

# Pluriversal Literacies: Affect and Relationality in Vulnerable Times

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## ABSTRACT

Through a consideration of literacies in theory and international policy, this article pushes at the edges of existing frameworks of functional and sociocultural literacies. In critique of existing policy directives, the author explores an approach to literacy that engages in the affective and posthuman relationality of human and environment and in the plurality of literacies globally that are overshadowed in prevailing models of literacy education. The author was motivated by a commitment to literacy education responsive to a world that is unsustainable in its current practices, to a world that faces increasing fragmentation and vulnerability (socially and ecologically) while certain types of expertise, technologies, and global infrastructures continue to proliferate. As a mainstay of education and a tool of social change, literacies are inseparable from policy and practices of sustainability, equity, and development. Pluriversality is a concept emerging from decolonial theory that provides a counternarrative to contemporary Northern assumptions of the universal. Building on a history of ideas around pluriversality gives sociopolitical and ecological momentum to affect and relationality in literacy studies. The author challenges normative constructions of literacy education as Eurocentric and neocolonial, effectively supporting a pedagogy that normalizes certain practices and people and, by extension, sustains inequity and environmental degradation. Through interwoven research projects, the author highlights the contentious aspects of functional and sociocultural approaches to literacy and the possibilities of moving beyond them. In doing so, the author describes and demonstrates the practical and political implications of affect theory and relationality in literacies education in a plural anthropocenic world.

There is a beautiful simplicity to using a reusable water bottle if you live in a place where tap water is safe. Perhaps it is the money you can save on the cost of a bottle of water, or perhaps it is the feeling of demanding less of the world's resources or capacity for waste. (Approximately 480 billion plastic bottles are consumed every year globally, and only a small percentage of those will be recycled; see Laville & Taylor, 2017.) That basic practice of water consumption reveals a web of relations and forces in which economies, water, materials, health, and cultures quickly criss-cross the time-space of the globe. The mention of it reveals something about me as the author of this work, too, as I see out of the corner of my eye as I type my well-used, reusable water bottle. In this article, I address the practice of literacies in these webs of relations and in the actualisation of individual and collective behaviors.

Literacies as a field is dynamic, changing and negotiating in the space between always evolving human meaning making and communication in contemporary spaces, and educational practice and policy. In

this article, I respond to both of these conceptual locales. First, human behavior is now unquestionably transforming ecological and geological conditions, creating environmental uncertainties and ecological vulnerabilities that are unprecedented and considered a global crisis (e.g., Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2019; Singh, 2018; Vince, 2014). Second, educational policy on a global level reflects an ever-increasing focus on narrow, Northern,<sup>1</sup> and Eurocentric versions of functional literacy (UNESCO, 2016; Wickens & Sandlin, 2007). There is a geography to both of these issues, and the geographies have disquieting similarity. Our transforming environment is most acutely felt by those in the global South due to land degradation in rural populations, sea-level increase in coastal communities, and air pollution and waste mismanagement in rapidly urbanized and highly populated areas. Not unrelated to this, literacy education policy takes on its most narrow iterations (i.e., marketplace capacities and functional literacies aligned with existing Northern frameworks) in places already marginalized by economy, culture, and environment.

I am driven by the question of why education policy and practice remains so committed to our current frameworks of standard literacy. I wonder why the field of literacy and development is so dominated by research that strives to teach reading, writing, and numeracy in better, faster, richer, contextualized, and functional ways across all corners of the globe. As well as the epistemic violence of delegitimizing and erasing of other modes of engagement and being in the world, this type of literacy education has proven itself an insufficient tool to address the increasingly volatile and vulnerable entanglement of humans and environment. It cannot simply be a coincidence that as universal functional literacy education continues to become the accepted gold standard for development and progress, our ability to sustain our planet on its current path becomes increasingly far-fetched.

As a mainstay of education and a tool of social engagement, literacy is inseparable from policy and practices of sustainability, equity, and development—at community and international levels. I take up literacies as the practices that facilitate how we engage with the world and how we come to be in and with the world.<sup>2</sup> My purpose in this article is to highlight the contingency and contentious aspects of print language-focused functional, socio-cultural, and human-centered approaches to literacy education. In doing so, I describe and demonstrate the practical and political implications of affect theory and relationality in literacy education in a plural world. I use distinct examples of data that span global North and South contexts of research to illustrate the theoretical and practical need and possibility of this approach. I challenge global constructions of functional literacy education as Eurocentric and neocolonial, effectively supporting a pedagogy that normalizes certain practices and people

(Patel, 2016) and, by extension, sustaining inequity and environmental degradation. Finally, I bridge the theoretical possibilities with speculative practical examples, again in distinctively different contexts that span the global North and South.

Globally, literacy today remains predominantly based on paradigms whereby human agency is deemed central, in relation, at best, to the immediate social and cultural contexts of the learner. Our frameworks originate in a post-Enlightenment, Western version of the world (Escobar, 2018), a Saussurean assertion of human language as the pinnacle of all sign systems (Kohn, 2013), and a colonial legacy that has resulted in a small number of colonial languages dominating our global knowledge economy (Defourny & Šopova, 2019). The consequences of humanist, situated, and Eurocentric literacy education are visible in two trends of human behavior. First, a false distinction between human and environment is sustained (as evidenced by human behavior that directly harms immediate natural environments on which we depend), and second, a maintenance of the status quo of inequity exists (as evidenced by the consistent wealth and stability of the North in relation to that of the South; Hickel, 2017). When we are practiced at making meaning through print language, contextualized by our own social and cultural locations, we lack the tools of awareness or action to respond to the entanglement of our conditions, histories, and futures with other nonhuman agents and other locations.

## Writing, Working, Knowing in Relation

As a way of coming to be in (and in relation to) the world, literacies equip people to relate, communicate, and understand, both inwardly and outwardly. In a slum community on the outskirts of Kampala, Uganda, a snapshot of a day reveals the semiotics and subsequent literacies at work:

Two men are working in the urban garden. It is small, fenced with wire, and every inch is being utilized with crops, including spinach, sukuma wiki, peppers, and cabbage. The community hall is made of recycled plastic drink bottles constructed in a frame of reclaimed wood. Inside it, a group of young women are making earrings out of cloth and wire. A wooden building holds a newly established chicken farm. Anyone with shoes must take them off before going in to visit the chickens, to avoid the spread of germs or accidental harm of animals or eggs. The fencing and water and feeding troughs are all made of reclaimed plastic containers from the surrounding settlements. The school is a small concrete building, but the door is padlocked closed at the moment due to a conflict with the district about permits to teach in an informal settlement. The few concrete walls are painted vivid colors, orange and blue. The other structures, buildings, and partitions are the colors of wood and recycled plastics. A giant wire sculpture of a human head, mouth open and pointed toward the sky, is stuffed with

plastic waste and tufts of dry grasses protruding here and there. Approximately 20 children ranging from 4 to 14 years are gathered around a sound system currently being set up for a dance performance. Around the periphery of the space, community members are coming and going, amassing large piles of recycled plastic, the main source of monetary income here, eventually to be taken to a nearby depot where it will be exchanged for small amounts of money.

A certain mastery of academic literacy afforded me the privilege of working in this informal settlement in urban Uganda (via a certain presentation of ideas and track record in a funding application, which was trusted to be of good purpose in a context far removed from my own). With language arts and literacies as my tools of contribution (and my main tools of mediation within this space), I was welcomed as an expert. Not more than an hour into this work, I recognized the massive limitations of my knowledge and of the literacies that I had at my disposal. Working alongside situated experts, it was soon clear what literacies were at work in this space, what literacies needed supporting, nurturing, and valuing. These literacies were not primarily those counted as print, traditional, or functional by policy standards; furthermore, they were only marginally related to linguistics and were unrelated to the English language. As literacies equip people to come into being, they must relate to primary needs—the necessities of being.

Through education, arts and cultural production, parenting, livelihoods, and policy influencing, we engaged, communicated, and learned through multiple languages and practices.

In a peri-urban community in Malawi, a group of multidisciplinary researchers came together to explore the role of culture in the understanding and prevention of noncommunicable disease (specifically diabetes in Malawi and Tanzania). In this space—an open-air enclosure equipped with a make-shift cooking area, a stock of plastic chairs, and a wooden stage—living literacies mediated, performed, and taken up or abandoned as we struggled to find places of connection. Linguistics (between the English and Chichewa languages) were stifling and quickly gave way to dance—embodied relations (as we turned to semiformal local dance sequences). The latter was much more conducive to engagement, common ground, acquaintance, and group understanding. In the subsequent navigation of conventions and responses to context, across multiple languages and literacies, our early interactions with this community led to multiple contentious and vulnerable literacy incidents. Health literacy as we understood it from the global North (relating to the importance of low-salt and low-sugar diets, lean body fat, and adequate physical exercise) clashed with situated cultural literacies in Malawi (relating to the value of imported foods such as Fanta and bread, with large bodies and sedentary lives signifying wealth and health).

I wrote this from an academic post in a small European city, a city and a university that has benefited from a history of colonialism. Scotland played an active role in the abolitionist movement in the late 18th and early 19th centuries but is also accountable for a substantial history of

colonial appropriation as a key player in slave trade, along with tobacco and sugar trading, prior to and during the time of abolition (Mullen & Newman, 2018). Considered across time, the city's architecture, design, and cultural and economic wealth are partly at the expense of populations, economies, and cultures of the Caribbean and parts of Africa. I am not Scottish, and yet, being born to a white European family, I too have inherited versions of this wealth and take part in its ongoing development. Being European and a member of dominant social and cultural groups, the Northern models of functional literacy, and humanist approaches to literacy education have worked historically in my favor. In many respects, I am a beneficiary of what are now universalized literacy models. Not only did literacy education align with my onto-ethico-epistemological positioning as a young person, but these very models also are progressively the models by which populations all over the world are now evaluated. As a consequence of this past, I represent a sort of literacy standard against which others, who have little else in common with me or my history, are now compared. This geopolitical positioning is important to foreground as part of a proposition to unsettle universal and sociocultural assumptions of literacy practice. Put another way, my own positionality, as someone privileged by my cultural and geographical locations, at once obliges me and also destabilizes me in my capacity to speak about literacies of other places and paradigms.

The experiments and propositions that emerge and that compelled my work for this article respond to multiple and diverse encounters. These contexts span geographies, cultures, and public spaces, and my engagement in them, as a researcher and theorist, has put me in relation to recognizable and unfamiliar literacies and to many thinking and learning partners and places. I write therefore in the context of an assemblage, an ongoing and complex interplay of experiences, materials, events, and encounters. Lived, sustained, and ongoing collaborations with friends, peers, colleagues, places, and movements of thought and action informed this work. The last of these includes the extensive hidden or invisible work and contributions of people and traditions unrecognized in the spaces where I have learned and worked. Writing in relation to literacies and educational scholars (e.g., Kalman & Solares, 2018; Medina & Wohlwend, 2014; Somerville & Green, 2015), anthropologists (e.g., Hymes, 1964), and human geographers (e.g., Sharp, 2003) who engage with the multiple and often unrecognized forces of culture, politics, and everyday practice, I focused on the lived experiences of literacies and sought conceptual and methodological tools to bridge this with education in the Anthropocene. In this way, I am one of multiple contributors to, forces, factors, and authors of this work. The research on which it is based is shared in many avenues, through many voices and literacies.

With this positioning in mind, in this article, I build from and with a trajectory of conceptual and empirical research that begins in Europe and extends to North America, South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., Perry, Collier, & Rowsell, 2020; Perry & Pullanikkatil, 2019; Rogers, Winters, Perry, & LaMonde, 2014; Zaman, Inbadas, Whitelaw, & Clark, 2017). As with the bottled water with which I began this article, the data that I drew on to explore the literacy propositions of this work criss-cross the globe. I claim no insider status or saturated ethnography in any of the locations of my work; at the same time, I live in long-term and deep interactions with all of them, as a researcher/collaborator, community member/co-dependent, friend/colleague, and global citizen/intra-actor (Barad, 2007). I traverse specific data not to weave a cohesive narrative but to build an argument for a plurality and intraconnectivity in literacy education. I locate the proposition of this article in the context of the Anthropocene, as an area of scholarship that becomes ever more urgent in literacy studies.

## Theorizing the Pluriversal

Pluriversality is a concept that emerges from a decolonial movement of thought that provides a counternarrative to contemporary Northern assumptions of the universal and, in Escobar's (2018) words, to "the hegemony of modernity's one-world ontology" (p. 4). The concept of pluriversality, albeit with numerous names and lineages, has a long history forged by scholars and activists often marginalized by hegemonic systems, racism, and inequities. In this article, I underscore this literature and practice to acknowledge the invisible labor of scholars of color and diverse orientations.

The universal is an onto-ethico-epistemological concept; in other words, what is understood as common across the universe depends on where you stand (figuratively and literally) and how you see and experience this universe. We might then imagine that there are many universals depending on where the teller is positioned. Dominant discourses, policies, and practices in education, as well as across other public sectors, have become stabilized or sedimented in one version of the universal, one that has been defined by a post-Enlightenment, Eurocentric understanding of the concept. Mignolo (2018) contended, "Western epistemology and hermeneutics (meaning the Greek and Latin languages, translated into the six modern European and imperial languages) managed to universalize their own concept of universality, dismissing the fact that all known civilizations have been founded on the universality of their [own] cosmologies" (pp. ix-x). As arguably one of the most profoundly impactful concepts at work across international policy and practice (from

universal rights to universal literacy education), the universal deserves close scrutiny.

The concept of the pluriverse has provided a political and pragmatic alternative to the implications of the universal. The term has been traced back to the Zapatista movement, a leftist movement grown from the 1970s in Mexico that came to international attention in 1994, prompted by the force of the North American Free Trade Agreement on the country. A group of the Zapatistas (indigenous people from the Lacandon Jungle) occupied a city hall in the Chiapas and called for, in their now profoundly influential language, "*un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos*," or a world in which many worlds fit (Ziai, 2018). The Zapatista movement was particularly relevant to my tracing of the pluriversal because, above all, those involved focused their demands on land and freedom (Schacherreiter, 2009). This relationality between land and freedom made explicit by the Zapatistas in that phrase quickly foregrounds the essential intra-action between them, not only in land-dependent communities but also to all of us, all dwelling on and dependent on land in different ways. It points to one of the critical necessities of literacies in a pluriversal framework, that is, to address that relationality which connects the nonhuman and ecological (land) and the human and sociological (freedom) in the way that we teach and learn meaning making.

I align with Mignolo's (2018) position that "the ontology of the pluriverse [can] not be obtained without the epistemology of pluriversity" (p. ix). The one-world ontology that Escobar (2018) identified manifests in practice and language in terms of universality. Pluriversality therefore becomes a decolonial approach that we can apply to the field of literacy and the practice of literacies. It acknowledges forms of meaning making, experience, and knowledge that exceed the normative, Western or Eurocentric onto-ethico-epistemologies. An epistemology of pluriversality requires a framework of pluriversal literacies.

The pathway to this proposition is paved by the intersection of critical movements in and around the field of literacies. New Literacy Studies (Street, 2003) fundamentally expanded the notion of literacy to incorporate the plural social communicative practices that make up situated contexts of living and learning. This movement is layered with important contributions of critical literacies (Campano, Ghiso, & Sánchez, 2013; Gutiérrez, Larson, & Kreuter, 1995; Janks, 2000) that have highlighted the consequences of literacies in relation to the exertion of power and privilege in certain locations and erasure in others. This work has offered the representation of myriad frameworks, practices, and discourses to forge alternatives to top-down paradigms of education that insist on certain abstracted knowledge from sociocultural contexts (Campano, 2007). Coinciding with this work, cultural and arts theorists have long explored situated cultural knowledges and practices (e.g., theater,

dance, popular culture) as they emerge in relation to historical and political movements that have privileged certain forms and discourses and overshadowed others (e.g., Kagolobya, 2014; Mabingo, 2018).

Connected to this, of course, are the depth and history of critique, exposition, and analysis that have informed social and educational theory and public discourse, presented in the form of art (notably literature, theater, poetry, and music but extending to many cultural forms of production). Achebe's (1958/2001) *Things Fall Apart*, Gordimer's (2012) *No Time Like the Present*, Friel's (1981) *Translations*, and Clements's (2003) *Burning Vision* are all examples of the inquiry and cultural production that have contributed to the wealth of resources, justifications, and interpretations of plurality in literacies education as it relates to practice, politics, peoples, pasts, and futures.

Finally, the foundations of this thought experiment in pluriversal literacies are, to a substantial extent, constituted by the unwritten, both long-standing and ephemeral, practices of plural literacies that intersect with public pedagogies. From ECOaction in Kampala (see ECOaction Uganda, n.d.), to devised theater troupes like the Teatro Rodante in Puerto Rico (see <https://www.facebook.com/TeatroRodanteUPRCA/>), to the Tikondwe Freedom Gardens in Malawi (see <https://www.facebook.com/TikondweFreedomGardens/>), bodies of responsive and participatory pedagogical practice demonstrate the pragmatics of pluriversality in the Anthropocene. Practices such as these coexist visibly and invisibly with formalized education to enable ways of being and coming that confound standard notions of print literacy as a mediator of progress, learning, and coming to be.

The proposition herein applies the possibility of pluriversality to international literacy practice and policy in the Anthropocene with the underpinning onto-ethico-epistemology of affect theory. The current moment of the affective turn in literacy studies (Leander & Ehret, 2019; Masny & Cole, 2012) offers the opportunity to take up the historical and interdisciplinary line of thinking in the plurality and politics of knowledge anew. I take up the synergies between affect and pluriversality and propose an approach to literacies education in the context of anthropogenic and development-related literacies education.

## Monism, Ubuntu, and Literacies of Affect

During a multisite research project spanning Scotland and Canada (Perry et al., 2020), I explored literacy practices across digital and material arts with youth, colleagues, artists, and a curator to seek insights into the relation between literacies of arts and media, and mobilities (social and geographic) and to better understand the nature of youth engagement with digital spaces. In the

conception of that project, posthumanism and decoloniality did not feature as key research themes; yet, as the practice emerged and tactile arts practices mediated and diverted our participatory inquiry, the interrelationality and materiality of the young people's lives became paramount. It became hard to ignore the nature, history, and impact of connections between the local and global in the lives of the youth, and it became equally hard to ignore the role of the material and nonhuman in the youth's construction and experience of literacies.

The participants in Glasgow, Scotland, were characterized by a diversity of circumstances ranging from asylum seekers and recent immigrants to Scottish youth who had never had the opportunity or means to move beyond a 15-mile radius of the city. We played with various materials and discourses to explore our digital spaces: paper, paints, clay and plasticine, video, and texts. Anthony (pseudonym), a 15-year-old born and brought up in Glasgow, with little experience of travel outside of the Scottish borders, chose to play with plasticine. In between a mobile video game never far from his reach (phone held discreetly in his lap), Anthony played with the plasticine independently, away from the larger groups of youth chatting and working together. He did not ask for advice or guidance from the artist cofacilitating; he did not draw any attention to himself at all except for through his lack of explicit engagement or interaction with the room. Quietly, then, he created something, and upon being asked, he said he was done, finished with the task. He had created a small plasticine globe, complete with blue and green approximations of land and sea. It was the size of a stress ball that he could hold in his hand. I asked him why he chose to make a globe, and he explained that his phone, and by extension, his digital space, "is the whole world" to him (Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1**  
"My Plasticine World": A Youth's Expression of His Digital Space



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

The plasticine globe, not geographically accurate in any topographic sense but symbolic of Anthony's conception of his world and his relationship to it, is included here as not only a literacy form but also a provocation and a force of affect. Spinoza (1996) wrote of an ontological monism, in which there is ultimately only one substance, and in this way, all things living and nonliving, material and immaterial, are not only related but also essentially part of the same all-encompassing substance (he called this substance God; see also Burchardt, 2018). This relationality or shared existence can also be understood through many other onto-epistemological frameworks. One that intersects with other contexts in this journey is ubuntu, a communalism that extends across all living and nonliving things, attributed as an African ethical principle (Chibvongodze, 2016; Kamwangamalu, 1999). It is often explained with the phrase "I am because you are" and speaks to a spiritual and cultural value system that is on the one hand fundamental to many African cultures but on the other hand is at odds with much Northern-informed interventions of socioeconomic progress, such as individualism, exceptionalism, and capitalism (Museka & Madondo, 2012). Ubuntu is an ancient belief system but has been taken up increasingly in the development of social, educational, moral, and methodological solutions to the current environmental and educational contexts (Dillard, 2019; Le Grange, 2015; Power-Carter, Zakeri, & Kumasi, 2019). Museka and Madondo (2012), in examining ubuntu in relation to environmental pedagogy in particular, defined it as a philosophy and a "force that helps to uphold and maintain the equilibrium of natural, spiritual and human forces in the cosmos" (p. 259).

Thinking with ubuntu and monism, the plasticine globe can be seen as portraying the very specific ways in which the boy (conceiving of digital space), the plasticine globe, and the world it represents exist or become in relation to one another. These interrelated entities, existing in the way that they do because of one another (ubuntu) or because they are of the same substance (monism), will continue to emerge, mediated by the intra-action of materials, literacies, and experience. This sheds light on myriad issues around a global condition, a singular perspective, abstractions, and agency, but for the purposes of this study, what is most relevant here is the blatant need and possibility to consider literacies in terms of a relational or intra-acting world not only geographically and sociopolitically but also ontologically and materially. Put another way, Anthony holds a device (his phone) in his hand that he (and he is not alone in this) conceives as a tool of connectivity, giving him the agency or sense of contribution to, and participation in, inexhaustible spaces and times. Does our literacy education even scratch the surface of what skills and awareness that level of connectivity demands or what that level of connectivity might afford?

An idea or experience of the whole (in monism) or the relation (in ubuntu) is, in any sense of entirety, unknowable. Be it a whole vision, a god, a universe, a marriage, or a person, in all senses, it is known differently, engaged with differently, and emerges differently for each person, place, and thing. This is a sense of a whole that is better characterized by plurality more than unity, a sense of a whole that is populated with vibrancies that interact in different ways with the always emerging states, surfaces, and substances of a whole. This brings us back to an assumption of interrelationality, or intra-action (Barad, 2007), of the activity, influence, and affect of all components (human and nonhuman). The possibility of literacies, then, is that of a contribution to and from a sense of wholeness and relationality, rather than a specific line of a type of logic and meaning making—afforded by print and spoken text—through the ever-changing, growing, shifting, living, plural field of experience.

Affect theory as it has infused literacies studies is a tool to move literacies to engage beyond the subject, the human, and to acknowledge the breadth of forces that move us to act or think in a certain way amid an intra-acting whole. Leander and Ehret (2019), in their edited volume *Affect in Literacy Learning and Teaching: Pedagogies, Politics and Coming to Know*, aimed to attend to the surplus emerging from what we understand as literacy events and practices—in other words, "the felt intensities of literacy learning and teaching that provide openings that may reorient us to what could be, to what should be and to shifting relations and mangled movements up close and far off" (Ehret & Leander, 2019, p. 3). Affect, Spinoza (1996) reminded us, is only recognizable or articulable to us to the extent to which we can account for it via our human senses and then interpret it via our individual literacies. In other words, we cannot speak of, or know, affect except those affects which we can recognize, sense, and then interpret or articulate somehow. Literacies, understood expansively, are the tools through which we come to know and be in the world and, in this way, the tools we use to make sense of the stimuli, sign systems, and experiences we encounter. As we develop skills in these literacies, we become more and more fluent in working with those particular sign systems. Like a written word, affect materializes as a force and a source of information; like a written word, it collides with people differently and, in that collision, is the potential for transformation or knowledge, no matter how miniscule or profound. Unlike a written word or a symbol, however, forces and information sources beyond the symbolic and linguistic are not accounted for by our education systems, policies, and standard literacy practices. All of this, then, swirls as surplus from affect to sensation, from cosmology to spirituality, from tides to soils. In earlier work, I wrote about embodied methodologies and literacies (Perry, 2011; Perry & Medina, 2015), and particularly about the

sensational body. If, in a posthuman world, as Braidotti (2013) reminded us, we are ever more agentic and able to relate and contribute positively to our shared world, then this must be with literacies that, through our bodies' senses and our minds' capacities, can respond to our lived, material, cultural, and tangible contexts, which are yet beautifully, amazingly plural.

As I move through local and global contexts of literacy policy, education, research, and pedagogies, I am struck and overwhelmed by a disconnection between the wholeness and intra-action of the world, its people, places, materialities, vitalities, and the literacies that we increasingly lean on, prescribe, and teach to function in it. The blunt tools of reading, writing, and numeracy (progressively in a decreasing number of colonial languages) appear as the tools not of development and learning but of epistemic violence (De Lissovoy, 2010; Spivak, 1994). If already in a privileged space, we may find formal curricula in multimodal literacies, navigating nonlinguistic forms of representation common in communications systems such as images and design. In some spaces, we may find collectives of people who practice outside of educational policy to explore and expand literacy education (e.g., within research collectives). However, in spaces of vulnerability (geopolitical and/or economic), the narrowest versions of literacy dominate, driven by the aid and directives of those with economic and political power. The vitality and interrelationality of the world may exceed current models of literacy, and in this way, these excesses can be seen as surplus; but when lives (ways of being), species, oceans, and land are being jeopardized, there is urgent need to seek out frameworks of literacies that can hold this this surplus, this plurality. This framework needs to be fluid, porous, and living, beyond the capacity of any individual person, place, or policy to design.

Pluriversality provides an alternative conceptual frame to work relationally in a globalized world that shares a multiplicity of ontologies and sensemaking frameworks. As a framework for literacies, it gives sociopolitical and ecological momentum to affective and relational theory in literacies studies. Affect theory provides a discourse to decenter and entangle the human in the ecologies and materialities that cocreate our plural world. Unsettling the contingent primacy of representational, linguistic, and humanistic logic allows for emergent relations within literacies events that become encounters with a rhizomic world that is intra-acting. I argue that an ability to engage with "the integral relation and interdependence amongst all living organisms (in which humans are only a part)" (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 1), and a global context (Blommaert, 2010) is essential to sustainable and equitable futures.

"In my culture, we do not have different drums. We have different ways of beating the same drum to give

different meanings" (A. Okot, personal communication, March 22, 2019). I quote a colleague here as he worked to bridge the divide between my literacy capacities and his. He went on to inform me that what I witnessed, when our day's work was done and we gathered for food and entertainment, was not a drum but a calabash (a type of gourd, the fruit from the calabash tree). This exchange not only quickly highlights the plurality of functional literacies, and the limitations of my own to understand practices and communication outside of my one life experience, but also makes plain the materiality of codes. The calabash is a flexible and functional vehicle of (nonlinguistic) communication that viscerally, sensationally, and practically interlinks us with the vibrant, communicating materials of biodiversity and nonhuman elements: "Traditionally, the calabash was used for different purposes. For eating, drinking, fetching water, as musical instrument, bathing, as a pillow, as a bell for waking up or warning" (A. Okot, personal communication, March 22, 2019).

Okot and I work together in the Sustainable Futures in Africa Network (see <https://www.sustainablefuturesin africa.com/>), a large research collective that seeks to co-construct new approaches to global and participatory research collaboration across vast onto-ethico-epistemological differences (see also Perry & Pullanikkatil, 2019). In this work, we strive to take no literacy for granted; the foundations and practices of communication become the subject and objective as we strive and struggle to understand one another to cocreate and coexist. In this work, we are not searching for particular traditional or indigenous literacies but rather literacies that respond to the immediacy of place (locally and globally) and to ecologies (human and nonhuman).

In an affective engagement with sign systems (that are not always linguistic), the boundaries among signs, senses, and resonances are unstable and porous. In this approach to literacies, meaning and agency are relational and inclusive of sociocultural, situated, and functional components, but not exclusively so. The drum, which was not a drum, is an interdependent object, literally fruit from the soil (soil that is currently vulnerable due to damaged biodiversity), used to communicate messages and provide safety and comfort. The communicative use of the calabash may be partly semiotic, but the materiality is entangled with life in ways that exceed any semiotic and functional literacy. The drum plays an important sociocultural role in rural Uganda today but not for the same reasons that it did 100 years ago. Meaning emerges rhizomatically with forces that are partly cultural, environmental, sensory, instinctual, temporal (in relation to pasts and futures), and material. With this allowance, the tools of situated and functional print and linguistic literacy both focus and blinker the emergence of meaning and the possibility of action. Affect theory within a pluriversal version of the world calls on our engagement to be

understood as relational to the other, physical, imaginary, and affective forces that hover above particularities of place and time.

## Tracing a Global Literacies Framework: Literacies for Whom?

In this section, I traverse some of the key building blocks of current prevailing models of literacy as emerging through policy and practice internationally. Conspicuously, these building blocks have largely been formed and articulated in the English-speaking world of the global North. Following this excursion, I explore the ethical and critical possibilities of pluriversal literacies as an expansion to the current models that prevail in international literacy policy.

Many pathways of theory and practice in literacy studies have foregrounded overlapping and sometimes conflicting perspectives. Even a brief review of the field confirms a vibrancy and responsiveness to the shifting demands of literacies research, literacy policy, and practice over time. Various described and demarcated over the past 50 years, the field of literacy has expanded from ideas of textual and numerical decoding to comprehension, social and personal practices, and participation (Robinson-Pant, 2008; Street, 2013). It is worth considering the relation between the academic field of literacy and practices of literacies themselves. Literacies, of course, existed long before formal education or educational research began to formalize, organize, name, or theorize the practices. Literacies emerge, mediate, and facilitate interactions across the globe, despite the fact that published policy influencing literacy theory and research has originated from a tiny number of urban centers, mostly in the global North and mostly in the English-speaking world (Hassett & Grant, 2016). It would be naive, however, to assume that literacies are enacted and evolve regardless of a relatively small number of theorists, policymakers, and educators. Despite the wide distance between me, for example, sitting in Glasgow, and the informal settlement in Dhaka, Bangladesh, or the farming family in Lira, Uganda, and despite the distance (geographically, culturally, and economically) between New York City, New York (where the United Nations General Assembly Headquarters is located), and these places, the knowledge economy—the infrastructure of research, policy, and international development—gradually ensure that what is decided about literacies (definitions, practices, systems, respective values, and rights and wrongs) is implemented through public materials and investments and, ultimately, social policy.

Literacies are entangled, substantive, and contributing to all encounters, learning, decision making, behavior, and becoming. Literacies are agentic. Therefore, by logical

deduction, literacy theory and policy impact behavior. There are three interrelated strands of literacy theory practice that are important to unpack. They are movements and discourses in literacy theory that have developed in various relations to one another and broadly define the field of literacy as it moves between policy and practice. The first relates to the concept of autonomous literacy, the second relates to sociocultural literacies, and the third relates to the discourses of functional literacy that powerfully serve to acknowledge and activate, through policy, the key developments in literacies education research. From this portrayal of a global literacies landscape, I attend to the politics that emerge from it, and I engage with the visceral and practical implications of it in terms of language and modes of communication, expression, and meaning making. Finally, I explore the life, the resources, and the relationships that exceed and are excluded from this framework, escaping through the cracks of it.

Autonomous literacy is technical, practical, and an essential component to participation in many sectors of society or walks of life. It takes up the sophistication of language and the technologies of reproduction and representation and enables people to access abstracted information and vocabulary through which to frame and understand experience and to communicate to build relationships and networks across time and space. To the varying extents of people's capacity in it, autonomous literacy supports systems to grow, ideas to spread, and discursive bridges to cross myriad material and immaterial boundaries. In itself, this speaks to a core value of literacies: a practice that allows texts and ideas to move and endure across spaces and time (Brandt & Clinton, 2002).

The conceptual work that supports and ultimately comes to constitute autonomous literacy was developed in interdependency with Northern valued literacy practices contemporaneously to its development and dissemination as a literacy model (Barton, 1994). The written word has long been a powerful tool of production associated with progress and development and has left other ways of communication in its shadow. Perhaps because, as de Certeau (1984) compellingly argued, in the abstract nature of composed signs on a blank page, "a text...has power over the exteriority from which it has first been isolated" (p. 134). This assumption, of the validation power of text, of its clarity, and to an extent, of its autonomy, has prevailed across academic, educational, and political contexts as a universal norm.

Yet, as with many comprehensive frameworks, a closer look reveals its precarity. Autonomous literacy relies on the untroubled primacy of linguistic semiotics, in other words, the science of the linguistic sign/symbol and its signified/meaning. Affect theory pushes at this analytical method of engagement by attending to the movements around and in between these two literacy pillars (the sign



and the meaning). Affect exceeds the sign. The gap between the sign and the meaning has no singular or universal pathway between it. The inadequacy of the word alone to be functional in any general or universal manner, let alone autonomous, was made abundantly clear by Spinoza (1996), who held the word insufficient to represent anything beyond itself. Rather, the word has affect on the reader, which prompts ideas of the affections of the reader's own body. Building on this, Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 1994) proposed an a-signifying semiotics to incorporate into semiotics the existence of an a-signifying gap. This gap is a space of movement, interrelationality, and affect that characterizes the process of thought and experience that occurs between the sign (the text) and the meaning conferred. Semetsky (2007) explained that this gap is proposed "as a precondition for the production of meanings, that is, meanings are conferred not by reference to some external object but by the relational, or rhizomatic, network constituting a sign-process" (p. 200).

All of this notwithstanding, the model of autonomous literacy, as Street (2003) and others have contended, "disguises the cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin it so that it can then be presented as though they are neutral and universal and that literacy as such will have these benign effects" (p. 77). The sociocultural literacies model addresses this issue head-on (Street, 1993, 1995, 2013). Culturally relevant, interpretivist, and flexible meaning becomes substantive in the sociocultural model. Sociocultural literacies rest comfortably in a social constructivist and humanist version of experience (i.e., human experience as being the source, and the making, of meaning) that broadly continues to dominate education and qualitative research (St. Pierre, 2013). As meaning making is recognized as social, cultural, and situated, it exceeds the written word. Literacy becomes plural as we recognize other sign systems for their role in representation and communication: visual, artifactual, and digital (e.g., Ávila & Pandya, 2012; Pahl & Rowsell, 2010). Literacies become relative practices as we recognize that we do not make meaning in an individualized vacuum: critical, community, cultural, racial, and multiple (e.g., Alim, 2011; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Janks, 2018; Medina & Costa, 2013; Morrell, 2009; Tierney, 2018). Literacies become physical as we chip away at the inherited conceptual divide between mind and body, human and nonhuman: embodied, material, and place (Comber, 2015; Jones, 2013; Morawski, 2017; Schmidt & Beucher, 2018).

In particular relevance to notions of the pluriversal, literacy theorists from a range of paradigmatic and sociocultural contexts have exposed and explored diversity, difference, and multiplicity in the work of literacies education. This includes the role of story, imagery, and play in navigating borders and transitions across difference (e.g., Arizpe, 2009; Medina & Campano, 2006), and the rich resources of out-of-school and community literacies as

often overlooked or disconnected bodies of knowledge (Kinloch, 2009; Kinloch, Burkhard, & Penn, 2017). Vernacular languages, Englishes, and linguistic pluralism have been taken up in the context of literacies education and foreground the sometimes subtle, sometimes explicit ways in which we can work against normative assumptions of linguistic sociocultural literacies (Canagarajah, 1999; Moore & Kirkland, 2010; Sterzuk, 2011). Within and beyond classrooms, printed texts, documented curricula, and sociolinguistics, educators, learners, and theorists have articulated, exposed, and investigated the limitations and possibilities of crossing, merging, shifting, and redefining the literacies through which we variously come to know, do, and be in the world. Literacies become our geography of communication, and we can now use literacies theory to understand broad scopes of human interaction, communication, meaning making, decision making, and actions.

### ***From Theory to Policy and From Local to Global***

A fertile and interdisciplinary ground of sociocultural, multimodal, material, and affective, literacies theory equips theorists with discursive tools to engage with literacies education in many contexts with many intentions. This fertile ground does not represent the lived experience of formal literacy education for most learners, especially those already in geographically or socioeconomically marginalized positions. In an exploration of the limitations of the sociocultural turn in literacy studies, Brandt and Clinton (2002) foregrounded the important and often undertheorized role of the transcontextualizing potential of literacy, which relies on technologies of reproduction and representation of texts across contexts. This theoretical scope of local and sociocultural approaches in relation to the transcontextual in literacies theory is an important perspective to bring to the pragmatic and political work of literacy policy and practice. Building bridges for literacies education to be practical, assessable, and transcontextual across the world has involved a movement of standardization, to seek well-intentioned policy directives for literacies to support development across and for global contexts. More recently, the concept of transliteracies has been foregrounded (Stornaiuolo, Smith, & Phillips, 2017) in a way that takes up the mobilites of literacies today, across spaces and materials. This conceptual framework sheds light on how meaning making and power emerge as literacy practices move across physical and digital spaces.

On an international level, literacies are overwhelmingly leading the charge for well-intentioned educational initiatives supporting sustainable development. UNESCO's (2015) Sustainable Development Goal 4.6 states, "By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of

adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy” (p. 19). The Sustainable Development Goals, influencing major sociopolitical and economic decisions, are grounded in universal concepts of a just and renewable world (UNESCO, 2015). The operationalization of literacies is one of functionality. In 1965, at a UNESCO conference of ministers of education (i.e., the World Conference of Ministers of Education on the Eradication of Illiteracy; see UNESCO, 1965), education leaders from across the world articulated a series of principles of education to “ensure the provision of learning opportunities so that all youth and adults acquire functional literacy and numeracy and so as to foster their full participation as active citizens” (UNESCO, 2016, p. 29). In 2016, UNESCO used the following definition:

Literacy is defined as the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute using printed and written materials associated with diverse contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, develop their knowledge and potential and participate fully in community and society. (UNESCO. 2005. *Aspects of Literacy Assessment: Topics and issues from the UNESCO Expert Meeting, 10–12 June 2003*. <http://unesd.org/images/0014/001401/140125eo.pdf>.)” (p. 47)

Suffice it to say, the value of functional literacies is high; the currency of functional literacies in the context of international development seems almost as if gold. The detail of Sustainable Development Goal 4 clarifies a particular focus on functional literacy and numeracy skills (UNESCO, 2016). This prevailing understanding of literacy has been reflected in international reporting, such as by UNESCO (2016), OECD (2016), and the World Bank (Verner, 2005), whereby populations are assessed for literacy (or illiteracy) according to functional abilities to read and write in various contexts. Also, literacy, it seems, can right social wrongs:

Literacy<sup>10</sup> is part of the right to education and a public good. It is at the core of basic education and an indispensable foundation for independent learning<sup>[xxx]</sup>...Numeracy is a key skill: manipulating numbers, accounts, measurements, ratios and quantities is a basic to life required everywhere<sup>[xxxii]</sup>. But improving youth and adult literacy and numeracy remains a global challenge...Adults with poor literacy and numeracy skills face multiple sources of disadvantage. They are more likely to be unemployed, and those who are employed receive lower wages. They find it more difficult to make use of opportunities in society and to exercise their rights. They are also more likely to be in poor health. (UNESCO, 2016, pp. 46–47)

I contend that the power or value of functional literacy as defined by global policy is its danger at the same time as its obligation. Just as sociocultural literacy theorists have warned of the ideological implications of fixed conceptions of literacy, functional literacy too can be mistaken for a neutral or benign practice. The policy discourses of functional literacy promise a contextual relevance to interpreting

linguistic sign systems, and the very success of it is assumed to connect people with knowledge, influence, structures, infrastructures, and ways of thinking and being. The potential, therefore, is indeed massive and complex.

Yet, this prevailing literacy education framework traces back to a Euro-American post-Enlightenment position that the linguistic forms and methods of communication are appropriate (to them), sufficient (for them), and important for all if the world is to reflect the Euro-American version of development. Wickens and Sandlin (2007) published a review of international literacy education programs as they relate to neocolonialism, casting an important and underattended perspective on the forces of globalization on literacy education. Hasset and Grant (2016) asserted the monoculturalism and epistemological blindness of print literacy today and critiqued the assumption of literacy learning as developmental and progressive. I extend and apply these important commentaries to the specific literacies I have at my own disposal, to the literacies that my own children are learning and using in school in Europe, to the literacies taught via public platforms such as digital networks, and to the literacies of communities that I encounter in places made vulnerable through degradation of the livelihoods and lands they are dependent on.

Despite multimodal, material, and embodied literacies that are increasingly recognized in small pockets of socioeconomic stability and wealth and despite the fact that people use many nonlinguistic ways to make sense, communicate, think with, and base decisions on (Kohn, 2013; Peirce, 1992), our global literacy frameworks have maintained a focus on a technical, humanist, and primarily linguistic semiotics. I argue that humanism and situatedness in literacies, combined with the primacy of functional skills of reading and writing (texts, codes, numbers, and signs), amounts to a well-rounded but Eurocentric (at best), neocolonial (at worst) pedagogical movement. This understanding is visible across most standard provisions and practices of compulsory education, but this is especially the case in socioeconomically marginalized contexts, where typically the narrowest versions of literacies are prioritized and resourced.

The fluid, appropriate, and broadly accessible communication as afforded through functional print literacy is, of course, an extremely valuable tool, an undeniably positive contribution to education and information exchange in many respects in many contexts. It would be futile and detrimental, therefore, to argue for the erasure of functional print literacies. The questions that emerge are, At what cost does functional literacy spread, and how can functional literacy be made accessible without the erasure of other ways of engaging with the world? In response, I pause with a proposition by Deleuze and Guattari (1994), that perhaps it is not communication that we lack. They suggested that Europeanization, of

which I argue functional literacy education is a part, “does not constitute a becoming but merely the history of capitalism, which prevents the becoming of subjected peoples” (p. 108). Deleuze and Guattari proposed that what we lack is rather a “*resistance to the present*” (p. 108). I argue that it is by rethinking the highly functional, powerful, and sociopolitical practices of print literacy education that we might make possible a resistance to the present state of global engagement.

## **Literacies and Language**

Functional literacies in a globalized world equate to global literacies. Just as text overrides other forms of communication in dominant sectors of society and mainstream education (e.g., Conquergood, 2002; de Certeau, 1984), so does English (the global language) override other languages in terms of choice and functionality of use (Crystal, 2012; wa Thiong’o, 1986). The abovementioned example of the calabash reminds us not only that our vocabularies delimit our capacities to understand our encounters with life but also that the code itself (in this case, the word *drum* and the object of the calabash itself) does something to the space, intra-acts with and in space (de Freitas & Curinga, 2015; Phipps, 2019).

If, as academics, educators, and global scholars, we accept the contingent primacy of print text and numeracy in our communications, and the drive to functional literacies which inevitably incorporates and sustains this primacy, we must attend to the affect and practice of language as it manifests in text in relation to an always emerging dynamic of people and place. There is a constitutive and practical affect and agency of language in relation to place, self, and subjectivity (Campano & Damico, 2007; Davies, 2005; Foucault, 1983; Spinoza, 1996). In other words, how and what we use to communicate and make meaning affects us and, subsequently, our understanding of reality and experience, our conceptual apparatus, and as a consequence, our agency and action in it. Yet, constitution does not imply creation (May, 2005), and affect pervades both: It can escape, and confound and seep through language. Language is a vehicle, usually one with assumed (if sometimes vague or unethical) authority.

Words as material things have affect; they prompt affections in the body, associations, and then relations with the external world. As policy and education work toward functional linguistic and numeric literacies and indirectly propel literacies in colonial languages (that function across global contexts), the language (the literacy), let’s say in English, affords a certain nature of encounter and excludes others. One of the affordances of English is its power to connect one with a vast range of geographical and sociocultural spaces. By sheer scale, the affect of the English language is intervening, interacting, and influencing many other linguistic contexts. Like any very effective

and efficient mode of transport, English (along with Mandarin and Spanish) has, and continues to, become more functional to those aspiring to current conceptions of global citizenship than an alternative indigenous language. A quick look at statistics of poverty in relation to the prevalence of indigenous languages is enough to deduce the relation between economic development and adopted global languages. “One-third of the world’s people living in extreme poverty belong to indigenous communities” (Defourny & Šopova, 2019, p. 3). As functionality takes hold, with its promise of economic development, global citizenship, and improved well-being (UNESCO, 2016), indigenous languages will continue to disappear. If language is a force, albeit an often unspecific one, that beckons an exteriority, and languages are disappearing (as they are quickly), then it must be assumed that with word will also go relations with certain exteriorities. As the words leave the lived experience of people, the affections and relations of those particular things will also fade and become lost in subjugated or buried knowledges. Versions and types of engagement with the world, ways of being, move out of reach and often, in the case of indigenous oral languages, without trace.

## **Literacies With and Beyond Language**

At the outset of a formal meeting with colleagues and collaborators in Uganda, the work often begins with prayer. The prayer is often spoken in English to mitigate the many different languages that may mediate the room. As the prayer is spoken, time and space are created for a reflection and connection to the present task, people, and place. This spiritual literacy practice reminds us all differently of our belonging and common ground or our differences and the distances between our positions. In this open and affective space, literacies intermingle to move a collective practice forward in recognition of our differences and, at the same time, of our shared space and endeavor.

In early 2019 in Northern Uganda, as part of a broader research initiative, a meeting was convened to pursue the scope of impact that international, participatory, and interdisciplinary research with two communities could have on regional policy. I reflect on time spent with community members, teachers, policymakers, and academics there, time that included presentation and debate, and those formalities contextualized by negotiations with place, customs, climate, food, and relationships. Moving back into my day-to-day life that includes analyzing that work, my fumbled inadequate means to make sense of the experience reveals itself again and again. Yet, equally unsettling as my own literacy limitations was the seeming disconnect between the literacies of other groupings of interdependent

participants, particularly those of the district officials of the Alebtong District of Northern Uganda and those of the community members they serve. From the outset, the Ugandan academics and development workers were required to mediate, through translation, description, and framing, among community members, policymakers, and international collaborators. The Ugandan policymakers present spoke in fluent English, the community teachers spoke in broken English, and the mothers spoke in their indigenous language, Langi. A debate took place about the felt needs and experiences of the community in relation to the provisions by policy and state. It was in this encounter that the jeopardies of functional literacy acquisition could be seen most clearly. The literacy proficiencies that the local policymakers brought with them included fluent English; an ability to understand and interpret financial, industrial, and cultural norms; and a sense of a particular rationality that many of us, from the city and from the North, could connect with (these are literate professionals). The literacies we encountered that eluded my, and the policymakers', analyses are indigenous oral languages; the embodied knowing of women who had borne over eight children, some of whom they had also buried; the depth of knowledge and engagement with land and its behaviors through rain and drought; an understanding of time and distance from their village and another center; a language of purpose and faith; a sense of interfamilial expectations and taboos; and on and on. Among us, amid this room of people who share much in common, there resided a sense of bafflement at the failure of our well-intentioned literacies, and the officials' well-intentioned policies, to engage with, let alone affect, positive change to tangible needs, such as family planning, food security, and community well-being.

This meeting across sectors, nations, and communities happened largely thanks to the affordances of standard functional literacies (and their ability to connect us to economic resources, political influence, and infrastructures). However, when these forces (of varying expertise, influence, experience, and contexts) came into contact, our capacity for genuine understanding and ethical collaborations were thwarted, unsupported by any common set of literacies, and confounded by a singular way of meaning making or logic. The challenge for literacies education is to work within this complex, and sometimes contradictory, dynamic whereby functional literacies—reading, writing, and numeracy—do not become tools for erasing other literacies, but combine to support collective and collaborative engagement. Our research brought to the fore not only our failures but also our obligation to explore relationality and challenge a sedimented monocultural version of meaning making and semiotics.

Taking interrelationality or intra-action seriously, we quickly see that there is more to life and literacies than the social, the situated, and the linguistic. Arguably, these are

things that some of us have mastered, but denial of other forces (spirituality, animal and plant life, and more) does not cause them to cease existence; it simply moves them out of our frame of reference. Literacies are what people do to engage with emerging sign systems, and the world is permeated with signs. Yet, as Peirce (1992), considered a foundational semiotician, concluded, not all signs are languagelike, and not all are symbolic. Similarly, Hymes (1964), through ethnographies of communication, acknowledged both the verbal and nonverbal forms of communication both possible and important in our everyday lives. Furthermore, beyond the social, the situated, and the linguistic is the material and the posthuman. This takes interconnectivity beyond something that connects people, ideas, and cultures and expands it to our connection with others, including the nonhuman, including the expanses of substance, of earth, or of an existential whole. As Kohn (2013) postulated, “the world beyond the human is not a meaningless one made meaningful by humans” (p. 72). A posthuman approach not only decenters the human but also, in our very act of repositioning, expands human capacity and relevance (Braidotti, 2013).

The language and theory of affect overlap and inform embodied, new material and posthuman literacies, that is, the visceral, sensational, material, ecological, spiritual, and more-than-human forces that mediate the practice of literacies (e.g., Kuby, Spector, & Thiel, 2019; Leander & Ehret, 2019; Pahl & Rowsell, 2010). This trajectory of scholarship has created hybrid theoretical and methodological spaces with other disciplines, finding resonance with human geography (e.g., Massey, 2005), philosophy (e.g., Braidotti, 2013; Stengers, 2014), and science and technology studies (e.g., Booher & Jung, 2018), to name but a few. Yet, although this space has been important to the evolution of the field, it has often been detached from practice or policy. Indeed, new theoretical trajectories and discourses have necessarily emerged in relation to ways of being and knowing, unshackled from preexisting structures, practices, and policies of teaching and learning (e.g., schools, media). This distance increases substantially when it comes to other disciplinary areas of education (in which literacies remain central but unscrutinized), such as citizenship, development, and sustainability education. In my work, I endeavor to reclaim the thingness of literacies (Brandt & Clinton, 2002) informed with affect and relationality theories as sensemaking with practical and political implications.

The thingness of literacies is pragmatic, bridging local to global, practical to personal. Just as it can be taken up as its ability to transcend differences, it can differentiate and marginalize (the literate vs. the illiterate). It can equally be seen in terms of a pathway to empowerment (the critically literate). It is entangled in coloniality (to educate) and in postcoloniality (to reclaim). Affect theory and relationality unsettle much of these categories and concepts but do not

discount them as forces in the broad field of teaching and learning literacies. To think with affect and relationality beckons us to think with, beyond, and between what are often incommensurate spaces and discourses. Critical and political discourses that inform current sociocultural and postcolonial debates are put in relation to the ineffable, the ecological, the spiritual, and the surplus. Affect theory and posthumanism unsettle and reorient us to the primacy of representational, human-centered, and semiotic ways of being and knowing, but reach to policy, to texts, and to practice as allies to pursue ethical actions and structures in a common world.

In the next section is a bridge crossing sociocultural and affective frameworks, albeit a speculative one, to support new ways to imagine literacies education and practices that may bring about different possibilities for relationalities across the geographies, materialities, and emergences/y of the globe.

## Pluriversal Literacies

It is hard to critique models of literacy that have molded the way that I see, understand, and communicate the world. Even in this experimental inquiry, it is difficult to imagine otherwise. Yet, it is equally hard to believe that my own literacies are universally relevant or sufficient. Braidotti (2013) proposed that “we are becoming posthuman ethical subjects in our multiple capacities for relations of all sorts and modes of communication by codes that transcend the linguistic sign by exceeding it in many directions” (p. 190). In this light, the compelling task is to connect the essential, yet sometimes ephemeral, conceptual apparatus of posthumanism and decolonialism to the thingness of literacies as sensemaking. Along with literacies come understandings of value systems; culture, social, and personal positions; and by extension, of one’s being in a given society, community, and globe. Pluriversal literacies involve the practices of sensemaking in fluid and intra-active global contexts through the multiple texts of culture, language, place, and materials that we navigate from our various positions on the globe. This concept takes seriously the role of globalization in literacies studies, which pushes us “to rethink our conceptual and analytic apparatus” in this context and consider our work “in terms of trans-contextual networks, flows and movements” (Blommaert, 2010, p. 1). Pluriversal literacies are not literacies of any particular place, topic, or people; rather, they are a practice of making sense and forming actions in relation to an always emerging global context. Furthermore, pluriversal literacies do not exclude forms of functional literacy (e.g., digital, cultural, health, and financial literacies). In fact, these platforms, modes, and codifications are embedded within pluriversal literacies but taken up with an awareness of their contingency

within the plural onto-epistemological contexts that meaning making occurs.

A crammed curriculum, a pressurized timetable, and a looming examination period for most teachers are more than enough motivation to focus on functional skills (one key function required is how to pass the test). The opportunity of the pluriversal literacies classroom must be that of onto-ethico-epistemological depth. Following the Spinozian concept of monism, it leans on a deep exploration into relationality and qualities to contribute to an active and aware engagement with a plural and intra-acting world. This is an expansion of an individualized process of preparing pupils for qualifications and skill sets to contribute to an existing marketplace. This looks very different in different places, as what is functional in one place is not functional in another, and what makes sense in one place does not in another. Below are two speculative examples that are at once simplistic and illustrative of the proposal developed thus far.

Picture a literacies curriculum in Southern Scotland that includes books as a resource but not the main resource. This curriculum incorporates phonics, along with comprehension, interpretation, and relations found within the text, but it also considers standpoints, origins, and material futures of the book. Curricular focus is leaned to the author, but not just the author, also the computer, paper, or team that put the text together and the paper or screen via which the pupils receive the text. The plastic wrap that covers the school supply of books is analyzed in terms of standpoints, origins, and material futures. Importantly, the literacies curriculum focuses on how and in what ways the resource (the text, the book, the representational symbol) connects us inextricably with our neighbors in another geographical location, and how and in what ways does the book connect us inextricably with our environment? As you can imagine, this literacies model does not need to begin with a book. A piece of graffiti or food packaging could equally suffice, likewise an instruction manual, a song, a seed packet, a piece of clothing, and so on.

This expanded pluriversal approach allows a classroom to be a space where pupils are put in relationship with the material, ecological, cultural, and social world around them. This short illustration foregrounds the issues that can be made visible and invisible in the pluriversal literacies curriculum. It implies the tools that are being taught to support pupils’ understanding of the relation between things and of how to manage, sustain, and develop as part of a vulnerable and quickly changing globe.

Now picture a classroom in Central Malawi. The teacher is aspiring to similar literacies types and levels as the teacher who occupies the Scottish context described above. The books (the resource) in Malawi look remarkably similar to those in the Scottish classroom (let’s assume that they were supplied by an international aid organization).<sup>3</sup> The text is

in English, the second language of the Malawian pupils who speak Chichewa outside of school. A pluriversal literacies model may make use of these donated books, but as in the Scottish school, the curriculum will be based on an understanding of the types of literacies that those pupils need to access and master to sustain the socioecological communities, livelihoods, and their selves in their context. An aspect of that will always involve the relational tools required for global interaction, and the donated English-language books may effectively support that goal. Yet, an equal, if not more important, aspect of the literacies education in that classroom will be focused on the resources needed in place and time. This could be environmental resources (water management, land protection, and food security); it could be cultural, spiritual, and familial; and it could be material, to do with economics or value systems.

In both narratives, taking place in Scotland and then in Malawi, only some of the aspects of meaning making and communication with the world can function and thrive through our current universal models of print literacy dominated by colonial languages. Few of these aspects of human flourishing were developed through print literacy, and few can be adequately sustained through print literacy alone. The world is saturated with signs, with semiotics, and when we unshackle literacies from the purely representational and the linguistic, the world becomes a place where literacies are tools for people to relate and become in plural and responsive ways. For people to have autonomy in their relationships in and with the world, there are, and will continue to be, specific literacies currently undefined by global educational policies that will be essential, such as the communication systems of animals, of trees, of clothing and the codification of the cultural faith system. These are fundamentally functional in some contexts, often where print literacy is a relatively recent imposition.

Epistemologies of the South (Mignolo, 2000; Santos, 2016a, 2016b) remind us that the prevailing conceptions of universal truths, globalization, and knowledge have been verbalized and authorized by Euro-Western societies. Literacies, sustainability, and equity as taken up in public and critical discourses are similarly underpinned by these discourses, including ideals within them of social justice. However, taking up practices of pluriversal literacies with posthumanism, socioecology, and decolonization as core principles of practice ensures that the pedagogies and subsequent practices embrace rather than overlook the diversity and plurality of the world.

It is a diversity that encompasses very distinct modes of being, thinking and feeling; ways of conceiving of time and the relations among human beings and between humans and non-humans, ways of facing the past and the future and of collectively organising life.” (Santos, 2016a, p. 20)

Pluriversal literacies must allow for more than one logic, semiotic focus, and terrain of functionality. This can be a

common endeavor, but one that begins with a deep understanding of monism; the inseparability of spirit, matter, human (Spinoza, 1996), or ubuntu; and the interaction of our visible components (Barad, 2007).

A pursuit of depth beyond existing functional literacies will require engaging in smooth spaces of inquiry and experience. Smooth space, a concept developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987),

is filled by events or haecceities, far more than by formed and perceived things. It is a space of affects, more than one of properties....It is an intensive rather than extensive space, one of distances, not of measures and properties. (p. 479)

Smooth spaces of learning and inquiry beckon new ways of engagement, representation, and exploration that may require connecting with cultural practices, collective imaginaries, and speculation in response to the present.

Pluriversal literacies practices may resist the present (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994) by spending time and pedagogical pursuit in exploration of the detail of our condition (or by finding ways “to stay with the trouble”; Haraway, 2016, p. 2). Learning that attends to the affective intensities and relations among things, people, places, and the properties of distinct elements will enable the possibility of the multiple capacities that Braidotti (2013) optimistically recognized, “for relations of all sorts and modes of communication by codes that transcend the linguistic sign by exceeding it in many directions” (p. 190).

## Conclusion

Discourses and frameworks of affect and relationality infuse literacies with the power to support the complex sensemaking and decision making that increasingly impact our world. The social and the ecological have always been inextricable, intra-acting and always emerging in relation, but the sheer scale of force determined by human sense and decision making is putting our ecological world in an ever more precarious state; we are collectively remaking our physical and social environments (Ellsworth & Kruse, 2013).

Innovative and profound moves have been made practically and theoretically in the name of literacies studies, many of which have gone unmentioned here, but undoubtedly have opened up the possibility and, in many cases, directly influenced my proposition of pluriversal literacies. However, these propositions, from multimodality to embodiment, from affect to posthumanism in literacies theory, largely come from positionalities and contexts that reflect relatively small minorities (in terms of population) of privileged, urbanized, middle classes primarily in the global North. Put another way, the critique and expansion of universal functional literacy models in this academic context is enabled by those very same tools (and by

extension, those logics) that solidified and universalized them in the first place. The dissonance and contradictions must then be balanced with the opportunities and possibilities of this entanglement. The project of pluriversal literacies is not to eliminate print text but rather to find ways to incorporate a much broader understanding of relational human experience. To this end, and building on the work of decolonial activists and theorists such as Harding (2018) and Chakrabarty (2000), this development in literacies theory requires an acceptance of contradictions and of new types of alliances and relations across peoples, traditions, and onto-ethico-epistemologies. Beyond ways of being, this call infers rethinking relations and affects across types of being (Haraway, 2016). Engaging across perspectives and practices from multiple disciplines and contexts has motivated and strengthened a pluriversal framework for literacies that cuts across the siloed sector and disciplinary structures that currently dominate the drivers of literacy education. After all, we share one globe, and to acknowledge multiple ways and types of being in this world compels the field of global literacy education to support multiple ways of making meaning and engaging in that shared world.

## NOTES

The research contributing to this article was supported by grants from the UK Research and Innovation Institution's Economic and Social Research Council (ES/P006701/1), the Scottish Funding Council (SFC-GCRF/305471), and the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (430-2016-01166). I thank my colleagues in the Sustainable Futures in Africa Network who inspired, informed, and motivated this work.

<sup>1</sup>Northern here refers to both the geographical understanding of the global North and the conceptual understanding of *norths* describing the subaltern or marginalized in any location.

<sup>2</sup>To prevent a semantic obstacle, I use the term *literacy* in its plural sense (it describes a field, a curricular area, and a general practice), but where relevant, I indicate the different types of literacy by using the plural version, *literacies*.

<sup>3</sup>For more information on Malawi's aid dependency, see <http://www.oecd.org/countries/malawi/>.

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Submitted March 31, 2019

Final revision received February 20, 2020

Accepted February 24, 2020

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