

Transnational Literacy

Concept: Transnational Literacy

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Description Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was the first critic to use the term "transnational literacy" extensively. First used in "Teaching for the Times," an oft-anthologized essay originally published in 1992, Spivak continued to develop her thoughts on transnational literacy in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999) and in *Death of a Discipline* (2003a). Transnational literacy seems to draw historical antecedents from both the pedagogical concepts developed by other activist-scholars such as Paolo Freire and aims of the Subaltern Studies collective, a group of historians largely in India who privilege non-elite perspectives. There is a common goal of resisting colonial power "from the ground up," based on local sources and knowledges. Transnational literacy implies a Marxist and Leftist approach to global issues grounded in an ethics of responsibility, as more than neo-liberalism, more than multiculturalism, development, or aid. As a result, the term has been increasingly drawn upon in post-colonial cultural studies and in related disciplines that share in the methodologies and aims of post-colonial studies.

Transnational literacy in its broadest sense refers to a reshaping of colonial systems of education and institutional knowledge away from (European) nation-based formations to a study of the multiplicity of languages and cultures in the world. In "Teaching for the Times," Spivak called for "readers from various parts of the world ... [to] produce some effort to work out how, in their contexts, the teaching of literature can be transnational" (1992, 177). Transnational literacy posits a responsible form of cultural explanation and instruction that can further decolonization (Spivak 1992). Advocates of transnational literacy understand that reading can serve as a way to think with and through concepts of the nation that are being troubled by the cultural and economic effects of globalization.

While transnational literacy challenges students and researchers to understand and transform geopolitical power and privilege through "training in a literary habit of reading the world" (Spivak 2003a, xii), it not only promotes reading-based literacy, but literacy more generally, as an interpretive act. In other words, the concept employs reading (and the literacy it entails) metaphorically to indicate a mode of interpretation. To be literate under globalization requires more than mastery of reading and writing as traditionally constituted. Following from Spivak's original deployment of the term, transnational literacy has come to be used as an extension of critical literacy, which pays particular attention to the intersections of knowledge and power in pedagogical practices (Brydon

2004). Transnational literacy is thus instrumental in linking literature and culture to global capital and other forces that impinge on personal and collective autonomies. Adopting a practice of transnational literacy involves, in part, becoming intimately familiar with the methodologies and histories of disciplines such as Comparative Literature, Area Studies, History, and Anthropology, and then "turning them around, labouriously, not only by building institutional bridges but also by persistent curricular interventions [which...] resist mere appropriation by the dominant" (Spivak 2003a, 10-11). Where geopolitical analysis presupposes a unitary national identity that is effected by international power relations (Friedman 2001), transnational literacy captures the complicated place of the nation-state in contemporary globalization debates and suggests that nation-formation has a colonial history that needs to be more fully understood.

Because it involves in-depth historical and linguistic study of areas of the world that are separated socially, politically, and materially from the Global North, transnational literacy challenges academics working in the Global North to rethink their approaches to knowledge and, ideally, engage in a more equitable process of exchange and understanding (Spivak 2003a, 5; 72). In particular, transnational literacy includes "tak[ing] the languages of the Southern Hemisphere as active cultural media rather than as objects of cultural study by the sanctioned ignorance of the metropolitan migrant" (Spivak 2003a, 9), and it necessitates greater understanding of indigenous languages, knowledges, and lifeways (Spivak 2003a, 15). Transnational literacy means producing research agendas that engage with what is politically imperative, for instance to "use our locational, material and institutional privileges to develop more politically effective feminist research strategies in the context of globalization" (Nagar 2002, 185). For Spivak, transnational literacy encompasses the global garment industry, female-driven home-work and biodiversity as much as it means critiquing exploitative transnational corporations, US-imperialism and the vestiges of older forms of imperialism and colonialism. It also means a retelling of histories and stories from different vantage points, and it may prompt us to examine different kinds of debates (for instance, those around militarization, war, gender, and the financialization of the globe). To take an example from *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, transnational literacy means responsibly acknowledging sexist exploitation within migrant communities as much as it means acknowledging and countering white racism (Spivak 1999, 377). Transnational literacy also involves understanding that resistance movements — "ecological, agricultural, against pharmaceutical dumping, against geo-engineering, against bio-piracy" — are "not new social movements — they are only new social movements if you define them from Europe" (Spivak 2003b, 185-6). In short, transnational literacy constitutes an alternative political project with the goal of encouraging critical engagement with issues that affect people all over the world, as well as a commitment to understanding these issues from more than one perspective. Transnational literacy is a way to resist sanctioned ignorance, those forms of not-knowing that are allowed to perpetuate at the institutional, local, national, or hemispheric level; to be

"transnationally literate" is to "think otherwise" and be willing to "unlearn one's privilege as one's loss," two of Spivak's other central concepts.

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