

Decolonizing Literacy: Mexican Lives in the Era of Global Capitalism.

Gregorio Hernández-Zamora, *England: Multilingual Matters*,
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Armando Garza

University of Texas – San Antonio

Hernández-Zamora challenges the present-day assumptions of how literacy and illiteracy are measured among post-colonial Mexican adults who live either in Mexico or the United States. By doing so, he states that literacy should be situated within the society rather than the individual. He frames his research by drawing from sociocultural, dialogical, and postcolonial research and theories. Since Hernández-Zamora's main thesis is that the development of literacy is promoted or hindered by social conditions, he methodologically uses the "study of communities and the study of individual trajectories of literacy practices across time and space" (p. 31) to describe and understand how those trajectories are marked by social, cultural, and postcolonial factors. This book provides valuable contributions to the sometimes overlooked body of research on literacy and language experiences of poor Mexicans on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border.

Decolonizing Literacy is divided into three large parts. In the first part, the author portrays and defines colonialism and globalization as the socio-historical context/s in which the center focus of the research study, literacy, is located. In this part, Hernández-Zamora also describes the theoretical frames that support his research. Part two is composed of case studies of main participants subdivided into three main categories based on the research subjects: (1) agentive—participants engage and appropriate practices to exert a sense of belonging; (2) mainstream or survivors—participants who grow up and live locally in extreme cases of poverty; and (3) transnational Mexican people—these participants at present live in the U.S. but engage in transnational literacy practices. Finally, part three encompasses two chapters in which the first one synthesizes key concepts or patterns among participants and locates them within current discussion/s on language and literacy policies and politics in both Mexico and the United States. The second chapter of this concluding part describes closing reflections on issues discussed in the whole book—issues pertaining to decolonizing literacy.

Hernández-Zamora includes long case studies of Mexican individuals who have experienced socioeconomic and/or educational marginalization most of their lives. These case studies stem from an ongoing research project carried out between the years of 2001 and 2009 in Mexico and the United States—this book presents only eight case studies obtained mainly through "in-depth life-history interviews" (p. 43). All research-subjects were native Spanish speakers—five females and three males, with an age range of 34 to early 60s, and with different work experiences (such as factory workers, naturist healer, construction, cleaning, car repair, among others). It is interesting to note where Hernández-Zamora found his participants. The participants in Mexico were residents of large districts of Mexico City such as Iztapalapa—a 1.8 million-person district in Mexico City which is considered "the most chaotic, problematic, and dangerous area of the city" (p. 15). On the other hand, the research subjects in the United States were found in Mexican "*barrios* or ghettos" (p. 14)—words that Hernández-Zamora used to describe the poor and politically-abandoned areas where his participants resided. It is important to note that the Mexican and U.S. sites do not share transnational connections among the selected research participants; however, the two locations were precisely what Hernández-Zamora wanted to portray—sites populated with poor individuals whose voices do not matter to the post-colonial world.

Hernández-Zamora's main research question intended to portray the meaning of literacy development of Mexicans who were/are marginalized and, as he put it, they "are not yet full citizens in either nation: Mexico and the U.S." (p. 10). To achieve this goal, besides the central research question, the author formulates some focus questions that address such themes as: availability of cultural resources for learning; access to different kinds of literate communities; how access to literacy-mediated dialogues and practices are expanded or constrained; ideas and theories about literacy and being literate; and types of learning and cultural resources aiming to make a difference on individual literacy development experiences.

Hernández-Zamora asserts that in order to become literate, we need to appropriate the meanings and all discourse practices that are socially created—which, according to him, are indispensable to understand and shape the place and role that we have in our world. In addition, he believes that the action of becoming literate is not “just a psycholinguistic process” (p. 32); instead, it is the adoption and assimilation of the culture, language, and ideologies of the “dominant other” (p. 32).

Since the focus of Hernández-Zamora’s research is on learning and literacy in marginalized contexts, according to him, he needed to observe how education and literacy is socially distributed and shared in a particular community. He relies on narratives because he strongly believes that the voices of marginalized people are rich descriptions of both their current social realities and personal experiences entangled with their available learning and literacy practices. For Hernández-Zamora, participants’ narratives matter because he believes that their voices were lost in many social institutions such as schools, media, workplaces, governmental offices, etc. His positionality is marked by his personal experiences as a marginalized man, native of *Ciudad Neza*, in Mexico City. Although he, throughout his book, defines and uses the term *narrative* as a valid tool to portray his research findings, he is very aware that every text is subject to interpretation and he leaves the final judgment to his readers.

Hernández-Zamora conducted lengthy interviews over the course of several months. Sometimes he carried out anywhere from two to five 2-hour-long interviews per person that were digitally recorded. These interviews contained semi-structured and open-ended questions on topics about participants’ family backgrounds, their past and current activities, their education, work, social participation in either Mexico or the United States, their schooling experiences, and perceptions on literacy acquisition and practices. The physical sites where these interviews took place varied according to each participant—from homes to community centers and public places. Hernández-Zamora built on data in the form of *self-authoring literacy practices*, which he defines as “practices involving print and multimodal texts that have significantly influenced people’s sense of identity, as well as their dis/engagement with particular discourses and communities” (pp. 51-52). He used these kinds of data since he believes that literacy has to be understood as a basic practice of people’s voices. Consequently, he aimed to examine the barriers faced by contemporary, but poor and lower castes of Mexicans.

Hernández-Zamora elaborates on his data by asserting that his marginalized participants and their practices are truly portraits of how poor people can get access to “broader conversations, intellectual sponsors, powerful discourses, and decolonizing literacy practices for voice and agency” (p. 180). By doing so, he allowed his participants to present to us, as an audience, powerful forces (social, political, economic) that, at present, shape ideas about literacy, language, and learning practices.

Since literacy is a socially-contested term, Hernández-Zamora affirms that researchers and scholars on learning and literacy need to re-conceive the role that language and literacy take in our social global era. He suggests, drawing from his data, that old postcolonial thoughts and actions are still present in the twenty-first century—in both Mexico and the United States. In addition, he states that even if Mexicans have access to the modern world of a new knowledge-based economy, they are still part of lower castes and silent citizens—if they are considered citizens at all. As he put it, “in the U.S. most Mexicans are not citizens but illegal aliens; in Mexico they are not full citizens but second- or third-class citizens; in our globalized world they (we) appear to be global outcasts” (p. 183). These assertions lead Hernández-Zamora to contend that many policies and norms within both countries promote “literacy genocide” (p. 183). However, since many contemporary scholars working from sociocultural, postcolonial, linguistic, and other fields are constantly challenging the ideas of having unified and unquestionable language and/or literacy practices, Hernández-Zamora asserts that the paradigm of acquiring an elite type of language or literacies—which belongs to the dominant other—is being attacked and “in crisis” (p. 187).

Based on his findings, Hernández-Zamora concludes by suggesting that in order for poor people to become literate, they have to challenge the official models of education that, according to him, “restrict their sense of intelligence, agency, and competence” (p. 196). Furthermore, it is interesting to note that Hernández-Zamora asserts that the process of decolonizing colonized people encompasses the utilization of postcolonial theories and *the colonizer’s language* as instruments to write their histories and counteract traces of colonialism. Thus, we cannot completely escape the grasp of colonization though we may engage in more liberatory practices.

Hernández-Zamora's book is an important contribution to the small, but growing, research field on Mexicans and their language and literacy experiences on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. Students, educators, and scholars in this particular field will find this book to be an excellent starting point; just as we know that the Mexican population will continue to grow in the U.S. (and in Mexico)—and that globalization will not cease to produce vast amounts of poverty. Therefore, work in literacy studies with marginalized Spanish-speakers is ever so important.