The word "literacy" is overburdened with multiple meanings and assumptions, especially now since the Internet Age finds us peering out into a wide and digital landscape of written language. Everywhere it seems that what we can do, say, think, and imagine appear dependent upon the machines we can use and signs that we can read. And it is also often the case now that the "literacy" we need is not limited (or even relevant) to what has been written upon paper. For now we can speak of "computer literacy," "cultural literacy," "media literacy," and other assorted literacies, which are often invoked by the urgent recognition that our age and our culture require one to read in order to participate, to play, to know what is necessary for our cultural survival and progress.

Although the various literacies tend to be articulated and identified by journalists on editorial pages or politicians who stump to the electoral beat, the ability to understand the demands and expectations of these literacies often requires a literacy of its own. Perhaps even more importantly, the various literacies which educational, theoretical, and political pundits identify are often heralded by what they see is a "crisis" climate. If our culture's viability depends upon, and is a condition of, the ability to read it, then the inability to read predicts the culture’s immanent decline. Moreover, current literacy discourse, which links cultural participation and progress to reading, makes specific demands upon its marginalized peoples. The ability to read is the condition for the possibility of political participation, which is uniquely urgent for the economically and historically underprivileged. The current belief that literacy is the primary means by which the underprivileged can achieve economic parity goes largely unchallenged, yet the belief is undertheorized and problematic. I wish to contend here that literacy discourse locates underprivilege to produce the valence of written language.

In order to theorize and understand how "literacy" has become so saturated with multiple, and often contradictory meanings, this study will examine several of literacy's various points of historical descent. For, as the term is used in popular and political contexts, "literacy" gathers to itself a distinct historical emptiness: In its repeated and diverse deployments across multiple discourses, the term is
emptied of its historical and theoretical contexts. Historian Harvey Graff calls this emptiness a function of the "literacy myth," as his historical study first outlines the investments and impoverishment in many of our current understandings of literacy (3). But even Graff's study does not do much to address the problematics of literacy's definitions, since he limits literacy to "basic or primary levels of reading and writing," and then he does not qualify precisely what is written, and to whom. Moreover, to say that there is a "mythology" which characterizes our current understanding of literacy would seem to contradict the belief that literacy is the condition for the possibility of an end to mythology, and a beginning of history.

The contradiction is only apparently ironic, for if we agree with Roland Barthes that myth is the mode of bourgeois ideology, then we also understand that myths function as a type of language, which displaces meaning and naturalizes history. For instance, literacy functions as myth in the ways that written language use becomes ahistorical, and instead seems natural (Barthes 129). "Literacy myth" allows us to see the ways that literacy's meaning functions within a semiological system. The ways in which we understand the functions of myths semiologically is that myths first empty the sign of all meaning in order to fill it, as contingencies deem necessary. Literacy as myth will be appropriated, and its sign will become impoverished through repetition and deployment, when it will ultimately cease to produce knowledge of its own historical emergence. Literacy as myth works to erase the ways that written language has become so meaningful and important, and yet so ahistorical and overused. Literacy, as a myth, is a motivated distortion of multiple meanings. The multiple meanings which inhere in "literacy" function to empty "literacy" at the same time that the deliberate work of particular discursive practices invest "literacy" with increasingly impossible tasks. To understand the mythology of literacy, we must first realize that much of our current misunderstanding and confusion is caused, in part, by imprecise and inadequate definitions of literacy.

In the popular or current definitions of literacy, the historical conditions within which the word became "The Word," or how literacy became so critically important to the current and future transmission of knowledge are not revealed. Yet any historical definition or understanding of literacy requires the consideration of the multiple, often contradictory ways by which the term has been used and applied. Historical conceptions of literacy occur when written languages are recognized and implicated in the emergence and decline of communities, traditions, and political power. The current location of oppression by literacy has multiple historical precedents. Whenever a community, culture, or society had access to, or utilized the technological means for the creation and transmission of languages through time and space, that culture stood in a distinctly privileged relationship to its non-literate surroundings. Cultures with written language have used the relative permanence of signification to dominate other cultures who were without written language.

However, a relationship, to any signifying practice, is never a guarantee of privilege. And I use "signifying practice" here to deliberately recall its use by others who broaden yet refine what constitutes "legitimate" writing, for written language is first of all a semiotic gesture (Godzich Emergence 112; Culture 3). Writing indicates a relationship to signs which, in turn, are reproduced within communities for the purposes of communication. Writing signals; it is a signifying practice. Yet such practices have never sealed historical subjects into position of power. The written language which secures power for
A salient and historical function of written language is its apparent tendency to produce contradictions at every discursive turn. Yet such contradictions, emergences, and declines are all characteristic of any genealogical examination of literacy, which affords the possibility of multiple beginnings (Foucault 140). And no matter where the understanding of literacy begins, the term's production of -- and dependence upon -- difference and oppositions emerge. The Oxford English Dictionary finds that literacy is first "the antithesis of illiteracy." And the earliest written usage of the term identifies the "native" from the others when the 1883 New England Journal of Education says that, "Massachusetts is the first state in the Union in literacy in its native population" (OED).

The OED further states that literacy is "the quality or state of being literate; knowledge of letters; condition in respect to education; esp. ability to read and write" (Ibid). But this definition of literacy is useful only in regards to opposition. Literacy is meaningful only in regards to "illiteracy," but neither term is fully defined nor given historical understanding. Moreover, the dictionary does not define precisely what counts as knowledge: which letters, what ability and to what degrees that ability can be measured and in what contexts. The dictionary is uninterested in a historical context within which to understand literacy. For the ways that we know of historical and various literacies -- our historical sense -- is constituted by signification. Our historical sense is constituted through literacy. The interpretations of linguistic signs that yield what we call “history” always occur within, and are conditioned by, distinct cultural and ideological moments. As Hayden White observed, "[J]ust as every ideology is attended by a specific idea of history and its processes, so too . . . is every idea of history attended by specifically determinable ideological implications" (25). The ideological implications of history's relationship to literacy are such that written language is the primary venue of historical knowledge. Even more importantly, the literacy discourse of history, and the knowledge such practice produces, is knowledge of literacy's subjects. The subject of history is produced by literacy discourse, which locates denial, power, privilege -- and their opposites -- through a relationship to specific forms of written language.

Once literacy discourse locates underprivilege, then it determines ameliorative activities that clearly explain that, for the lacking subject it produced, a relationship to written language is required for participation in political and social life. If written language is necessary for their political involvement and participation, they reason, then a way to affect the relations between these subjects and their political contexts is by facilitating their access to written language: "[F]or literacy the stakes are high . . . involving opportunities for advancement, labor force participation, and national awareness" (Vanezky et al. ix). Richard Vanezky does not have to explicitly state for whom the "stakes are high," for literacy discourse already enfolds those subjects, power relations, and value which it is its function to produce.

Moreover, the knowledge generated by educational policy-makers and theorists finds that an understanding of literacy must include an understanding of the contexts within which there is the possibility for social and political participation through written language. Literacy is therefore tied to the democratic process and the means for social mobility. As such, the correlation of democracy with written language indicates that the ability to read and write are fundamental to a citizen's access to voting and institutionalized education. The synthesis of written language with political and institutional
access, or "literacy discourse," has functioned on behalf of and by means of both government and private interests to determine the uses and value of writing in political life. Literacy discourse is, therefore, the discourse of political action: "Since literacy is inextricably intertwined with social contexts, literacy decisions almost inevitably become political and social decisions" (Mikulecky 31). Commonly, the "almost inevitable" adequation of literacy with political behavior results in prescription: "To politically achieve a society where . . . individuals have access to information and the means to participate productively implies a massive integration of . . . education into most aspects of our society" (Mikulecky 31).

The International Reading Association (IRA) researchers tie literacy into education; therefore, written language is configured in relation to institutionalization. In this way literacy discourse also locates the work of institutions which function to reproduce ideas and relations of power. As Wlad Godzich puts it, institutions are apparatuses which concern themselves with reproduction to ensure regulatory, normative processes. He finds that their work "contains what would otherwise threaten to turn into anarchic proliferation" ("Afterword" 157). Literacy discourse locates itself within institutions, and issues from their normativity, for the same reasons: to contain and control the production of knowledge about signifying practices. And the subject-matter, i.e., subjects, are the subjects of oppression, marginalization, access denied. Relative distance from institutions -- e.g., schools -- again allows literacy discourse to locate underprivilege.

Literacy discourse has also deployed the language of physiology to describe scientific observations about literacy. The "processes" of reading and writing are studied and measured, where eye movements and fine-motor skills "signal the acquisition and utilization of symbol-sound correspondence" (Vanezky 10). The use of scientific language indicates what I call the "scientization" of literacy discourse, where standardized tests and other measures yield statistics and data about literacy. Theorists use literacy data in order to do comparative studies, which may conclude, for instance, that U.S. literacy rates are rising/falling from an era of literacy decline/increase (Godzich Culture 3). Not long ago, declines in test scores for university admissions and international organization data (like that gathered by UNESCO and the IRA) heralded a state of "crisis" in literacy. The researchers reason that, if written language is an index of political involvement, then literacy discourse is responsible for immediate amelioration of illiteracy, and only by solving the illiteracy problem can theorists affect access to democracy and social uplift.

However, in order to determine that literacy is the means by which one becomes political, the correlation of written language to empowerment tends to collapse all available written material into that which yields or produces political knowledge. Instead of realizing the multiple, often contradictory and overlapping forms that written language can have, the cause-effect relation must target a few forms and restrict prescriptive, ameliorative efforts to these few. Moreover, the relation of literacy to political behavior does not fully explain the historical relations of subjects to language in ways that could usefully articulate the degree to which language, in its written form, can just as easily deny a subject's political participation. Written law permits or prohibits, and the ability to read the law does not necessarily afford protection or opportunity. The possibility of denial and/or opportunity characterizes a historical understanding of literacy if we consider that literacy indicates a mediated relationship to language.
Language and literacy are "distinct entities," writes Godzich. Yet "literacy" has been allowed to serve as a "shorthand description for a determinate set of relations that we have to language, relations that arose under, and were conditioned by, concrete historical circumstances" (Culture 5). The "historical circumstances" in which we presently understand literacy are constituted by our relationship to language, and our relationship to language is constituted by and for literacy. And the way in which we understand the functions of reading and writing is through reading and writing. We presently understand literacy because the theory and research, which produce literacy discourse, are written and read. In addition, the kinds of writing which are assumed to be politically active and critically important are very narrowly conceived as such, and related to the values of a particular class and culture. These types of writing do not include, for example, the writing of urban gangster codes upon subway trains, which is understood in popular culture as "tagging" or "graffiti." These terms already indicate the terms of value which attend literacy discourse as it locates the underprivileged: "tags" are remnants, disposal, impermanent. "Graffiti" signals its Italian translation as "crude scratches" of public inscription -- without legitimacy or official (i.e., institutional) sanction. Neither public language produces legible knowledge for literacy discourse: Literacy discourse is unable to read unofficial, unsanctioned, illicit inscription as signs of value.

Theorists of literacy and literacy historians are in a distinctly written relationship with language. However, to understand that relationship historically means that the relationship is neither immutable nor eternal: There are, and have been, other possible relationships to language. The more compelling and useful scholarship is that which looks at the historical relations to written language, and attempts to redirect attention away from terms of value, and more toward the conditions under which written language -- as a signifying practice -- may produce knowledge. A broader, more inclusive figuration of literacy attempts to understand the ways that inscription and writing are instances of signifying communication. When "literacy" considers any instance of signifying communication, our current and historical understanding is necessarily broadened to include both historical documents and modern graffiti. Furthermore, the theoretical move to apprehend all inscription as significant is necessary in order to reveal and examine the ideological function of literacy in its orientation towards the underprivileged, and in its tendency to deny knowledge or understanding of certain orders of consciousness.

The subjects of literacy are found only through particular forms of written language, and literacy discourse is therefore unable to locate the possibility of a non-literate consciousness. However, when literacy is already the relationship of a subject to a signifying practice, we can begin to consider the ways that certain orders of subjectivity have escaped, or been excluded from, literacy discourse. And the conceptual framework afforded by "signifying practice" can allow literacy discourse to recognize the foundations upon which the exclusion can occur. Exclusions are characteristic of literacy history, and they occur when written language is understood in a distinctly temporal and dependent relation to spoken language. Literacy history, as such, has determined that oral language, or "orality," precedes written language, i.e. "literacy," and written language is therefore a representation of the spoken word, or "phonetic" (Havelock 30; Martin 10). Wherever writing systems do not represent spoken language (the example used most often is Chinese scripts), the written system of communication is an example of
"craft" literacy, but not the "widespread" literacy of the West. Eric Havelock further finds that in literacy history there are two different effects of written language upon culture. Wherever a writing system is able to represent spoken language directly, the culture can be said to have "widespread" literacy. When the writing system has too many signs to represent the spoken language, (e.g., syllabaries) then the result is a "craft" literacy, where only the elite few can read and write. He then concludes that it is only with widespread literacy that democracy, philosophy, and logic are possible (30). Literacy discourse, again, locates oppositions, and exclusions: craft literacy versus widespread literacy.

Literacy history posits analogous, binarily opposed concepts which, in the final analysis, serve to illustrate the domination and superiority of Western writing systems like the Greek alphabet. The argument goes something like this:

ORALITY : LITERACY :: PRIMITIVE : PROGRESS

Or, to put it another way:

PRIMITIVE : PROGRESSIVE :: MYTH : HISTORY

Literacy history's discovery of orality has allowed the historian to determine the origin of humanity as that site where spoken language precedes the written word, but only insofar as the written word can adequately represent the a priori spoken language. That is, writing systems which do not represent the smallest elements of spoken language, e.g., the phoneme, (and this includes picto-ideograms) are not progressive. In this way literacy history has determined that the writing systems which adequately represent spoken language have facilitated the ascendance of Western cultures. Literacy historians further find that writing systems indicate a particular stage in the evolution of human consciousness. For them, written language is the marker for the progress of human consciousness and the emergence of history. The history that becomes a written record of mankind begins in the Fifth Century, B.C., when Herodotus established a "new relationship between the word and its referent, a relationship that was more abstract" (Goody and Watt 15). The new, abstract relationship between a word and its referent -- or, "history" -- indicates a particular way of thinking about the signifying practice of written language which Jacques Derrida says indicates a "logocentric, ethnocentric bias which is related to the history of the West" (79).

The literacy historians' arguments that adequate writing to the evolution of human consciousness elide the metaphysical foundations which inform their understanding of what precisely constitutes "consciousness." In literacy history the correlation of writing with consciousness produces, in turn, a conscious "subject" which is produced as an effect of reading historical documents or their absence (read as "illiteracy"). The arguments also limit the possible uses of written language at the same time they determine that a signifying practice indicates a subject's status in human evolution. The "bias" to which Derrida refers is a product of literacy history's exclusion of non-alphabetic writing systems. That is, the evolution of human consciousness, which is an effect of alphabetic writing, is only possible if literacy history ignores the non-alphabetic writing. Havelock has found that the Chinese picto-ideographic writing system is "inferior" to the Greek alphabet (18). He then excludes Chinese in
his history of literacy because their writing system does not represent the smallest elements of spoken language. Derrida calls this strategy "the death of Chinese" (79).

In order to read written language historically, and yet allow the illegible, and non-representative signifying practices into a historical theory of literacy, the function of writing as signs is necessary because writing is signifying communication -- it is semiotic -- and, as such, it is always contextual and historical. Writing is a "signifying practice" and therefore literacy is always in relation to signs, and in relation to communities, which use signs for discreet purposes, all of which are significant. Since the 1960s, semioticians and theorists in Cultural Studies have identified an ethnocentric bias of literacy history, yet their findings have either been ignored, or reduced, then dismissed. For instance, Walter Ong's gesture toward semiotics is reduced to a diagnosis of error: "Our complacency in thinking of words as signs is due to the tendency . . . to reduce all sensual and indeed all human experiences to visual analogues" (76). However, Ong's orality paradigm posits the "discovery" of primary orality, and subsequent stages, all of which evolve into literacy. But he then concedes that the discovery of orality is possible because of ethnocentric studies like Cultural Anthropology and History -- all of which are possible only because of written language. So Ong's theory regarding "orality," or the "preliterate stage of human consciousness," reduces all human consciousness to that which stands in relation to literacy (76). Both reductive figurations of literacy discourse still locate the underprivileged and the illiterate as their primary modus operandi.

So far I've tried to draw a map for understanding various and current figurations of literacy. Where the literacy historian is concerned, the map is mottled with binarily opposed markers that chart a determined origin and ascent. Along the way, a reader is cautioned to avoid the distracting illegibility and irrelevance of non-alphabetic writing, and to pay close attention to the emergence of history, logic, and reason on an avenue called "The West." At this point the mapmaker's position in a logocentric, ethnocentric vacuum becomes apparent. Up to this point I have used "subject" interchangeably with "human consciousness" or/and "human being" in reference to writing. Yet such a conflation is possible only if we believe that the subject and her/his consciousness is knowable through written language. What remains to be seen is the relationship of language to literacy in order to discuss how the subject of writing is historically constituted.

Although literacy and language are distinct entities, one way of thinking about how they are related to each other is in our current understanding of the sign. For instance, language -- the practice of communication -- and writing are not the same, but they can be understood to have a similar function, that is, social communication. So when I agree with Godzich that literacy is the relationship between a subject and a signifying practice, I understand that the relationship is, first of all, a subject's relationship to language. And that relationship is, in the instance of writing, mediated by a signifying practice. Writing becomes the means by which a particular relationship to language is constituted through signs.

If signification mediates a subject's relationship to language, it must be understood that we can only interpret any sign system in a given society or historical moment through language. The practice of interpretation is a way of reading signs and then discovering meanings for those signs, meanings that
are conditioned by the contexts within which the signs have been read. However, those meanings are always offered as language; that is, I agree with Godzich when he finds that interpretation is always a practice of linguistic meaning-discovering ("Afterword" 157). Before literacy discourse locates value, privilege, or its absence, literacy discourse must first recognize language and acquire the means to interpret the non-written subject who is outside literacy discourse. Language is the primary tool for the interpretation of signs and of writing. And it is the linguistic sign -- the sign that can be interpreted through language -- which, in literacy history, has produced the subject of history. Language is said to function as the interpreting system of any given culture, and it is through language that subjects are possible (Benveniste 236). The subject of writing, then, is already the subject of language. Yet the subjectivity which language produces is not a static entity, rather the subject’s historical positions relative to culture or signification are themselves discursive. When literacy discourse locates the underprivileged, the unwritten/unlettered and lacking, their lack of written language -- their illiteracy -- is not an ontological identification, Ong’s preliterate consciousness notwithstanding. Before the subject of literacy discourse there is the subject of language, and it is this subject who circulates outside the economy of literacy discourse and its institutional affiliations.

That it is possible for a signifying practice to privilege and deny, identify and exclude, are contradictions which recognize the distinct effects of genealogical investigation. Literacy discourse locates the value of writing by first locating the underprivileged. However, the limited understanding of what counts as "literacy" -- what writing, and to whom -- are the ways that literacy discourse does not ameliorate uneven power relations as much as it produces and then illuminates them. In order to understand the orientation and function of literacy discourse, this study has examined historical figurations of "literacy" and found that literacy discourse functions primarily to locate underprivilege, and assert the value of written language. In addition, a "literacy crisis" is possible because literacy discourse does not recognize that ontological issues related to writing and economic/social uplift do not inhere in the relationship of subjects to written language. Again, the crisis is not one of literacy, but of legibility and legitimization, when literacy discourse narrows the range of signifying practices which are deemed valuable. Our current understanding of literacy is the product of a history which has reduced human consciousness to that which is produced by and for written language: Unwritten consciousness escapes the ability of literacy historians specifically, and Western History generally, to inscribe it.
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