

Revisiting Multiliteracy: Contemporary (Re)Forms of Multiliteracy Pedagogy

Dani English Northeastern University

Black Girls' Literacies: Transforming Lives and Literacy Practices

Detra Price-Dennis and Gholnecsar E. Muhammad, editors

Routledge, 2021

English as an International Language Education: Critical Intercultural Literacy Perspectives

Ahmed Sahlane and Rosalind Pritchard, editors

Springer Cham, 2023

Pluriversal Literacies: Tools for Perseverance and Livable Futures

Romeo García, Ellen Cushman, and Damián Baca, editors

University of Pittsburgh Press, 2024

Student-centered learning, gamification, and critical pedagogy represent some of the most prominent and increasingly influential paradigms in contemporary educational scholarship. Central to these frameworks is an expanded understanding of literacy, one which acknowledges and embraces literacy as broad, inclusive, and context dependent. The concept of “multiliteracies,” introduced by the New London Group (NLG) in 1996, sought to redefine literacy beyond “formalized, monolingual, [and] monocultural” understandings (61). This framework was developed in response to the growing diversity of communication channels and remains relevant in today’s global political climate, especially given the spread of misinformation (Abrantes da Silva; Kalantzis and Cope; New London Group; Zapata, Kalantzis, and Cope). However, the rapid development of multimodality and the ubiquity of the internet, which the NLG could not have fully anticipated, necessitate a reevaluation of their framework in light of these developments (Anstey and Bull 15).

This review examines how multiliteracies, as a theoretical framework and pedagogical approach, has evolved over the past three decades. Through an evaluation of three recent publications, it explores how the concept has been adapted, reshaped, and expanded to address the needs and perspectives of diverse groups. First, I briefly discuss critiques of the original NLG conception of multiliteracy from the perspectives of critical literacy and critical pedagogy, as these are often paired with the concept of multiliteracies.

At first glance, multiliteracies, critical literacy, and critical pedagogy appear compatible, as all emphasize the importance of fostering a critical understanding of the world. The NLG’s call for “efficacious pedagogy” explicitly includes the development of students’ critical abilities to “critique a

system and its relations to other systems on the basis of the workings of power, politics, ideology, and values” (85). Their call aligns with critical literacy and pedagogy, both of which draw from critical theory—rooted in Marxism and the Frankfurt School—to examine how structures of inequality shape individual experiences and social relations. Despite these commonalities, a closer examination reveals limitations in NLG’s framing.

One primary critique is that the NLG situates multiliteracies as an additive framework to existing curricula rather than as a wholly new system based upon a transformative critique of educational systems. This approach risks perpetuating structural inequalities by failing to dismantle the traditional models it seeks to supplement. As some scholars covered here argue, such a framework may function as a superficial remedy, failing to address the systemic harms of traditional literacy education. Moreover, the perspectives added to standardized education through multiliteracies often remain “othered” in the process, reinforcing existing hierarchies.

Another limitation lies in the NLG’s emphasis on students’ future roles within the workforce. While the framework acknowledges the need for “meaningful success” beyond economic terms, it frequently centers students’ relationships with labor and capital. Their concept of “productive diversity,” wherein cultural differences are leveraged as resources for global capitalism, exemplifies this focus. By proposing a “productive global order” to replace “monocultural, nationalistic” civic ideals, the NLG’s framework raises questions about whether it truly diverges from traditional homogenizing forces such as capitalism or merely broadens their scope (69).

Furthermore, the NLG’s articulation of multiliteracies constrains students’ ability to imagine alternative futures. By framing students’ identities and futures as “essentially the same as texts,” the NLG unintentionally suggests “a domestication that subtracts movement, indeterminacy, and emergent potential from the picture” (Leander and Boldt 24). In other words, the framework may limit students’ capacity to “imagine [their futures] otherwise” (Hughes; Van Asselt).

These critiques invite a reevaluation of multiliteracies use in education and its potential to challenge, rather than reinforce, traditional structures. Specifically, this review asks: what do so many scholars—especially those who pair it with critical pedagogy and critical literacy—find useful in multiliteracy pedagogy? How is the concept being used today, and how does its use compare with the vision of multiliteracy described 30 years ago?

To provide a partial answer to these questions, I cover three recent publications that discuss literacies in connection to critical literacy and/or critical pedagogy more broadly. These texts offer different views of literacies by shifting the lens through which multiliteracy is operationalized and examined. It is important to note that the specific goals of each text differ and, consequently, the range of literacies presented in each are not the same in scope. That is to say that the texts do not address literacies within the same disciplinary contexts nor with the same geopolitical scope or orientation as one another. Such distinctions suggest that multiliteracy, as a term and as a concept, has evolved significantly since 1996 as scholars have taken up the term and reshaped it to better suit their needs. These texts were chosen to represent recent (i.e., within the past five years) scholarship regarding literacy, and to offer a glimpse into how multiliteracy has been adapted by those whose frames of reference were most commonly marginalized within, or omitted from, traditional literacy education.

BLACK GIRLS' LITERACIES: TRANSFORMING LIVES AND LITERACY PRACTICES

In this 2021 publication, editors Detra Price-Dennis and Gholnecsar E. Muhammad, both Associate Professors of Education at their respective institutions, contribute to the ongoing Expanding Literacies in Education series published by Routledge. This series, Routledge states, aims to highlight “changing landscape and explore new directions and theoretical tools in literacy studies as it is transforming education.”

Price-Dennis and Muhammed build upon previous research on Black girls' literacy practices as they are described in Gholnecsar E. Muhammad and Marcelle Haddix's 2016 article “Centering Black Girls' Literacies: A Review of Literature on the Multiple Ways of Knowing of Black Girls” and further elaborated upon throughout the special issue of *English Education* for which that article serves as the introduction. In both Muhammad and Haddix's essay and in the introduction to this book, six components of Black girls' literacies are highlighted. In both works, the authors write that “Black girls' literacies are: (1) Multiple, (2) Tied to identities, (3) Historical, (4) Collaborative, (5) Intellectual, and (6) Political/Critical” (Price-Dennis and Muhammed 1–2; Muhammed and Haddix 325). The aim of Price-Dennis and Muhammed's edited collection, however, is to illustrate the ways this framework—the Black Girls' Literacy Framework (BGLF) —has been used by teachers and researchers in service of “cultivating Black girls' literacies within and beyond school contexts” (6).

It should be noted that the editors and their contributors emphasize throughout the work that, while their focus is on Black girls, they are not suggesting that their work is irrelevant to other students/youth. Rather, they approach the transformation of literacy education through this lens due to the particular harms faced by Black women and girls related to their position within societies such as the United States. As Black women and girls are located at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression, the editors and contributors take on the Black feminist belief that efforts towards Black women and girls' liberation “necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression,” thus benefitting all people (Combahee River Collective 277).

The work itself is divided into four sections, each with three self-contained essays followed by a conversational piece between several Black women scholars. Each of the work's four sections explore a different area of literacy, with the first focusing on spaces made explicitly for Black girls, which the authors argue are “a necessary condition for Black girls' literacies to thrive” (Price-Dennis and Muhammed 7). The subsequent sections focus on linguistic practices, reading, and digital literacies, respectively. The conversational pieces that close each section are described as “Kitchen Table Talks,” which references the practice of the authors' “foremothers and grandmothers who sat at the kitchen table” for socialization and to “bare their souls and receive healing and affirmation,” a reference chosen for its cultural significance and “as a reflection of our collective desire to transform spaces by sharing our experiences and asserting our voices” (Price-Dennis and Muhammed 7).

Across all four sections, the contributors to the work highlight specific extra-curricular programs and curricular interventions they have created, engaged with, and/or researched which aim to “cultivate students' identities, literacies, and social activism through multiliteracies” in schools as

well as outside of school, such as within peer support settings (Price-Dennis and Muhammed 6). This divergence from the context of school is one of many points of departure from the form of multiliteracy offered by the New London Group. In fact, only one contributor—Autumn A. Griffin, in their piece, “A Digital Mismatch: Adolescent Black Girls’ Perceptions of the Usefulness of Digital Tools” —mentioned the New London Group’s use of multiliteracies. Griffin references the 1996 piece only in passing, as a basis for the discussion of much broader forms of literacy that are quite distinct from those outlined by the New London Group. Rather than multiliteracy as something guided by teachers or mentors, as described by the New London Group, Griffin describes the development of literacy that is not just “without teacher or school mediation,” but resisting the limitations of the schooling context without prompting (218). Griffin’s work is just one example of the way multiliteracy is repurposed in the context of *Black Girls’ Literacies*: here, multiliteracies are not solely methods of engagement and meaning-making which students are guided to develop, but are also methods within students’ existing funds of knowledge that have not yet been recognized as such in school nor by many peer supporters of Black girls outside school settings.

Furthermore, the application of multiliteracy in Price-Dennis and Muhammed’s work is not framed solely in opposition to the “formalized, monolingual, [and] monocultural” form of traditional literacy education (New London Group 61), but also as a way to work against views of literacy which uphold misogynoir. Misogynoir, a term coined by Moya Bailey, describes the combined force of anti-Black racism and misogyny that Black women and girls face (1). Despite the potential to broaden the work’s scope by examining multiliteracies through this lens in international contexts, Price-Dennis and Muhammed’s collection is focused exclusively on the United States and the particular form of misogynoir that Black American women and girls face. Nevertheless, it makes an important contribution to the expanding definition of multiliteracy by centering Black women and girls, helping to ensure that the forms of literacy Black girls have are supported both inside and outside school contexts.

ENGLISH AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE EDUCATION: CRITICAL INTERCULTURAL LITERACY PERSPECTIVES

In this 2023 publication, editors Ahmed Sahlane, a Senior Instructor of English at the University of Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, and Rosalind Pritchard, Emeritus Professor of Education and Senior Distinguished Research Fellow at Ulster University in Northern Ireland, contribute to the Springer’s English Language Education series. As the series title indicates, whereas Price-Dennis and Muhammed’s work was not limited to schools nor to any specific discipline, Sahlane and Pritchard’s collection of essays is focused on the teaching of the English language in school contexts in countries where English is not the sole nor primary language of the state, and where it is rarely, if ever, a native language for their students.

The text itself is divided into five sections of varying lengths. These sections focus on (1) resistance to native-speakerist ideologies, (2) culturally responsive pedagogy, (3) critical intercultural understanding and communications, (4) navigating and critically engaging with English language

teaching materials to foster intercultural understanding without relying on solely Western representations in teaching materials, and (5) (de)coloniality and the prevalence of “monolingualist language ideologies and native-speakerist deficit theories” in international English language education (Sahlane and Pritchard 389). The emphasis of the text, as evidenced by the themes of these sections, is on critical engagement within English language pedagogy and classroom practices.

Though the contributors to Sahlane and Pritchard’s collection do not mention “multiliteracy” or the New London Group, there is discussion of “literacy as a social practice” and a similar recognition to that of the New London Group that, as Criss Jones Díaz wrote, in “our increasingly globalised, super-diverse world, the relationship between communication and culture is ever more present as we progressively encounter people from different social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds” (146). Throughout the essays, contributors describe several specific forms of literacy, including (inter) cultural, global, media, health, critical, and visual literacies. Many of these certainly indicate an influence of the original conception of “multiliteracy” in these authors’ works, even without explicit reference to the New London Group.

However, in the time since the New London Group’s description of multiliteracy pedagogies as a necessary element of preparing students “for the formation of locally sensitive and globally extensive networks” (67–8), the efforts towards diversity have not actually moved much past generic calls for such diversity. Sahlane and Pritchard note that in reality, “diversity” has looked like a “homogenisation of world cultures and the continuing global internationalisation of higher education,” alongside the erasure of different epistemological frames and ways of being (9). Put another way, Sahlane and Pritchard agree with the underlying sentiment that students must develop means to better understand different worldviews and interact successfully beyond national and cultural borders, but, within their disciplinary context, the reality has not been a negotiation of these differences but rather a forced set of Eurocentric ideologies and instructional materials that are framed as neutral, “global” texts. Where texts are framed within the context of local cultures, they tend to reinforce “tendencies to regard one’s own culture as the centre of human experience and meaning making,” presenting the local culture without any other meaningful frames of reference (Sahlane and Pritchard 320).

Oftentimes “universal” materials ignore both the concerns of local cultures, and also local Englishes. Yet, as the editors and contributors attest, the English language is “not a possession which [native, Anglophone speakers] lease to others,” but rather is a diverse set of language practices that “serve [...] the communicative and communal needs of different communities” in distinct ways (Widdowson 385, qtd. in Sahlane and Pritchard 4). Because of the various forms of English used throughout the world, there is no real “global” English that will enable one to communicate without any barriers in every place where English is used. As such, the editors stress the value of English-language instruction that can challenge the deference to native speakers as the “norm” of English by which all other Englishes are measured.

Through attention to international concerns, Sahlane and Pritchard take a somewhat different approach to the scope of their work, the relationship with geopolitics, and the nation-state than both other texts covered in this review. The editors describe a need to navigate the reality of English as a dominant language throughout the globe with the particularities of local circumstances where they

are teaching, while also attending to the need for exposing students to some other ways of being in the world. Many of the authors in their collection contend with these issues directly, including in the editors' own piece within the collection, "Assessing Perspectives on Culture in Saudi EFL Textbook Discourse." Sahlane and Pritchard utilize critical discourse analysis to examine the EFL textbooks in Saudi Arabia and highlight the surface-level "multiculturalism" within the textbooks that provides idealized portrayals of English-speaking countries and fails to offer students a way to critically engage with the nation-state they reside in or their own culture.

By moving the focus of attention away from the United States and other Anglophone contexts, Sahlane and Pritchard's book is able to provide insight into the "other(ed)" side of calls for multiplicity in literacy, language, and pedagogy. The common thread among all these diverse contexts is the strained relationship between the local context and linguistic colonialism through the force of English as an international language. The goals of this text are not entirely divorced from those of the New London Group, but it nevertheless provides an important mark of increasing distinction from the origins of multiliteracy pedagogy.

PLURIVERSAL LITERACIES: TOOLS FOR PERSEVERANCE AND LIVABLE FUTURES

Pluriversal Literacies: Tools for Perseverance and Livable Futures, edited by Romeo García, Ellen Cushman, and Damián Baca, is the third and final collection of essays in this review. Published in early 2024, it is one of the latest works in the University of Pittsburgh Press's series, "Composition, Literacy, and Culture." The editors of this collection also collaborated three years prior to this book's publication, producing "Delinking: Toward Pluriversal Rhetorics," the introductory article for a special issue of *College English* (Cushman, Baca, and García). The essays presented here are intended to "deliver [. . .] on the promises of pluriversal literacies set forth" in that special issue (García, Cushman, and Baca 15).

Unlike the prior two works in this review, the thirteen essays in this collection are not explicitly divided into sections. Rather, the editors describe the method of organization as one that offers a set of signposts that take readers through "paths through the analytics for perseverance and prospectives for livable futures from around the globe" (20). These paths may be interpreted as thematic and "tracing the instrumental, historical, and place-based implications of the representational tools at the center of each chapter"; through a lens of the chapters' "various loci of enunciations of knowledge"; or in relation to "the variety of sign tools . . . as these pertain to the creation of difference" (20). Still, in outlining the chapters of the text, the editors highlight particular themes of chapters in the order they appear. These themes are border thinking (chapters 1–3); linguistic, embodied, and educational expressions of knowledge (chapters 4–6); and decolonial knowledge making and the tools used in such practices (chapters 7–12). The closing chapter brings the collection back to the central focus of the work as a whole, describing tools of representation, languages, knowledge making practices, and perseverance in relation to those seeking livable futures.

Though this text shares a decolonial perspective with Sahlane and Pritchard's collection,

Pluriversal Literacies explicitly resists what the editors describe as “the coloniality of disciplinarity,” i.e., the regulatory function of academic disciplines which, they argue, are “meant to secure epistemic obedience from all who enter them” (15). Additionally, the collection centers local epistemologies linked by a decolonial praxis. This effectively reverses the relationship between the local and the global seen in Sahlane and Pritchard, deemphasizing the role of nation-states in the role of knowledge creation and instead homing in on local practices and the shared histories of colonialism (and present effects of coloniality) in these local contexts.

In the introduction to this book, the editors reference their 2021 article wherein they critique cultural rhetorics and its current formulation as a “multicultural alternative within the terms set forth by ‘master narratives,’” thus replicating “the structuring tenets of thought created by imperial legacies of knowledge” (12–13). In a consonant manner, García, Cushman, and Baca diverge from the discourse of “multiliteracy” through this text, though, as was the case with Sahlane and Pritchard, the New London Group is not explicitly referenced. In their introduction, the editors articulate two essential distinctions of their approach from other ways of viewing a plurality of literacies. First, they challenge traditional Western definitions of “literacy.” They also reiterate and elaborate upon the critique of cultural rhetorics and multiculturalism, two frames that are key to the New London Group’s multiliteracy pedagogy, first discussed in their September 2021 *College English* article.

Regarding their challenge to the concept of literacy itself, some of their critique is familiar: they, like the New London Group and the other works in this review recognize that the traditional formulation of literacy, which focuses on reading and writing, is far too limiting. The concern in *Pluriversal Literacies* goes further than calling for digital literacies in classrooms, however, and call into question the privilege afforded to specific modes of linguistic representation as the idealized forms of knowledge production, preservation, and sharing. García, Cushman, and Baca further note that the Modernity/Coloniality Collective’s research helps “to reveal the workings of logocentrism with its insistence on alphabetic literacy and the imposition of a ruling language that destroyed other forms of mediation of knowing” (11). They go on to encourage educators to “unsettle Eurocentric literacy by refusing its location as the colonial center against which all other meaning-making practices across the planet are to be compared” (12–13).

García, Cushman, and Baca also level a similar criticism of multiculturalism and cultural rhetorics to the one articulated by Sahlane and Pritchard. They note, for example, that their use of pluriversality is not an effort to “globalize literacy because globalization is something that Western literacy is always already doing” (14). Such criticism is echoed by other scholars, including African and Australian sociolinguist Finex Ndhlovu, who notes that multicultural ideologies and practices have, in essence, created “multiple monoculturalisms, multiple monolingualisms and multiple monolithic identities that exist side by side in [. . .] the nation-state” (qtd. in Zembylas 121).

Overall, this text presents a substantial departure from traditional literacy education by rejecting multiple forms of organizing knowledge, i.e. disciplines, languages, races, and other socially constructed forms of difference. In doing so, the editors and contributors are able to shape the notion of plurality here to address lived experiences and the nuances of particular manifestations of coloniality. This stands out in large part due to a “tendency to read interculturality as a problem

of individual competences and knowledge rather than a political problem of colonial relations and structures” (Zembylas 121). *Pluriversal Literacies*, then, offers one of the most unique and productive glimpses at imagining multiliteracy otherwise.

CONCLUSION

The framework articulated by the New London Group in 1996 needs revision to adequately account for recent and future changes in educational settings and beyond as well as to better address the needs of a wider range of students and their possible futures. Still, the past several years have demonstrated that multiliteracy pedagogy was (and is) an important intervention, bringing the need to move away from traditional models of literacy into the academic mainstream. Nevertheless, academic concepts travel and transform over time through scholarly conversations and debates, and in response to attempts to put their insights into practice. All three texts here—*Black Girls’ Literacies*, *English as an International Language*, and *Pluriversal Literacies*—show the movement of multiliteracy pedagogy through distinct frames of what multiliteracy is and what it can do in different disciplinary and geopolitical contexts. Likewise, the texts share the goal of valuing multiple forms of meaning-making, knowledge, and representation. As suggested in *Pluriversal Literacies*, there is need for all of these diverse perspectives for education to meaningfully contribute to students’ and educators’ livable futures.

The challenge, moving forward, seems to be how instructors can reconcile the calls for finally moving past traditional notions of literacy that have persisted despite efforts to de-center them. Given the diversity of educational and extra-curricular contexts where instructors may find themselves, all three texts in this review are capable of providing insight into potential paths forward as, taken together, this group of texts attends to the distinctive needs and diverse constraints one may navigate.

With all of this change, it may appear that the New London Group is no longer directly relevant to contemporary multiliteracy pedagogy. The evidence from the texts reviewed here certainly seems to suggest, apart from acting as a signal back to the origin of multiliteracy pedagogy, that the New London Group’s work has largely been left behind, but one would need a much larger sample size to conclude such a thing. What can be said here, however, is that the term “multiliteracy” itself would not exist without this group’s imperfect proposal, and “multiliteracy” has clearly proven itself as a useful term even as its uses have strayed further and further from its origins (Chan xiv). The legacy of the New London Group, then, is not so much the specifics of their proposed framework, but their invitation to redefine literacy beyond its initial confines through the mere suggestion of “multiliteracy” as a concept.

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