

Fall 2019

## Illegal Alphabets and Adult Biliteracy: Latino Migrants Crossing the Linguistic Border. 2nd ed.

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### Recommended Citation

Leonard, Rebecca Lorimer. "Illegal Alphabets and Adult Biliteracy: Latino Migrants Crossing the Linguistic Border. 2nd Ed." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2019, doi:10.25148/clj.14.1.009061.

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## Illegal Alphabets and Adult Biliteracy: Latino Migrants Crossing the Linguistic Border. 2nd ed.

**Tomás Mario Kalmar**

Routledge, 2015. 192 pp.

**Reviewed by Rebecca**

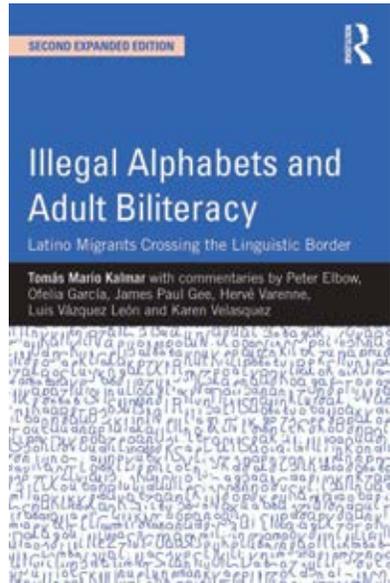
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In writing *Illegal Alphabets and Adult Biliteracy: Latino Migrants Crossing the Linguistic Border*, Tomás Mario Kalmar has composed a parable about literacy. A simple story used to demonstrate a lesson with “serious political implications” (xv), Kalmar’s parable tells the tale of a group of “illegal” migrants in Southern Illinois in the eighties, working together to create an “illegal” alphabet to get by in their labor camp. After a series of violent events between the migrant and anglo populations in town, the migrants leverage their history of biliteracy—primarily among indigenous languages and Spanish—to write English *como de veras se oye*, the way it really sounds. To do this, they break linguistic laws, creating bilingual glossaries that are governed by hybrid English/Spanish sounds. The question of legality gives the parable its deep resonance: In order for their labor to have value, migrants must cross borders and challenge the laws that police national/linguistic geographies. In the book’s terms of literacy learning, “the law itself poses a major part of the problem to be solved” (77). In other words, *Illegal Alphabets and Adult Biliteracy* is a story about migrants working at the borders of literacy in order to survive. That this story is true, and stems from three years of ethnographic fieldwork, makes it a book with lasting relevance for any literacy teacher or researcher working with communities whose creative, strategic, and serious writing work is marginalized or deemed somehow illegal.

This review covers the second edition of *Illegal Alphabets*, published in 2015 by Routledge. Beyond a new set of scholarly commentaries at the end of the book, the argument, organization, and contribution of the book remain the same as the 2001 first edition. In what follows, I review the book’s argument and the shape of its chapters.

In *Illegal Alphabets* Kalmar argues that alphabets have always been social constructions and that such literate productions are deemed illegitimate, suspect, or illegal when their writers are. As James Paul Gee notes in his commentary, even the



“seemingly simple” phenomenon of letter-sound correspondence “is profoundly embedded in social practices, in the formation and transformation of people’s identities, in the pursuit of their political projects, in the trajectories of institutions” and their cultural meanings (139). This “Pandora’s box of complex pedagogical, social, cultural, and political controversies” lives inside of literacy learning and thus cannot be excluded from “any serious dialogue on linguistic diversity in the United States” (59). Although such claims are well-established in literacy studies, the book’s argument is distinct in that it leads readers to reflect on their aversion to hybrid (mixed, meshed, bi-, trans-) literacies and their commitments to language purity, in the guise of correctness or boundary-guarding rules. Referring to his story of literacy as a parable, Kalmar says simply, “What you find in it reflects back what you bring to it. What you think the point is tells you who you are” (160). The parabolic lesson about literacy that readers take away will be inflected by the direction, angle, and distance from which they approach the book.

Kalmar unfolds his argument in a narrative grounded in the town of Cobden, in southern Illinois, where he lived and worked in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Chapter One, “No Man’s Land,” sets the scene of migrant writing in Cobden, and Chapter Two, “The Cobden Glossaries” depicts the scene’s actions and materials. Chapter Three, “Some Laugh, Others Frown,” describes an official institutional reaction—ESL teachers’ approval and disapproval—to the biliterate materials the migrants produced. Chapter Four, “Making it Legal: The Social Construction of Hybrid Alphabets,” moves the reader’s perspective to a historical scale, revealing the historical and professional precedence for the migrants’ practices and the anachronistic naiveté of teacherly disapproval of them. The sequence of these chapters is effective: the reader is immersed from the start in the migrants’ life conditions that catalyze the creation of an illegal alphabet; the reader then proceeds through the latter half of the book with an insiders’ point of view, which heightens empathy and legitimizes the migrants’ biliteracy.

In Chapter One, Kalmar sets the scene of writing in Cobden, Illinois, moving quickly from a joyful depiction of migrants and anglos teaching and learning *corridos* in a public park to the violent death of a migrant, Leonardo. The page turn from five to six shows how abruptly the stakes of language learning can change: page five contains a *corrido* and describes a teen transcribing English in order to talk to a girl; page seven begins with the large print headline: “Body Finally Identified as Migrant Worker.” The shift is tragic and makes vivid the conditions that led to the migrants meeting in the basement of a store to decide how to write English *como de veras se oye*. Their motivation to learn shifted from curiosity to self-protection and survival, and they decided that they had to *dominar el inglés*. The rest of the chapter narrates the collaborative learning that occurred in the basement, with migrants negotiating and ultimately voting on written phrases ranging from “everybody wants to learn” (*evri bari guants tulum*) to “the law doesn’t protect us” (*doló dasn’t protect as*). Because they were joined by two reporters from Carbondale, Kalmar is able to include in the chapter a newspaper article which erroneously describes Kalmar leading the migrants through an adult ESL class, highlighting the reporters’ misunderstanding of the migrant-driven learning they witnessed. The bulk of the chapter shows the mi-

grants puzzling together over the *rompecabezas* of English, working in the no man's land between languages in order to learn English the way they learned and taught the *corridos*—*liricamente*.

Chapter Two takes a deep dive into the action and materials that resulted from the scene of writing. As power relations in Cobden temporarily shifted, the migrants' status as "fieldworkers" took on multiple meanings: during and after their work in the fields picking fruit, migrants "felt free to ask a local citizen to repeat something over and over; free to carry a notebook and pen into new places—work, the bar, home; free to write in that notebook in the presence of anglos; free to show what he had written to other illegal aliens and to look at what others had written; free to mimic the voice of a friend, a neighbor, a boss, an enemy" (46). The chapter illuminates, in careful linguistic detail, the metalinguistic discourse the migrants recorded in their notebooks. Supported by substantial footnotes, Kalmar carefully lays out how the migrants navigated the relationship between *los alfabetos* and *los abecedarios*, sets of letters and sets of sounds. Following the notion that phonetic transcription records "not an utterance but an analysis of an utterance," Kalmar frames the migrants' analytic options—"the law" could be *dolor*, *dolod*, *doloc*, *doló*—as a "strategy chosen by a player in a game" (36) with a single move guided by the rule "let this letter *y* in the roman alphabet take the value of this sound *x* in spoken English" (55). The migrants played within these rules, but strategies were cast by vote as they used the "strategic reasoning" necessary to choose a *good* move over a "merely legal move" (41). With each recorded strategic move, the game became a "collective discursive event" that produced *diccionarios*, glossaries which were photocopied and some of which were passed beyond Cobden, Illinois. In his painstaking scholarly framing of the migrants' biliterate practices, Kalmar finds sophistication not only in their writing, but in their discussion of what should be written.

In Chapter Three, however, this sophistication is lost on some teachers introduced to the migrants' glossaries. The chapter describes several teacherly takes on the Cobden glossaries, as Kalmar witnessed them in professional development workshops in the Boston area in the 1980s. From his point of view leading the workshops, Kalmar describes the range of reactions to one migrant, Jacinto's, *diccionario* wherein participants who were bilingual "laugh," delighting in the migrants' sophisticated work, while those operating under monolingual ideologies tended to "frown." While bilingual participants in the workshops treated Jacinto's glossary as "beautiful," others condemned the writer as "zero-lingual" (66), echoing the "languageless" or "semi-lingual" labels for language minoritized students that persist in educational contexts (Rosa; Flores et al.). The critical component of Kalmar's workshops was his inclusion of another improvised glossary—the Kassell glossary from ninth century medieval Europe—to suggest the long-established vernacular utility of the glossary genre itself. Tellingly, if Kalmar presented Jacinto's glossary first, teachers generally "groan[ed] with dismay," leading to a workshop fueled by "conflicting ideologies and discourses on purity and pollution" (64). With more complexity than can be summarized here, chapter three raises pressing questions about how teachers approach multilingual students, including how teachers imagine bilingual literacy learning. The chapter inter-

rogates whose writing is seen as legitimate and whose is dismissed, leading readers beyond the question of whether to “allow” students deemed illegal to use languages other than English, to “the controversial question [of] whether to let them speak at all, whether to even let them walk into the classroom” (77). Such questions seem to be “disturbing to teachers who regard[ed] themselves as professional gatekeepers charged with maintaining the standards of traditional English literacy,” a charge many contemporary literacy and language instructors wrestle with still (64).

Kalmar concludes his legitimizing project in Chapter Four, showing the migrant glossaries to be “something more than a mere curiosity of trivial value” by placing the genre in its historical and professional lineage (85). Reviewing glossaries produced by the U.S. army, professional linguists, Christian missionaries, and revolutionary educators, Kalmar presents “variations on the theme represented by the case of the Cobden glossaries” (84). In doing so, Kalmar emphasizes the differing goals of these disparate rhetorical situations, distinguishing among the discourses “by which their legitimacy has been established, the status of those who have produced them, and the ‘scenes of reading’ in which they have made sense to their readers” (96). Most remarkably, Kalmar shows that the Christian missionaries and revolutionary educators involved in the 1930s Tarascan Project in Mexico created hybrid alphabets to teach indigenous Tarascans to become biliterate in Tarascan and Spanish, explaining that the migrants in Cobden, Illinois—most of whom were Tarascans from Cherán, Michoacán—indeed knew these missionaries. This means that the biliterate game the migrants undertook in Cobden in the eighties may not be entirely original to that time and place, but may have moved with them from Cherán. In his later commentary, the social anthropologist Luis Vázquez León indeed claims that the Cobden migrants from Cherán “were already biliterate in that peculiar way” referencing writing of codices before the sixteenth century and colonial linguistics projects, underlining the historical continuity of the migrants’ literacy practices (145–146). The chapter shows that across disparate contexts writers were playing the same game, making strategic decisions “to let a single letter of the alphabet take the value of two sounds” and “to let one alphabet code the speech of both communities” (85). What is deemed impossible in linguistic theory is possible in practice if you take “illegal” steps with the “legal” rule of one letter, one sound, as professional linguists, missionaries, revolutionary educators, and others in various fields long have.

The concluding sections of the second edition—the epilogue, commentaries, and afterword—reinforce Kalmar’s argument and raise further important questions. The scholarly commentaries, offering perspectives from a variety of fields and positions, are differently insightful: Ofelia García’s commentary is a helpful reframing of Kalmar’s biliteracy in terms of translanguaging and transliteracies (132); James Paul Gee’s comment (the former foreword from the first edition) is a brief but thorough introduction to new literacy studies and *Illegal Alphabet’s* unique contribution to it; Hervé Varenne and Luis Vasquez León’s essays are especially helpful for drawing out Kalmar’s methodological choices. But it is Kalmar’s own concluding words that push readers to think hard about the significance of what they encountered in the book.

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Both the epilogue and the afterword align national, linguistic, and racial frames to make the notion of purity kaleidoscopic:

The question of whether a letter represents one pure sound, or an impure mixture of two or more, may seem like a storm in a teacup. But so may the question of whether a person represents one pure race, or a mixture of two or more. It's the same teacup. And the same storm. (121)

As have scholars from across literacy studies, Kalmar shows that literacy can be powerfully mechanized to distinguish “between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ between those who know the chosen code and those who don’t” (160). But Kalmar uniquely shows how literacy can be redefined as an activity “born in the no man’s land between languages” and thus necessarily comprised of “switching and mixing bits and pieces of code proper to more than one cultural, economic, or social system” (160). Kalmar admits that there are those who will not understand the consequences of feeling threatened by activities that exceed or bleed their legal borders, and so the book ends in what can be read as a plea or a challenge: “Do you, dear Reader, have ears to hear?” (161).

*Illegal Alphabets* is immeasurably useful for community literacy research and teaching. As a model for ethical community research, and as an elegantly accessible write-up of an ethnography, the book invites readers to explore scholarship about genre, vernacular writing, phonetics, and identity, all in terms of a lived literacy *rompecabezas*, grounded in one historical moment but resonating across time and space. Although told in fine ethnographic detail, the migrants’ story is a case study—or case history, in Kalmar’s terms—of a larger social phenomenon. The case is culture clash in a small town, but the phenomenon is fear of the other. Thus, the book’s narrative simplicity belies its complex meaning; its singularity—the case—allow complex truths to become clear. As anthropologist Hervé Varenne notes in his commentary “The Power of the Single Case,” the case of the migrants writing in Cobden is about the “otherwise unimaginable possibilities,” of “something that *can* happen,” the important interplay between the unique case and the ubiquitous possibilities its production affords (141–142). The book also is an exemplar of respect for migrants’ literate knowledge: not only for their multilingual invention but for the long histories of sophisticated literate labor, rooted in indigenous, here specifically Tarascan, traditions that carry the know-how of exposure to colonial intervention, religious conversion, and bodily harm. Methodologically, the book is in conversation with scholars who ask for a fuller accounting of the geography of migration that often exists only as backdrop to current research on writing (Martinez et al.). Taking account of bodies that have always and still are moving across these geographies at great risk, gives the case of Cobden its timeless quality, helping to avoid what commentator Luis Vásquez León calls a presentist approach to literacy, and sustaining the “socio-historical context that is still active” today (146).

The accessibility of its narrative makes the book suitable for use in a wide variety of courses or workshops with undergraduate, graduate, and community populations. Single chapters can stand alone to support discussion or writing activities; the first chapter, for example, has been included in first-year writing course readers

to help students think through writing in terms of multimodality, borders, or labor. I have assigned the book in graduate seminars to help students consider how writers self-sponsor their own resistance and adaptation to local power structures; to trace how literacy is embedded in transnational economic or religious circuits; to explore the relationship among literacy, schooling, and education; to relocate their gaze to Cherán, Michoacán and rethink the literate repertoires that migrant Tarascans carry up to the U.S. Midwest. In upper-division English department undergraduate courses, I have used word association activities to tease apart the levels of meaning in each of Kalmar's chapters, asking students to define key words like legal, labor, fieldwork, game, and border first under a column entitled "people" and then under a subsequent column entitled "language." For example, students consider: What does it mean for people to be legal? And then: What does it mean for language to be? The impact the book has on students in each of these contexts cannot be overstated: the migrants' story not only stays with them but reverberates across their subsequent writing as they connect the case of Cobden to immigration and language politics happening now.

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