

## Essay Book Review

*English as a Local Language: Post-Colonial Identities and Multilingual Practices*. Christina Higgins. (2009). Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters. 184 pp. Softcover. ISBN 9781847691804. US\$39.95.

*Literacy and Power*. Hilary Janks. (2009). New York: Routledge. 250 pp. Softcover. ISBN 9780415999632. US\$43.95.

*South African Visual Culture*. Jeanne van Eeden & Amanda du Preez (Eds.). (2010). Pretoria, South Africa: Van Schaik. 269 pp. ISBN 9780627025983 (ZAR)240 (US \$36.05).

# Multilingual Practices, Critical Literacies, and Visual Culture: A Focus on African Contexts

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## ABSTRACT

In this essay, we review and comment on three books that focus on language, literacy, and visual and cultural communication: *English as a Local Language: Post-Colonial Identities and Multilingual Practices* by Christina Higgins; *Literacy and Power* by Hilary Janks; and *South African Visual Culture*, edited by Jeanne van Eeden and Amanda du Preez. Each of these books takes a critical stance toward language, literacy, and culture and each is focused on particular contexts in Africa. Taken as a whole, these books reveal the complexity of social practices that surround literacy in particular contexts through the careful examination of historical contexts, power relationships, and social interactions. While focused on African contexts, the arguments related to language diversity, multimodal literacy practices, and cultural representations of meaning in these books have global relevance.

In this essay, we argue that the sub-Saharan African context offers an excellent opportunity for researchers to examine critical issues in literacy education that have applications around the world.

The oppressive effects of colonialism, postcolonialism, conflict, and globalization that are part of African history and its current reality may be more transparent in acts of language, literacy, and visual representation in

sub-Saharan Africa than they are in more economically developed contexts. These acts of language and literacy include a focus on multilingualism and literacy, critical literacy, and multimodal literacies. Through the critical examination of three books that are focused on these issues in specific African contexts, we attempt to describe the insights of international scholars, which have global relevance and importance. These three books share more than just the context of Africa, they also address the complex challenges facing scholars and educators through critical examinations of forces that divide and privilege groups in various societies. In this way, the books address issues that are part of the global reality today.

In his 2009 book *Teaching Africa*, Ghanaian-born University of Toronto professor George Dei critiqued the Eurocentric views of Africa and argued instead for Africans to design their own futures by reclaiming their histories as they contest and interrogate the present. Following this argument, we recognize that our African colleagues—specifically South Africans, Tanzanians, and Kenyans—might rightfully view us as outsiders and perhaps as perpetuating an imposition of Western or Northern views.

Indeed, we recognize that, as Westerners, our discussion about language, literacy, and teaching in South Africa, Tanzania, and Kenya is on what Linda Smith has described as “tricky ground” (Smith, 2005, p. 88) as we are not from these communities. Because of this tricky place, we are keen to share our views against a backdrop that recognizes the complexities and questions about our own speaking positions and interpretive authority in reviewing these books. In so doing, we see ourselves as informed by our own collaborations in Africa, including those with our South African, Batswana, Malawian, and Tanzanian colleagues, as well as our affinities with Western colleagues who have discussed similar matters from a globalized perspective. We hope our thoughts contribute to heightening awareness of the complex language, literacy, and educational issues and developments in 3 of the over 50 countries that currently constitute the African continent.

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## English as a Local Language: Post-Colonial Identities and Multilingual Practices

In the preface to Christina Higgins’s study of language in use in Tanzania and Kenya, Alistair Pennycook, Bonny Norton, and Vaidehi Ramanathan, the editors of the *Critical Language and Literacy Studies* series, assert that English (or any language) can no longer be viewed as a discrete entity; instead, they

argued for a theory of how English participates within contextually rich forms of global, urban, and multimodal multilingualisms that serve local needs. Pennycook, Norton and Ramanathan, like Higgins, draw on Bakhtin’s (1981, 1986) notions of multivocality and recent works in critical and global sociolinguistics (e.g., Blommaert, 2005; Pennycook, 2001) to illustrate how hybrid forms of English and local languages, such as Swahili, become local resources—in this case, in communities in East Africa, specifically in Tanzania and Kenya.

Higgins conducted an ethnographic study in East Africa over a seven-year period, beginning with her doctoral dissertation in 2001. It is apparent from her acknowledgments that she worked with East African colleagues in various phases of her research and in her learning and interpretation of Swahili in its various forms. She opens her first chapter with an example from the city of Dar es Salaam, where a store owner named his shop “2PAC STORE,” as pictured on the front cover. She argues that this name invokes the late U.S. rapper Tupac Shakur while doubling as a more practical signal that the two staples of the Tanzanian diet, rice and beans, are available for sale. In skillfully mixing popular culture and marketing, Higgins says, “This example illustrates how English can serve as a local sphere of material consumption through intersecting with a sphere of global cultural production” (p. 2).

With the help of this and other examples, Higgins provides a rich theorization and adaptation of the notion of multivocality, suggesting that it exists at the micro and macro levels. At the micro level, the polyphonic and bivalent voices in single utterances are evident. Polyphony, for Higgins, signifies the intermingling of languages and language varieties in single utterances. These polyphonic voices result in borrowing, language mixing with no pragmatic effect, or code-switching with pragmatic effect. Higgins also notes the possibility of bivalent voices—language mixing that contains the multivocal quality of the utterance and conveys all possible meanings simultaneously, as in the use of parody.

At the macro level, centripetal and centrifugal forces are at work when languages are voiced in society. Centripetal forces move toward standardization while centrifugal forces move toward the decentralizing of language use. In this context, the decentralizing forces allow for the use of English, Swahili, localized Englishes, urban vernaculars, and hybrid forms of English and Swahili.

At both the micro and macro levels, multivocality results in rich local, hybrid forms in spoken language and in various other modalities. Higgins posits that this theorization allows for an analysis and understanding of how both linguistic imperialism and resistance via

local appropriation can coexist in urban, global contexts.

Higgins closes this first chapter by recognizing the limits of a Western/Northern researcher's representation of the other, and points to her research methods that give interpretive authority to the Kenyans and Tanzanians whose perspectives she shares. These methods include ethnographic and critical discourse analysis tools, such as interviewing, observation, and text analysis; they also include the interpretations of those who create and read the texts as well as the researcher's own analyses. She acknowledges in a later chapter, though, that she cannot always fully gauge the significance of multivocal utterances. This issue is further complicated by noting that "insider" researchers with "oppositional subjectivities" (p. 16) expand our understanding of local language practices by democratizing western discourses; however, she also cites Canagarajah (1999), who argued that insider researchers in particular must struggle to culturally defamiliarize themselves. Insider researchers cannot guarantee accurate interpretations, particularly in the context of layered discourse communities. We return to this issue of the layered complexity of interpretation, representation, and researcher reflexivity in the context of global language and literacy research at the end of our review.

The second chapter provides a careful comparative overview of the political and social roots of Swahili and English in Kenya, where Swahili is the national language while English is seen as the de facto national language because of its higher status, and in Tanzania, where Swahili is both the national and official language, reflecting a more nationalistic pride. These differences are tied to the relative diversity of indigenous linguistic groups and interethnic contact and harmony, which is stronger in Tanzania. Higgins then delineates the status and use of Swahili and of other languages in various combinations, such as Swanglish (or Swahinglish). Here she presents the key argument of her study: that English use can be seen in these contexts as both a legacy of a colonial past and a contribution to a modern, multivocal creativity in various domains of use.

The next four chapters each represent a domain of language use: (1) a newspaper office, (2) beauty pageants, (3) hip-hop, and (4) advertising. In the chapter on the newspaper office, Higgins further elaborates the historically marked code of English and how it has been fully localized so that the journalists at the *Tanzanian Gazette* (pseudonym), an English-medium newspaper, double-voice (cf. Bakhtin and McGee, 1986, 1981) the language to make it their own. She then outlines the tools of analysis used to contextualize and interpret the conversations she presents, many of them in the sports room, which is identified as the street corner of the Gazette office. She claims that among these

journalists, the use of English (which is often mixed in with Swahili, Swahinglish, and other local languages) is a kind of postcolonial performativity (cf. Pennycook, 2001), in that they do not evoke the voice of colonialism or neocolonialism but their own hybrid alternatives. Higgins illustrates these claims through rich discourse samples and triangulates them with interview data, allowing her to convincingly illustrate how the hybrid linguistic repertoires are used to manage social relations, including the destabilizing of hierarchies and the use of language creativity for humor to soften difficult conversations. For instance, in an exchange in which a young journalist admits to copying parts of her article, a more senior colleague says "If you are sweeping, don't allow your broom to go too far under the bed. You might retrieve unwanted objects" (p. 49). Higgins is arguing that this switch to English both mitigates the reprimand and makes it more confidential in this context.

Articles and advertisements that chronicle the beauty pageant season of each year in magazines and newspapers in Tanzania and Kenya are the focus of another chapter. Here Higgins introduces additional critical discourse analysis techniques based on the work of Fairclough (1995, 2001), Hall (1997), and Van Leeuwen (2005) to examine the discursive claims and public dialogue at the interstices of western and Afrocentric representations of female beauty. In her analysis, Higgins attends to triangulation by including interviews with cartoonists and journalists and observations of pageants. She opens with an illustrative example of parody from the cover of a magazine that contrasts the competing representations: a light-skinned, straight-haired, thin woman versus a barefoot, big-bottomed woman with braided hair. Higgins then discusses how these representations are tightly woven with language issues. Seeking social mobility, the pageant contestants not only represent and adopt westernized notions of beauty and competition, they often use monolingual English or Swahili rather than hybrid forms because English speakers have the advantage. She then illustrates instances of resistance to the pageants and returning to Bakhtinian theory, the use of parody in particular allows for multiple claims to truth about how women's bodies are represented and judged. For instance, male comic entertainers who perform at weddings and other parties often dress as women, "placing volleyballs on their backsides to emulate a well-endowed woman.... exaggerating their pelvic movements in order to make the volleyballs jiggle as much as possible" (p. 86). Higgins notes that the audience is sophisticated in the sense that they are aware of the disjuncture between western and traditional notions of female beauty.

The chapters on the polyphony of East African hip-hop and advertising domains again provide rich

evidence of the types of localization and multilingual recontextualization of global, cultural, and linguistic references that take on new meanings in music and in the marketplace, providing sites for creative double identifications. The chapter on language in advertising ends with a short but interesting comment on the paradox between the power of consumerism with its attendant creativity and the role of the free market in Eastern Africa that serves to divide the haves from the have-nots. This connects to a larger argument, made by Blommaert (2010) and others, that the sociolinguistics of mobility is less focused on languages per se and more focused on languages in use—that is, more concerned with concrete language resources deployed in particular sociocultural contexts with the attendant consequences of power and (in)equality.

In the final chapter, Higgins relates her findings from the domains of popular culture and commerce to the domain of school, and returns to the theoretical construct of centripetal forces that conspire to keep a unified, monolingual standard in schools of English and Swahili, respectively. The policy discourses of formal education often remain impervious to the recognition of multivocality of the language in use that seeps into the classrooms, for instance, in the form of code-switching. As Higgins notes, while there is in practice much language mixing inside the classrooms, “the deepest lines are drawn between the domain of education and the spheres of life inhabited by mediated popular culture, consumerism and creative expression” (p. 151). Although there is growing support for hybrid language use in Kenyan classrooms, there is still resistance to the use of written materials in, for instance, Sheng (a Swahili-English fused lect or blend with invariable codes, as opposed to language-mixing and code-switching). The government of Tanzania closely regulates Swahili with standards for any written publications, including school textbooks. With these final observations, Higgins effectively resituates her findings in broader sociolinguistic research and calls for policies in which hybrid languages are seen as productive resources in classrooms in Eastern Africa, as well as other parts of the world.

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## Literacy and Power

Hilary Janks writes in the preface of her book that she regards literacy as both a set of cognitive skills and a set of social practices. Her work is focused on the social side as she synthesizes across a variety of sociocultural threads that surround literacy: “I leave it to cognitive scientists, psychologists and psycholinguists to draw together the threads of their different orientations to literacy” (p. xiv). She continues, “This book works against the dividing practices in the field” as her intent

is to show “how literacy is tied to questions of power and that how we choose to teach literacy is political” (p. xiv). But this is not a theoretical treatise designed to just stir minds around the societal inequities. This book is a direct, personal, and passionate challenge to act.

*Literacy and Power* is organized into nine chapters. The chapters are less parts of a whole than they are transition points along the pathway of an argument. The first, “Turning to Literacy,” begins, “Many languages do not have a word for literacy” (p. 1). This opening is testimony to both the craft of the writer and the power of the ideas that follow. Janks draws the reader immediately into the context of South Africa to consider the discourses and literacy practices of taxi drivers. She grounds her examination of these and other kinds of literacy practices in the work of literacy theorists such as Halliday (1985), Heath (1983), and Street (1984), always returning to the social contexts in South Africa. Janks deconstructs the widely held binary view of literacy versus illiteracy, and reveals the complexity of literacy through a critical inspection of daily life.

Visual images, mostly from commercial media, are offered throughout the book to illustrate her points. For Janks, media affords a context for practicing critical discourse analysis, as well as a context for explaining her view of literacy that includes visual texts. Janks engages the reader in the analysis of images, offering questions for discussion. She speaks directly to classroom teachers about how these kinds of images, including those gathered locally, can be used to create awareness in students of the ways in which literacy is portrayed in the media, with a particular focus on how certain groups are identified, targeted, and positioned in relation to their literacy. It is at this early point in the book that the reader begins to appreciate how many different audiences are being addressed simultaneously in ways that draw those audiences together around a central purpose: critical literacy.

Janks frames her discussion of becoming a literacy teacher in terms of her own lived experiences. She writes, “I never used to think of myself as a literacy teacher” (p. 10). Through an account of her own teaching experiences as an English teacher at the secondary level, she brings us into the context of South Africa under apartheid and to events, like the Soweto uprising, that were centered on issues of language and power. It was at this point in her teaching career that Janks realized the struggle for language rights of the oppressed was, in fact, a literacy issue, a power issue, and a political issue. Janks marks her own introduction to a theoretical perspective for critical literacy from the time when she observed English teachers in Australia as they were applying Freirian principles.

Next, Janks introduces the reader to Critical Language Awareness as a tool for the critical analysis of text. She describes her own work with teachers in South Africa using these tools to reveal the ways in which literacy can be used to divide people. She takes on the discourse around second-language learning as one example of how such seemingly straightforward academic constructs are potentially dangerous and far removed from the complex reality of language learning and use in South Africa. Specifically, she argues that the academic use of second language has the effect of othering languages, making one not as good or as useful as the language of privilege and power. Finally, drawing on the work of Kress (2003), Janks continues to build on the idea that discussions around literacy are too often focused on the words and not open to considering other visual forms of literacy, including new technologies, for students “to develop their multimodal literacies” (p. 17).

Continuing, Janks introduces the concepts of design and redesign. Design refers to creating meaning in a way that is roughly parallel to writing but can be broadly applied across modalities (e.g., the composition of a photograph). Redesign involves the critical reading of texts moving from deconstruction (a strategy used often in critical literacy) to reconstruction of those texts into new forms. Janks makes personal connections to her own work in South Africa using a pedagogy of reconstruction. She challenges teachers to adopt a critical literacy approach to help students “rewrite themselves and their local situations by helping them to pose problems and to act, often in small ways, to make the world a fairer place” (p. 19).

We offer this detailed summary of the first chapter to illustrate the density of ideas and the complexity of the arguments presented. Indeed, the content of this chapter alone might serve as the focus for an entire graduate course in critical literacy. But at no point is the reader overwhelmed; there is more a sense of being introduced to a new way of thinking that is exciting, important, and thanks to Janks’s strong writing voice, highly personal. The remaining chapters are just as dense and complex, but for the purposes of this essay, we only highlight the major topics covered.

The second chapter, “Orientations to Literacy,” is deceptive in its brevity (it is only 12 pages). Here Janks puts forward her model for critical literacy. The model comprises four different conceptualizations of language and power: (1) domination, (2) access, (3) diversity, and (4) design. Janks describes how these four elements interact in relation to language and power, arguing that these four orientations are equally important and “crucially interdependent” (p. 26). She makes this concrete with specific examples from her work with two graduate students at her institute of higher education, and the experiences of those graduate students in

becoming literate in the context of apartheid and reconstruction. She goes on to reveal the ways in which these two students gained access to academic discourse.

The following chapters focus on literacy and power. “Language and Power” draws on Foucault’s theory of power and Gee’s work in discourse. Again, Janks engages the reader with examples for analysis and discussion. “Reading Texts Critically” offers a short, practical guide to the tools and strategies for critical discourse analysis, with multiple examples, including images, on how to approach the uncovering of power relationships in discourse.

The next set of chapters—“Diversity,” “Access,” and “Critical Text Production”—examine the elements of her model in detail. In the chapter “Redesign, Social Action and Possibilities for Transformation,” Janks challenges the reader to consider how to begin to rewrite the world in ways that promote fairness. In these chapters, Janks contrasts the big *P* politics with the little *p* politics. Big *P* politics refers to “the big stuff,” such as apartheid, government, and peacekeeping missions (p. 188). She argues these big *P* issues are difficult to address directly, particularly so for the individual. Little *p* politics refers to the “little stuff,” the daily minute-to-minute decisions we make that define who we are, such as “Do we learn someone else’s language?” Little *p* politics is about “desire and fear” and “identity and place” (p. 188). For Janks, time and attention are much better spent focusing on the small *p* issues. In the end because the two are connected, lots of attention to the little *ps* can have an impact on the big *P* politics of the world.

The final chapter, “The Future of Critical Literacy,” examines the need for critical literacy today and in the future. Janks cites many examples of work on critical literacy in countries around the world. The chapter concludes with a consideration of literacy “beyond reason” (p. 212). Here Janks delivers on a promise made in the preface of the book to explore the “non-rational unconscious on work in the area of critical literacy and flirts with ideas beyond the rational, trying to imagine the critical in relation to desire, identification and pleasure” (p. xv). We view this exploration of literacy beyond reason as highly promising in relation to the limitations of critical literacy as well as its continuing importance. That Janks chose to close her book by pondering the limits of critical literacy suggests, thankfully, that there is more to come.

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## South African Visual Culture

In a vein similar to the work of Janks, the authors in this edited volume explore South African visual culture through a careful view of markers of class, race, and

gender identity. The authorship of this edited book draws from a variety of South African institutes of higher education and other South African organizations and entities. The editors, Jeanne van Eeden and Amanda du Preez, begin with a description of the ways in which the book was conceived: three of the authors were “lumped together” (p. 1) in a session called “Graveyard Issues” at the 18th annual conference of the South African Association of Art Historians. When asked how they would like to be introduced, they realized how at odds they were with the rest of the conference in terms of topics and emphasis. They chose to be introduced as “lapsed art historians,” indicating their close yet awkward relation to art history (p. 1). It was then that the team began to formulate a plan for the edited volume under review here.

Visual culture, according to the editors, is the

location of common areas between visual cultural studies, cultural studies, the new art history, popular cultural studies, and media studies, at the intersections of their interest in the visuality of culture (visuality designating the complex visual event of seeing and being seen). (pp. 1–2)

As the editors suggest, the book’s chapters represent a sample of South African visual culture. The introductory chapter begins by contextualizing the book in the field of cultural studies, which defines culture politically and not in “the former exclusive sense that denoted high art or cultured aesthetic excellence” (p. 3). The introductory chapter then situates the book in the “visual turn” (p. 4), which equivocates the importance of pictures with traditional text. To further the argument, the editors quote the work of W.J.T. Mitchell (1996), who observed that “pictures want equal rights with language, not to be turned into language” (p. 5). To provide the reader with a concise definition of visual culture, the authors again turn to Mitchell: “Visual culture is the study of the social construction of the visual field, and the visual construction of the social field” (p. 6). We construct what we see, just as we are constructed by what we see.

The first set of chapters deals with the ideological domain of consumer capitalism in everyday South African life. The second set of chapters deals in broad terms with aspects of gender and race construction in South African society. The third set of chapters deals with the fact that digital media are used in an anarchistic manner to create and convey specific visual and ideological identities. Finally, the last set of chapters deals with related media of cultural production, namely photography, film, and television. Here the authors use social semiotics to demonstrate the culturally embedded meanings of these media.

The study of visual culture appears equivalent to what we would refer to as visual literacy and certainly

overlaps with critical literacies. It is through the careful selection of a few chapters in this book that we hope to illustrate that overlap, and the connections in this volume to the works of Higgins and Janks.

In the chapter “Don’t give me what I ask for, give me what I need”: advertising dilemmas in contemporary South Africa,” Michael Herbst provocatively explains the ambivalent role the media plays in the lives of people who have only irregular access to media. Herbst begins the chapter by arguing that human beings are “complex and multifaceted participants in their social worlds, not soft putty” (p. 13) to be molded and shaped by other entities into complacent and compliant subjects. We are, according to Herbst, active participants in the shaping of our worlds, whether we realize it or not.

Herbst continues with the argument of what he calls a politics of representation. He demonstrates that advertisements neither sell lifestyles nor products. Rather, the engendered lifestyles that advertisements represent are those lifestyles that society already desires. For example, advertisements for holidays at the beach with beer or wine, surrounded by women in swimwear, work most effectively on those who already identify with and enjoy such vacations: bourgeois heterosexuals who tend to stock their wine racks or refrigerators with the advertised beverages. This target audience is media literate, according to Herbst, and derives a sense of pleasure from this advertisement. Therefore, he argues, it is the “viewer who settles on a way to respond to the advert; advertisers have no direct control over the process” (p. 17).

Similarly, Herbst argues that advertisements do not indoctrinate; rather, the fact that advertisements portray a particular lifestyle (or an aspect of a lifestyle) must mean that society has already begun to *accept* that lifestyle, making advertisements a product of society rather than the root cause of it. Furthermore, according to Herbst, advertisements engage in the act of resignification, a process of “mobilisation in which images and signs that have over time become significant in maintaining dominant worldviews and ideas are reoriented to signify anew” (p. 33). For example, one advertisement described in this chapter portrays a photograph of a pair of hands interlinked over a pregnant woman’s abdomen. The woman’s hands are white and the man’s black; the sharply contrasting lighting in the photo emphasizes the duality. Marketing Dulux paint, the slogan on the advertisement reads, “Any colour you can think of” (p. 31). As Herbst points out, this image signifies a changing view in South Africa—where interracial mixing was once illegal—of mixed relationships, and further posits that only those who tolerate the idea of mixed relationships will tolerate this image. Those who do not tolerate mixed relationships “will not be able to participate,

since another ideology (of racial separatism) will make such identification impossible" (p. 32). Consequently, this image represents "patterns of thinking" or "ideological identifications" (p. 33). Resignification requires that advertising companies engage in self-reflection and self-critique by altering sexist or racist imagery used in advertising.

In "Constructing femininity in 'Huisgenoot,'" authors Louise Viljoen and Stella Viljoen follow a genre of scholarship that investigates gender constructs as indicative of broader sociopolitical trends. Their chapter explores changing trends and the cultural conceptualization of femininity in two issues of *Huisgenoot*, an Afrikaner magazine. The authors examined two issues (December 4, 1953 and December 11, 2003). These two were selected because they represent the larger goals of the magazine. In the early issues of the magazine, the goal was to be secular and globalized; more recent issues represent the developed identity of the magazine. Both are joined by the magazine's construction of femininity. The authors analyzed the front covers and the advertisements as well as the articles and fictional stories in the two issues.

The analysis of the articles across both issues seemed to reveal the changing nature of the target audience. In the 1953 issue, the articles focused on men whereas the advertisements, features, and stories focused on women, and women were present in the domestic sphere but absent from the public sphere. A shift was seen in the analysis of the 2003 issue toward an eclectic target audience, including a broadened concept of family, which included single-parent, multiracial, "broken," and unmarried families (p. 109). The fiction in the issues reveals similar themes: The 1953 edition contained nostalgia for the rural past, and the 2003 issue contained the stereotypical portrayal of a female as a caring, nurturing mother. Interestingly, the analysis of the advertisements in the issues revealed themes that centered on a more cosmopolitan, commercialized and global identity: Advertisements in the 1953 issue centered on kitchen or nursery while the majority of advertisements in the 2003 issue centered on the "vain preoccupations of the 'bedroom' or boudoir" (p. 111).

The authors conclude that the construction of femininity is connected to the culture of Afrikaner identity as an "organic and changing entity" (p. 113) but also reflects an influence of global trends in the visual construction of gender. This shift, the authors conclude, is due to the "global effects of an increasingly consumer-driven and populist culture," and this exemplifies the employment of the visual image as a "quick and accessible means of communicating identity" by the Western culture (p. 113). However, the fact remains, women are still portrayed largely as mothers, primary caretakers, and nurturers of children, most of which

correspond to findings of critical content analyses that have been conducted in family literacy research in the North (e.g., Smythe, 2006).

Throughout this book, we saw ways in which statements posed and questions asked by the visual culture are similar to those asked by critical literacies, such as, "Working out who asks such questions and who is meant to answer them is less interesting than querying why the advert places such an emphasis on feeling in the first place" (p. 22). Similarly, as we read the chapters, we were reminded of the social construction of literacy. That is, participants in a literate society are not constructed by the literacy acts in which they are engaged. Rather, those participants are active co-constructors in that process. Herbst makes the same point in reference to advertisements and the visual culture of this field. There were other places, too, in which we made deep connections to critical literacies, such as the findings that were presented in Viljoen and Viljoen's representation of femininity and Donna Smith's representation of lesbian and gay people in another chapter, "From the other side: the representation of lesbian and gay people in popular visual media—a personal view." Although most chapters shied away from and in some cases explicitly denied connections to text, there were blurred lines between critical literacies and visual culture throughout the book. Tacit connections were made between our two fields, as evident in the chapter by Pieter Swanepoel on understanding photography. In this chapter, photography is a "visual language (or code)" that is to be read "actively to extract meaning from it. Although the image does not appear in a written form, we can still refer to it as text" (p. 211). Swanepoel uses semiology, or asking questions about the "meaning or message" in pictures as a way of "uncovering what lies beneath photography" (p. 209).

We highly recommend this book for these subtle ties to critical literacies. We also appreciate the approach of the authors as they problematized traditional views of critical perspectives. Rather than using a single framework to critically examine the role of the media (Marxist, feminist, deconstructivist, for example), visual culturists, and we would add critical literacy researchers and theorists, might adopt a more pluralistic approach, broadening the critical perspective taken on such endeavors.

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## Common Ground

We find important theoretical and practice connections among these three books that speak to communities outside of the African context so vividly portrayed here. First, these books point to the power of an approach that views language, literacy, and culture as social practices that are contextual, dynamic, and

evolving. Second, and in a related way, the positioning of this work in the daily lives of people, as in conversations with taxi drivers; the examination of popular culture, as in hip-hop and beauty pageants; and the engagement with media, as in advertisements, is a space shared by the three books. The aesthetic, the economic, and the political are revealed through the acts of the art, language, and literacy practices involved.

To some degree, all three books represent the language and literacy in use as political. Janks openly asserts that her book is about power and the ways in which acts of literacy define others and position them in relationship to each other. Janks offers a theory and a set of practical tools for researchers and citizens, especially youths, to use to uncover the purposeful and sometimes nonpurposeful ways that acts of literacy unfold in daily lives inside and outside of schools. Janks is also transparent about her purposes related to deconstruction and reconstruction. She is directed toward the goal of using the tools of critical discourse analysis, for example, as a means of transforming a society and working toward social justice.

Higgins does not have an equally explicit political agenda, beyond a call for the recognition of sociolinguistic theory that “treats human agency, contextuality, diversity, indeterminacy and multimodality as the norm” (p. xi). She also questions, as noted earlier, the ways in which schools remain impervious to this linguistic multivocality and invention so plentiful in other cultural domains. Higgins notes that even informal education, such as AIDS/HIV prevention campaigns by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Kenya, capitalizes on hip-hop, a polyphonic cultural form, yet schools continue to favor monolingualism, as evidenced by signs such as “English Only” posted on school entrances. She closes the book by calling for a reexamination of the language ideologies and policies that support this continuing divide.

The van Eeden and du Preez volume is quite explicit in its political agenda; the content of the book, from interracial relations to gender to class identity, is a tribute to the politicized nature of the work of these authors. The book addresses these politicized issues much in the same way that Harste and colleagues do (Harste, 2009; Siegel, 2006) in their explorations of semiology and multimodality in relation to reading. Harste theorized around a broad conception of literacy in relation to sign systems:

It is important to understand...that sign systems are not necessarily in competition with one another. Each affords a particular type of meaning. I like to think about literacy broadly as all of the ways that humankind has for mediating their world...how humankind uses sign systems—art, music, language, mathematics, dance, and drama—to

mediate and transmediate themselves and their world. (p. 39)

From our perspectives, the expansion of literacy to be inclusive of visual media resonates with the need to move beyond print-based literacies, and it is essential to being cognizant of the role that visual images and media play in contemporary and historic African societies (e.g., Blommaert, 2005, 2010). In compiling their volume, van Eeden and du Preez have taken a similar stance by including critical examinations of shopping malls as a visual culture, digital media and subcultural expression, and television genres.

In closing, we would like to return to some of the notions raised in our introductory remarks and recommend some cautions. First, through these three books, we are alerted to the dangers in treating Africa as monolithic. To be sure, regions such as Southern and Eastern Africa share common histories and present realities. However, at the same time, the histories of not only the regions but also the countries across Africa differ in important ways. While some countries are aggressive and innovative in protecting their mother tongues through the political recognition of those languages (e.g., Ghana and South Africa), other countries remain more traditional in their representation of language policies (national languages and dominant, colonial languages as official languages, e.g., Kenya and Tanzania). Regardless, the majority of the African countries that we read about and interact with continue to struggle with the role of dominant languages within their communities, governments, and educational practices. We have grown to appreciate the complexity of these power issues and the way research is framed to reveal power struggles within African contexts.

Second, we want to comment again on our positions in relation to these African contexts. In her book *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science*, Raewyn Connell (2007) discussed the power of western and northern ways of knowing as an overriding force in the colonizing of what counts as the knowledge of others—in Africa, in the antipodes, and elsewhere. In particular, Connell explored discussions of indigenous African research by African sociologists (e.g., Akiwowo, 1986; Lawuyi & Taiwo, 1990; Makinde, 1988). She posited that social science at its core is an undemocratic enterprise in its preference for the traditions of the Northern scholars at the expense of indigenous work, and she calls for dialogue and cooperative intellectual work between the Western or mainstream and the sociology of the periphery. She argues in particular that we should strive to achieve a form of unity in understanding that requires a fuller consideration of how indigenous researchers are studying their own changing cultures.

Perhaps this unity is achieved in part by adopting a demeanor that entails a form of comparison and contrast across the multiple layers of complexity that exist within cultural sites but also in similar embeddings across sites. As Rizvi (2009) has argued in “Global Mobility and the Challenges of Educational Research and Policy,” the local might not be exceptional within the global context. As he states, the complex relationship between global and local

has to deal, for example, with the diasporic spaces that enable many people to now belong simultaneously to more than one country, and to forge their identity within the context of economic, social, and political relations that span national boundaries. (p. 283)

In the context of discussing this global mobility and hybridity, Rizvi argued that “focus must shift to the ways in which cultural forms become separated from existing practices and recombine into new forms, and into new practices in their local conditions set against global forces” (p. 284). Indeed, perhaps we might exploit the books by analogizing to ourselves. For example, the divisions of rich and poor discussed by Janks may not be dissimilar to those found in North America, and they tend to fall along the same lines of cultural, racial, and linguistic identities. While not commonly referred to in terms of imperialism, the construction of the “other” (e.g., someone who is non-white, non-English speaking) in the United States in neoliberal discourses as individually responsible rather than as systemically disadvantaged is really the same. Whether these divisions are vestiges of colonialism, as Willinsky (1999) argued, or rationalized and institutionalized in other ways that perpetuate differences is something to be continually interrogated.

## Final Word

What we would certainly claim is that these three books demonstrate that the language, literacy, and visual tools we use have the power to contribute to developments within communities in ways that are transformative, artificial, or a combination of the two. The books highlight how issues surrounding the linguistic and extralinguistic tools we use are tied to global and local dynamics where the current circumstances, inevitable outcomes, or aspirational goal may be a form of continuous creative hybridization of the indigenous and the global.

Clearly, the sociopolitical context is changing as the world is experiencing massive global forces and similar challenges that might warrant a united position that respects rather than overrides differences—that is, a position that supports unity but not uniformity. What we can learn from these books,

as educators in particular, is that local action in schools that equips teachers and learners with the skills to recognize and then rewrite their worlds is a small step we might embrace. However, this process should be considered against the backdrop of complex, multilayered considerations of communities amidst changes that we may share, but which we experience and might respond to differently. We hope that our thoughts on the issues raised in these three books provide at least a considered representation of the complex communication issues faced in selected African contexts, albeit one that is at least partly tainted by a Northern perspective. Mostly, we hope our essay prompts a reading of these books and provokes further conversation and critique.

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