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Cultural Practices of Literacy: Case Studies of Language, Literacy, Social Practice, and Power

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Sponsoring Literacy beyond the College Curriculum, and of course, Paula Mathieu's *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition*, a text largely referenced throughout this collection. Unique to this collection, however, and its main strength, is the focus on "unsuccessful," or unsustainable, civic and service-learning projects. Authors explain the "what went wrong" aspects of their unsustainable projects to (re) evaluate the definition, enactment, and assessment of sustainability with more fluidity and flexibility.

A misfire in this collection is the incorporation of Border Theory (*mesitza* consciousness—Chapter 9), Maternal Theory (literacy *dula*—Chapter 9), and Greek mythology (*techne/chronos/kairos*—Chapters 10 and 11). Although these are relevant and valued theories and discussions, these chapters feel disconnected from the rest of the collection because of their heavy reliance on theoretical abstractions instead of concrete examples, like most chapters in the collection. These chapters belong in a more theoretically-based collection.

Overall, *Unsustainable* is a must-read for all faculty and university administrators who engage in civic and service-learning projects. Although it does not provide specific solutions to troubled projects and their inevitable unsustainability, this collection is an invaluable resource on how to create or revise institutional civic and service-learning programs. Furthermore, *Unsustainable* should also be required reading in graduate programs that emphasize sustainability because it forces readers to question the definition of sustainability and how it should be enacted and assessed.

Cultural Practices of Literacy: Case Studies of Language, Literacy, Social Practice, and Power

Purcell-Gates, Victoria, ed.

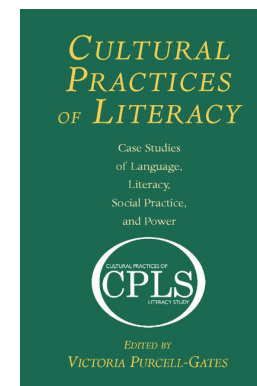
Mahwah, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2007. Print. \$46.95

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In *Cultural Practices of Literacy* Victoria Purcell-Gates argues that school-based literacy instruction does not necessarily transfer into the literacy practices in individuals' everyday lives. Drawing from a theoretical framework that reveals how literacy is a social practice, Purcell-Gates constructs an edited collection where contributors to this volume are part of the Cultural Practices of the Literacy Studies (CPLS) team. The collection disrupts an assumed correlation between direct English-based literacy instruction in schools and the literacies practiced by members of traditionally marginalized groups in everyday contexts. Contributors to this collection employ ethnographic methodologies to provide a careful and detailed account of participants' uses of literacy within and outside of the classroom. They present complex accounts of individuals' literacy practices, indicating how power is always embedded in the use of reading, writing, and speaking, as many scholars invested in "non-traditional" literacies have long explored (See Albright, Ball; Cushman; Barton and Hamilton; Brandt; Brodkey; Gee).

The first chapter affords readers with the theoretical and methodological basis for the Cultural Practices of Literacy Studies (CPLS) study. In "Complicating the Complex," Purcell-Gates discusses how each chapter follows a standard protocol that explicitly reveals contributors' locations and relationships to participants. This move serves as a general introduction to each chapter, which is followed by a description of the historical and/or cultural contexts where literacy practices emerge. The framework informs all studies in the collection; Purcell-Gates intends to encourage readers to identify patterns across studies and make more generalized claims about the relationships amongst schooling, literacy, and literacy development. To that end, Purcell-Gates gathers information about the material conditions through which individuals participate in literacy events—emphasizing the extent to which literacy is a social practice—while presenting substantial evidence for an understanding of how hegemony, power, and domination affect the uses and representations of literacies (15-17).



The collection is invested in changing the ways that certain literacy practices are valued over others. Purcell-Gates argues that this collection responds to a need to “paint a picture of literacy as multiple and social”; therefore, she optimistically positions this project as one that presents a global range of the ways individuals use literacy practices (ix). Contributors seek to provide a more global understanding of contested uses of literacy in spaces not fully explored by researchers; however, their commitment to these outcomes and their use of an ethnographic methodology may limit this outcome.

The collection falls short in providing a full account of the *most valued* literacy practices of participants. Because of the large scope of this project, it is difficult to make substantial claims about patterns in literacy use in such different populations. The collection provides snapshots of school-based literacy practices as well as those performed outside of the traditional classroom, where a small number of individuals serve as representatives of a particular group. This need for consistency across chapters in the CLPS study—along with multiple exigencies to establish historical and cultural contexts of particular rhetorical situations where literacy practices are employed—makes it more difficult for contributors to create substantial claims about the social nature of literacy of a more global range of participants.

The collection is broken down into four sections. The beginning of the collection discusses how linguistic hegemony in the context of imperialism is demonstrated through the lives of both Puerto Rican farmers and Botswana students. In this first portion, “Language, Literacy, and Hegemony,” participants reflect on their literacy practices and produce detailed accounts of how they use English and their respective native languages at work, in schools, and in the home. Contributors address the larger cultural attitude that English is needed for access into a global economy because they highlight how participants are rhetorically savvy in gaining access to information and resources while not fully assimilating into the dominant culture. For example, in chapter 3 “Language and Literacy Issues in Botswana,” Annah Molosiwa conducts a series of interviews with individuals from Botswana who discuss how they negotiate both English and their native language. Participants explain how they use English when reading printed text, yet they indicate that oral literacies are utilized in their homes (47-48). Molosiwa’s contribution raises questions about the nature of schooling for Botswana students because their reflections of their literacy practices reveal a clear division between home, on the one hand, and religion, school, and work on the other. Therefore, she argues that additional research on the literacy practices of non-native speakers of English should consider literacy acquisition in the home because before students reach school their exposure to print literacy is minimal (53-54).

Both studies in this section emphasize how historical struggles over power are reflected through current uses of literacy. Participants reveal how they are cognizant of the ways that using English in certain contexts produces favorable results. This first section makes visible and valuable the use of literacy by non-native speakers of English and emphasizes how individuals make clear and distinct choices about using their non-native language. Purcell-Gates pushes the boundaries of location (working with

individuals outside of the United States) and draws attention to participants’ awareness of the effects of using the dominant language to accomplish their goals.

While the previous section addresses how language is negotiated in the context of linguistic domination and oppression, the next section mobilizes these conversations by using the theme of immigration as a point of entry. In “The Immigrant Experience: Languages, Literacies, and Identities,” contributors focus on how country of origin, native language, and purpose for immigration factor into the literacy practices of Sudanese, Chinese, and Cuban immigrants. They reveal how immigrants draw from past experiences—including their experiences with family members—to successfully participate in contexts that require the use of English.

For example, in chapter 5, “Multiple Border Crossing: Literacy Practices of Chinese American Bilingual Families,” Gaoming Zhang examines the literacy practices of two Chinese American bilingual families to emphasize the relationships amongst school-based literacies and the impact of family support on overall literacy development. Unlike some of the previous studies in this collection, Zhang’s case studies indicate that school-based instruction—both in English as well as Chinese-based weekend schooling—impacted literacy practices outside of school. School literacy was transferred to self-motivated learning: “what was learned in school was supplemented and applied to after-school, self-motivated activities” (93). Therefore, this study indicates that in some cases, school literacies do make their way into the practices that students engage in outside of the classroom; however, Zhang resists a one-to-one correlation by drawing attention to the role of family in providing support for literacy practices (96).

In this section, notable patterns of literacy use are identified through the concept of “immigrant,” which serves to bind many of these participants together, even as there are notable differences in their experiences as immigrants in the United States. Even as contributors to the collection argue that certain factors like family, access to resources, and explicit support in schools and at home directly affect the successes of the “immigrant,” there is a clear tension between directly describing their literacy practices in the US, their past experiences, and finally, the overall historical contexts that produce these literacies. The scope of this section makes it difficult to provide a more detailed account of the different literacy practices by individuals within these respective groups.

The remainder of the book is grounded in the context of the US classroom and is heavily invested in making visible the literacy practices of “at-risk” students. Participants in this section reflect on literacy practices in different domains of their lives and shed light on the fact that boundaries between domains of literacy use are fluid. In the first portion, “Literacies in and out of School and on the Borders,” contributors explore the borders between in-school and out-of-school literacies. Research in this section provides a strong case for taking additional time to work with participants to ascertain how they understand the significance of literacy in their everyday lives. This particular section provides an effective model for creating meaningful relationships with participants. For example, in Chapter 8 “Literacy and Choice: Urban Elementary

Students' Perceptions of Links Between Home, School, and Community Literacy Practices," Jodene Kersten works with fifth graders, who were invited to aid in the process of documenting their out-of-school literacy practices with disposable cameras (134-46). Students discuss how they succeed using literacy in contexts out of schools. Results indicate that participants are cognizant of the ways that their literacy practices at home differ from those valued in a school setting, thereby placing responsibility on the schools to more directly take into account the literacy practices and values that the children bring to the classroom (150-53).

This section also provides a glimpse of the literacy practices of "mainstream" students. In "School and Home: Contexts for Conflict and Agency," for example, Chad O'Neil outlines significant turning points in writing tutors' understandings of literacy; he emphasizes how they see their families' role in cultivating this literacy (174-75). Each participant's account of literacy draws attention to the school's role in identifying out-of-school literacies as valuable in their lives (178). This chapter provides a backdrop to understand the literacy practices of students who successfully work in a university climate; however, this chapter works as an anomaly against the contributions that precede it. Even as this work may enhance our overall understanding of literacy as a social practice, the chapter is indicative of scope evident throughout the collection, as conducting research with two college writing tutors on their literacy practices begins to note strong patterns in "mainstream" users of literacy.

This collection is a wake-up call for both educators and policy-makers because it establishes a theoretical framework for responsibly gathering research about literacy practices outside of the classroom. Indeed, contributors do demand that future research on individuals' literacy practices must be done in order to maintain an understanding of literacy as social. However, the relationship between the work in this collection and the ultimate goals for future work in literacy studies walks a fine line. The collection provides a glimpse of the uses of literacy through a description of a limited number of case studies. However, contributors still create a serious call-to-action for other scholars interested in literacy, educational policies, and linguistics to contribute to these conversations by providing their own in-depth studies of people on both a local and global level.

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