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CRITICAL ISSUES: CIRCLES OF KINSHIP, FRIENDSHIP, POSITION, AND POWER: EXAMINING THE COMMUNITY IN COMMUNITY-BASED LITERACY RESEARCH[1]

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Literacy research conducted in communities of practice outside classrooms and schools has proliferated in the last decade with little attention given to what it means to talk about literacy in "the community." This article explores issues surrounding community-based literacy research and suggests that, although well intentioned, literacy researchers risk overdetermining, essentializing, and romanticizing what it means to engage in community-based literacy if we do not define and question what is meant by community. The need to define and complicate community as a construct is important, because communities are becoming more complex, and sometimes less communal, with the diversity and rapid change of new times and fast capitalism (Hall, 1995; Lankshear, 1997; Luke & Luke, 1999, in press). This piece examines various definitions of community that have framed community-based literacy studies to date and argues for concerted efforts to define and complicate perspectives on community in future research.

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1 The inspiration for this title comes from Luis Moll and Norma Gonzalez in their JRB discussion of critical issues in research with language minority children (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994).

RECENTLY, WHILE WORKING ON THE RESEARCH DESIGN of a large-scale project on engagement, I was asked to talk about what I would like to see happen in the project in terms of research on children's engagement in activities outside of school, activities that would take place in children's communities. After I had talked for several minutes about spending time with kids in their homes, on the playground, in the streets, and in community organizations such as churches, businesses, and clubs, one of my colleagues stopped me and said, "Wait a minute. How are you defining community? It sounds like a really messy construct." When I responded that community is, indeed, a messy construct, his response was, "Well, that makes it almost impossible to study scientifically."

This comment put words to a nagging sense of uneasiness that I have been struggling with for the last 3 years, ever since I ventured out of the relative safeness and familiarity of secondary school classrooms (which I thought were messy places) and into the complex, fragmented, and ever-changing world of "the community." What does it mean to study community? When I follow a group of adolescents out of a content-area classroom and into their "community," where am I going? Am I entering a confined geographical space? A psychological space? A cultural space? Whose community is studied? By whom? And more important, *why* am I studying the community? These questions represent the critical issues that I raise in this article: As more and more research on literacy in "the community" is promoted and produced, what definitions are literacy researchers giving to the construct of community, for what purposes are we engaging in the research, and how are we using what we learn from our research?

Before rushing into a discussion of the problems inherent in community-based research, it may be helpful to discuss why community-based literacy research is at all important to the literacy field. In brief, community-based studies have yielded findings that have profoundly reshaped what it means to talk about school-based literacy. For example, such studies have highlighted mismatches between home, community, and school literacies – mismatches that have consequences for students' access to literacy learning. These studies have also illustrated that literacy practices are ideological in nature and thus have implications for the identity construction and social positioning of people. Moreover, community-based research has demonstrated that the changing nature of society has changed the nature of literacy (regardless of how one defines the construct); these changes have implications for how we might teach literacy in schools. In the following section, I discuss these findings in more detail and discuss some of the pedagogical implications and innovations that have been derived from these studies.

The Importance of Community-Based Literacy Research

Over the last two decades, literacy theory has expanded from a cognitive focus on reading and writing processes to an understanding of reading and writing as tools used for specific purposes in specific contexts (Gee, 1990; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984). This expanded theory of literacy learning and practice has led a number of literacy researchers to empirical work that explores the social, cultural, and historical contexts of literacy practice, one of those contexts being the communities in which students live and work outside of school. The changing demographics of most schools and communities throughout the world also demand that literacy educators pay close attention to the multiple, diverse practices that people use to make and represent meaning through reading and writing. These theoretical and material changes underscore the importance of studying communities; in brief, we cannot understand the complexity of literacy practice and literacy learning in school without examining literacy practices in multiple contexts.

One study that stands out as an impetus for community-based literacy research is Shirley Brice Heath's (1983) *Ways With Words*. By studying literacy as well as language practices, Heath extended the work of sociolinguists who had highlighted differences between the language practices valued in children's homes and communities and those valued in their schools (Gumperz, 1981; Phillips, 1972). Her work also emphasized the importance of understanding literacy as a culturally situated and mediated practice (cf. Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984). In her research on the different literacy practices of three communities, Heath illustrated that literacy learning in school was more than a matter of linking new information to known information to construct meaning. *Ways* of knowing and doing – especially ways of knowing and doing with words – were as important to literacy learning and practice as were the specific pieces of information that children connected or the knowledge that they constructed in the process of reading and writing. Because the schools valued only certain kinds of cultural knowledge, however, not all ways of knowing represented cultural "capital," or valuable knowledge, that would be counted as legitimate currency in the world of school.

Such insights inspired a range of studies that focused on social and cultural practices involved in acts of literacy as well as on the cognitive processes required to engage in such acts. Many of these social practice-based studies have taken place in classrooms (cf. Bloome, 1989; Dillon, 1989; Moje, 1996; Santa Barbara Discourse Group, 1994) and focused on social interactions and related literacy practices of teachers and students. Others,

..owever, have moved outside classrooms and schools (or started outside them) to examine the "ways with words" (and related practices) that children and youth brought to classrooms and to design pedagogies that would draw from and extend these practices as a way of supporting students' literacy learning (e.g., Au & Mason, 1983; Barton, Bloome, Sheridan, & Street, 1993; Cairney & Ruge, 1998; Mace, 1995; Moje, in press; Moll, Velez-Ibanez, & Greenberg, 1989; Noll, 1998; Purcell-Gates, 1995). A number of theorists have also suggested that language and literacy are ideological in nature (Graff, 1987; Street, 1995; Volosinov, 1973) and have turned to the study of communities to examine how the ideologies embodied in home and community literacies may conflict with those that support school literacy practices. According to these perspectives, the mismatch between school practices and home and community practices has implications that extend beyond whether people learn to read and write. Critical and cultural perspectives on literacy suggest that who people are, or who they are allowed to be, is shaped in part by their literacy practices (Gee, 1996; Luke, 1995/1996; Street, 1994). The privileging of particular literacy practices and the exclusion of others have implications for identity construction, social positioning, and, potentially, school and social success (Heath, 1983; Luke, 1993). These perspectives have also prompted researchers to study home and community practices in an attempt to understand what is valued in terms of literacy in communities and how children and young people represent themselves differently in their sites of learning.

Finally, it has been suggested that interest in literacy in the community has become even more important in recent years as educators, researchers, parents, community members, and children and youth themselves seek to situate their reading and writing practices in meaningful questions and experiences. These attempts represent more than just a search for ways to increase engagement and success among students; they also represent a response to the changing nature of literacies (Alvermann, 1998; Bean, Bean, & Bean, 1999; Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996; Lankshear, 1997) and communities in "new times" (Luke & Elkins, 1998).

"New times" is a phrase offered by Hall (1995) to suggest that the times in which we now live are significantly different from the past because of burgeoning information technologies and shifting economic structures throughout the world. According to such perspectives, even the nature of the capitalist enterprise has changed so that in new times workers and consumers experience "fast capitalism" (Gee et al., 1996), in which the discourse of work positions workers as creative partners in production – often of information – for particular niches, rather than drones engaged in repetitive assembling of parts in a line of production of a single product

(New London Group, 1996). For example, Hull (1998) illustrated that the literacies demanded of factory workers has changed significantly both as result of increased access to information via electronic technologies, and also because workers are now expected to participate in decision-making teams that employ various information technologies. Such work practices demand literacy skills that are not necessarily captured in school literacy practices.

Moreover, the work demands of fast capitalism, no matter how team oriented or ostensibly creative, remain immersed in complicated power hierarchies – hierarchies that are often disguised by the discourses of fast capitalism. The possibility that the discourses of the new workplace actually function as powerful forms of "mind control or exploitation" (New London Group, 1996) suggests the need for critical literacies, or the ability to question and challenge dominant discourses and structures. A stress on developing critical literacy abilities applies not only to workers, but also to consumers, as the discourses of fast capitalism also support a focus on fast consumption, or the constant need for more and better information and access to information. Consequently, community-based research is important, because it allows literacy teachers and researchers to explore new ways to match the school-based literacy practices they offer to the literacies that children and youth actually need to negotiate multiple communities of practice and work (Gee et al., 1996; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1998).

The existing body of research on the literacy practices of various communities has yielded important insights that support the development of richly textured pedagogical practices. For example, Moll and Greenberg's (1990) "funds of knowledge" projects, in which teachers and students extended learning beyond the classroom walls into the students' communities, drew from community-based literacy studies, classroom studies, and studies of how individuals make meaning to support children in further developing and extending their existing funds of knowledge in two languages. Culturally congruent or compatible approaches to children's reading and writing instruction (Au & Kawakami, 1994) have drawn from both cognitive strategies research and from community-based research that highlights the literacy and language practices unique to particular cultural groups. The New London Group (1996) employed literacy research from various communities (theoretical, disciplinary, and material communities) to argue for a pedagogy focused on "designing social futures" (p. 60) through the development of metadiscursive awareness among learners. (For additional examples of literacy and language pedagogy that draws from social, cultural, and cognitive research, see also Goldman, 1997; Mercado, 1992; Warren, Rosebery, & Conant, 1989).

The Problems of Community-Based Literacy Research

The need for research in communities of practice outside the classroom and school seems clear. However, my exploration of issues surrounding community-based literacy research suggests that well intentioned though our work may be, literacy researchers risk overdetermining, essentializing, and romanticizing what it means to engage in community-based literacy if we do not define what we mean by community and explicitly acknowledge the complex nature of communities, especially the ways in which communities overlap, converge, and conflict (Mace, 1992; Pratt, 1991). Defining what we mean by community is important as community-based literacy research expands in new times, because many different social groupings with very different meanings (i.e., neighborhood, culture) are being used synonymously with the word community in the literature. And, regardless of the definition given, many representations of community suggest stable, homogeneous, and relatively fixed groupings of people, a stability and homogeneity that is at odds with the diversity and rapid change represented by new times and fast capitalism (Hall, 1995; Lankshear, 1997; Luke & Luke, 1999, in press).

A focus on community as a stable, homogeneous, and unified group fosters the romanticizing of community practices in what Heath (1998) has referred to as "the power of the positive imperative," or the sense of obligation to present only positive images because so much past research on communities – especially marginalized ones – has been negative. Barton and Hamilton (1998) echoed this concern, but attributed the romanticization of community to the construct itself: "As Raymond Williams puts it in a discussion of the word community, 'unlike all other terms of social organization (state, nation, society, etc.) it seems never to be used unfavorably'" (p. 15). Barton and Hamilton's concern suggests a further need for clarifying the construct of community. The positive connotation of the construct lends itself to suggestion that the literacies connected with a community must also be positive. This romanticizing of the practices of any group denies the presence of unequal power relations within groups and forestalls the analysis of ways that even seemingly positive literacy (and other social) practices may be complicit in the fostering of oppressive relations.

Finally, community has been used in recent years to refer especially to marginalized or minority groups (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Bhabha, 1994; Garcia Canclini, 1995; Heath, 1998). Thus, using the word speaks certain perspectives and goals for research and often suggests either that the literacies under study need fixing or that they are all positive. Both such perspectives overlook or dismiss groups and literacies that are viewed as less

than positive or those that are not systematically organized. As Wade & Moje (in press) argue, these unsanctioned, unorganized, and sometimes vilified literacies and their accompanying texts often serve important social purposes in the lives of those who practice them but they are rarely studied in a systematic way. Such literacy practices need also to be studied and understood as articulated to standardized school and social practices and to practices of resistance, marginalization, and oppression.

Thus, literacy researchers need to study the literacy practices of communities. But because we live in new times, in which social institutions – such as communities – and literacies are continually developing, fragmenting, shifting, and merging (Luke & Luke, 1999), we need to rethink how we study communities and how we write about what we learn about literacies from such research. In what follows, I use my own work and several exemplary studies to argue for the need to define our terms more carefully and, more importantly, to look for other constructions of community in the practices of the people with whom we work. Ultimately, I suggest that whether or not researchers want to study community "scientifically," we need to reorient our practices so that we can work toward the ethical representation of research participants and the useful application of the results of community-based literacy research in new times.

"It's Such a Messy Construct": What Does It Mean to Study Community?

The difficulty of defining community for the purpose of doing research on literacy in the community became especially evident to me most recently when I was engaged in writing a grant proposal. The difficulty lay in two areas. First, my purpose for studying the community was to contribute to the development of culturally and linguistically responsive science curricula and pedagogy in two schools in Detroit. My premise was that one needed to know the communities from which students hailed in order to respond appropriately to their cultural and linguistic – or literacy and language – needs and interests. Implicit in this premise was the assumption that culture and community were synonymous or at least overlapped in important ways. I knew that this was a tenuous and potentially problematic assumption, but I struggled to deal with it directly and succinctly in the brief space of the proposal.

The second difficulty in defining community for the proposal was that one of the schools I sought to study was a bilingual immersion school that drew from geographical spaces all across the sprawling city of Detroit. The unique nature of the school brought out the messiness in the study of community practices: Is the community a geographical space? Is a geographical

space the best place to start when developing a study of literacy in the community? If the geographic sites of a school are not neatly bounded, then does the school have no community? In the study I proposed, I could not easily identify the school community as the geographic intake area of the school as has been done in a number of other studies (Cairney & Ruge, 1998; Moll, 1992; Orellana & Hernandez, 1999). Furthermore, although I could be relatively sure that the ethnic membership of the school community would be largely Latino, I could not be certain what particular cultural groups (e.g., Latin American, Caribbean, Mexican, Mexican American) would be represented in this community, because the geographic space covered by the school was broad, and the Latino population of Detroit is heterogeneous. Finally, because the school was not confined to a narrow geographical space, I could not be sure of the social class, economic, or political positionings of families and other "community" members. For these reasons alone, the definition of *the* community for this study would be, of necessity, quite broad and quite messy. To make matters messier, these considerations surrounding the physical space of the community did not even begin to acknowledge the complexity of studying the hybrid identities and competing interest of people within groups, even assuming that I could identify specific groups for study within the broad physical space.

Questions about hybrid identities and competing interests within communities stemmed from my past research on the literacy practices of six youths whom I identified as marginalized in school (Moje, in press). To understand their literacy practices *in* school, I sought to study their literacy practices *out* of school, in their communities. I was particularly interested in those practices that were not sanctioned by adults and, as a result, I found myself studying, among other things, their practices that were connected to street gangs – a type of group not necessarily organized by neighborhood,[2] ethnicity, or other social identifiers, and not necessarily identified as a community in the literature. By starting with the kids and following them into the various spaces – or communities – that were relevant in their lives, I realized that they had many different communities of practice, communities that at times overlapped and that were also unique and distinct. Because these youth were invested in each of these communities to some extent, their identities were, to use Homi Bhabha's word,

2 Many people associate street gangs with territories or neighborhoods, and indeed, territory is a critical aspect of street-gang membership. However, I found that most of the gang-connected youth I worked with moved through many different territories and neighborhoods in their everyday practices, and that membership in a particular gang did not necessarily require that one lived in the territory or neighborhood claimed by the gang.

"hybrid." Bhabha (1994) articulated this notion of "cultural hybridity" by arguing that:

> The move away from the singularities of "class" or "gender" as primary conceptual and organizational categories has resulted in an awareness of the subject positions – of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation – that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world.... It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. (pp. 1–2)

The hybridity of identity and community membership is best exemplified by Chile, one of the participants in my study who identified herself variously as "just a little kid" and "a teenager," "Spanish" but "not Mexican," a devout Catholic who seldom attended Mass, and "down with, but not jumped into" a gang. Each of these identifiers suggests a possible community of membership and suggests resistance to other communities. Throughout our relationship, I learned that pinpointing Chile's community, or even multiple communities, of identity and practice was not an easy task.

For example, Chile's neighborhood did not provide a community of identification for her for the simple fact that she moved frequently. (Chile moved five times in the course of 1 year of research together.) In the 3rd year of our work together, Chile lived in one place, but I was not able to ascertain a strong sense of identity or membership attached to the specific geographic location of her neighborhood. Without neighborhood as a starting point, I had to search for other communities of membership: Was she a member of an adolescent community, to borrow from Camitta (1993)? Or was she a member of a Latino community (see Delgado-Gaitan, 1996; Moll, 1994)? Perhaps she could be considered part of a gang community, if gangs could ever be conceptualized as communities.

Chile was a member of each and of none of these communities. She identified strongly with adolescents, especially as represented in her choices of clothing, music, and literature, and yet she often referred to herself as "just a little kid," especially when discussing interactions with her family and with unknown men who spoke to her on the bus or the street. She was positioned in a space between these age-based communities and represented herself as a member of a particular community according to the situation in which she found herself. Nevertheless, I could have easily represented her as an active member of an adolescent community by detailing literacy practices such as writing notes to friends, reading adolescent literature, singing along to music and writing lyrics, writing poetry, and

discussing the plots of popular films and television shows. But these representations would have been partial, at best, because many other communities vied for my attention as I attempted to study her community-based literacy practices.

Her ethnic community, for example, also shaped her literacy practices in important ways. Had I studied her as a member of an ethnic community, I would have represented her as one who delighted in the sharing of family and cultural stories, both oral and written, who code switched between English and Spanish with some ease, and whose literacy practices were employed for the maintenance of family and religious practices and relationships. I could have identified "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1989) drawn from her ethnic and familial relationships. Each of these literacy practices and knowledges was an important part of her everyday practice and of her identity, but they were not the only practices of importance. Although her ethnic community was salient in her life, it was by no means the only important community in her everyday practice.

What's more, Chile's ethnic community was not a homogeneous community. As in most cities across the United States, the Latino community in Salt Lake City is comprised of people from Mexico, from South and Central America, and from the Caribbean. Some are recent immigrants – and identify as such – whereas others are members of families who have lived not only in the United States but also in Utah for many generations. Some are politically active and identify with Chicano movements, and others are disdainful of such movements and enact conservative political discourses and practices, especially in regard to the treatment of undocumented immigrants from Mexico.

These differences were represented in different kinds of social, cultural, and literate practices, thus further complicating my study of Chile's literacy practices in relation to her ethnic community. Such differences also led to the enactment of asymmetrical power relations within this diverse Latino community. Chile herself enacted many of these relations of power as she spoke with disdain about undocumented immigrants or about fellow students who spoke English as a second language. Although she identified as "Spanish" or "Hispanic" (she preferred "Spanish") and had many Latino, Mexicano, and Mexican American friends, *the* Latino community in Salt Lake City was not Chile's community, for the simple reason that there was not a singular Latino community with which Chile could identify. Thus, to represent her and her literacy practices as based in the Latino community of Salt Lake City, or even in multiple Latino communities, would have, again, been a partial – and misleading – representation. And yet, her ethnic heritage was a critical part of her identity and had a dramatic impact on her literacy practices in and out of school.

Another set of relationships complicated my study of Chile's community-based literacies: her membership in what might be called a "gangsta" community. Had I studied her only as a member of such a community, I would have focused on her writing graffiti on walls, notebooks, and bodies; dressing in particular coded styles and colors; flashing hand signs; and representing her life through books, poetry, films, and music about gangs (Moje, in press). My representations of her as gang connected, however, were challenged by the complexity of what it meant to be a member of a gang community. Although Chile identified herself as "down with" gangs and was involved in gang activity when I first met her, her membership in a gang community shifted and changed in the 3 years we did research together. As she grew older, Chile became critical of certain members of gang sets, particularly those members who were also Latina and female. She despised the way that the "cholas," as she called them, "dressed all ugly, like men" and stated that she preferred to dress more "feminine." Her disdain for "cholas" represented an important overlap between her gang community, her ethnic community, her social-class community, and her gendered relations,[3] illustrating another layer of complexity in thinking about how to study literacy in another person's community.

Finally, although neighborhood did not play a central role in establishing a sense of community for Chile, physical and geographic space did (Moje, 1999). Like the other youth who participated in my study, Chile's community memberships and literacy practices were shaped by the religious and cultural communities of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints (also called the LDS or Mormon church), which has its headquarters in Salt Lake City. Chile and the other youth were not members of these Mormon communities, but the communities in which they claimed membership were often in contact and conflict with the dominant, church-based communities. Chile's and other's community memberships and practices were shaped as their communities came in contact with one another and with the dominant communities in the geographic space of Salt Lake City. The contact zones (Pratt, 1991) that are established as these communities interact further complicate the systematic – or scientific – study of community, because it is in these contact zones that people "constitute each other relationally and in difference"(Pratt, 1987, p. 60).

I use my work with Chile and my struggles to identify a single community of membership for her to illustrate the complex, messy work involved

3 Unlike ethnicity, gender is rarely used as a synonym for community, and yet both women and men often seek out exclusively gendered relationships to pursue particular interests. Although such relationships often express "a subjective feeling of the parties, whether affectual or traditional, that they belong together," to borrow from Weber's (1947/1978, p. 40) definition of community, they are rarely identified as such.

in studying literacy in communities. When one examines the practice of a person such as Chile, community seems to be about neighborhoods, spaces, ethnicities, cultures, genders, religions, age groups, orientations, and social and economic classes simultaneously. It is also about contact with other communities. To study literacy in any one community, then, would seem to require that we study that community's interaction or contact with other communities, while also studying how people identify with multiple communities simultaneously. Messy work on a messy construct, indeed, and yet too often community-based literacy research suggests the existence of clear-cut, stable, and homogeneous communities of practice.

Exploring the Literature: How Do Others Represent Community?

My own struggles with the complicated nature of community membership, as represented by Chile and the other youth in my study, led me to examine the literature on community-based literacy practices to get a sense of how the rest of the field was defining this messy construct. Like Rex, Green, Dixon, and the Santa Barbara Discourse Group (1998), who examined the use of the term "context" in literacy research, I was surprised to find that "community" is not a particularly well-defined construct in published pieces on community literacy.

Even a cursory review of the various studies of non-school literacies reveals that numerous definitions of community – mostly implicit – abound. These definitions range from community as neighborhood (Delgado-Gaitan, 1996; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994) to community as culture – usually ethnic culture, although they often also refer to cultural commitments of particular social-class groups (Cairney & Ruge, 1998; Camitta, 1993). Other phrases that often stood in for community, in addition to "culture" (which vied with "neighborhood" as the word most often used as a synonym), were phrases such as "networks" (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Wellman, 1979), "associations" (Saleebey, 1997), and, one that I find particularly compelling, "circles of kinship and friendship" (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994). Some, as indicated previously, initially identified the community as the intake area of the school (Orellana & Hernandez, 1999); others talked in terms of specific groups, such as community-based youth organizations (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993), churches (Kelly, in press), or families (Cairney & Ruge, 1998; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).

This is not to say that the various studies I consulted neglected to describe the communities under study. In most cases, the researchers provided thick descriptions of the community, but they did not discuss how they came to view the group under study as a community unto itself or as

part of a larger community. More to the point, they did not indicate what it took to constitute a community. To borrow a phrasing from Rex et al. (1998), it is important to ask of the various studies that comprise the research base on literacy in the community, "What counts when community counts?"

That said, it is important to note that most of the studies that I discuss here did not set out to study literacy in "the community" or even in a set of communities, although they do frequently refer to "the community" or "communities" in their written reports. What's more, each of these studies has made important – in many cases, critical – contributions to the literacy field's understanding of what literacy looks like out of school. I do not discuss them here to criticize the work they did or their findings; these are studies that have shaped my thinking in important ways. My intent is simply to use these studies to represent the many different ways that community has been conceptualized in literacy research and to call attention to the need to be more explicit in future studies of literacy in community settings – regardless of the way one chooses to define the construct or the purpose of one's research.

Defining the Construct

A few exceptions to the general lack of discussion of the construct stood out in my review of these studies. First is Barton and Hamilton's (1998) study of the literacy practices of one working-class community in England. Barton and Hamilton not only provided a rich description of this community – and of the various networks of relationships within the community – but they also discussed and problematized the concept of community, arguing as I do in this article, that the concept has been overdetermined and underdefined. They also argued that beginning with a fuzzy definition of community – but seeking to specify it throughout their data collection – allowed them to pursue what community meant as a construct to the people they studied.

Similarly, Orellana and Hernandez (1999) indicated that they began their study by defining community as the school's intake area, but also invited their young participants to define what they saw as the community, a move that dramatically shifted the researchers' focus to spaces and relationships they had not previously thought relevant. The insightful observation that what the children saw as relevant to their communities depended heavily on where physical objects and discursive identifiers were located (i.e., they did not see, and therefore did not read, signs that were placed well above their heads), illustrates the importance of thinking about what community and community literacy mean in the eyes, ears, minds, and hearts of the participants of the study.

Juan Guerra (1998) faced the task of problematizing community head-on in his study of a transnational Mexicano community. Because Guerra studied a group who actually lived in two different physical sites throughout the year, he, like other anthropologists of such transnational groups (e.g., Rouse, 1991), had to acknowledge the ways that people moved back and forth – physically, psychologically, and culturally – among communities of practice.

Guerra drew from two perspectives that are useful for thinking about community-based literacy. First, he employed Pratt's (1991) notion of "home fronts" and "contact zones," suggesting that individuals operate in two spaces: a close-knit structure – the home front – in which common interests, knowledges, and literacies prevail; and "contact zones," where these close-knit home fronts come into contact – and often conflict – with one another. Second, uncomfortable with the dichotomous representation of home fronts versus contact zones, Guerra borrowed from Bizzell's (1982) model of discourse communities as "dialectical" spaces in which literacy and other social practices operate according to norms and conventions of the group, but are also always evolving as group members interact in multiple, competing, and conflicting communities of practice simultaneously. In this way, Guerra allowed for the possibility of both unity and conflict within and among communities.

Although most studies do not discuss the construct of community explicitly, some do describe what made the communities they studied unique, and these descriptions provide insight into how the researchers were conceptualizing community. For example, Canieso-Doronila (1996) acknowledged the many different relationships embedded in the different Filipino communities she studied, and specified that the common characteristic of each community in her sample was their "marginality with average incomes below the poverty level" (p. 5). In doing so, she made clear what aspect of the groups led her to assign the label *community* to them, and she suggested that there might be any number of other ways to think of the people she worked with as members of communities. Likewise, Heath (1983) articulated her study of two communities to specific ethnic and social-class relations, as well as to particular occupations and features of the geography of the communities. Heath did not take on the concept of community as a construct for definition, per se,[4] but her descriptions of the communities allude to the importance of understanding communities as spaces in which more than ethnicity, class, or other social categories dominate:

> A natural tendency of readers of this book will be to highlight the different racial memberships of Trackton and Roadville. Some readers will want to explain the differences between the attitudes, events, and patterns of communication of the two communities in terms of race only, overlooking the fact that the Blacks and Whites who were townspeople had far more in common with each other than with either Roadville or Trackton.... The various approaches of these communities to acquiring, using, and valuing language are the *products of their history and current situation.* (Heath, 1983, p. 10)

4 Heath has since discussed community and the problems of community-based literacy research in Heath (1995) and Heath (1998).

Heath's focus on history and situation makes clear her sense of community as being more than ethnic, class, or occupational relationships. Much in the way that (Soja, 1996) wrote about space as a raw material in which particular raced, classed, or gendered relations are enacted, Heath articulated a sense of community that brings together ethnicity, class, work, gender, time, and physical space.

Clarifying Purposes for Community-Based Literacy Research

The studies described previously are exemplars of outliers – most studies did not explicitly define community in their writing about community-based literacy. In addition to a lack of specificity in definitions of community, very few studies of literacy in the community explicitly identified their purpose for studying the community. Studies that identified themselves explicitly as based in the community (they referred to community and literacy in their titles, or they appeared in Boolean searches using those terms) tended to engage in work that was designed to ameliorate some problem in the community under study, although there are some notable, recent, exceptions (e.g. Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Cairney & Ruge, 1998; Guerra, 1998; McLaughlin et al., 1994; Moll, 1992).

A broader search in which I sought any research on literacy practices out of school yielded a number of studies in which researchers again used the term community in the body of their work. Although they did not identify the purpose of the research as studies of community-based literacy, the authors used the term community in their discussions and often used it interchangeably with terms such as neighborhood, culture, and ethnicity,[5] thus suggesting that these studies assigned the label of community-based literacy to anything that occurred out of school. These studies rarely identified the communities studied as problematic. Instead they tended to see research in communities as a way of identifying resources or practices that could inform or challenge school curricula, pedagogy, or policy.

Each of these different definitions and purposes is embedded in a larger philosophical orientation toward or perspective on community, and yet very rarely did the pieces I reviewed discuss explicitly the stance toward the community or toward the literacy practices under study. Moore and

5 The conflation of the concepts of culture and ethnicity was also evident in a number of studies, but that is a different critical issues article.

Readence (in press), in an analysis of secondary-school literacy research, suggested an analytic rubric that links the perspective one holds – or "metaphor" in their terms – toward the construct under study to the goals that researchers put forward in their work (see Moore & Readence, in press, for a full explanation of this rubric). Moore and Readence's rubric suggests a useful way to categorize the unwieldy literature on community-based literacy, because it links research goals and definitions to larger questions of stance, perspective, and beliefs about the construct under study. Consequently, I borrowed and modified the rubric they suggested to analyze how perspectives on community shaped researcher's purposes for research.

I classified the studies according to four goals and accompanying metaphors that emerged as I read the different pieces. Specifically, some community literacy studies appear to view the community as a problem to be fixed. Others see the community and its literacy practices as an unknown to be examined and interpreted. Still others view the community as a resource to be integrated into school curriculum, pedagogy, and policy. And finally, an emerging perspective views communities as alternatives to traditional schooling that can serve to reposition communities and their members in relation to schools and other dominant social institutions (see Table 1).

Community as Problem to be Fixed

Those studies that implicitly defined communities as problems in need of fixing also were the most likely to identify themselves as studies of community-based organizations or programs. This group of studies usually focused on establishing family and community literacy programs designed to improve literacy among school-aged children, parents, and other community members (e.g., Cooter et al., 1999; Cronan, Cruz, Arriaga, & Sarkin, 1996; Dias, 1992; Oliveira, Nova, & Coelho, 1992). These studies ranged in their definitions of community, with Cooter et al. (1999) discussing community in terms of the Dallas Public School intake area, and Oliveira et al. (1992) defining the community under study as an ethnic and class-based

Table 1. Common Goals and Metaphors for Community-Based Literacy Research

Goals	*Metaphors*
Fix	Problem
Interpret	Unknown
Integrate	Resource
Reposition	Alternative

group, specifically, the Gypsies who lived on the margins of Portuguese society. Dias (1992), by contrast, although also working with a cultural group (in this case, also Gypsies), chose to reform what had been identified as a problem neighborhood. In her research, she chose not to emphasize ethnicity, viewing all participants as living in a community by virtue of their social-class standing. Although each of the studies viewed the community as having a problem, usually the lack of print literacy skills, each of these studies talked about the community as a potential resource if given the proper education or training. Cooter et al. (1999), for example, wrote, "We have learned that when parents and other caregivers are provided with helpful information and concomitant reading materials they nearly always respond in ways that help their children succeed" (p. 896). Thus, the community was not seen as a resource for informing the program that was offered, but as a source of labor for achieving the goals of the program.

The lack of specificity in terms of who and what constitutes the community in these studies raises several questions. Although the communities are identified as neighborhoods (or whole cities), social-class groups, or ethnic groups, in effect, the actual definition of the community is "problem." Examining and addressing the community as problem without acknowledging the ways in which ethnicity, age, gender, or social class shape the literacy practices of the community members overlooks the power of the community members to make meaning in useful ways – without perhaps the benefit of print literacy skills. When, for example, Cooter et al. (1999) argued that parents and other caregivers "nearly always respond," to whom do they refer? Which members of the community are not responding? Is the lack of response a matter of individuals not taking up the call for community response, or are the needs of some community members not met through the particular programs offered? Because the communities under study are not examined in terms of difference but instead are asked to put aside difference to take up the practices offered, it is difficult to assess how the programs might work in other communities of practice.

Community as Unknown to be Described and Interpreted

Studies that fall into this category tend to be ethnographic in orientation and thus usually give rich descriptions of the community under study. The first half of Heath's (1983) *Ways with Words* falls into this category.[6] As Heath explained in the prologue, two of the communities she studied had populations under 150 people and were often reduced to as few as 30 residents, thus making it easier in some sense to define the groups as stable communities on the basis of their size and cohesiveness.

Numerous other recent examples of community-based literacy studies

6 In the second half of Heath's research, she documented her work with teachers to draw from the communities as resources, thus moving from the goal of interpreting the community to integrating the resources of the community into mainstream school practices.

that have a strong descriptive or interpretive lens include Barton and Hamilton's (1998) study of "local" literacies in one community in the United Kingdom; Barton et al.'s (1993) study of "everyday writing" in a United Kingdom community; Canieso-Doronila's (1996) study of literacy in marginalized Filipino communities; Delgado-Gaitan's (1996) study of literacy in a Latino immigrant community in California; Fishman's (1990) study of literacy practices among Amish families; and Lofty's (1990) study of writing in a Maine fishing community. Each of these studies articulates the literacies practiced by individuals to their relationships – social networks as Barton and Hamilton call them – in specific geographical, cultural, and psychological spaces, although the researchers each use different starting places for their community study.

Delgado-Gaitan (1996), for example, began with the community as neighborhood, but it is evident that Delgado-Gaitan was studying community in terms of an ethnic culture, one situated in a particular geographical space. By contrast, Barton and Hamilton (1998) explicitly stated that they initially defined the community under study in geographical and social-class terms, and "Soon [we] became aware of the complexity of the term as we contrasted community with family and with neighborhood, and as we uncovered many communities of interest which cross geographical boundaries" (p. 15). Fishman (1990) studied the Amish community, but represented the community through the literacy practices of a family. None of these representations of community is particularly right or wrong, but when taken as a body of work on literacy practices in the community, some caution should be taken with the implications that can be drawn for "community-based literacy" from studies that examine such different groupings as representations of communities.

Community as Resource to be Integrated

The studies in this category share with the previous category a focus on interpreting the literacy practices of the community, but these studies tend to begin explicitly with the idea that community literacy practices are a resource to be brought into school practices. However, in each of these studies, the "community" as resource is identified differently. Moll and his colleagues (Moll, 1992; Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Moll et al., 1989) identified community in their work as consisting of "families within a Hispanic, predominantly Mexican, working-class community in Tucson, Arizona," whereas the specific families in the study were drawn from schools "in the same barrio within three miles of each other" (Moll, 1994, p. 182). Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, by contrast, studied family-based literacy practices, and yet their work is routinely referenced as an exemplar of community-

based studies (Au, 1998; Cairney & Ruge, 1998), because they articulated family practices to the communities in which families live. The community as resource to which Camitta (1993) referred is the "adolescent community," whereas Orellana and Hernandez (1999) viewed community as places, things, events, and relationships that children cared about. The unifying theme of these studies is that the literacy practices of the community are assumed to be positive, and that these practices are currently not valued or even acknowledged in school settings, but that they could serve to dramatically reshape what is offered in terms of school literacy.

Community as Alternative to be Repositioned

Studies that see the community as offering alternatives to school literacy and that seek to reposition the community as a site of learning that is equivalent to the institution of school are numerous (Barton et al., 1993; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Buss et al., 1994; Flower, 1996; Kelly, in press; Mace, 1995; McLaughlin et al., 1994). These studies, like the others previously identified, define community in very different ways, as represented in neighborhood organizations, after-school programs, churches, interest groups, or work groups. What makes these studies unique in regard to their goal is that although they offer possible implications for school-based literacy teaching, they do not seek to bring community literacy practices or knowledges into schools. Instead, they want to reposition these community-based institutions alongside the school as a valued – and perhaps for many youth more generative – site of learning. Thus, the kinds of community-based practices that they privilege are not necessarily ones that could easily be integrated into schools as institutions.

As with the studies previously described, these studies by and large do not explicitly identify what was meant by community. Their focus on organizations and institutions outside of school, however, gives a decidedly different perspective on community literacy practices than any of the three sets of studies mentioned previously. Heath and McLaughlin (1993) and McLaughlin et al. (1994) represented youth as members of neighborhood organizations and institutions that value them and empower them with decision-making capabilities that other out-of-school institutions such as families or churches do not necessarily accord youth. Their studies of the organizations and "urban sanctuaries" that shape kids' practices represent youth as powerful shapers of the institution's norms, something that distinguishes these community-based studies from studies of other less organized community settings or of families as communities.

Kelly (in press) demonstrated how the institutional practices sanctioned in a Black Baptist church support and extend the school literacy practices

of an African American middle-school student. Although Kelly did not address what constitutes the varying levels of community represented in her study, her research articulated complex relationships between different institutions in several different facets of the community, from the city (Salt Lake City) as community to the church as community to a particular ethnic group as community.

At least four different metaphors and purposes for community-based research exist in the literature, and within each of these stances on community many different groupings seem to count as community. In many ways, this complexity is warranted because communities are complex entities. So what's really wrong with these different uses of the term? After all, researchers are generally providing thick descriptions of the groups they study. Why does it matter whether they articulate what they mean by community?

Multiple Goals, Multiple Definitions – What's the Problem?

It should concern literacy researchers that at a time when other fields (e.g., community psychology, public health, cultural studies) are questioning the concept of community and the existence of a sense of community among individuals and groups, we in the field of literacy are increasingly moving into what we have implicitly and unproblematically defined as communities to study literacy practices. I do not question the critical importance of literacy research outside of school in what we identify as relevant communities (Au, 1998); indeed, this is the research that I am doing and plan to continue doing. Nor do I wish to convey the idea that it is impossible to identify normalized and accepted practices of particular groups, practices that can be useful for rethinking standardized literacy practices in schools. Certainly the community-based work of Heath (1983), Moll (1992), Au (Au & Kawakami, 1994), and many others prove such an assertion wrong. Moreover, at a time of increasing marginalization for many groups in societies throughout the world (Guerra, 1998) and at a time of popular calls for increased standardization of literacy practices, there is a critical need to engage in strategic, unified resistance to marginalization and standardization; and this resistance can be accomplished through literacy research that highlights how particular groups use literacy in particular ways. Thus, the critical issues that I raise here are not meant to serve as a call for radically individualized studies of literacy out of school or for the dismissal of community-based literacy research. However, I do argue that community-based researchers should consider some challenges to easy assumptions about what constitutes community.

In particular, we might consider how changing times and changing

spaces shape research in communities. According to Glynn (1986), the deteriorating sense of community observed by many community psychologists has been attributed to urbanization, industrialization, and the increasing reliance on information and other electronic technologies. As Heath (1994) illustrated in studying the "children of Trackton's children," many of the youth of Trackton, which was a very small, definable community, had moved in search of employment to nearby urban centers. Their children were growing up without the community resources, practices, and knowledges that had been available to their parents and were making use of different kinds of resources – primarily media-based ones – in the construction of identity and literacy practice. The children of Trackton's children were, consequently, developing identities that drew from multiple spaces, and they did not have access to cultural or social networks or communities in the same ways that their parents did. This shift from the local, traditional community to urban, fragmented community structures has been discussed in sociological (Durkheim, 1964) and community psychology (Sarason, 1974) literatures for many years, but the majority of community-based studies of literacy do not address explicitly the complicated nature of studying community in urban settings and in new times.

Thus, in urban centers, where communities converge, overlap, and conflict (Mace, 1992), we need to acknowledge that communities may represent more than geographical spaces, and that the literacy practices of individuals we study may represent multiple and competing communities. Mobility in new times is not just a function of physical transportation; electronic and other audiovisual media enable people to establish and maintain relationships – perhaps communities – across time and space. The work of Rouse (1991), for example, in a Mexicano border community in California, illustrates how people use electronic technologies to maintain and build communities across geographic space.

> Through the constant migration back and forth and the growing use of telephones, the residents of Aguililla [California] tend to be reproducing their links with people that are two thousand miles away as actively as they maintain their relations with their immediate neighbors. Still more, and more generally, through the continuous circulation of people, money, commodities, and information, the diverse settlements have intermingled with such force that they are probably better understood as forming only one community dispersed in a variety of places. (Garcia Canclini, 1995, pp. 231–232)

Likewise, Purcell-Gates (1995) illustrated the maintenance of community ties to "down home" or their rural Appalachian roots (both physical and cultural) among urban Appalachians. As Purcell-Gates argued, the "down home" community was as important to the literacy practices of the people

she worked with as was the urban Appalachian "ghetto" community in or near which they lived. Garcia Canclini (1995) used such boundary crossing examples to argue that the concept of community – as a geographic space – has collapsed. It can no longer be assumed, he argued, that "the links between members of those communities would be more intense inside than outside of their space, and that the members treat the community as the principal medium to which they adjust their actions" (Garcia Canclini, 1995, p. 232).

The conflating of community with ethnic cultural relationships should also be worrisome for those who study literacy practices in communities. Miller (1986) argued that local and particular community associations have developed from the *resistance* to the essentializing of cultural relations and practices:

> Few historians would argue that our times are not characterized by a concern for local community.... What we have *not* acknowledged is that the rise of local history and community studies has coincided with a revolt against a deterministic notion of culture as a total way of life definitive of the possibilities of human behavior in particular locations or times. (p. 353)

It is ironic, given Miller's argument that a focus on local and particular communities stems from *resistance* to deterministic views of culture, that many local and particular community-based studies assume the ethnic cultural relations of a particular group to be a unifying, and in some cases, totalizing aspect of their community. Heath (1998) has argued against a perspective on culture and ethnicity that essentializes members of the ethnic or cultural group, arguing that there is a tendency to try to generalize from very specific studies of very particular groups. Similarly, on the question of cultural and community identity and essentialism, Bhabha (1994) quoted Renee Green, an African American artist:

> "It's still a struggle for power between various groups within ethnic groups about what's being said and who's saying what, who's representing who? What is a community anyway? What is a Black community? What is a Latino community? I have trouble with thinking of all these things as monolithic fixed categories." (p. 3)

Green's words echo complaints raised by the youth with whom I worked in Salt Lake City. Chile and her friends often questioned the ethnic identifiers with which they were asked to label themselves in school-based surveys, and although they spoke of each other in terms of color and ethnicity, all the youth with whom I worked described themselves as having mixed identities and cultural backgrounds.

In my research in and out of Salt Lake City schools, I learned first hand

of problems of such overdetermination and essentializing of ethnicity as a type of community. For example, because Salt Lake City is comprised of a significant number of immigrants from Pacific Island nations, many educators (at all levels of education) commonly refer to the "Pacific Islander community" or to the "Polynesian community" in their talk about multicultural education. Although this designator is useful in helping educators think about certain cultural practices that might be unique to Pacific Islanders, it masks differences among the people from different island communities. Island rivalries (e.g., between Samoans and Tongans) do not disappear simply because individuals have moved from their island homes to Salt Lake City. These differences were often represented in street gang alliances and in the ways that the youth I worked with talked with and about one another. The collapsing of each of these distinct communities into one led to a number of comments such as this one from a teacher at the beginning of school: "He's a typical Polynesian male. Doesn't look you in the eye. Doesn't talk." My research with that "typical Polynesian male" demonstrated a much more complex picture of him than could be represented in such a community or cultural designator. Even the more precise ethnic identifier, "Samoan," did not capture who this young man was as a person, a literate being, or a member of many, complex social, cultural, and geographic communities.

Similarly, one participant in my study, a young woman named Khek, lived in a neighborhood commonly referred to as "Little Saigon." The neighborhood residents were not only Vietnamese, as the neighborhood nickname would imply, but were also Laotian, Cambodian, and Mexican. Ethnic rivalries regularly erupted into violent practices as different ethnic groups, families, and age groups vied for space and position in the neighborhood. Although this neighborhood could have been studied in much the same way that Conquergood (1992) studied a Chicago tenement – in which he explored the many complex and conflicting relationships represented in the neighborhood – to have studied this neighborhood as a homogeneous community might have suggested a cohesiveness and cooperativeness and a set of positive practices that did not exist in practice.

What's more, representations of communities as homogeneous and fixed groupings may lead to the assumption that the practices of a group are all good and useful or to assume that all members of the group practice them with the same zeal or proficiency. Recent studies of adolescent members of various ethnic communities (Deyhle, 1998) suggest that adolescents often struggle to negotiate their membership in their adolescent peer communities, ethnic communities, and families, often engaging in practices that are in direct conflict with those espoused by their ethnic communities or by their families. As my representation of Chile illustrated, I observed

Chile engage in different everyday literacy practices depending on the group she identified with at the time of the observation. When I focused on specific aspects of community membership to the exclusion others, I was hard pressed to explain many of her representations of her world. I could not, for example, interpret Chile's construction of Mexican girl "gangstas" apart from her gendered, ethnic, and social-class relationships or community memberships. Should these affiliations (e.g., street gangs, skaters, cheerleaders) be studied as communities? And, if so, then in what ways do we represent the ethnic, religious, and neighborhood communities that also play a role in the lives of these youth? These communities or relationships need to be acknowledged for they shape and reflect the literacy practices – and the hybrid identities – of the people being studied.

Bhabha (1994) claimed this hybridity as an artifact of minority perspectives, "resourced by the power of tradition to be reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are 'in the minority'" (p. 2), but I want to suggest here that it would behoove researchers interested in the literacy practices of any particular communities to pay attention to the hybrid identities of many participants in the communities they study, especially in light of the fragmented and shifting nature of all spaces in new times.

Finally, the emphasis on community – a term that suggests positive, organized, and "cozy" (to borrow from Barton & Hamilton, 1998) relationships – overlooks many groupings and practices that are relevant in the lives of people, but that are not organized and sanctioned or that are not accorded the same privilege and power, even in ostensibly noninstitutional settings. I find it difficult, for example, to speak of gangs as "communities" because of the positive connotation of the term. And yet, gang practices were significant in the lives of the youth with whom I worked. Similarly, the secret, "sub-rosa," or hidden literacy practices (Finders, 1996; Gilmore, 1986) of smaller groups of people may not be acknowledged as community practices, and yet these practices may shape school literacy and other social practices in important ways.

Why Does This Matter and What Can Be Done About It?

Some of my concern with the lack of explicit conceptualizations of community in community-based literacy research revolves around issues of representation and ethics. When I begin to write about the people with whom I work, I use a simple test to examine my representations: I ask myself how I would feel if I were the person being written about rather than doing the writing. (The test is simple, but the answers are always complicated.) As I have written about Chile, Khek, and the other four youths I

worked with over the last 3 years, I have struggled with identifiers and [illegible]scriptions of each person. I try to put myself in their places as the one being identified. In what community would I fit? If, for example, someone were to study my neighborhood in Ann Arbor, a neighborhood comprised predominantly of retirees, how would my literacy practice of using a laptop to write research articles while sitting outside on my deck be represented? Would I be an outlier? A misfit in the community? Or supposing that I were 1 of 5, or even 50, members of the neighborhood being studied – would my literacy practices be used to represent the literacy practices in the community? What of my other community membership? How would they be accounted for in a study of literacy practices in my neighborhood? And how would the weaving together of my institutionally accepted literacy practices at the university with my everyday literacy practices in the neighborhood be explained in terms of the in-community versus out-of-community or school-versus-community configurations that have predominated in the literature?

Taking a different angle on the same question, imagine a researcher studying my community of practice rather than my community of geographic location. If one were to study the academic community of which I am a part in Ann Arbor, how would my literacy practices, as a relative newcomer both to the field and to the specific community, be represented? My interests and concerns are certainly better represented in the academic community than in my geographical living space, but there are still many ways in which I am distinct from other members of my academic community, as are all others in the community. What's more, the academic community here in Ann Arbor might be very different from one in another geographical space, specifically because the geography – both physical and cultural – of the spaces is different. How would those distinctions – the practices of all the other communities of which I am a member, the various identities and positions that I occupy in each community, and the contributions of the physical environment in which my various communities are enacted – get represented?

These are challenging and important questions, for which there are no easy answers, simply because it is impossible to study and write about all facets of people's community practices simultaneously. Ultimately, however, the issues that I raise regarding conceptions of community in community-based literacy research are more than issues of ethics in representation. If researchers of literacy in various communities do not clearly define what they mean by community or what the people who participate in their research mean when they talk about community, then such research findings may either be used inappropriately or not be used at all. This not just another academic debate over semantics. As Hawe (1994) wrote in her analysis

of conceptions of community in public health research, how researchers and reformers conceptualize community does matter in regard to the decisions they make about how to proceed with community intervention.

In literacy education, researchers have used findings from community-based work to generate what they hope is culturally responsive pedagogy and curriculum, and in many cases these curricula and pedagogies have been extremely successful (cf. Au & Kawakami, 1994; Moll & Greenberg, 1990). But as Sarris (1993) and Obidah (1998) have demonstrated, building culturally relevant or responsive curriculum and pedagogy is a complex process, especially for diverse[7] classroom settings. As Sarris observed, the choice of what a teacher considers culturally appropriate texts or literacy practices – often derived from research in the community – might in fact exacerbate marginalized students' sense of alienation in the classroom if the texts and corresponding literacy practices do not serve the students' needs or interests. In the case of the Kashaya Pomo Indians, which Sarris (1993) represented, students resisted the teacher's attempts to offer traditional folk tales (e.g., The Slug Woman) by becoming "poor readers, 'too ignorant to learn' … and dropp[ing] out by second or third grade" (p. 258). Similarly, Obidah illustrated how African American adolescents were frustrated with their teacher's well-intentioned attempt to engage them in what she thought would be a culturally responsive study of African nations.

7 When I say "diverse" here, I mean that the classroom population is comprised of students from many different cultural, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Chile and her cousin Yolanda taught me a number of similar lessons about what they might think of as relevant or appropriate texts and practices. In more than one interview, for example, Chile and Yolanda both argued that they disliked Chicano literature despite their investment in many aspects of the Salt Lake City Latino community. As Yolanda explained, "My mother keeps giving me these Chicano stories to read. I'm sick of it. I want to read, you know, just regular literature for a while." Yolanda's words remind us that people come from multiple – and sometimes competing – communities. Chile and Yolanda, for example, saw the influx of Mexican immigrants as threatening their security, both in terms of their status as Hispanics ("They make Hispanics look bad") and in terms of the availability of jobs and other material resources. They viewed Chicano literature and movements as supportive of this wave of immigrants and not as part of their communities of practice or identification. This may not have been evident to a researcher studying them as members of a Hispanic or Latino community. In many ways, both young women were deeply invested in particular aspects of their ethnic communities, but communities – whether geographic, cultural, or psychological – are complex entities that overlap with one another and that change and grow. Culturally response pedagogy and curricula, then, need to be made equally complex, and we need to have research that highlights the complexity and hybridity of people's lives and communities to guide the construction of such approaches

Members of communities – especially in large urban settings – are simultaneously members of other communities, and their multiple memberships shape the ways that they identify with their various communities. Thus, to offer curriculum, pedagogy, or policy based on what we know about *the* community, or to elide community with ethnic culture, adolescent culture, gang culture, or social-class culture (among other constructions of culture) is to risk essentializing and alienating students. Specifying definitions of community, and problematizing these specifications – acknowledging, that is, the difficulty one has in representing individuals as members of any one community – can only serve to make community-based research more trustworthy, valid, and usable for reconceptualizing the teaching and learning of literacy in and out of schools.

Issues of representation and of the use of research findings underscore the importance of explaining our perspectives on community and of being careful not to conflate community with cultural commitments, gendered relationships, or political causes without clearly acknowledging how and why we are making such connections. Thus, if one wants to study the community as an ethnic space, then one needs to specifically identify the community as such. If one wishes to study adolescents as a group or a community, then one should identify them as such. At the same time, we must also be willing to acknowledge, as Mace (1992) did when she talked about workplaces as communities, that communities can overlap: "Any one of us belongs to several different communities at any one time. At work [or school], we are seen to belong to the work community. But because we bring the whole of ourselves to work, we are also bringing other communities there, too" (p. 126).

In addition, it is important to acknowledge that communities are not necessarily tied to permanent geographical spaces. People come together for specific purposes in specific places at specific times. The community represented by the National Reading Conference (NRC) is a good example of a community constituted not by geographical space but by common interest. Such a convergence of people with a common interest (Mace, 1992) can constitute a non-geographical community, although such a community is shaped by the particular geographical or physical space in which the members converge. Think of how different the NRC community might be, for example, if the annual meetings were held in schools rather than at resorts. The people who would converge might not be different, but the interests, concerns, and practices, as forged by the particular tools available in the physical space, might look very different.

Finally, the growth of electronic forms of communication, such as listservs and chat rooms, signals a need to reconstruct a sense of community as a geographic space. Are these interest groups who meet in cyberspace, but may never meet face to face, communities? Allan Luke (in press) argues

in a forthcoming editorial that a number of school-based programs that seek to link electronically young people from different communities around the world represent examples of "concentric communities." These concentric communities forge relationships among old and new communities, face-to-face and virtual communities, and real and imagined communities, thereby building knowledge and changing power relations among the members of the groups who interact.

Whatever one decides to count as community, the construct needs to be clearly defined, and we should explicitly discuss how non-geographic groupings overlap and converge with other groupings. Saleebey (1997) offered a perspective on community as "association-based," and provided a helpful way to think about communities:

> Associations are local collectivities established through the consent of participating residents that provide a place for people to pursue their interests and concerns using the natural tools and resources in their environment and to promote the stories and visions of their community.... Associations can be cultural and ethnic; they may focus on common interests (hobbies); they might be formed through churches or community-based businesses (e.g., an aerobics class in someone's house). What they have in common is their capacity for inclusion, celebration, problem solving, creativity, and the recounting and restoration of residents' wisdom, lore, narrative, ritual, and story. (p. 297)

Thus, the key to establishing community is not geography, culture, age, or some other singular social quality, but is the enactment of many different kinds of relationships – cultural, age-related, gendered, occupational, or other – within a given geographical and physical space that makes available particular tools for making sense of and participating in social practices. Saleebey's definition, however, has the potential to emphasize a positive and homogeneous sense of community that may preclude the examination of equally important practices within particular groups.

A somewhat different construction of community is offered in the network analytic perspective (Wellman, 1979), which argues that the neighborhood is "only one variety of social network" and that the "community in the urban setting ... is no longer a territorial unit, but consists of a variety of linkages among persons sharing common interests or activities" (Olson, 1982). As Barton and Hamilton (1998) argued, the concept of networks evokes a sense of the social relationships that are enacted to serve certain purposes and meet certain needs. It also implies that the members of a network engage in similar sets of social practices and ways of knowing the world. The concept of networks emphasizes that the interests, needs, relationships, and knowledges of groups of people, in addition to the geographical space they share, shape their sense of community. However, Barton and Hamilton (1998) also argued that like communities and associations, networks can be "oppressive, disruptive, or resistant to individuals' needs for change" (p. 16).

Although I ultimately turned to the construct of networks to explain the complicated community served by the bilingual immersion school I described previously, I struggled not only with Barton and Hamilton's concerns about networks, but also with memories of my experiences with Chile, Khek, and their friends. Networks can imply a systematicity, a connectedness and simultaneous separateness, and a strategic sense, but the hybridity I witnessed was more embodied and fluid, shifting "betwixt and between times and places" (Bhabha, 1994) in less conscious ways than a network perspective implies. Although the concept of hybridity does not have to deny the strategic use of various networks, associations, spaces, or communities, neither is it completely captured in such constructs:

> What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These "inbetween" spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 1–2)

To evoke the sense of fluidity and hybridity that Bhabha suggests, I find Soja's (1996) conception of space – and particularly of "thirdspace" or the articulation of real and imagined physical, cultural, and social spaces – compelling, because it offers possibilities for examining hybrid identities and community relationships that get enacted within particular physical, cultural, and social spaces. Theories of spatiality suggest somewhat less organized and institutional constructions of social relationships than do the terms community or network. The advantage of less organized constructions is that they might direct attention toward the less obvious, unsanctioned, and everyday practices of people. Theories of spatiality are not without problems, however. Spaces are never empty of institutional and social constraint or of power relations. Nevertheless, the concept of space does move away from the emphasis on only institutionalized, normalized, or accepted practices. Employing Pratt's (1991) notion of contact zones and Bizzell's (1982) dialectical discourse communities (see Guerra, 1998) in conjunction with Soja's (1996) conception of space as a resource for linking and shaping multiple relations could offer a complex way of analyzing and articulating in print what it means to be a member of many different communities simultaneously. As Luke and Luke (1999) argued,

the field does not yet have a discourse for analyzing and writing about relational differences and how those differences shape the lives and literacies of people from different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. This is troubling because our curricular initiatives therefore tend to be essentialized and homogeneous (Luke & Luke, 1999), especially when taken up in large school settings.

Finally, as I have mentioned previously, Moll and Gonzalez' (1994) phrase, "circles of kinship and friendship," which they used in reference to important community relationships, jumped out at me as a phrase that was evocative of the kinds of relationships that the word community signifies, but one that was not, perhaps, as loaded with assumptions about the homogeneity and uniformity. Although the phrase maintains a generally positive sense, the plural "circles" allows for the possibility of multiple and overlapping relations within community frameworks. To Moll and Gonzalez' phrase, I have added the words, "position and power" to signify that social groupings, whether circles, networks, or associations, both require and maintain certain positionings and power relations that literacy researchers need to understand if they are to understand and draw implications from the power of the literacy practices associated with these groups.

It seems clear that any term one might choose would open a whole host of new theoretical and practical problems for literacy research out of school. Nevertheless, considering other possibilities for discussing organized and casual relationships in everyday practice (i.e., associations; networks; spaces; or circles of kinship, friendship, position, and power) may help to highlight the complex nature of communities, the ways in which they overlap, converge, and conflict. Regardless of the term one uses, carefully specifying what one means when talking about a particular group can only serve to strengthen literacy research in multiple sites.

Community-based literacy research needs to continue, but it also needs to continue to develop. We should clarify our metaphors, goals, and definitions as we study and write about communities. We should also commit to studying the complexity and hybridity of communities even as we continue to study what makes particular communities unique and unified. In my future work, I plan to limit my use of the word *community* to specific geographic spaces, and to examine how within those physical spaces, particular cultural and psychological spaces are constructed as circles of kinship, friendship, position, and power, and how these circles are developed and maintained through literacy and language. Moreover, because these circles may spill over into many different physical spaces, I find it most useful to start, as Elizabeth Noll (1998) did in her study of two American Indian youths, with individuals, and to study the spaces and circles that seem central to their lives. I will be likely to constrain my choice of individual youth or teachers on the basis of a particular geographic space, but then I will walk with these individuals – both metaphorically and literally (Orellana & Hernandez, 1999) – in that space and seek to understand what constitutes circles that matter in their everyday lives.

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ON THE LIMITS OF REFRAMING: REREADING THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES REPORT ON READING

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Jim Gee's (1999) essay "Reading and the New Literacy Studies: Reframing the National Academy of Sciences Report on Reading" (appearing in the September 1999 issue of JLR), a set of reflections on the report titled *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (National Research Council, 1998), contains a number of misstatements of fact about the report that demand correction. In this response, I address the most important of these before turning to a more substantial commentary on Gee's reflections.

The nature of the report. On page 359 of his essay, Gee characterizes the report as one "written to and for the government" and states that it is thus "not liable to advocate for the return of ... social programs as the key answer to the 'literacy crisis.'" This characterization betrays a lack of understanding of the National Research Council, which sponsored the report, and how it operates, and impugns the motives of the members of the committee that wrote the report. The National Research Council is, indeed, the operating

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