

Sam Mejias
Institute of Education, University of London, UK
sammejias@gmail.com
© 2013, Sam Mejias
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14748460.2012.761822>

Literacy and the politics of representation, by Mary Hamilton, London, Routledge, 2012, 178 pp., £26.99 (paperback), £95.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-415-68616-7 (paperback), 978-0-415-68615-0 (hardback)

Literacy and the practice of writing in the 19th century: a strange blossoming of spirit, by Ursula Howard, Leicester, NIACE, 2012, 349 pp., £24.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-86201-564-7

2012 has been a good year for books about adult literacy. Mary Hamilton's *Literacy and the Politics of Representation* was published in July, followed in September by Ursula Howard's *Literacy and the Practice of Writing in the 19th Century: A Strange Blossoming of Spirit*. These are simply two very important books, written by two very important women. Each book is a new contribution to the field of adult literacy studies, each book can also be seen as celebrating the extraordinary career contribution of its author, and together, these two books most certainly mark this year as a very important time for adult literacy studies as an academic field.

Adult literacy studies is not the kind of academic discipline that is made flesh by rows of books within every university library. There is, compared to most fields, little sense of agreement on what students studying it at, for example, MA level should be reading or should have read before they start their course. Its relationship with less amorphous fields can also be confused and contested. Is it a form of sociology or social history? Is a branch of linguistics or English language studies? Does it have a relationship to literary studies? Does it share any territory with studies of children's literacy? Or cognitive psychology? All of these? None? What should I read if I want to know more about how to develop adult reading or writing? Where do I go and which experts should I be listening to?

This may be an overstatement. Perhaps it would be simpler to say that this is a field *in the process of finding its shape*, and the contributions of these two books cannot be overstated. The 2010 publication of Hughes and Schwab (ed.) *Teaching Adult Literacy: Principles and Practice* was a crucial step in shaping this field, by bringing together the living knowledge of hugely experienced adult literacy teachers. It shaped the field pedagogically. Hamilton and Howard's 2012 books are doing, and will do, the same thing academically.

Together they tell us, for example, that social history, literature and sociology are key elements of adult literacy studies. They tell us that the meanings people give to literacy, in their private and public lives, in their diaries and in the media, *are* literacy. They tell us that literacy cannot be understood without gaining the perspectives of individual readers and writers, and they show us how national and international educational policy, statistics and initiatives affect, produce and are resisted by these readers and writers. They demonstrate that literacy is both individual and communal, and teach us how the very ways we understand terms like 'individual' and 'communal' have been shaped by literacy.

Sam Mejias
Institute of Education, University of London, UK
sammejias@gmail.com
© 2013, Sam Mejias
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14748460.2012.761822>

Literacy and the politics of representation, by Mary Hamilton, London, Routledge, 2012, 178 pp., £26.99 (paperback), £95.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-415-68616-7 (paperback), 978-0-415-68615-0 (hardback)

Literacy and the practice of writing in the 19th century: a strange blossoming of spirit, by Ursula Howard, Leicester, NIACE, 2012, 349 pp., £24.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-86201-564-7

2012 has been a good year for books about adult literacy. Mary Hamilton's *Literacy and the Politics of Representation* was published in July, followed in September by Ursula Howard's *Literacy and the Practice of Writing in the 19th Century: A Strange Blossoming of Spirit*. These are simply two very important books, written by two very important women. Each book is a new contribution to the field of adult literacy studies, each book can also be seen as celebrating the extraordinary career contribution of its author, and together, these two books most certainly mark this year as a very important time for adult literacy studies as an academic field.

Adult literacy studies is not the kind of academic discipline that is made flesh by rows of books within every university library. There is, compared to most fields, little sense of agreement on what students studying it at, for example, MA level should be reading or should have read before they start their course. Its relationship with less amorphous fields can also be confused and contested. Is it a form of sociology or social history? Is a branch of linguistics or English language studies? Does it have a relationship to literary studies? Does it share any territory with studies of children's literacy? Or cognitive psychology? All of these? None? What should I read if I want to know more about how to develop adult reading or writing? Where do I go and which experts should I be listening to?

This may be an overstatement. Perhaps it would be simpler to say that this is a field *in the process of finding its shape*, and the contributions of these two books cannot be overstated. The 2010 publication of Hughes and Schwab (ed.) *Teaching Adult Literacy: Principles and Practice* was a crucial step in shaping this field, by bringing together the living knowledge of hugely experienced adult literacy teachers. It shaped the field pedagogically. Hamilton and Howard's 2012 books are doing, and will do, the same thing academically.

Together they tell us, for example, that social history, literature and sociology are key elements of adult literacy studies. They tell us that the meanings people give to literacy, in their private and public lives, in their diaries and in the media, *are* literacy. They tell us that literacy cannot be understood without gaining the perspectives of individual readers and writers, and they show us how national and international educational policy, statistics and initiatives affect, produce and are resisted by these readers and writers. They demonstrate that literacy is both individual and communal, and teach us how the very ways we understand terms like 'individual' and 'communal' have been shaped by literacy.

These two books refocus us on the voices from within adult literacy studies which we need to keep reading and revisiting, such as Jane Mace and Deborah Brandt, as well as reminding us of the other voices which have a lot to teach us about adult literacy, such as Charles Dickens and Alice Walker. They also present us with new theory which can help us better understand literacy use and learning, for example 'Charles Taylor's notion of the modern social imaginary' (Hamilton) and the concept of literacy as 'unbidden' (Howard).

Literacy and the Practice of Writing in the 19th Century and *Literacy and the Politics of Representation* are of course very different books, just as the careers of these two matriarchs of adult literacy studies, Howard and Hamilton, have been very different. *Literacy and the Practice of Writing in the 19th Century* is a historical study, making use of – breathing life into – extraordinarily rich primary sources. It is also concerned with writing in particular, not reading. *Literacy and the Politics of Representation* addresses literacy as both reading and writing and is more of a sociological study, or analysis, of present-day representations of literacy. It may also be that readers will approach these two books differently, greedily moving back and forth between Hamilton's chapters while working their way through Howard's book more slowly and steadily, from the first page to the last.

Yet for all their obvious differences, both books end up telling us what literacy means, has meant and can mean to different people, in different ways. The pages of each book are full of ghost voices, spiring up and away. Everyone should read both of these books, for this reason as for so many others. To give just one example: on page 302 of *Literacy and the Practice of Writing in the 19th Century* is a facsimile of a page from the diary of a man called John Ward. It was written on April the 10th, 1864 in careful, beautiful handwriting, and then, somehow, ended up on a 'rubbish heap' from which it was later 'rescued' by a person 'feeding a furnace'. Ward writes that it has been a hard time for his mill, because the 'American war' and 'I have not earned a shilling a day this last month and there are many like me my clothes and bedding is wearing out very fast and I have no means of getting any more ...' I read this and John Ward was standing in front of me. I started worrying about how to help him; I found it — and find it now — a genuine mental effort to understand that this man is now long gone. His words are not; his literacy is not.

Sam Duncan

Institute of Education, University of London, UK

s.duncan@ioe.ac.uk

© 2013, Sam Duncan

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14748460.2012.761823>

Neoliberalism and applied linguistics, by David Block, John Gray and Marnie Holborow, London, Routledge, 2012, 168 pp., £26.99 (hardback), ISBN-10 0415592054; ISBN-13 978-0415592055

Neoliberalism and Applied Linguistics is an extremely original work that tackles the connection between a field of study and the ideology of a political economy. This unlikely marriage is one that highlights the influence of neoliberalism, whose emphasis on the market, individualism and competitiveness has permeated some key concepts in Applied Linguistics (Chapter 4), language itself (Chapter 3) and language education (Chapters 5 and 6). The book is co-written by three different authors who co-refer to each others' work and make the