that was the origin of why I decided to write a book. I don't know if it's an honest answer or a great story.

Rebecca: Sounds honest to me. I am convinced.

Tomás: There are many stories I could tell about what went on there, about driver's licenses, all sorts of stuff. But I didn't, I ended up writing a book about their relationship to the English language. And somewhere along the way I must have convinced myself that anyone who reads the book with full awareness will get to see that this is something unusual. That this is Kalmar telling you that this is what the world looks like from the viewpoint of someone who is not a U.S. citizen and is not a legal migrant, but is what around there was called an "illegal alien," using their intelligence and their other skills to pull together and to solve problems that they solve very intelligently. So, it's a metaphor. It's a parable that when they treat English—the English language—as if it was a hitherto unwritten

language of a primitive tribe, they are saying something to us. Us, on this side of the language border. Well they are both us.

Rebecca: So you were teaching prior to this and then you were doing work with agencies [in Southern Illinois] and then after that you went back to graduate school to write the dissertation?

Tomás: By the time I left, I had worn many hats because I had had various jobs. Not just with the Illinois Migrant Council. When I left though, 1983-4-5-6, I did an enormous amount of work in the Boston area. There was a big literacy campaign going on. I was very involved in that. I was one of the very few people who had seen someone learn how to read and write from scratch. But the Boston literacy really meant ESL for the many migrants. It was a very intense experience. I was very far removed from academic stuff. I went back to the Harvard Graduate School of Education in 1991 to write the book. I had dropped out of Harvard Graduate School twice. Harvard dropouts are a dime a dozen, you know, but to drop out twice takes a bit of doing. The first time I was a graduate student in medieval history, which was my passion and is still my passion. But I left under a cloud. I left and taught high school. . . . Then after I had been teaching for a few years from 1968–1972, my Australian wife then and me were very involved in the free schools that were popping up all over the place in the Boston area. All sorts of different little educational experiments, you know, the sixties. Then we went back to Australia. . . . In Australia, I was translator and coordinator for Paulo Freire when he came to visit Australia in 1974. And '75 I was back in Mexico; '76 back in New York. I was down and out, homeless for a little while. I went back to Australia and got my kids, so on and so on.

So then for me to return to Harvard graduate school after all of those experiences was a big thing. And I told myself, Tomás, this time around you're not gonna quit...you're gonna stay there because you're gonna write this book.

Rebecca: Were you working with Jim Gee at Harvard or was he a colleague at some point?

Tomás: Rebecca it is such a treat for me, the things you bring up. How come you mention Jim Gee?

Rebecca: His writing the first edition foreword. I wondered how that came to be.

Tomás: Jim Gee was already famous back then. He wasn't all about this game stuff. No, he was about the new literacy studies. So, I guess I'll just tell you how I met Jim Gee and how come he ended up writing the foreword. I was someone who had done so much in adult education—what then was called adult literacy. I was advocating that we call it adult biliteracy—I was trying so hard to raise the consciousness of my friends and colleagues who taught ESL or designed ESL programs that were monolingual. Trying to get them to see that if you're monolingual you don't know what it's like to learn a new language. Yes, you know English, but you don't know what it's like to become bilingual. These [students] were adults. They don't want to become monolingual; they are going to become

bilingual, and becoming bilingual is a very interesting journey. What we need is people who have become bilingual helping those who are starting on that path to progress along that path.

It was such a time for literacy. I was working with EDC, Education Development Center, a big enterprise in Newton, MA, outside of Boston. . . . He [Jim Gee] and a group of people at EDC met regularly to develop the New Literacy Studies. Courtney Cazden was very big in that little circle, and a bunch of people at UMass Boston whose names used to be household words to me but now I forget them.

Rebecca: Was Elsa Auerbach one of them?

Tomás: Elsa Auerbach! We all knew each other. Donaldo Macedo. Anyway, they were a group. It was early days for forming this discipline. . . .but Jim and me hit it off. . . . Jim loved the book because, he said, “This is very postmodern.” That was, I think, the first time I had heard the word. I was just beginning to learn what that meant. I was thinking of myself as the opposite, very old fashioned. So that was how our friendship began. He was the godfather of getting me through my [dissertation proposal] committee, and then when the book was done, he wrote the foreword to the first edition.

Rebecca: How were the commentaries chosen?

Tomás: When the first edition came out, when the book was finished and I was looking to publish it, I saw the publisher Lawrence Erlbaum Associates [LEA] had published a book very close to my kind of stuff, about all the different things that had been going on during my time with the Adult Literacy Initiative in Boston. Elsa Auerbach had written it, along with various other people. Half of the women on the cover were people I knew personally. We were part of the same circle. . . . So, I wrote to the editor [at LEA] Naomi Silverman. . . . saying I’m delighted to see my colleague Elsa Auerbach’s book and what a beautiful topic in choosing it. Here is my book *Illegal Alphabets*, maybe you’d be interested in publishing this? And lickety split, it got published. I mean, it was not like the complicated process where, you know, jump through hoops. The years went by. And ten years later—I mean the book was never marketed as being about undocumented workers. If one tries to read with that in mind, you are saying what is all this stuff about phonemes and so on? But I think there are many people out there who have enjoyed knowing such a book [exists] because the fact that this [kind of literacy learning] is a perfectly normal thing. Happens every day. . . .

So now I’ve got a doctorate and I’m back in academia. I wrote to Naomi and said, what do you think about maybe a second edition? I had this idea of comment essays. I thought different people from different perspectives might be a lot of fun. Well, one was my friend Luis Vasquez León’s, in Guadalajara, who had published the first chapter in a Spanish translation in a book published in Mexico called *Anthropología Cultural en Mexico*. . . .Then googling my book one day I found out there was this guy that used the book in his classes, Hervé Va-

renne. He taught educational anthropology at Teachers College at Columbia. I contacted him; we met I think. He was a very interesting guy. I said, "Would you like to write for it?" He said, "Yeah I'd love to." He's the one who did the thing about the single case cause he used it to teach his students how to do a good ethnography. Then, Jim Gee. Oh and then out of the blue it turned out that Peter Elbow (who I had admired my whole adult life and always had by my side) wrote a book called *Vernacular Literacy* in which there were a few pages about my book. I wrote to him and he said he'd love to write a commentary. And then there was a young woman who had written me . . . and she was Colombian, her parents were Colombian immigrants. So, she was gonna write. And there is one or two other people.

Rebecca: Ofelia García?

Tomás: Then I wrote a little proposal you know saying what the book was going to be like, because that's the process. I haven't a lot of experience with these things, you know. Reader number two said something along the lines of, "Kalmar seems to have hooked some heavy hitters in the field"—I can't remember what verb this person used—"Kalmar pulled off something quite surprising, getting all of these people to write for him! But he doesn't say anything at all about García."

Rebecca: Ofelia.

Tomás: Ofelia. "He doesn't say anything at all about Ofelia García and translanguageing." By this time, my lovely wife and I are running a little GED program in Arizona in the middle of the desert. I'm talking 2012 or 2013 or something like that. And uh, I think oh god, do I have to catch up with all this? So, I google this personage Ofelia García. Translanguageing sounds like my cup of tea, mix the languages up, this that and the other. Reader number two said I've gotta write a new foreword referencing, making really clear, where I stand with relationship to the work of Ofelia García. But I called Hervé Varenne at Teachers College and he called Ofelia García and she wrote to me right away saying, "I'd love to write a commentary! Your book is what set me on this path in the first place."

Rebecca: No way! Wow.

Tomás: So when I wrote back to Naomi, I said I highly agree with reader number two, and I'm very grateful to have had my attention drawn to Ofelia García and I'm delighted to let you know that Ofelia García will be writing one of them! [laughing] So that is how I chose my six commentaries.

Tomás: So we've talked about the origin, the professional aspect of the book. I told you some anecdotes and so on. I've got questions for you about the book itself. Cause I never get a chance to talk to anyone about this. What is the book not about?

Rebecca: It is not about—I mean in terms of?

Tomás: Just whatever pops into your head, Rebecca? Just chit chat and shop talk.

Rebecca: Well, I just thought [it] through. . . so maybe I'll say aloud all the categories I just went through in my head. Is it about school? Yes. Is it about translation? Yes, but maybe not in the way translation studies talks about translation. Is it about writing? Yes, but more like inscription than composition drafting or process or these things. Is it about students? Yes, but not in school, but in the school that they make.

Tomás: Did you say in the beginning that it is or isn't about school?

Rebecca: I think it is about learning but I don't think it's about the institution of school.

Tomás: This helps me because it takes me back to when I used to think about what this book is about and is not about. For me, the book is a testimony to how adults can help each other learn things without engaging in a teacher-student relationship, a curriculum. The first chapter says that there is none of these things and suggests that it's so weird to have anybody testify that such a thing is possible. It takes me back to Paul Goodman and de-schooling and all that. I'm really glad I asked you that.

Rebecca: When I teach this book, it's almost like [students] have to start with that misunderstanding before they can break out of it. So even though you write very clearly that the basement [where the migrants meet] is not a classroom, that we are not talking about teachers and students, and you bring in the outside perspective of the reporters who still misname what's going on. My students have to use classroom/teacher/student vocabulary because it's hard to understand how collaborative knowledge can be built outside of the power dynamic that is so ingrained in their learning process. We get there eventually for most of them, but it's pretty hard for college students to move beyond something that they don't see to begin with. So, they first have to see it and then they're like: "Oh, they're making new things together among learners!" It's really cool.

Tomás: Thank you so much, Rebecca. I'll say back what I'm hearing. It is actually surprising and enlightening to discover how difficult it is for all of us to let go of some of those patterns, those archetypal assumptions we have that we think of as nature when in fact they are socially constructed. And to live outside those, because that's really what I think. That's what I was trying to say in the book. If you are one of these people, you take pride in the fact that you got here and you are studying the United States and its culture from the outside. And you're not constrained by any, any of the institutionalized attitudes and opinions. You are free of all of them. It's a disadvantage and it's an advantage. And that's why, from very romantic me, you dear reader can learn something from this [book]. Now chapter three about the teachers who don't get it. Do you use that chapter with your students?

Rebecca: Yeah.

Tomás: Do your students read all the chapters?

Rebecca: Uh, pretty much, yeah.

Tomás: Cause most of the people I know who [I talked to] when I toured the book don't really read those two middle chapters. [laughing]

Rebecca: I mean, many of [my students] want to be teachers. So, they talk most about those two scenes. They talk about the learning in the basement and then they talk about the teacher chapter. They're pretty shocked that teachers would react in that way, you know, "the ones who frown."

Tomás: Okay, my other two questions. The second one, what is the worst thing about the book and what is the best thing about the book? Especially, what is the worst thing about it? That would be very helpful. [laughing]

Rebecca: Um, okay.

Tomás: Be frank please.

Rebecca: Yeah! The thing students have struggled with most is the phonetic detail and some of the formulas. So, I don't know if that's the worst, but they have a hard time, and I say to do what you can, take away the larger understanding of what it means to make rules or break rules or play with language.

Tomás: Oh yes, to Carol Chomsky at Harvard Ed School I said, "Shouldn't I leave out all this linguistic detail?" She said, "You will never again see this so clearly, so make sure you have it." [laughing] I'm very curious to know whether the students you are talking about are themselves bilingual or monolingual?

Rebecca: Both.

Tomás: Because I do find for the monolingual person it is extraordinarily difficult for them to imagine what their language sounds like to someone who doesn't speak it.

Rebecca: Yes, you're right. For the bilingual, multilingual students, or those who have been in community with multiple languages, they get it right away.

Tomás: I don't think I'm gonna ask you what's the best thing about the book.

Rebecca: No I wanna tell you! I'm gonna tell you. The best thing about the book is the narrative told through multiple literacies—so that there is a graphic component and there's music in the beginning and there's newspaper reporting inserted in there, all strung together in a narrative that's almost like—I describe it to students in this way: the plot thickens with each chapter.

Tomás: Doesn't it! It does. Thank you so much! You make my day and you give me the feeling that my life was not in vain. [laughing] Because you put your finger on what must have been the most important moments, what kept me going as I tried to conceive what the book was going to look like cause that's it, that's it.

Rebecca: Cause it's true. And that's the greatest strength. That's why undergraduates can read this book, both because they can access it—they can understand—and because it gets, it's like more jaw dropping. Like [first and second chapters],

okay here's the situation. Now [third chapter], here's a [negative] institutional reaction to what you have just experienced. And then [students] go to the genre chapter and you're like, "Oh and by the way, this has always been happening everywhere in the world, isn't that crazy?" And the students are like, "They are just doing what professional researchers do!" And you're like "Yeah, so what is this really about?" And then we can have this conversation about race and discrimination and identity and the things that create these borders.

Tomás: Thank you, thank you. I feel seen, I feel heard, I feel validated.

Rebecca: I'm so glad.

Rebecca: I am interested in the historical component, the glossaries that you included in the book. Why did you choose those ones and how did you find them?

Tomás: What a great question. So I told you how at first I was going to be a medievalist, and the ninth century was my century because I became so interested in King Alfred the Great. And how he became such a culture hero for the British empire. . . . When Alfred was dealing with the importance of Latin in Anglo-Saxon England, he was taking a new position on something that had been very important in the whole formation of medieval Europe which is Latin learning. So, in those days, if you could read and write, you read and wrote in Latin, not in your vernacular. If you were not a monk, you didn't read and write. And here was this king, such an adorable guy, [laughing] who translated from the Latin into the Old English. When he was a child, he went on a pilgrimage to Rome to meet the pope. What did he encounter linguistically if he went speaking Anglo-Saxon? What did he hear as he came to these towns, when he went to the marketplace or in the Vatican meeting the pope? What did he know about languages? Now, I was very tickled to find these Kassell glossaries somewhere along the way. When I wrote the book, I knew I was not gonna be able to bring King Alfred into it, but I managed to bring the ninth century in! So to be really honest, sometimes I think what the book is about is a reconstruction of the circumstances under which that ninth century document was written. . . . All of that certainly informed what I saw in what these guys were doing with the *diccionarios* that they were making.

Rebecca: I have a cluster of questions that are about the last paragraph of the book. It's very interesting to me. We've had whole class discussions about it.

Tomás: About the storm in the teacup.

Rebecca: Yep. But then I'm also wondering about contemporary contexts, immigration debates, what's happening at the border right now, and if concepts you forward in the book will have shifted at all for you? That's a lot of questions. So I guess the one I can ask is, what do you mean in the last paragraph of the book?

Tomás: Well. . . I'm saying aren't I, that if you think this is trivial about a hybrid pheme but you think that purity is important, some of us think *that's* trivial. And we may be right. Nowadays people talk about binaries; it's about binary think-

ing. It's about any us/them border, barrier. I feel that those of us who are bilingual, we codeswitch a lot, we treat the language border like ping-pong players with the net. The bounce allows the game to go on. So that's what it's meant to tease you into thinking.

But in the second edition, what is this parable about, what is it a case of? At the end it is a case of something in which if you are a binary type you are afraid of pollution or the hybrid or some negative term. But if you want to know how come you can read the bible today, it's because of all the people who were hybrid, who helped the bible get to you. It's about how those of us who are bi-make the world go round. Not the ones who are mono-. We are the ones who make the connections. I'm very surprised I said all that!

Rebecca: I think it's super central. I think it's really important.

Tomás: I'm glad you asked me, and I'm glad you sort of persuaded me to answer.

Rebecca: Because I often find myself saying, when I talk about my own research or the people that I talk to, I say that this isn't about language. Like, yes, it's about language, of course it's about language.

Tomás: Ah-ha.

Rebecca: But are we really talking about language here? Or are we talking about your fear of other people?

Tomás: Yes, yes, exactly yes.

Rebecca: What are we actually talking about? What is it that's actually regulating these movements and where does that fear come from? You can't really understand that accent? Are you sure? You know.

Tomás: Yeah, it's about otherness.

Rebecca: I see you making those connections in that paragraph and just kind of offering them up to readers.

Tomás: I do suppose if someone pressed me, that if a person doesn't get the point about a speech sound in two languages, if they don't understand what's going on when you jerry-rig the solutions and keep going, then there's something about the final paragraph that may be a little bit harder to get the full feeling for. Because all alphabets are born hybrid, every time an alphabet passes to another language. . . .

Rebecca: The other component of that question is if your thinking about any of this has changed or intensified or made more urgent by contemporary situations?

Tomás: I think I can answer that simply. Right from the start, and all the more so today, this is not a book about the undocumented workers you read about in the media. This is a book about a very unusual and extreme case. . . . By focusing on an extreme case, methodologically, you get to see the concepts that are very hard to see in the hurly burly of everything that's going on.

. . . What I think is really helpful [in the book] is the interaction between law enforcement and the community, which is that nobody was interested in the law. Everybody knew that there were 2,000 illegal aliens in this region. The *migra* never came down to deport them. Except once at the beginning of every summer someone would be deported, and then at the end of the summer somebody would be deported. Just to remind people that, you know, that they're here. And so that grey area, that no man's land which is what the book is about—that no man's land where you have to figure out how to cope without the benefit of *la ley*, without the benefit of the legal in the old sense of the word. Everyone is making up what they do in the no man's land, I guess come to think of it, that [is what] I experienced in that little town. Many of us are now in no man's lands where these old institutions and patterns of government and control and making decisions and society and so on are not being followed and people are making up ways of coping. It's just winging it, really. Making it up as you go, because that's all you can do in those situations. There's no road map. . . .

Rebecca: It's very human. Another central takeaway for students when they read, that I didn't anticipate, is that stories or narratives can count as support for an argument.

Tomás: Oh that's wonderful.

Rebecca: That this is a kind of data. That the actual lived stories can count as support for something that you're trying to say and maybe one other way to understand how an issue can be convincing or persuasive.

Tomás: Thank you so much, that was really helpful. This is possible. This happened. I call this a case history and I'd like to highlight that. The genre is a case history, not a case study. A case history is a way—Freud would write a case history—I mean a case history is an interesting genre. If it's not true, it's not a good case history. But it's not history either. It's a case of something. And so, I haven't had the pleasure of teaching the book to a bright group of undergraduates, but if that pleasure ever came my way, I would ask them what is this a case of? Because it is *not* about what you are mostly hearing about the topic [of "illegal" migrants] nowadays. It's about a case of something that you have to look at and say yeah, this same story could be told in a much bigger or different way.