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### Identifying Sociotextual Nodes in the Academic Knowledge Industry: “Multiliteracies” Research and Discursive Appropriation

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**Abstract:** This article proposes the concept of “sociotextuality” to explain the accumulation of symbolic academic authority, with a specific focus on the evolving discourse of “multiliteracies.” Examining how Western academia has asserted dominance in research about multimodal literacy practices despite the rich literacy traditions of non-Western communities, the study scrutinizes the erasure of the Iranian context from multiliteracies scholarship. The article traces the phases of this erasure, from treating the Iranian context as raw data for Western theorization to rebranding borrowed knowledge as a Western product under the name of “multiliteracies”—ultimately leading to its repurposing in new forms, such as the digital turn in literacy. The analysis centers on the role of “textual materiality” as the primary medium of academic communication, exploring how intertextual connections, citations, and genre practices have contributed to the transfiguration of the multiliteracies discourse. The study also discusses symbolic (alphabetic) collaborations that strategically have helped elevate Western scholars’ status and authority within the discourse of multisemiotic literacy engagement.

**Keywords:** decolonization, multiliteracies, new literacy studies, posthumanism, sociomateriality



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An important component of contemporary literacy research in Anglo-American academia has been a move towards creating pluralized concepts that allow imagining more inclusive educational policies and pedagogical practices. Major examples of these research trends in language and literacy education include: multiliteracies, hybrid literacies, intercultural literacy, multimodality, multilingualism, plurilingualism, and translanguaging. Although rooted in different areas of research, these multi, pluri, inter, and trans theories have aimed to address the gap between the academic performances of dominant social groups and minoritized students (Bourdieu, 2004; Gee, 1986; Kubota, 2016; Pennycook, 2006; Reay, 2004). Hence, they have been a source of inspiration for educators who seek to embrace students' diverse literacy practices and linguistic repertoires, especially in Western multicultural urban centers.

Nevertheless, this act of discourse creation for more inclusivity has a different character and function when Western academics present these trends to non-Western research communities. While complex, hybrid, multisemiotic, and plurilingual forms of literacy engagement were a norm in many parts of the world (Kalan, 2016; Liyanage & Canagarajah, 2023; Yu, 2020), Western academia devalued them in earlier colonial processes to promote print-based literacy in European languages. Print-based literacy—along with other modernist educational trends such as mass education, state-controlled centralized curricula, compulsory literacy education, and language standardization—was a crucial component of European nation-statism, industrialization, and colonialism (Dei, 2010; Donaldson, 1998; Hare, 2021; Perry et al., 2023).

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When faced with the dominance of these educational models in colonial processes, non-Western societies had to learn about and make sense of them as an obligation to deal with cultural colonialism. They also sometimes adopted these models as a result of a belief in effectiveness of these measures as a necessary component of the process of modernization. This dynamic put Western thought in the position of authority in speculations about modern education. However, the case of currently trending multi, pluri, inter, and trans theories is different from the aforementioned modernist notions. These concepts are hardly new to non-Western communities. Many of these concepts have long been discussed and/or practiced in other cultures (Kalan, 2016; Liyanage & Canagarajah, 2023; Yu, 2020). Despite this available reservoir of complex non-Western linguistic and literacy practices, current language and literacy research tends to ignore these traditions and positions itself as the pioneer of theories of multisemiotic, multimodal, and multilingual literacies.

Interestingly, in some cases, Western scholars have used data from the Global South to critique the modernist narrowing of the meaning of the word “literacy” in the West. One important example is the concept of “multiliteracies,” which, as we will discuss in the article, was partly created based on empirical data from multiple non-Western communities. In these cases, Western academia claims ownership of non-Western literacy discourses by reframing and marketing them as new Western academic products and cutting-edge research. Although a progressive discourse, multiliteracies theory has made use of the traditional colonial networks of knowledge generation and dissemination. The discourse has been formed based on the social practices of non-

Western communities, then it has been processed, repackaged, and sold back to academic circles in the South as a new “concept” in the form of books, journals, consultancy, training international students, and so on. This pattern of discursive appropriation is reminiscent of the more overtly belligerent side of colonialism: Exploiting global natural resources and using colonized nations as markets to consume the refined products (Curley, 2021; Gedicks, 2001; Rodney, 1972). This is a well-known pattern in decolonial studies: “The role of the metropole, as well as producing data, is to collate and process data, producing theory (including methodology) and developing applications which are later exported to the periphery” (Connell, 2014, p. 211). Alatas (2000) has also discussed this process in detail, developing a theory of *intellectual imperialism*.

In this article, we focus on the concept of *multiliteracies* as an example to illustrate how English academic sociotextual networks facilitate this process of discursive appropriation. Multiliteracies, as a research movement, was a development of an earlier research trend called the New Literacy Studies (NLS), represented by scholars such as Street (1984), Heath (1983), and Gee (1991). Conducting ethnographic fieldwork in several Iranian villages, Street (1984) showed how the villagers’ literacy practices demonstrated a multiplicity of textual, linguistic, and arithmetic engagement, which could be a useful alternative way of understanding literacy. Here we discuss how, despite the progressive agenda of NLS, the Iranian context was eroded in the subsequent conceptualizations of the complexity of literacy practices through what we call the “sociotextual dynamics” of knowledge production in Western academia. We will show how eventually this research

trend led to the formation of “a pedagogy of multiliteracies” (New London Group, 1996), which makes no reference to the Iranian background of this area of research or to other cultures’ traditional appreciation of multisemiotic, plurilingual, and transdisciplinary, and practices.

In what follows, we first discuss theories of decolonial posthumanism and sociomateriality as the conceptual foundation of our proposed concept of “sociotextuality” to explain how textual materiality allows academic circles to claim symbolic ownership of knowledge. Next, we illustrate how the Iranian context, as a main component of earlier NLS, was gradually erased from academic discourses about multiliteracies through a four-stage process. Finally, based on the illustration of the discursive erosion of the Iranian context, we identify a few examples of sociotextual practices that empower academic networks to appropriate and gatekeep knowledge.

### **Theoretical Frameworks: Sociomaterial Contexts of Knowledge Generation**

Theoretically, this article draws on a fusion of decolonial posthumanism and sociomateriality. Posthumanism is a growing body of social theory which questions classical humanist paradigms (Badmington, 2000; Nayar, 2018; Wolfe, 2010). Humanist paradigms uphold human superiority over non-human entities. Posthumanism challenges this view by introducing “a qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet” (Braidotti, 2013, pp. 1–2). Posthumanism also calls for a recognition of the interconnectedness between

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human beings and non-human entities (Zembylas, 2018), and it challenges common binary distinctions between humans and non-humans.

Some posthumanist and decolonial theories operate from a similar agenda, both offering powerful tools to dismantle ideas which uphold Eurocentric epistemologies and ideologies (Escobar, 2008; Mignolo, 2011; Santos, 2015; Snaza & Weaver, 2014; Wolfe, 2010). Decolonial posthumanism critiques the humanist hierarchy, wherein humans are deemed superior to other beings and things. However, it also recognizes and highlights that this hierarchy, ironically, extends within humanity itself, with the European human being regarded as the standard and thus occupying the top position:

Settler-colonization relies upon a racist discourse of imperial humanism in which modern European White Man is taken as a universal template for human being, value, and achievement. The normative model of the subject implied in the European humanist paradigm implies cultural superiority and ascendancy over the rest of humanity, whose modes of being and agency are, by contrast, considered at worst defective and eliminable, or at best deficient and in need of colonial intervention if they are to “progress” and realize their full “human” potential. (Bignall, 2022, p. 1)

A humanist outlook such as this, has inevitably led to the marginalization and othering of non-Western and non-European communities as well as their ways of being and knowing. In knowledge production processes, colonial humanism has provided Western academics with the ability to reject or verify knowledge as noteworthy. In response, decolonial posthumanism can help us center Southern knowledge and make it visible. Accordingly, we draw on critical posthuman theories that call for the “insurrection of subjugated knowledges” (Foucault,

2006, p. 7), or knowledges that have been marginalised, suppressed, or considered unworthy by dominant power structures.

Western academia portrays theories developed in the West as cutting-edge universal truths (Grosfoguel, 2013). Scholars that adopt a decolonial approach attempt to decenter Eurocentric knowledge domination and its control over different aspects of education including scholarship, pedagogy, and policy (Grosfoguel, 2013; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Quijano, 2007). For instance, Battiste (2019) and Lopez (2020) hold that the modern education system in postcolonial societies maintains a cognitive imperialist approach, which is intended to preserve and maintain the Eurocentric identity. Fúnez-Flores (2021), also, observes that Latin American universities often imitate a Western European and Anglo-American model of university including “academic standards, governance practices, pedagogies, theories, and methodologies” (p.183). In response, decolonial theorists, such as Walter Mignolo (2007), have called for epistemic disobedience and a delinking from languages and ways of knowing and thinking that are linked to colonial legacies. A movement such as this would promote alternative ways of knowing, particularly those originating from non-Western and peripheral contexts.

Furthermore, with posthumanism decentering the role of the human, this framework makes space for focusing on the role of materiality (Barad, 2003) in knowledge production dynamics, and thus can help us show the significance of “sociotextuality.” Sociomateriality, as a branch of posthumanist theory, extends the decentering of the human by drawing attention to material objects, technologies, things, and spaces as agentic elements that interact to generate experiences. Traditional humanist research marginalizes the agency of materials by framing them as “simply tools that humans use or objects they investigate” (Fenwick et al., 2015, p. 1), but from a

sociomaterial perspective, material objects are central to social and individual human experiences.

In this regard, academic networks, as sociomaterial contexts of knowledge generation, play an important role in framing and representing what matters as knowledge and claims to knowledge ownership. In this article, we view the sociomaterial contexts of academic production as “sociotextual networks” that create ideas through intertextual connections between the members of certain academic circles. We try to show how geographical privileges and academic hierarchies are sustained by in-group textual practices that extract, subjugate, and process the knowledge that is organically produced in the Global South.

In this article, we use theories of sociomateriality to make sense of academic networks and publications as the social and textual levers of knowledge subjugation. Sociomateriality focuses on how tools, technologies, things, objects, and spaces interact to generate experiences. Hence, studying academic textuality and scholarly communities that regulate textual dynamics falls within the interest of sociomateriality. In order to decolonize knowledge production, we need to identify and decenter the sociotextual layers of knowledge production. A sociomaterial theoretical framework can help us stress the power and impact of social affiliations and material manifestations of knowledge. From a sociomaterial perspective, material objects act together with social forces to brand certain forms of knowledge as legitimate and while negating and excluding other forms (Fenwick et al., 2015; Leonardi, 2012; McGregor, 2014).

These theories have helped us study the emergence and popularity of the New London Group’s “pedagogy

of multiliteracies” as more than an intellectual proposition, but a sociotextual trajectory of academic exchanges that, despite their progressiveness, follow traditional colonial knowledge production and appropriation patterns.

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### **Literature Review: Decolonial Scholarship in Language and Literacy Education**

Similar to other areas of knowledge, mainstream language and literacy research has been significantly influenced by coloniality as manifested in the dominance of European languages, prioritization of positivist research methods, and the prevalence of Western theoretical frameworks. Connell (2017) argued that “to publish in metropolitan journals, one must write in metropolitan genres, cite metropolitan literature, become part of a metropolitan discourse” (p. 8). Some scholars (Canagarajah 2022; Flowerdew 2007; Sowards 2019; Trahar et al., 2019) have called for challenging the linguistic hierarchy in academic exchanges. For Canagarajah (2022), decolonizing academic writing and publishing means challenging the monolingual and English dominant writing practices by including trans- and plurilingual writing. Although it is often thought that including other languages besides English may hinder comprehension of the text, Canagarajah (2022) suggests otherwise, arguing that:

Diversity in texts, including the use of diverse registers and varieties of English, or even different languages in English academic texts, don’t necessarily hamper intelligibility to readers who are not proficient in those languages. There are multiple textual and rhetorical resources in every writing to aid in interpretation of even unknown languages. (pp. 125-126)

In addition to disrupting the dominance of English in academic writing and publishing, Trahar et al. (2019) argued that decolonizing knowledge production necessitates the use of an inclusive range of genres that do not necessarily fall into the “metropolitan mainstream” (p. 150). This mainstream includes genres that prioritize argumentation and persuasion. Similarly, Kalan (2014, 2021a, 2021b) has offered descriptions and critiques of the dominance of essayist literacy and the elevated status of the rhetoric of assertion in Anglo-American argumentative and persuasive essays. He has suggested broadening genre possibilities as a decolonial rhetorical practice to include oracy, narrative-based communication, and autoethnographic writing that highlights the writer’s positionality in relation to the subject of inquiry.

These linguistic, rhetorical, and genre practices can help make Southern knowledge more visible and challenge the established borders of knowledge that have excluded the voice of Southern knowledge producers. Santos (2015, 2018; Santos & Mendes, 2020) introduced the idea of an “abyssal line,” an epistemological boundary that allows for the separation of knowledge of the Global North from knowledge from the Global South:

Being on the other side of the abyssal line, the colonial side, means being prevented by the dominant knowledge from representing the world as their own and on their own terms. ... By producing at the same time as concealing the abyssal line, the Northern epistemologies are incapable of recognizing the distinction between abyssal exclusions (those occurring on the colonial side of sociability) and non-abyssal exclusions (those occurring on the metropolitan side of sociability). Moreover, they conceive the Eurocentric epistemological North as the only valid source of knowledge, no matter where, in

geographical terms, it is produced. (Santos & Mendes, 2020, p. 3)

Santos’ concept of the abyssal line sheds light on the epistemological imbalance between the North and the South prevalent in language and literacy research. Kubota (2020) has pointed to *epistemological resistance* as a way in which to combat the epistemic privilege within the field of language studies. Her work firstly calls for a revision of citation practices which favor white male scholars from the Global North. With the same sentiment about citation practices, Connell (2007) expresses that literature developing social theories “almost never cites non-metropolitan thinkers and almost never builds on social theory formulated outside the metropole” (p. 370).

At the same time, while excluding Southern academics, Northern scholarship often treats the Global South as a source of raw data for its theorizations (Connell, 2014; Ergin & Alkan, 2019). Ndhlovu (2021) equates this to a form of “knowledge theft” where concepts, theories, and practices from the Global South become “the preserve of the coloniser” (p.195). With the same attention to geographical positions and roles, Diniz De Figueiredo and Martinez (2021) have recommended that, in applied linguistics research, scholars must unmask their loci of enunciation, which entails making explicit “the geographical, historical, bodily and ideological context from which one is speaking” (p. 356).

A focus on geographies of knowledge production overlaps with more overt sociomaterial approaches to language studies and literacy research. A growing number of researchers (e.g., Enns-Kananen & Saarinen, 2023; Fenwick & Edwards, 2015; Latour, 2005) argue for a sociomaterial approach to show how tools, technologies, and spaces interact in generating educational experiences. Particularly,

Prinsloo and Conrad (2020) proposed that a sociomaterial view of education and knowledge is necessary in order to understand how these material networks and nodes have come to be protected by gatekeepers, admission requirements, and licencing agreements. Without explicitly referencing sociomateriality, Kumaradivelu (2016) has made a case for constructing a new framework within language and literacy pedagogy and research by examining how textbook and publishing industries perpetuate cultural hegemony. According to Kumaradivelu (2016), publishing houses and the textbook industry are “the engine that propels the hegemonic power structure” (p.73) within the language learning industry. They promote language teaching methods and theoretical principles that are developed in the Global North, and they are responsible for what content is taught and how it is taught.

In connection with the publications cited in this section, in what follows, we will focus on the particular case of “multiliteracies” to highlight the sociotextual dimensions of knowledge generation in the field of literacy research. We will show how sociomaterial intertextuality enables discourse appropriation and manipulation. Intertextual entanglements work together to create hegemonic academic sociotextual networks. They also help develop textual mechanisms (such as citation, strategic co-authorship, and use of exclusive publishing networks) which contribute to the severing of ideas from their original subaltern locations and further act as gatekeeping mechanisms to this knowledge that has been cut off from its original source. In what follows, with a focus on the theory of multiliteracies, we will show some of the dynamics of these sociotextual networks.

## The Case of “Multiliteracies” and the Iranian Context

As a contribution to the literature explored in the previous section, we focus on the trajectory of the multiliteracies movement—as an example of trending pluralized academic concepts—to illustrate the process of discursive appropriation in literacy research through academic sociotextual practices. Here, we discuss the evolution of an influential literacy research movement called the NLS into the

internationally popular trend of *multiliteracies pedagogy*. NLS aimed to broaden understandings of literacy by focusing on the richness and complexity of Iranian discourses about literacy. Tracking the transformation of NLS to multiliteracies, we show how the Iranian context has been gradually erased from scholarly conversations in the West by sociotextual networks that regulate literacy research.

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To show the erosion of the Iranian background of NLS requires a close examination of canonical texts related to the multiliteracies movement. As such, we analyze the following four representative texts to show that the disappearance of the Iranian context from discourses about the plurality of literacies underwent a four-stage process: Brian Street’s *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (1984), James Gee’s *Orality and Literacy: From the Savage Mind to Ways with Words* (1986), The New London Group’s *A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures* (1996), and Lankshear and Knobel’s *New Literacies: Everyday Practices and Classroom Learning* (2006). Focussing on these publications, we illustrate four stages involved in the discursive manipulation of Iranian experiences with multiliteracies. Finally,

based on the dynamics involved in these four stages, we will discuss how academic sociotextual networks furnished and facilitated the process of discursive appropriation that used Iranian villagers' knowledge of multiplicity and complexity of literacy practices.

### ***Stage 1: Treating Non-Western Thought as Raw Data***

The 1970s was the beginning of the development of a new approach to studying literacy in English-speaking academia. In this period, the field that was previously called “reading” started to be referred to as “literacy” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). This change of label was the result of a significant philosophical shift. Whereas “reading” indicated the act of decoding printed text as a cognitive skill (and then encoding text in “writing”), “literacy” “represent[ed] a new tradition ..., focusing not so much on acquisition of skills, as in dominant approaches, but rather on what it means to think of literacy as a social practice” (Street, 2003, p. 77). This new perspective would bring together a group of scholars who created a research movement known as the “New Literacy Studies” (NLS) (Gee, 1991; Heath, 1983; Street, 1997, 2003). With the knowledge that educational structures did not recognize minoritized students' literacy activities as legitimate intellectual engagement and thus failed them (Bourdieu, 2004; Gee, 1986), NLS research often mobilized ethnographic methods to show the complexities and the significance of out-of-school literacies.

Brian Street played a crucial role in the development of this new paradigm, establishing himself as one of the pioneers of NLS with his 1984 publication: *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. Street's research reported in this book relied on ethnographic observations of the literacy practices of Iranian villagers when he undertook fieldwork during the 1970s in a mountain village outside Mashhad to demonstrate two distinct models of literacy: the

autonomous model and the ideological model. The autonomous model represents the dominant Western cognitive view of literacy in which reading and writing are technical skills that can be developed independently from social or cultural influences. Street argued that although modern (European style) Iranian schools were particularly designed to teach students skills such as commercial literacy, students' basic knowledge of commerce and financial calculation was an outcome of their involvement in traditional community-based schools, which often used poetry and religious texts for literacy learning. This, Street argued, would show that “autonomous” print-based literacies could not outperform organic literacy practices embedded within cultural and social networks.

In his work, Street described how Iranian villagers performed multiple forms of literacy in their daily lives. Their literacy practices varied from one social group to another based on the ideologies of each particular social group. This is what Street called the ideological model of literacy. He exemplified the ideological model, showing how three types of literacies existed among the Iranian villagers: the Maktab literacy (required in traditional schools), commercial literacy (required for commerce), and school literacy (offered by the state based on the European model of public education). The villagers would move between these spaces and use different sets of literate skills. Interestingly, however, what helped the villagers develop their commercial literacy for everyday businesses was the traditional Maktab literacy rather than the official schools, mainly as a result of a flexible multimodality.

The Maktab literacy was nurtured and fostered in traditional Iranian schools, which were often run by communities' religious leaders. The Maktab students learned religious and literary texts mainly through memorization. Through this textual engagement, they decoded meaning and made sense of alphabetic



presentation and rhetorical practices. At the same time, they engaged with Maktab teachers' oral commentaries on the canonical texts. Street, therefore, concluded that the Maktab literacy consisted of both an oral and a written mode. The textual rote learning was mixed by spontaneous conversations about the texts between the teacher and the students. The interpretations of the meanings of the texts were flexible and malleable in that they would include students' and teachers' own opinions and/or commentaries. Street also observed that students were required to read in Persian and Arabic, hence translanguaging and translation dominated the instructional communication. In a sense, Iranian villagers in their traditional schools were already practicing multimodal and multilingual forms of education that multiliteracies and translanguaging movements would be advocating several decades later in the West. If Street had observed the students in their homes, he would have learned that the poetry and prayers that the students memorized would take on a larger variety of multimodal forms, with students using the texts in song and calligraphy format in different creative forms (Barghi et al., 2021; Tarighi, 2017).

Interestingly, the multidimensionality of the villagers' literacy practices would also help them develop their commercial literacy. Street gave details of the commercial literacy used chiefly by the businessmen who attended the traditional schools in the buying and selling of fruits. The skills involved in the Maktab literacy such as "recognizing layout and formats and retrieval skills" (Street, 1984, p. 173) were transferred to commercial literacy and were further developed into more complex skills which allowed the villagers to formulate contracts and to use the same skills for constructing "their own classification systems" (Street, 1984, p. 173). This type of literacy allowed the villagers to have control over their financial lives and was partly responsible for and contributed to the economic growth of the villages.

Street used this evidence to form an argument against the view that deemed out-of-school literacies as "primitive" or "backward" and to show that literacy was not just a skill but a socially negotiated practice.

Echoed throughout Street's ethnographic report is an acknowledgement that the Iranian villagers were sharply aware of the existence of these types of literacies among their group, and of the distinctive nature of the three types of literacy. The villagers not only recognized the different literacies but also valued and widely accepted each type of literacy. For instance, Street explained that the farmers who practiced commercial literacy expressed appreciation for school literacy offered to their children by the state-run modern schools, but they also recognized that those who only practiced the school literacy would not be able to efficiently function in the local fruit market:

They [the villagers] did not make the mistake of many western observers and assume that literacy was a single thing, applicable once learnt to any context; the literacy which their children were learning was not easily transferred or transformed into the practices associated with 'commercial' literacy...The villagers were quite acutely aware of these differences and were fairly confident in ascribing relative value to the various literacies. (p. 178)

Street developed the concepts of autonomous and ideological literacies based on the discourses that Iranian villagers consciously used to make sense of the different literacies they needed in order to function in different social contexts. Street's work offered a label to the ideological model of literacy embraced by the Iranians to point out a misunderstanding of literacy in the West. Nevertheless, as we will describe in the following sections, as NLS developed and attracted new Western academic members, the perceptions of the

Iranians were reduced to observational and interview data for Western theorization. In this process, inhabitants of the Global South are not considered “producers of theory” (Connell, 2007, p. 381) and their words are treated as raw data.

Streets’ observations of the complexities of literacy practices in Iran’s Khorasan region are by no means new to Iranian intellectual thought. Khorasan for long has been home to great Iranian writers, thinkers, and scientists such as Abul-Qasem Ferdowsi, Omar Khayyam, Avicenna, Al-Farabi, Al-Biruni, Omar Khayyam, Al-Khwarizmi (Brotton, 2003; Yoeli-Tlalim, 2021), whose work has been a cultural reference in Iran and its surrounding regions for centuries. Among other things, they also wrote about literacy and the complexities it involves. As an example, here we loosely translate a few lines from Ferdowsi (931–1025) and explain (in a language understandable to a contemporary reader interested in literacy research) his perception of the multiple layers involved in the process of writing:

Written language does not only capture the meaning of speech, but it extends its meaning. Writing is not only a tool for reporting or for coded communication. Writing is the art of re-mixing, sampling, picking, pruning, and framing. As such any arrangement of written words involves exploration of unknown hermeneutic horizons and, at the same time, aesthetic decisions for the author’s rhetorical satisfaction and the audience’s appreciation. Bringing eloquence and writing together thus is an endeavor consisting of four layers: semantic (the content of communication), epistemological (writing as a manner of knowing), aesthetic (agreeable arrangement

of words), and affective (the author and audience’s emotional reaction)<sup>1</sup>.

Besides classical literature, there is much recent scholarship about the linguistic and literate diversity of the Iranian Plateau, illustrating modern educational structures are only an add-on to an already established educational culture (see for instance, Chamanara, 2013; Kalan, 2016; Rezaei, 2022; Sedighi, 2023). The sociotextual ecology of Western language and literacy research, however, often ignores this scholarship. Connell (2007) posits that social theorists sometimes assume that they are learning *about* populations from the Global South “in order to place them in a worldwide grid” (p. 369) when in fact they are really learning *from* these populations. Street’s discussion of the Maktab, commercial, and school literacies exemplifies this, where although the ethnographic study is presented in such a way as to give the impression that we are studying a population, what is really happening is that we learn from the Iranian villagers about what really constitutes literacy and how literacy works.

### **Stage 2: Theory Abstraction**

The process of theorization based on perceived “raw data” from the Global South can be demonstrated more effectively with scholarship published later than Street’s (1984) *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, where NLS scholars attempt to bring together empirical data to abstract theories that can be applied to all contexts. Regardless of the academics’ intentions at this stage, or the validity of their theories, the theory abstraction stage turns non-Western communities’ ideas and practices into a secondary element in these publications and promotes the Western scholar as the primary knowledge holder. One significant example of this

۱ بلاغت چو با خط گرد آیدش / براندیشه معنی بیفزایدش / ز لفظ آن گزیند که کوتاهتر / بخط آن نماید که دلخواهتر

attempt is James Gee's (1986) article "Orality and Literacy: From the Savage Mind to Ways with Words." In this article, Gee employs a review of literature to offer a more inclusive definition of "literacy." In this process of theory abstraction, the significance of the Iranian context is eroded as it is reduced to just another example of previously deemed "savage" contexts to allow Gee's theories to emerge. This turn, from Street's reading of Iranian literacy ideologies as "more sophisticated" because of their attention to the plurality of literacies to Gee's characterization of Iran as a context with perceived "restricted literacy," is instrumental in centering the Western theorizer and imposing his authority.

In this article, Gee (1986) focuses on the dichotomy of literate and nonliterate cultures and its association with the civilized/primitive conceptual division. In this attempt, he criticizes the notion that some communities, and hence students, are deemed as having "restricted literacy" and others as having "full literacy" (p. 719). He, then, concludes that "literacy [is] necessarily plural," a precursor of the multiliteracies movement: "Different societies and social subgroups have different types of literacy, and literacy has different social and mental effects in different social and cultural contexts" (p. 719). In order to offer this theory, Gee draws on Street's work in Iran and a number of similar contexts that were believed to possess only partial literacy. Other examples cited by Gee include the Vai, a West African community (Scribner & Cole, 1981), the Athabaskans in Alaska and northern Canada (Scollon & Scollon, 1981), and working-class African-American and white communities in Roadville and Trackton, the Piedmont region in the Carolinas in the United States (Heath, 1983). Gee, interestingly, synthesizes the data in these publications to theorize a solution for all contexts including a contemporary US issue referred to as "literacy crisis" (Gee, 1986; Gumperz, 1986; Kozol, 1985): "An unacceptably large number of children, a disproportionate number of whom are

from low-income and minority homes, fail to gain functional literacy in school" (Gee, 1986, p.179). Through this theory abstraction, Street's "enlightened" villagers in Iran, who functioned effectively in multiple literacy contexts, are associated with minoritized American students who "fail to" learn "school literacy."

Reflection on the aforesaid process can provide important insights. Theory abstraction in the social sciences usually involves a series of actions including isolation and generalization (Swedberg, 2020). In Gee's paper, the socially situated practices initially proposed by Street (1984) are no longer (through isolation) associated with the Iranian context but are applied (through generalization) to the American education system thanks to a process of theory abstraction. Swedberg (2020) explained that, in social sciences, what follows the act of isolation is usually generalization, wherein the concept undergoing theorizing is broadened, becomes "less detailed," and more "amenable to a theoretical analysis" (p. 262).

Postcolonial and feminist scholars have also problematized constructing generalized theories or explanations based on minoritized populations' experiences. For example, Dorothy Smith's body of work (Smith, 1992, 2001, 2005; Smith & Griffith, 2022) critiques how sociological theory tends to abstract the experiences of marginalized groups, to the extent that their diverse lived experiences are transformed into abstract theories and concepts. Such a process overlooks the particularities and complexities of these groups' lives, and the focus is shifted towards the conceptual frameworks that serve the interest of the theorist. Eventually, this sort of erasure provides theorists of the Global North with epistemological authority.

Regardless of the debate about theory abstraction in social sciences, this academic practice has allowed the disappearance of the Iranian context in NLS

scholarship. In the course of the transformation of NLS to multiliteracies, Gee's work marks a significant step in the abstraction/theorizing process that will change the position of the discourse practices of Iranian villagers, among other non-Western and/or non-middleclass populations, from an inspiration to a marginal model of literacy engagement that schools should make sense of to prevent the failure of minoritized students.

### ***Stage 3: Rebranding Borrowed Knowledge as a Western Product***

Gee's work is an appropriate link to the next stage, where the Iranian context is completely erased, and the plurality of literacy discourses and practices is presented as a contemporary Western recommendation rather than an organic practice that has long been made use of in non-Western communities. A decade after the publication of Gee's 1986 article, he appears as one of the authors of the New London Group's (1996) influential manifesto "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures." The New London Group's publication introduces the term "multiliteracies" as an invitation for literacy scholars and educators to embrace a broader definition of literacy that can capture multimodal ways of meaning making and multiple literacy practices in addition to traditional forms of print-based reading and writing. The key discourse in the manifesto is, still, the idea of "plurality" of literacy practices highlighted in Street's work. The Group, however, offers a new term to describe this plurality, "multiliteracies":

We decided that the outcomes of our discussions could be encapsulated in one word - multiliteracies - a word we chose to describe two important arguments we might have with the emerging cultural, institutional, and global order: the multiplicity of communication channels and media, and the increasing saliency of cultural

linguistic diversity. The notion of multiliteracies supplements traditional literacy pedagogy by addressing these two related aspects of textual multiplicity. (New London Group, 1996, p. 63)

The multiliteracies framework is proposed in the manifesto as a response to the increasingly diverse world in which we now live with learners who come from a variety of cultures and thus have diverse literacy practices. Also, it is presented as a reaction to new digital practices which have contributed to a change in how we produce and consume text. Despite sharing the centrality of the discourse of "plurality" with NLS scholarship, the Group frames "multiliteracies" as an academic invention with no reference to the trajectory of the idea and its connection with the Iranian context. Whereas authors such as Scribner and Cole (1981), Scollon and Scollon (1981), Heath (1983), Street (1984), and earlier Gee (1986) highlighted the inherent plurality of literacy discourses and practices based on observations of organic literacy practices that defied the dominance of institutional academic discourses in the West, the Group employs the concept of "plurality" to offer a rebranded variation of the same conversation as an original solution to a contemporary problem. With a tint of Western-centrism, the idea of plurality of literacies seems to have been bound to reach its ultimate theoretical crystallization in the West because of its cultural and civilizational centrality: new digital technologies are developed in the West and immigrants (with their different languages and literacies) will end up in Western urban centers. While the earlier NLS ethnographers presented their work as learning from their participants (mainly from minoritized and racialized contexts), the Group presented "multiliteracies" as an original concept.

Obviously, the manifesto was meant to address Western policy makers and educators in a language

understandable to them. This, however, cannot change the discursive trajectory of a shift from a position of learning to reframing it as original knowledge. Decolonial scholars have critiqued this epistemological imbalance where studies originating from the Global South are “seen as ‘data’ for the purpose of testing, examining, expanding, or revising theories that are produced in prestigious universities of the Global North” (Ergin & Alkan, 2019, p. 259). Thus, with the centrality of Western scholars, the Global South is providing both the pre- and post-theory data for Western theorization.

#### **Stage 4: Repurposing the Theory**

The New London Group framed the problem of sustaining the dominant mono-literacy regime as creating conflict with two contemporary phenomena: cultural diversity and digital technology. While the Group remained loosely connected to NLS preoccupation with minoritized populations’ cultures through the notion of “cultural diversity,” in the next stage of the discursive appropriation in question, the theory is entirely reconfigured and reassigned a completely new function. “Multiliteracies,” at this stage, metamorphoses into “digital literacy” as the theoretical continuity of the Group’s emphasis on “digital technology.” This development in the field is referred to as the *digital turn* (Mills, 2010). At this stage, the scholarship moves from *rebranding* the theory to *repurposing* it. As a result of this repurposing, critical dimensions of multiliteracies that addressed issues such as migration, education in urban centers, and cultural diversity were either erased or became of secondary importance because of the centrality of the discourse of digital literacies.

As a representative influential publication, *New Literacies: Everyday Practices and Classroom Learning* (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006) focused on digital literacies and understanding literacy within

the context of new media and digital technologies. It incorporated the technological aspect to challenge the traditional print-based notions of literacy that primarily focused on reading and writing. This new understanding of literacy makes space for various forms and modalities of communication, such as sound, images, videos, emojis and GIFs, the use of social media, and blogging.

As Mills (2010) highlighted, the digital strand within NLS “follows a much longer tradition of sociocultural research that has contributed to current understandings of print-based literacy practices in everyday use by different communities” (p. 246). It, however, involves a new mindset that perceives the world as fundamentally transformed due to the possibilities offered by new tools and techniques. Although a very interesting proposition with its own merits, this new direction completely severs the evolving discourse of “literacies” from references to literacy practices in places like Iranian villages that were the foundation of NLS. The overemphasis on *the digital* and *the technological* has even led to some unpleasant side effects for minoritized communities. The digital turn created a perception that those who lack such abilities were not considered literate in today’s technology-driven world. To quote Unwin and de Bastion (2009): “As ICTs become increasingly important for communication in the broadest sense, the inability to use them can disadvantage entirely new groups of people who previously thought of themselves as ‘literate’” (p. 194).

This mindset placed immense pressure on teachers and schools to incorporate technology into their classrooms (Howard & Mozejko, 2015; Okojie & Boulder, 2022), and more pressure on students and families to invest in these technological resources. Next to recreating the “literate-illiterate” divide, which Gee (1986) had correctly criticized in the earlier stages of this trajectory, the emphasis on digital literacies might have inadvertently

contributed to the current techno-feudalism (Varoufakis, 2024; Waters, 2020), which allows a handful of elite technological companies to dominate the Internet, and thus determine most of the textual content used in everyday online interactions.

### **Discussion: The Sociotextual Fabric of Discursive Appropriation**

Up to this point, we have tried to describe the discursive development of the concept of “plurality of literacies” from ethnographic observations in an Iranian village to the theorization of “multiliteracies” in the Anglo-American academic metropole, followed by a metamorphosis into a new academic discourse: “digital literacies.” Discursive transformations of this nature happen within sociomaterial networks of academic textual content. Here we discuss some of the sociotextual nodes that facilitated this discursive transformation through in-group intertextual connections. We use the word “intertextuality” to refer to textual links between publications, presentations, interviews, reports, syllabi, and other similar documents that allow a certain group of academics to maintain symbolic discourse control through the material means of academic representation.

Kristeva’s (1986) original conceptualization of intertextuality sought to emphasize the interconnectedness and interdependence of texts arguing that “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (p. 37). Fairclough (1992, 2003) further expanded on this definition, describing intertextuality as “the property texts have of being full of snatches of other texts, which may be explicitly demarcated or merged in, and which the text may assimilate, contradict, ironically echo, and so forth” (1992, p. 84). In analyzing intertextuality, Fairclough

(2003) also emphasized the need to recognize *absence* as an important aspect of intertextuality and consider “which texts and voices are included, which are excluded, and what significant absences are there?” (p. 47).

In further developments of the concept of intertextuality, there has also been specific attention to discourse formation through intertextual dialogues (Fairclough, 1992; Hodges, 2015; Porter, 1986; Solin, 2004). In connection with this study, intertextuality and critical discourse analysis have also been approached from a decolonial perspective. For example, Paul (2023) shows how the discourse in

**“We highlight how sociotextuality can determine symbolic ownership of knowledge and thus symbolic academic capital.”**

public documents published by the World Intellectual Property Organisation and the World Trade Organisation position indigenous and local communities “outside of the field of influence and in need of education by Western communities” (p. 2154). Posbergh and Clevenger (2022) used intertextuality through a

decolonial lens to examine how textually connected instances of media coverage of an athlete was shaped by Eurocentric ideologies. This use of the concept of intertextuality overlaps with critical discourse analysis and thus makes the concept an appropriate perspective for us to explain the sociotextual materiality that makes discourse appropriation and modification possible.

In what follows, we discuss a number of sociotextual nodes which were instrumental in the discursive appropriation described above. We highlight how sociotextuality can determine symbolic ownership of knowledge and thus symbolic academic capital.

### ***Intertextual Networks of Discourse Transfiguration***

Discursive appropriation often happens through a range of publications that focus on the same terms

and use the same vocabulary, but gradually modify the connotations of the terms. These publications retain an intertextual thematic connection, but at the same time create space for semantic alterations. This loose intertextual connection, occurring through a set of popular publications, helps an academic circle sustain its authority over discourse creation and alteration. Based on the case of “multiliteracies” and the erasure of the “Iranian context,” we have noticed that this intertextual discourse control happens through activities such as in-group citation practices, publishing in English academic journals, and a reliance on academic written texts to the exclusion of oral and performative knowledge. These practices almost entirely exclude local knowledge, and knowledge holders such as the Iranian villagers, or for that matter local academics, and in the long run, contribute to the perpetuation of inequalities and imbalances in North-South knowledge production and the eventual westernization of concepts originating in the Global South.

There is much emphasis in Western academia on the ethics of citation and it is a requirement to acknowledge the sources that one’s research builds upon through appropriate citation practices. This academic ethics, however, does not seem to apply to non-English non-academic knowledge and happens to permit borrowing knowledge from the Global South with no or little referencing. Knowledge generation in many Global South communities does not rely on academic written text (Canagarajah, 1996), resulting in there being no citation practice of the kind we are familiar with to ensure that the location and communities from which the data were originally mined remain in later academic exchanges. In the case of the multiple literacies practiced by the Iranian villagers, most of their local and community knowledge of such practices was not necessarily documented via written academic text, which potentially enabled Street (1984) to conduct the ethnography without properly citing the Iranians’

contributions as theory but raw data that requires intellectual processing.

### ***Genre Practices***

Part of this intertextual discourse transfiguration is the use of genres in interconnected publications. The discursive developments that helped transform the field’s focus from the “plurality” of Iranian villagers’ practices to the pluralized concept of “multiliteracies” were supported through certain genre practices. The genres employed in the trajectory described above move from “ethnography” (Brian Street’s *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, 1984) to “literature review” (James Gee’s “Orality and literacy: From the Savage Mind to Ways with Words”, 1986), and, at the end, to the “manifesto” (The New London Group’s “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures”, 1996). This genre formation, through a sociomaterial lens with a focus on semiotic presentation as the material foundation of communication, is an effective arrangement for data-digging (ethnography), theoretical control (literature review), and the authority of recommendation (manifesto). In the case of pluralized concepts and non-Western communities’ practices, this genre arrangement has helped the devaluation of the role of local participants as knowledge holders by reducing their ideas into data (as opposed to theory) as much as allowing Western academics to insert discursive control.

A principal aim of ethnography is to provide rich and complex accounts of the practices of a social or cultural group, typically accomplished by the researcher immersing themselves for an extended period into the lives of members of a group and observing and recording participants as they go about their daily lives (Anderson-Levitt, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Heath & Street, 2008). Ethnography is an interpretive genre: “Ethnography is resolutely personal; it is not meant for generalization, but to

offer a personal interpretation of a personal observation” (Wei, 2019, p. 162). At the same time, ethnographies are context-specific. Although ethnographies serve as a researcher’s representation of the community or cultural group, this type of research also values the perspective of the participants; it involves the researcher trying to interpret things from the viewpoint of participants. This mainly happens because the genre is constructed based on the assumption that truth is dependent on the specific context, and thus participants’ voices are crucial in building a realistic description of the context.

Literature reviews are considered important avenues for theorizing (Breslin & Gatrell, 2023; Post et al., 2020) and therefore a useful textual ground for theory abstraction. Unlike ethnography, which gets into the intricacies of specific contexts (Heath & Street, 2008), the literature review genre involves consolidating existing research and scholarship in a particular area (Snyder, 2019). In literature reviews that attempt to theorize, scholars often extend already existing concepts and theories in their fields beyond their original scope and context (Breslin & Gatrell, 2023). As scholars cite ethnographic and qualitative studies in literature reviews, the contextual richness is marginalised and often relegated to a backgrounded status. As such, the reader often only gets a truncated version of the broader context within which ethnographies are carried out.

Manifestos carry this process of decontextualization even further. Similar to political manifestos, which impose a tone of authority and/or assertive stance-taking (Fahs, 2020), academic manifestos serve to articulate demands and tend to possess a persuasive and compelling power. As Fahs (2020) points out:

The manifesto author tells us how to think, assumes we agree with them, and imagines no possibility for refusal or resistance. They do not invite us to carefully piece apart the

claims; rather, they want an emotional response. ... manifestos have no reverence for the past, no homage to what has come before. They want only what is new, of the now, in the present tense, and they want it immediately. (p. 12)

In the same manner, the manifesto style of writing utilised by the New London Group allowed them to declare their authority, assert their expertise in the field (Hanna & Ashby, 2022), and make claims about the novelty of multiliteracies pedagogy, “a programmatic manifesto, as a starting point of sorts” (New London Group, 1996, p. 63). Such academic manifestos allow authors to speak about “what is new” with no mention of “what has come before,” such as the Iranian context in the trajectory of the field.

The New London Group featured prominent, elite, and leading scholars in the field of language and literacy, all of whom wrote from the Global North. Given the collective authority of these ten powerful authors, their assertions would be taken seriously, especially in a genre like the manifesto. The publication would compel new and upcoming scholars, including the authors’ graduate students and their academic networks in their respected universities, to cite this manifesto. A focus on the collective power of the academic elite who wrote the manifesto can connect us to the next theme.

### ***Constellations of Academic Authors as Symbolic Academic Authority***

Another significant element contributing to the textual sociomateriality that reinforces colonial knowledge production and epistemic injustice is the symbolic gathering of academic names, in print form, in journals that gatekeep knowledge production. We call this collaboration “symbolic” because this form of collaboration is alphabetically embedded within



academic textuality (in articles, books, theses, websites, interviews, and so on). In contrast, embodied collaborations that generated the knowledge that Street was exposed to occurred on farms, in fruit gardens, fruit markets, local traditional schools, and everyday rural family life. What generates knowledge such as an understanding of plurality of literacies is contextual interactions and local experiences; however, what provides the ability to frame and present this knowledge is symbolic collaborations embedded within the textual sociomateriality that sustains academic authority. The symbolic control over such sociotextual networks allows alterations such as the erasure of the significance of the Iranian context, which serves the transfer of epistemic authority from real knowledge holders to narrators of the knowledge.

The New London Group's manifesto brings together a large number of influential names in the field to establish this symbolic control: a print-based consensus among important academics. It features ten prominent academics, all from Global North countries and all connected with prestigious universities within these same regions. The New London Group, no doubt sought to challenge dominant knowledge paradigms and promote critical pedagogies with their multiliteracies manifesto. However, their collaboration centred voices and perspectives from established academic institutions from the Global North.

The scholars involved in the group's publication were already highly cited and their presence in this symbolic collaboration would compel emerging scholars to cite their work if they wanted to establish their credibility in the field and because of the pressure to situate themselves in theories that are sanctioned by influential scholars. It is also important to note that the New London Group published their manifesto in *Harvard Educational Review*, a high-profile educational journal associated with a highly

prestigious university. This move further helped the popularity of the New London Group's conceptual leadership. "Symbolic capital actually constitutes the capitalization of the prestige conferred to individuals by the possession of other forms of capital valued in that community" (Fedor, 2020, p. 28). The New London Group's collaboration made use of the said alphabetic and textual possibilities to accumulate the symbolic academic capital that provided the Group with the epistemic superiority needed to process, and in this case ignore, the experiences of the Iranian villagers because their readership would anyway trust their knowledge of the issue in question.

### **Conclusion & Implications: Sociotextuality and Discursive Appropriation**

This article has been an attempt to conceptualize the notion of sociotextuality to explain accumulation of symbolic academic authority. With a focus on "multiliteracies" as an example of trending pluralized concepts that advocate for multi, pluri, trans, and inter literacy and language practices, we asked how Western academia has been able to claim authority over this area of research despite the long presence of non-Western communities' rich traditions of complex multimodal and plurilingual literacy practices. We chose to focus on multiliteracies because we were aware that multiliteracies was one of the offshoots of the NLS, which, through Brian Street's work, significantly drew on some Iranian villagers' perceptions of literacy. As NLS grew into new discourses, the Iranian context was gradually erased from multiliteracies scholarship.

We identified that this erasure happened in a number of phases. Despite the initial presence of the Iranian context, it was treated as raw data at the service of Western theorization. In a process of theory abstraction, the Iranian context was treated as just another case in the trajectory of the field among other cases accessible to Western scholars. Next, the

knowledge borrowed from Iranian villagers was rebranded as a Western product, “multiliteracies,” with the complete exclusion of the Iranian context. Finally, the same product was repurposed and presented in new forms such as the “digital turn” in literacy.

Based on this pattern, we tried to identify how textual materiality, as the main medium of academic communication, has enabled a group of Western scholars to gain symbolic ownership of theories of multisemiotic literacy engagement. Thus, we discussed how intertextual connections and citations have helped transfigurations of the multiliteracies discourse. We highlighted the significance of genre practices among these intertextual relations, and we wrote about symbolic collaborations that bring scholars together alphabetically to magnify academic status and authority. With the presentation of these findings, we would also like to stress that our analysis is by no means about the individual scholars who have been named in this publication. We indeed recognized the significance of their contributions at different points in the text. Instead, this article is about broader structures of academic colonialism that make use of sociotextuality as an important foundation.

What are some implications of a recognition of the role of sociotextuality? In his *Decolonizing Sociology* (2021), Ali Meghji recommends that one decolonial method of dealing with critically oriented canonized figures in Western thought is to reveal “the hidden links in [their] social thought” (p. 133). Focusing on Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, Meghji suggests it is important to highlight that most of Foucault and Bourdieu’s anti-establishment work is rooted in their experiences in Algeria and Tunisia,

where they lived and witnessed the impact of French colonialism. Although Foucault and Bourdieu’s work was informed by their observations of these North African societies, this connection is not visible in the Western intellectual cannon, and they are treated as

**“The most important implication of our project is an evidence-based invitation for recognizing non-Western communities’ invisible knowledge contribution to mainstream academic conversations.”**

just another generation of sociologists in the trajectory of Western thought. Ali Meghji asserts that increasing the visibility of the influence of the African experience on Foucault and Bourdieu’s work provides it with the opportunity to be seen as the continuity of critical African thought. The most important implication of our project is an evidence-based invitation for recognizing non-Western

communities’ invisible knowledge contribution to mainstream academic conversations.

This recognition cannot happen without forming alternative sociotextual nodes that engage with referencing, citation, rhetorical, and genre practices that center Southern voices. Part of this endeavour would also be an attention to the languages of academic content production. Reforming the submission mechanisms of mainstream journals to include articles written in non-European languages is an obvious first step; however, there are more transformative possibilities. We, for instance, can start thinking about decentering the journal industry by identifying and elevating the role of important journals outside or in the margins of the academic metropole. In this process, influential Western academics can write in the journals of the territories which have informed their theories.

Finally, a decolonial review of our research methods, data collection, and data analysis is crucial to allow for the presence of research participants in our texts as knowledge holders and theorists. Much organic

knowledge generation occurs beyond academic presentation and publication genres. It happens in oral exchanges, songs, poetry, and stories. A lot of knowledge is not authored by an individual but is collectively crafted through communal and intergenerational dialogue. These forms of knowledge should also be viewed as “theory” if used in dominant academic scholarship as opposed to being used as “raw data.” As we highlighted in our literature review section, we are aware that some of these implications have also been recommended in other publications and we hope that the case we illustrated can provide more proof for arguing in favour of moving towards epistemic justice in language and literacy research.

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