

Lynn Mario T. Menezes de Souza

Literacy theory has advanced enormously from abstract de-contextualized conceptualizations to current 'naturalized' views of literacy as social practice and ideologically and ethnographically situated communication (Street 1985, 1995; Barton and Hamilton 1994, 2000). These contextualized concepts of literacy have made the much-needed connection between communication, community and, more importantly, *place*.

Distant from the the previous colonial presupposition of linear *time* as a watershed between the 'a-historical primitive' and the 'modern', where literacy functioned as a crucial indicator of 'development' and access to 'modernity', this new found emphasis on *place* brought social and political agency into the discussions of literacy, perhaps an inheritance from its anthropological and ethnographic antecedents and the need to account for the 'native's point of view'. However, as post-colonial theory (Bhabha 1990, Spivak 1990) has pointed out, such ethnographic moments of cultural contact between outsiders and insiders is traversed by myriad sources of inequalities which, historically naturalized, often become transparent, leading to what Bhabha calls the *containment* of difference rather than its recognition or respect. *Place* here plays a crucial role in perceptions of local, situated, literacy practices, as *both* the outsider analyst, *and* the members of the community under analysis, originating in different *places*, are situated in their own cultural and epistemological formations, which foreseebaly affect not only their practices but above all their perceptions and interpretations of alterity. Thus certain practices or forms of communication may not even be perceived as 'literacy' by the unwary outsider.

In this presentation, I analyze one such possibilty of the containment of difference in intercultural contact in literacy theory – indigenous literacies in Brazil - where the difficulty in conceiving literacy lies beyond epistemological difference (acceptably divergent forms of knowing) and may have to be explained as ontological difference (radically different forms of 'being'), posing challenges to literacy theory and policy.