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Multimodal Critical Inquiry
Nurturing Decolonial Imaginaries

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We approach the invitation of this handbook chapter – to discuss multimodality in reading research – with an acknowledgment that multimodal frameworks have a long history and numerous intellectual lineages that precede their influence in literacy studies. By "put[ting] images, gestures, music, movement, animation, and other representational modes on equal footing with language" (Siegel, 2006, p. 65), multimodal lenses offer an avenue for re-reading "literacy" beyond school-based notions of reading and writing, and underscore how individuals and collectivities mobilize literacy practices within and across specific contexts and in relation to power asymmetries. They also invite us to look forward, to consider how phenomena such as transnational migration, global neoliberal policies, and activist movements of resistance might be aligned with, and inform, the next phase of multimodal literacy research.

One of the well-established contributions of multimodality to reading research is a more expansive understanding of what constitutes a text (e.g. Gee, 2003; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Kress, 2000; Rowe, 1988; Serafini, 2013; Siegel, 1995; Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1994). This idea has provided educators theoretical and empirical justifications to go beyond traditional books and support students in reading across semiotic modes (Alvermann, 2010; Hassett & Curwood, 2010; Mills, 2010). Multimodality has also placed a renewed emphasis on collaborative work and creation (e.g. Beach & O'Brien, 2015; Vasudevan, Schultz, & Bateman, 2010). What has perhaps been less explored are the ways in which multimodal inquiry, decoupled from critical and postcolonial perspectives, can reproduce the conventional hermeneutic it has claimed to upend: the individual, rational subject transacting with an autonomous text; the Eurocentric, liberal humanist subject. Indeed, multimodality can potentially re-inscribe schooling as usual – one need only witness the co-opting of digital and media literacies within new standards, "college readiness" discourses, and high-stakes accountability that serve to widen the achievement gap rather than expand who counts as literate in school (e.g. Buckingham, 2010).

This chapter argues for the need to more explicitly co-articulate multimodality with postcolonial theory. We first review the various scholarly lineages and debates that have shaped the literature on multimodality in literacy and reading education. The emerging literature on multimodality, in particular those that are informed by materialist philosophical traditions (e.g., Deleuze, 1994) and concerned with ontology (e.g. Leander & Boldt, 2013; Lenters, 2016; Stornaiuolo, Smith, & Phillips, 2017), provides an opportunity to (re)imagine and enact alternative pedagogical communities that value multiple and non-dominant ways on knowing. Much of the

research on multimodality in education, however, has shied away from directly addressing issues of race and legacies of colonialism in the lives and learning of youth. One promising area of critical research is from scholars and educators who have been working at the intersection of critical literacy and participatory methods (e.g. Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2015). This body of work, although not always explicitly in conversation with multimodal scholarship, provides rich examples of youth who are tapping into subaltern literate legacies, both to critique power and to create new educational communities. We believe one generative avenue for further research in multimodality is through an engagement with postcolonial theory. We offer examples from two research studies (Campano, 2007; Campano, Ghiso, & Welch, 2016) to bring together multimodal literacy frameworks with the postcolonial theories of Édouard Glissant. This pairing invites educators and literacy researchers to confront traumatic histories, tap into the agency of individual and collective literate identities, and imagine insurgent intellectual communities.

Multimodality and Reading Research

In one sense, approaches to multimodality that engage postcolonial perspectives are not far afield from previous research in reading and literacy studies that explicitly ties the concept both to the proliferation of new technologies and to the recent spread of globalization and neoliberal policies (e.g. Jewitt, 2008; New London Group, 1996; Siegel, 2012). This is not to say that multimodality is, itself, a new or recent phenomenon: researchers readily acknowledge that reading has always involved processes of decoding not only words, but also images, spatial layouts, and even tones as texts are read aloud (e.g. Johns, 1998; Palmeri, 2012). Indeed, as historians of literacy have argued, some of our earliest alphabetic characters emerged first as pictorial representations (Schmandt-Besserat & Erard, 2007), and it was not until the late Middle Ages that "silent reading" displaced the conventional practice of orally reciting written text (Clanchy, 1979). What scholars have signaled as unique, then, is not the existence of multimodality but rather the accelerated pace with which information technologies, transnational migration, and geo-political shifts have tested the limits of our previous frameworks for categorizing, analyzing, and understanding reading practices (Kress, 2010; Stornaiuolo et al., 2017).

Researchers have used different terms to characterize such cultural shifts. Kress (2003) deems it "the new media age," where the primary medium for reading has moved from printed text to the digital screen. This pivot, he argues, has put visual images at the center of human communication – which demands that we recalibrate our understanding of how modes combine in different contexts. Luke (2003), likewise, suggests that we are living in "new times," which call for "new literacy practices" for navigating a landscape for reading that does not fit nicely into formalized structures. Building on this idea, the New London Group (1996) articulates a notion of "multiliteracies" to suggest that these new practices must not only attend to emerging arrangements of modes, but also to the ways globalization has brought together a plurality of languages and cultures that challenge any singular approach to studying or teaching reading. While these approaches use different language to frame the central problems that multimodality addresses, their unifying thread is the recognition that the multiple modes and participatory nature of new technologies have made it difficult – if not impossible – to think of reading as a simple process of decoding symbols on a page. Much like earlier proponents of literacy study who had advocated for an expanded view of reading that took into account larger social contexts (e.g. Cole & Scribner, 1981; Heath, 1983), these technological and geopolitical developments elucidated the need for research frames to be expanded further still – to include those social dimensions that help to shape the interplay between multiple modes, media, and languages.

To do so, researchers of multimodal reading have drawn on different conceptual frameworks to guide their inquiries. Jewitt (2008) delineates three parallel traditions in educational literature

that examine how modes interact: New Literacy Studies, Multiliteracies, and Multimodality. The first of these, New Literacy Studies (NLS), signals a body of scholarship that examines literacy not as a discrete bundle of skills, but as a complex, culturally-situated practice (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; Gee, 1990; Street, 1995). "Multiliteracies" builds on the NLS tradition, arguing that the changing role of global capitalism has shifted what it means to be literate – and therefore demands new pedagogical approaches whereby literacy teaching and learning are understood as matters of "design" (New London Group, 1996). Multimodality, likewise, has been couched as a response to similar political phenomena. Siegel (2012), for example, views multimodality as a counterpoint to the "hard times" associated with globalization, neoliberalism, and the implementation of rigid academic standards in public education and an intervention that can open up curricular opportunities for meaning-making. As in the aforementioned traditions, scholars of multimodality have argued that meaning can be made and interpreted using a plurality of communicative resources and combinations thereof – including, but not limited to, language, image, gesture, body posture, sound, writing, music, and speech (Kress, 2010; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). Further, Hull and Nelson (2005) have stressed that the merging of different modes is not simply a discrete additive process, but one that results in new, generative combinations of meaning – or, put simply, that the whole of a multimodal artifact is more than the sum of its individual parts.

Given certain similarities across these terms, it is not surprising that they are, at times, used interchangeably; however, some have argued that there are subtle tensions that exist between them. Anderson (2013), for example, notes that the genealogies of New Literacy Studies and Multiliteracies stem from anthropological traditions that foreground the study of literacy events and practices as social exchanges. By contrast, Multimodality has roots in Systemic Functional Linguistics, which helps explain why some of its proponents have not simply used the term to denote descriptive studies of semiotic practice, but have developed elaborate frameworks or "grammars" for organizing and analyzing multimodal artifacts (e.g. Jewitt, 2014; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). According to Anderson, glossing over differences in such methodological approaches

> could lead to misinterpretations of the assumptions and priorities underlying a particular research study, which can become problematic when the findings are uncritically adapted from studies whose underlying premises are not commensurate with educators' own beliefs about learning and author.
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> *(p. 296)*

Tensions within and between these traditions are not limited to their respective intellectual and academic lineages. Bazalgette and Buckingham (2013), for example, note that there is a tendency for multimodal research to reinscribe and reify the very divides between print and non-print texts that such perspectives are meant to dissolve. They argue that this is, in part, due to an elision of differences between multimodal analysis (which involves a process of trying to understand how distinct modes work together to achieve a particular social outcome) and multimodal texts (which, they suggest, is not a particularly useful category, since all texts are, in some sense, constituted by multiple modes). Street (2013), likewise, develops this claim further, positing that multimodal analysis must be careful not to grant too much autonomy to the individual modes themselves, as their meanings and functions cannot be disembedded from their situated social uses. For instance, talk of the "affordances" of a given mode that does not acknowledge the specific contexts in which the mode is put to use seems to assume certain limits and possibilities in the mode itself, not as something interdependent with the contingencies of social use. Recently, literacy researchers have tried to attend to these uncertainties by turning attention to

those dimensions of use that have traditionally been harder to account for – materiality (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010), embodiment (Ghiso, 2015), and affect (Lenters, 2016), for instance. Leander and Boldt (2013) draw on "rhizomatic" assemblage theories of Gilles Deleuze (1994) to illustrate how multimodality is an emergent phenomenon – where meaning is not only something that unfolds through an interplay of aesthetic and linguistic modes, but also through the embodied experiences and practices of those who interact with such texts.

Multimodality and Critical Inquiry

The recent resonance of Deleuze's work in reading research on multimodality – with its emphasis on creativity and difference – could provide an opportunity for educators to embrace alternative forms of sociality and community in education. This is because, as May (2005) argues, Deleuze embraces ontology and larger questions about how one might conduct one's life beyond dominant scripts and ossified categories of identity, such as, in the field of education, "struggling readers". By contrast, much of reading research and pedagogy with a critical orientation draws on theorists who take a more detached and skeptical posture toward the world. For example, the traditions of critical literacy (e.g., Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002) and critical discourse analysis in education (Janks, 2010), developed during an intellectual zeitgeist aptly characterized as a hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur, 1970), are geared toward supporting students in questioning the idea of an essential nature to human life or existence. From this perspective, the great books of the Western Canon, for example, do not reveal timeless truths, but are themselves the products of particular historical and political forces. A high school English teacher may encourage the class to adopt a "postcolonial" lens in their reading of a "classic" such as *Heart of Darkness*, not only to expose its pretense to universality, but also to demonstrate how cultural "others" are dehumanized and regulated to the background in the dominant narratives of human history (Achebe, 1977). At an elementary level, a teacher may invite children to analyze Disney movies in order to question the ways in which gender normativity is reproduced in popular culture, or how representations of (dis)ability stand in for human vice or virtue. Thus, these critical "lenses", traditionally applied to canonical texts (Appleman, 2015), may also be employed to analyze multimodal texts as well (e.g., Baildon & Damico, 2009).

Challenging or Reproducing Reading-As-Usual?

These approaches have been invaluable in the field of literacy studies and reading, but they do not – in and of themselves – transcend a conventional hermeneutics and narrow notions of what it means to be educated. As the literary theorist Felski (2015) has argued recently, there are "limits" to dominant critical approaches aimed at "demystifying" and "deconstructing" texts; for example, they do not always point the way toward viable different futures. In primary and secondary schools, students may be invited to take a critical stance, but the literacy event itself may still involve an individual reader analyzing an autonomous text in a manner that can be assessed and evaluated quantitatively to justify sorting and ranking students according to normal-curve ideologies, too often along lines of race, class, and language (Simon & Campano, 2013). This is because, as the philosopher Linda Martin Alcoff (2006) reminds us, the notion of an individual rational self that can transcend social context – the Western liberal humanist subject – is pretty much hardwired into our educational institutions. A curriculum may use culturally relevant content, but students may nonetheless feel alienated because they are still experiencing schooling as usual. Even educational approaches informed by Deleuze, such as "assemblage theory", may just become another abstract analytical lens for students to "apply" to the interpretation of texts or for a researcher to analyze a classroom dynamic. Ironically, the renewed emphasis on

embodiment, materiality, and affect in literacy studies, has not always translated into helping students and teachers address the realities of racism and colonialism in schooling (Nichols & Campano, 2017).

We believe a multimodal orientation can provide a pathway for reclaiming indigenous and subaltern literacies. Walter Mignolo's scholarship (1995) unpacks writing as a site of colonial struggle, whereby definitions of literacy cast solely in alphabetic terms served to inscribe a binary between those deemed "literate", and by implication "civilized", and those considered "illiterate" and thereby savages in need of "taming" and "salvation." A multimodal approach makes visible the multiple indigenous literate traditions of the Americas – from Mayan codices to Andean quipus, among others – and also brings into the relief the power relations inherent in what gets named as literacy (Saldívar, 2004). As an example, European colonizers often burned entire indigenous archives to instantiate a myth of "illiteracy" and fuel the colonial enterprise. As Rasmussen (2012) notes, "broadening the definition of writing in the Americas beyond a particular semiotic system – the alphabet – disrupts a whole complex of cultural meanings, as well as dynamics of dominance" (p. 4). It frames the colonial encounter as a "confrontation between different literate traditions" (Rasmussen, 2012, p. 3) or as colonial semiosis (Mignolo, 2000), a bi-directional exchange that puts alphabetic and non-alphabetic texts in dialogue and "mutual inter-animation" (Rasmussen, 2012, p. 10). These exchanges have relevance for understanding the literate practices of today's youth, whose multimodal textual productions potentially draw on visual literacies and indigenous legacies of resistance (e.g. Cowan, 2004; Jiménez & Smith, 2008), and whose school literacy trajectories may have too often been circumscribed by their acquiescence to, or deviation from, an idealized alphabetic literacy.

Subaltern Literacies and Insurgent Communities of Inquiry

Some of the most promising research in multimodal inquiry comes from scholars who are working at the intersection of critical literacy pedagogy and participatory/community-based research (e.g. Mirra et al., 2015). Because their methodologies involve collaborative inquiry alongside youth and families, they are concerned with nurturing more egalitarian communities, collectively embodying humanizing and decolonial forms of sociality, ones that value interdependence and are more conducive to students' holistic flourishing (e.g. Ghiso, 2016). The language of this scholarship, following Lorde (1984) and rich traditions of feminist critical thought that do not separate emotions from cognition, is one of connection, love, healing, joy – multiple ways of knowing and being – and asset orientations that honor youths' brilliance rather than its deficits (e.g., Alim & Haupt, 2017). Often theorizing from non-dominant activist, artistic, and intellectual legacies, what may be characterized as organic critical literacies (Campano, Ghiso, Sánchez, 2013), this emerging scholarship also goes beyond critique to prefigure other possible worlds of education. While it does not always invoke directly the academic conversations on multimodality per se – although some scholars certainly do – what does appear to be a salient pattern is that it documents how youth draw on and inter-animate a range of semiotic resources, including subaltern literacies, in culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995), sustaining (Paris & Alim, 2014), and procreative ways.

San Pedro (2017), for example, examines the context of a Native American literature class to inquire into the ways youth engaged in multimodal projects that sought to build on Native traditions and give students opportunities for expressing identities as "in-process." He documented how, through visual and verbal storytelling and humanizing dialogue, a new classroom culture emerged that prioritized trust and mutual relationships. Ghiso (2016) draws explicitly on theories of coloniality to analyze how young Latina/o children use photography as a form of multimodal inquiry to recenter their immigrant neighborhood as a place of innovative knowledge

production, cross-cultural and multilingual exchange, and interdependence. Wong and Peña (2017)'s study of two classrooms utilizing performance arts, revealed that this medium fostered inquiry into aspects of students' cultures and enabled them to address contemporary topics that impacted them daily. In this reimagined and interdependent school space, students built cultures of sharing, storytelling, and listening, that served both to acknowledge shared traumas and to joyfully and collectively project images of the futures they desired and deserved. Enciso (2011) showcases how storytelling as a culturally-inflected literacy practice, can build connections and solidarity between immigrant and non-immigrant youth. In their ethnographic study of Hip Hop culture in South Africa, Alim and Haupt (2017) found that Black South Africans both reclaimed and retold their linguistic and cultural histories while validating and celebrating their Black/Indigenous discourses and forms of expression. In turn, they used these ways of expression to cast a vision of a pluralistic future that centered people of color. Korina Jocson (2005) framed a study of June Jordan's *Poetry for the People* around the perspectives of feminist poets such as Adrienne Rich, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Jordan herself. In this work, she explores the potential of the *Poetry for the People* curriculum to harness student and teachers' multiple literacies, voices, and cultural resources, and to help students see the connection between poetry, identity, and political action.

Maisha Winn (2011, Fisher, 2009) has investigated multimodal literacy pedagogy that builds on cultural practices of resistance, such as playwriting and spoken word poetry. Reading, writing, and performing poetry gave students an opportunity to reclaim often silenced histories of Black revolutionaries, share testimonials, participate in political action, and resist dominant narratives that deficitized their literacies and knowledges. In her work with incarcerated girls and their teaching artists, Winn (2011) observed the ways that the girls, who had been assigned deficit narratives based on their race, gender, and class – narratives further impacted by their incarcerated statuses – used playwriting and performance built on traditions of political theater to describe their worlds and engage in collective acts of resistance. Through these multimodal practices the young women brought their stories and perspectives to light, reimagined their futures, fostered a community and a sense of home with one another, and advocated for themselves. In both of these studies, Winn demonstrates how multimodal pedagogies that connect students to traditions of resistant arts can create opportunities for youth of color to enact change as they assert identities as literate and knowledgeable.

A number of literacy scholars have used Black feminist traditions as theoretical grounding for multimodal pedagogies that attend to students' evolving identities and seek to reimagine schooling as more communitarian and decolonial. For example, Price-Dennis (2016) highlights how Black girls use digital tools to explore their "multiple, political/critical, historical, intellectual, collaborative, and identity-laden literacies" (p. 337), and how these multimodal facilities might be leveraged in the curriculum to mediate teachers' relationships to students across boundaries of race, gender, class, and ability. Price-Dennis builds on the work of Elaine Richardson (2007), who studied the multimodal literacies of Black girls. Richardson argues for the importance of using a racial and gendered analytical lens, and highlights how their literacies not only draw from cultural histories, but are also a response to the ever-present racism and sexism of our contemporary society.

Carmen Kynard (2010) adds to this literature by attending to the ways the 13 Black women in her study appropriated modern tools to tap into historical legacies of resistance. Through a digital listserv, the young women created what Kynard refers to as a "hush harbor", a communicative dynamic that was not audible to the broader class, and through which they could use literacy to share counter stories and more freely engage in acts of individual and collective self-definition. These spaces strove to prefigure decolonial worlds within the hegemonic white space of the academy, allowing students to recreate and reimagine the academy from within. Similarly, Haddix, McArthur, Muhammad, Price-Dennis, and Sealey-Ruiz (2016) created

a "virtual kitchen table talk" – a multimodal conversation in the form of recorded Zoom videos that transposed the gendered cultural epistemological practices of "kitchen table talk" to the context of higher education. In both these examples, multimodality became a vehicle through which to nurture what Harney and Moten (2013) characterize as an educational "undercommons," an alternative inquiry community informed by Black radical theory and liberation struggles operating within and against predominantly white institutions, autonomous notions of literacy, and conventional hermeneutics.

All these studies reflect how multimodal approaches, when fused with critical theories, might give rise to insurgent communities of inquiry (Cochran–Smith & Lytle, 2009) that mobilize reading and writing for social change. The aforementioned research examples attend to the histories of systemic racism and colonial oppression that continue to shape schooling and tap into the meaning-making traditions of non–dominant communities. As we look to the future of reading and literacy studies, we anticipate scholarship that will draw both from cutting edge research on multimodality and from a wider array of intellectual traditions that are concerned with issues of power.

Multimodality and Decolonial Imaginaries

The convergence of multimodality and critical literacy provides a foundation for understanding reading practices as a situated coming-together of identities, geographies, and semiotic resources. Such a framing echoes the work of postcolonial scholars who have examined the ways language and identity are bound up with "place" and "history." To understand how these intersections might expand our conceptions and uses of multimodal inquiry, one perspective we have found especially instructive is that of Édouard Glissant. Much like scholars of multimodality have looked at the ways texts are not monoliths, but rather, exist as a constellation of communicative modes, and critical literacy scholars have recognized the ways that readers' identities condition their engagement with texts, Glissant also attends to the ways observable practices are animated by rich and textured histories. In his theorizing of a "poetics of landscape," Glissant (1989) suggests that situated activities which appear to us as stable and knowable are, in fact, an assemblage of identities, materials, and labor that, together, produce a perceived sense of stasis. In this way, we see in Glissant a resource for examining multimodal reading, too, as a layered assemblage.

Glissant is perhaps best known for his conceptualization of creolization, borrowed from linguistics, to characterize broader social phenomena, including how cultures and identities come in contact with one another. Unlike créolité, which may refer to a new, reified identity made from two formally separate identities, creolization draws attention to a universal, though largely unpredictable, relational process, whereby identities do not become fixed and cultural transactions do not have an end point. In literacy research, Lemrow (2016) draws on Glissant to understand the critical literacy practices of youth in a "developmental" (i.e. remedial) reading class, many of whom identified as multiracial. She argues that:

> within the realm of education, and literacy education, in particular, créolization theory can be a useful tool to explore how our literacy practices are informed and created within classrooms, with a special focus on those who best articulate a créolised reality: students who draw their identities from the interstices of the more formerly rigid categories of race, ethnicity, language, and gender.
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> *(p. 4)*

She documents, for example, students' engagement with literature from ethnic studies that "awake[ns] the opportunity to see across and within difference" (p. 7). Lemrow traces how one

student, Jeremiah, drew on these openings to link his experiences of the Philippines with Junot Diaz's (2007) characterizations of the Dominican Republic in *The Brief Wonderous Life of Oscar Wao*, reminding us that geographically disparate spaces are linked by colonial histories and reframing his particular lived reality as part of a global phenomenon.

As "creolization" demonstrates, Glissant's work engages *both* poststructural and decolonial thought, theorizing from the particular location of Caribbean ideas that have increasing worldwide resonance during this current era of globalization, information technology, social networking, mass migration, war, xenophobia, cultural and linguistic interaction, and conflict. In reading research, a thinker such as Glissant can play an important role in helping to reconcile scholarship that has embraced post-humanism to think about multimodality, new literacies, and technologies, but has largely evaded issues of race and colonialism with the work of critical literacy scholars concerned with more humanizing and liberatory pedagogies.

Glissant himself was an anti-essentialist but also a critical realist, who situates identity within collective memory and trauma. He did not shy away from a direct confrontation with colonialism, including the genocide of the middle passage, such as, for example, his formulation of the rhizomatic identity. Glissant was in dialogue with Deleuze and Guattarri, and applies their metaphor of the rhizome – an image to characterize non-hierarchical thought that has multiple entry points for interpretation – to identity, a term seemingly at odds with their philosophical project. For Glissant, the rhizome becomes an apt way to critique the dominant views of identity as adherence to a "single root, of racial or linguistic purity" (Hiepko, 2011, p. 256), often tied to exclusionary origin myths of nationhood. Multifarious cultural influences, an entangled and everexpanding root system, shape a person's identity through processes of creolization, as identities are not static but rather perpetually in the act of becoming, formed, and reformed through our contact and relations with others, "identity-as-relation" (Hiepko, 2011, p. 260). In the field of reading, an identity-as-relation framing underscores that there is no one-to-one correspondence between a student's identity and some easily identifiable "primary discourse" (Gee, 1989) – thus complicating, for example, assumptions about what books students may gravitate to or what background knowledge students have for accessing particular textual content. Rather, through Glissant's formulation, what becomes salient are students' multiple, ever-expanding literacies, which borrow and remix from a range of discursive contexts.

Conceiving identity as dynamic does not imply, however, a type of unfettered self-invention, unconstrained by history and the material word. Glissant's (2010) figure for subjectification in the opening pages of the *Poetics of Relation*, is the errant slave ship and the triple forms of abyss the captives' faced: that of the boat's hull, the ocean bottom underneath it, and the foreign "new" world to which the ship sailed, where survivors were sold into chattel slavery. This new world was not discovered, but conquered through the genocide of its inhabitants and repopulated, in part, by subsequent waves of settlers, many with their own colonial legacies. These historical images and referents set a different stage than that of ethereal Deleuzian nomadic lines of flight, at least as Deleuze has been taken up in literacy research. Glissant strikes a delicate balance of acknowledging the productive forms of agency that arise out of history's contact (and conflict) zones without romanticizing suffering. It was within the abyss that new identities and alternative modes of expression and resistance emerge. Glissant's unsentimental historicizing of identity is a reminder that language and literacy are never neutral, but always implicated in colonial legacies and relations of power.

Our histories are thus entangled and we are implicated in one another's fates, but differences matter and matter differently. In fact, according to Glissant (2010), a central compulsion of the colonial imaginary is to absorb differences by making them "transparent" or assimilable into dominant Western paradigms, an imperial scholarly project which is inherently reductive, employed to promote hierarchies and justify racism and colonial power. For example, the long history of high stakes

testing in the US masks how concepts such "reading comprehension" and literacy assessments are tied to legacies of oppression (Willis, 2008), and sets Western notions of reading (e.g. the bedtime story routine, [Heath, 1982]) as the interrogated norm for interactions with texts. This is why Glissant privileges the "right to opacity" (2010, p. 190), a way of asserting one's irreducible singularity, that which is not fully transparent to others, even possibly to oneself. We can learn from others, become transfigured by others, work in solidarity with others, without having to finally "know" others, and speak essential truths about them which they do not wish to articulate for themselves.

Opacity is also necessary for "furtive" (Ramazani, 2001, p. 129) resistant communicative and literacy practices, especially under conditions of oppression and power asymmetry (e.g. San Pedro, 2015). Nurturing a decolonial imaginary would entail promoting genuine dialogue across differences in order to imagine a collective future not premised on the need to homogenize and control. It would also require a more poetic sensibility in our relations with others, one that is genuinely open to the unexpected, creative alchemy of thought and expression when the robust diversity of the world is embraced rather than standardized or excluded.

Youth Conveying Rhizomatic Identities through Multimodal Design

How might destabilizing linear associations between students' "visible identities" (Alcoff, 2006) and their presumed knowledge of and relationships with texts extend existing multimodal research in new directions? How might a decolonial approach, coupled with multimodality, offer a lens through which to understand how students read the word and the world (Freire, 1970)? In this section, we probe these questions and possibilities through examples from two studies (Campano, 2007; Campano et al., 2016).

Dancing across Borders

Twenty years ago, before the concept of multimodality had taken widespread hold in literacy research and policy, Gerald was a fifth grade teacher in California's Central Valley, conducting practitioner research into how the official reading curriculum might be more dialogically attuned to the diverse immigrant narratives of his students (Campano, 2007). During that time, under the guidance of Angelica, an undergraduate student teacher, Gerald's students formed a performance group they called "Dancing Across Borders" (DAB). The troupe organically embraced a multimodal approach to literacy, composing and performing spoken-word poetry, choreographing musical routines, sharing essays, and scripting and producing plays, including one about the braided history of Filipino and Mexican farmworkers in California's Central Valley. When Gerald was asked to facilitate a professional development at his school on "classroom management" – a topic which usually takes a behavioral orientation in identifying and disciplining individuals to fit a preconceived norm of academic participation – he enlisted the help of the Dancing Across Borders group. The youth wrote and staged a play titled "What the Teacher Didn't Know", which spotlighted a series of common "management" scenarios in the classroom between students and a fictionalized teacher, Mr. Sid (modeled after the Dickens character Mr. M'Choakumchild). After each conflict, all the actors would freeze, and then the character reprimanded by Mr. Sid recited a soliloquy – a device the class embraced from Shakespeare – about "What the Teacher Didn't Know." For example, when the teacher reprimands a student, Susana, for speaking in Spanish and proclaims that "This is the United States, so there will be no foreign languages!", she replies:

> What the teacher didn't know is that I just came from Mexico five months ago, so sometimes I don't know how to say things in English. He didn't know my language is an important part of me. Speaking Spanish is something I feel proud of, but he is cruel for not

> encouraging me to maintain my traditions. Instead he put me down and made me feel like a stranger. And also, my teacher didn't know that people spoke Spanish here before English!
>
> *(Campano, 2007, p. 99)*

The nationalistic English-only policy of the school does not take into account legacies of colonialism and students' embodied and affective relationships to language. The performance was both humorous and poignant, as each soliloquy raised critical consciousness inequities related to class, culture, gender, and language difference that often lurk beneath the surface of classroom dynamics. In an act of empathy and generosity, the Dancing Across Borders troupe reserved the final soliloquy for Mr. Sid himself who, a one-dimensional villain throughout most of the performance, became humanized as he recounted the challenges of being a teacher in a severely under-resourced school district.

The writing of the DAB troupe exemplified many characteristics of traditional academic reading and writing (e.g. use of evidence-based argumentation, academic language, point of view, summarizing, inferring) as the children met, and often surpassed, the demands of conventional English Language Arts standards. Their plays were also hybrid texts: shifting between English, Spanish, and Illocano languages; literary, comic, and conversational registers – all dramatically conveyed through gesture, movement, and voice. They reflected the literacy practices associated with the students' rhizomatic identities, which are often invisible in the official curriculum. It was only after some time spent with Angelica and the students that Gerald realized their creative labor was informed by El Teatro Campesino, an activist and artistic legacy that grew out of the local intellectual soil of nearby migrant labor camps. Similar to El Teatro, the plays of DAB were collectively produced living texts that were revised and improvised in the process of performance, sometimes in response to audience feedback (Broyles-González, 1994), a poetics of relation. Often there was no single author to their plays; all students would contribute to the collaborative process of authoring in unique and, ideally, complementary ways. These furtive literacies protected the students by making their individual critiques "opaque" to institutional power. DAB employed a collective creative process that transgressed the ideology of individual authorship that underpins so much schooling and the high-stakes testing paradigm in the United States. Many children who were positioned as struggling in the mandated, standardized literacy curriculum of the school blossomed in DAB, which cultivated an ethos of interdependence rather than competition and the individuation of learners as conforming to or deviating from a norm.

The DAB troupe was engaged in multimodal critical literacy inquiry. In a Freirean (1970) manner, they were reading their worlds, including their world of schooling. In "What the Teacher Didn't Know," the students critiqued the education system and employed political theater as a vehicle to educate educators. Their insights, in part, derived from inquiry into their own subaltern experiences and identities. The students wanted their audiences to take seriously their claims about schooling, particularly the ways in which it can dehumanize and perpetuate inequity. DAB became a "community of epistemic resistance" (McHugh, 2017, p. 272; Mohanty, 2003) to official institutional practices that too often deficitize and criminalize youth, and that do not take into account systemic causes of inequality, such as poverty, racism, xenophobia, and colonial legacies. In the process of critique, however, they were simultaneously prefiguring and enacting an alternative community, one that fosters cooperation and celebrates human variance, including the multifarious literate and intercultural resources which fertilized their creative and intellectual imaginations. Although the elementary students were courageously addressing serious topics, there was a good deal of joy and bonding in the troupe, both in their performance as well throughout the process of collaborative inquiry. As Audre Lorde (1984, p. 56) reminds us: "The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not

shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference." Through multimodal inquiry rooted in and repurposed from the decolonial artistic and activist traditions of migrant political theater, the children were able to merge physical, emotional, psychic, and intellectual ways of knowing to make the academic literacy curriculum their own.

The Collective Educational Futures Project

Our second example comes from a university-community research partnership, now entering its eighth year, between the University of Pennsylvania and St. Thomas Aquinas (STA), a multilingual, multi-ethnic Catholic Parish, school, and community center in South Philadelphia (Campano et al., 2016). South Philadelphia itself has become a sort of archipelago, not unlike Glissant's actual Antilles, where different cultural and linguistic communities live alongside one another and engage in everyday relations. There are longstanding African American and Italian communities, Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees that arrived in the 1980's and 1990's, an Indonesian population beginning in the late 1990's, newcomers from Latin America within the past ten years, and most recently, arrivals from Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. STA itself has masses in five different languages – Indonesian, Vietnamese, English, Spanish, and Tagalog – and supports an active Concerned Black Catholic organization. While Christianity has historically been an instrument of imperialism, St. Thomas Aquinas is composed of (post-)colonial communities, with legacies of war and genocide, who now occupy formally exclusive church space – such as a convent converted to a community center – in order to organize for their survival and rights. They also use the space and its resources to sustain cultural traditions, celebrate community, and engage each other in often compassionate and joyful ways.

On an early summer afternoon, in the cool, fluorescent-lit basement of the church, the youth of the Collective Educational Futures Project are busily sorting, flipping through, and snipping apart the heaps of magazines, newspapers, old discount bin art books, print-outs of textiles, and photographs of South Philadelphia. They are creating collage self-portraits after having viewed and discussed the collage art of Kara Walker and Lorna Simpson, among others.

Mai sits quietly in a corner, deliberately cutting shapes from the mounds of colorful paper before her. With care, her fingers deftly shift her cuttings ever so slightly, millimeter by millimeter, until a face, with shoulder length ombre hair and wispy bangs emerges (Figure 8.1).

The hair is made of delicate slivers of traditional Indonesian Batik textiles and photographs of South Philadelphia, reflecting a creolized lived reality and the multiple roots of her ever-evolving identity that transverse political borders and cultural boundaries. Mai explains that her hair carries a lot of meaning for her and her family. When she cut it without telling her parents, her mother, who saw her hair as a symbol of her Indonesian tradition, was upset because she felt it indicated that Mai was cutting off her ties to her culture. Mai explains, though, as she runs her fingers over the tendrils of Indonesian Batik and shimmering South Philadelphia lights, that she still holds onto her Indonesian roots. She mentions, too, that she used a picture of the sky in collaging the shape of her ear, symbolizing her openness to new relationships, experiences, and the world. Her collage is one multimodal representation of her dynamic identity, her ongoing process of becoming. This visual rendition shows both her singularity and her relationship to an ever expanding root system of cultural influences in ways that complicate common dichotomies of "old" and "new" cultures used to describe the experiences of transnational youth. For someone who first encounters Mai's artwork, it may seem – following Glissant – opaque, because the complexity of Mai's experiences defy reductive institutional categories, such as "model minority" or "immigrant student". As we learn from listening to Mai, it is in fact replete with interpretive possibilities.

Figure 8.1   Mai's collage self–portrait

It was multimodal inquiry that enabled Mai and her peers to draw from the range of multifari-ous cultural influences that shape their identities, and inquire into where their experiences over-lap and diverge, and what possible futures they may want to forge together (Gultom et al., 2019). Through the arts, youth are exploring and communicating their own processes of becom-ing, reading and interpreting their worlds, and negotiating their relationships to others. Through film and critical media making (Thomas, 2017), youth, families, and community leaders are col-laborating to learn about the ways local knowledge has been used to challenge educational bar-riers and to collectively imagine the futures they desire and deserve.

Conclusion

Multimodality is ancient. As a key term in literacy education, it has gained prominence over the past several decades, but may even be waning in recent years. While a multimodal approach has the potential to expand reading and writing opportunities and who "counts" as literate, we have argued that there is nothing inherently liberatory about employing diverse semiotic modes in the literacy curriculum. Like any social practice, multimodality must be understood contextually. We have also suggested that its salient features – an expansive notion of the text, the ineluctable twin-ning of reading and creation, and collective meaning-making – are promising for inquiry into

culturally sustaining as well as culturally procreative pedagogies, especially when informed by theorists of race and coloniality. Glissant reminds us that the multimodal worlds students inhabit – worlds characterized by a multiplicity of identities (even within the self), languages, literacies, and meaning-making practices, often in the same school or neighborhood block – is an outgrowth of violent colonial and imperial legacies. But despite the unpredictability and uncertainty of cultural interaction and conflict, there is also the potential, if educators put their fears aside, to help nurture decolonial imaginaries, collective forms of resistance, and communities that embrace, returning to Lorde, the "interdependence of (non-dominant) differences". This hope may seem utopian, especially as we are writing this handbook chapter in a political period marked by a vicious resurgence of nativism and (re)legitimization of racism in the United States and across the globe. The critical multimodal inquiries of The Dancing Across Borders troupe and the families and youth of Collective Educational Futures Project provide evidence, nonetheless, that there are alternative worlds being imagined and enacted in the shell of the old. Like multimodality, these struggles are both longstanding and new.

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