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Reyes Elizondo, A.E.; Hendriks, S.; Oudshoorn, M.; Smits, L.; Vergeer, T.

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# TO READ OR NOT TO READ

## TEXTUAL VS MEDIA INTERPRETATION

**Andrea Reyes Elizondo**

Leiden University, Leiden, the Netherlands

*The act of reading is an elementary cultural technique which, together with writing, has allowed humans to pass on and access information beyond spatial and temporal limitations. Its importance is evident in the many uses and guises given to the verb 'to read'. For example, the interpretation of other media is often referred to as reading. This expansion stems from the different aspects of the activity itself as well as its history. Thus, for book and reading historians, reading often includes the interpretation of images or listening to an oral performance. In this article I first reflect on why this conceptual expansion has taken place and how it has been useful to book historians. Given that concepts are never neutral, I also look critically at the ethical ramifications of considering certain modes of communication as 'reading'. Lastly, I propose the use of a clear distinction between reading practices of the literate from media interpretation practices by illiterate people.*

### INTRODUCTION

Humans invented the complex yet ubiquitous technology of reading around 4,500 years ago simultaneously with writing. Owing to the complicated first writing systems and the deep class and working divisions of ancient societies, few people knew then what these activities involved. Following the advent of universal education as an ideal in the nineteenth century, most people would now describe reading as decoding text from a paper or screen.<sup>1</sup>

In book and reading scholarship, the concept is sometimes expanded to include the interpretation of images — or even objects — as well as listening to someone read aloud. The

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<sup>1</sup> The pursuit of universal education was not grounded solely on ideals. Beyond their emancipatory potential, books are commercial products. Spreading literacy also increased the potential pool of customers, as well as serving the interests of trade-oriented societies.

first conceptual development, interpreting images, owes to the field's objects of study. Manuscripts and products from the printing press often have both texts and images. The further jump to interpreting objects stems from the language and terminology of other disciplines in cultural history, such as semiotics. According to the historian Jonathan Rose, "historians of reading agree with postmodern critics: all things are texts, which can be read, and are open to interpretation".<sup>2</sup> The second development in considering listening to someone read aloud as 'reading' originates from the history of the activity, in which people would read to one another.

These expansions of the concept of reading are understandable. Concerning the first expansion, many scholars would find it ludicrous to study only the texts in manuscripts or books and exclude images along with the many roles they fulfil. As for the second, reading aloud is one of the many forms and manners of reading and likewise cannot be ignored. At the same time, the activity of reading and who 'possesses' it has huge implications for societies, as well as for individuals. Not only does the technique allow for a greater access to information in a heavily textual-based society, but our brains change as well once we have learned how to read.

Considering this, I argue that there can be unintended consequences when equating unflexibly the activity of reading with other means of interpretation. These consequences can affect not only scholarship focused on current affairs, such as low literacy or functional illiteracy,<sup>3</sup> but can also impact historical approaches. For example, arguing that the poor and uneducated read through images — whether in the past or the present — leaves out vital contextual information. Did these people *read through images* due to a lack of capacities, or was it due to systemic inequalities? This paper first elaborates on how the concept

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Rose, "The History of Education as the History of Reading," *History of Education* 36.4-5 (2007), 595-605.

<sup>3</sup> The first universal definition of literacy was proposed by UNESCO in 1951 as "a person who can, with understanding, both read and write a short, simple statement on his everyday life". The definition was expanded in 1962 by adding that the knowledge and skills must be sufficient for the individual to function effectively in their group or community, thus including more complex sentences. Many education experts argue that a literate person must not only be able to read, but also "to write and compute with the functional competence needed for meeting the requirements of adult living". Thus individuals who can recognize a basic vocabulary, but cannot understand complex sentences, are considered by some researchers as functional illiterates. D. Harman, "Illiteracy: An Overview," *Harvard Educational Review* 40 (1970), 226-28.

of *reading* has been expanded to include image interpretation and listening to someone read aloud. Next, I consider the unintended consequences of this expansion for historical research as well as for educational policies. Finally, I propose a way by which more clarity can be given when referring to and studying the activity of reading. It is not my intention to propose new definitions; rather, I emphasize the importance of highlighting the differences that are overlooked when using overarching definitions.



Fig. 1. Image and text perception are not equal in the brain.

Andrea Reyes Elizondo, *Textual vs media interpretation*

Digital image based on Descartes's *Tractatus de homine, et de formatione foetus*, CC BY-NC-SA

## THE MANY FORMS OF READING

The acts of reading and writing are two elementary cultural techniques which have proven vital for us as a species: they have allowed us to pass on and access information beyond spatial and temporal limitations.<sup>4</sup> There is a relationship of reciprocity between the two,

<sup>4</sup> Bernhard Siegert, "Cultural Techniques: Or the End of the Intellectual Postwar Era in German Media Theory," *Theory, Culture & Society* 30.6 (2013), 48-65; Carl F. Kaestle, "The History of Literacy and the History of Readers," *Review of Research in Education* 12.1 (1985), 11-53.

however in this article I focus mainly on reading. The activity of reading knows many forms and manners. Some of these are related to (a) sonority, that is, whether it is done aloud or silently; (b) imagery, the relation between text and images; (c) speed; (d) prescriptions, on approved texts and how to interpret them; and (e) distance, the mediation of lost and very large texts. Of these, sonority and imagery have contributed in particular to an expanded concept of “to read”.

Intuitively, most people would define reading as interpreting text from a paper or screen with the eyes and — if inclusivity-minded — with the fingers, where text is generally understood as a “graphic scriptorial sign system” that represents a “continuous stretch of discourse having linguistic coherence and semantic cohesion”.<sup>5</sup> Being read to might also be considered by some as reading, especially when concerning an audio-book. For book historians, sonority is a constant in the history of reading. Not only did people use to read aloud to themselves, as some still do, but the activity itself can often be communal where one person reads to others.



Fig. 2. Reading can be a communal activity. C.W. Sharpe after Frederick Goodall *Groups of people are gathered outside a building reading newspapers and letters* Engraving. Credit: Wellcome Collection. CC BY.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday, “Text,” *A Dictionary of Media and Communication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Adriaan van der Weel, *Changing Our Textual Minds* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 50.

Throughout history there have been plenty of instances in which reading was performed orally. In Antiquity, the literate would gather at public readings to hear one another's works recited.<sup>6</sup> In ancient Rome, writings were read orally due to the phonetic nature of script in *scriptura continua* which knew no word separation.<sup>7</sup> During the Middle Ages, a monk would read aloud to his brothers during their meals as part of their devotional practice, as some religious orders still do. Reading aloud was both a consumption activity where the text was apprehended, and also part of how texts were produced. During some periods, such as in the early Middle Ages, texts would be composed orally in a group: an author would have secretaries to whom a text would be dictated, usually first as drafts onto wax tablets. Then these texts would be re-read and re-written in various iterations in which the scribes would often alter or correct the text.<sup>8</sup>

ISEGRIMTHEWOLFWITHHISLINEAGEAND  
FRIENDSCAMEANDSTOODBEFORETHE  
KINGANDSAIDHIGHANDMIGHTYPRINCE  
MYLORDTHEKINGIBESEECHYOUTHAT  
THROUGHYOURGREATMIGHTRIGHTAND  
MERCYTHATYEWILLHAVEPITYONTHE  
GREATTRESPASSANDTHEUNREASONABLE  
MISDEEDSTHATREYNARTTHEFOXHATH  
DONETOMEANDTOMYWIFE

Isegrim the Wolf, with his lineage and  
friends, came and stood before the King,  
and said, "High and Mighty Prince, my  
Lord the King, I beseech you that through  
your great might, right, and mercy, that  
ye will have pity on the great trespass  
and the unreasonable misdeeds that  
Reynart the Fox hath done to me and to  
my wife

Fig 3. Excerpt from *The History of Reynard the Fox* in scripto continua and spaced transcription  
Andrea Reyes Elizondo, *Scripto continua and spaced transcription*, Digital image, CC BY-NC-SA

<sup>6</sup> Guglielmo Cavallo, "Between Volumen and Codex," in *A History of Reading in the West*, eds. Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier (Oxford: Polity, 1999), 75.

<sup>7</sup> In languages where polysyllabic words (usually more than three syllables) are written in continuous script, the reader has to manipulate the phonetic symbols in their mind "to form properly articulated and accented entities" in order to make sense of the words. Paul Saenger, "Silent Reading: Its Impact on Late Medieval Script and Society," *Viator* 13 (1982), 367-414; *Ibid*, *Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 4-5.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Saenger, "Reading in the Later Middle Ages," in *A History of Reading in the West*, 133; Mike Kestemont, Sara Moens, and Jeroen Deploige, "Collaborative Authorship in the Twelfth Century: A Stylometric Study of Hildegard of Bingen and Guibert of Gembloux," *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* 30.2 (2015), 199-224.



Reading aloud is also realized in educational contexts. For example, during the nineteenth century, factories in Cuba had *lectores* (readers) who would read novels or newspapers aloud.<sup>9</sup> And until our current day, reading aloud has been a fundamental element of teaching children how to read. Other occasions when reading is done aloud is to people who are ill, or to less-able individuals who do not have access to the necessary tools with which to approach a text, such as magnifying devices or braille books. As a result of the various practices that involve reading aloud, there is often no differentiation made between whether one is directly reading a text aloud or one is being read to. Both activities are considered reading.



Fig. 4. A *lector* in a cigar factory.  
Anonymous, *A lector reads at a cigar factory*  
Photograph. Credit: havanajournal.com.

Similar to sonority, imagery is an element that shares a long history with reading. The earliest writing systems evolved from images such as early Sumerian script, which was based mostly in pictograms — characters “which represent an object ... by a picture of it”.<sup>10</sup> Through time, pictograms were substituted by logograms (characters that represent

<sup>9</sup> This practice extended to Florida in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Aberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (New York: Viking, 1996), 111-14.

<sup>10</sup> P. H. Matthews, “pictogram,” *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Ignace Jay Gelb, “Sumerian System,” in *A Study of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 61-72; Jean-Marie Durand, “Cuneiform Script,” in *A History of Writing: From Hieroglyph to Multimedia*, ed. Anne-Marie Christin (Paris: Flammarion, 2002), 20-32.

whole words as in Chinese Hanzi) and phonograms (letters or combinations of them which can represent sounds as does the Latin alphabet). Yet even without pictograms, texts are often found in tandem with images, which are not necessarily illustrations of the text itself, but are often complementary to it.

In the High Middle Ages, diagrams, maps, and charts in texts did not have the same function as illuminations. Where the latter would often serve to merely illustrate an event — such as a passage of the Bible — the former would transmit information previously known to the reader but which was not necessarily found in the text.<sup>11</sup> In other words, authors of specific texts could assume the reader was already familiar with a concept which did not require elaborate explanation in the text itself. These visualisations had the primary function of being “conceptual enclosures for stored information”, similar to the role diagrams and infographics fulfil nowadays.<sup>12</sup>

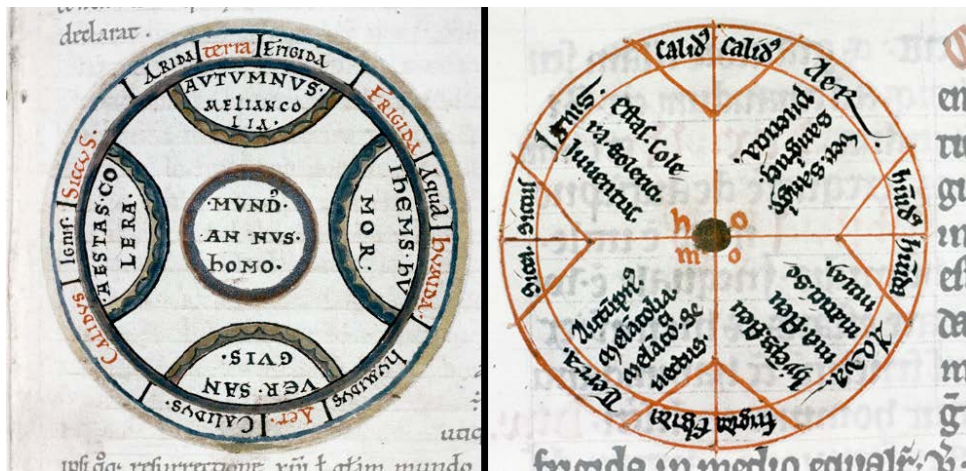


Fig. 5. Two circular diagrams of the four elements.

Isidore of Seville? / William of Conches?, *Circular diagram of the four elements and the four season (De natura rerum)* Bodleian Library MS. Auct. F. 2. 20 Folio/page: fol. 006r / Circular diagram labelled with names of the four elements (*Dragmaticon*) Bodleian Library MS. e Mus. 121 Folio/page: fol. 050v Manuscript illustration. © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford

<sup>11</sup> Paul Saenger, “Silent Reading,” in *The History of Reading*, ed. Shafquat Towheed (London: Routledge, 2011), 117.

<sup>12</sup> Naomi Reed Kline, *Maps of Medieval Thought: The Hereford Paradigm* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2001), 10.



When a person who knows how to read sees an image alongside a text, whether an illustration or a diagram, it is perhaps unnecessary to elaborate on whether the person is reading or interpreting the image. The same applies to a literate person who listens to somebody reading aloud. As I later argue, there is however an issue when the act of *interpreting images* or *being read to* is considered *reading* for those who do not possess the skill of reading. This issue arises because reading is such a ubiquitous activity that we are not conscious of the neurological processes that precede it. Subsequently, it is usually assumed that seeing an image or a text are akin to each other.

It is unclear when the text-image equation began, but perhaps it can be traced back to pedagogy. In a letter, St Nilus of Ancyra (d. c. 430 CE) argued for the decoration of churches with scenes from the Bible as they could “serve as books for the unlearned, teach them scriptural history and impress on them the record of God’s mercies”.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Pope Gregory the Great (540-604 CE) was of the opinion that “for the common folk, pictures are the equivalent of reading”.<sup>14</sup> In any case, for almost five centuries, children have learned how to read with alphabet books that link letters to images (for example *A for Apple*), thus making a strong case for linking the interpretation of images to reading.<sup>15</sup>

The three activities of reading a text, interpreting images, and listening to someone read aloud are cultural practices which serve as communication tools. It may seem counter-intuitive to try to demarcate them by stating a border of where one stops and the other begins. After all, the three activities might take place at the same time. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental difference which has relevance beyond the activity of reading itself: acquiring the skill.

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Manguel, *A History of Reading*, 97.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>15</sup> The oldest known printed alphabet book in English that uses images linked to letters is John A. Hart, *A Methode or Comfortable Beginning for All Vnlearned, Whereby They May Be Taught to Read English* (London: Henrie Denham, 1570).



Fig. 6. Paintings in churches have been long seen as 'reading material' for the illiterate.

Anonymous, *Nativity scene at Kiliclar Kilise*

Byzantine wall painting. Universität Wien. CC BY-NC-ND

## LEARNING HOW TO READ

The main difference between a literate person and an illiterate person interpreting images or listening to someone read aloud lies in the possession of reading skills. As the adjective says, the literate person has *learned* how to read, while the illiterate has not. This fact might seem obvious, but it is important to stress that in most cases the lack of skill does not owe to capacities, but rather to circumstances. Unless a person is severely mentally impaired, every human being can learn how to read, least the proper conditions are met. This is one of the contextual details that becomes lost when several interpreting activities are considered reading.

When we read, our brains assign meaning to each word in its context by using several language and comprehension processes. The brain connects each differentiated visual symbol (the letters) with their sonic information (the phonemes) to interpret the text; it then integrates this information with the knowledge it already has (cumulative knowledge).<sup>16</sup> To sum it up, reading depends heavily on the ability to connect and integrate visual, auditory, linguistic, and conceptual information.

Given that vision and speech are natural — or genetically programmed — cognitive processes, it could be assumed that something similar happens when an illiterate person listens to somebody read aloud. While the neurological pathways for vision and speech are already formed in every human brain, the pathways for reading are arranged *artificially* by combining these two. In other words, once a brain has learned how to read, its pathways have been changed. Therefore, the process of a literate person listening to someone read aloud is presumably neurologically different from that of an illiterate, in whose brain the pathways have not been combined. The different pathways that are created when a brain has learned how to read may have significance for human civilizations beyond the skill of reading. According to Stanislaw Dehaene, the development of the reading brain — which entails the creation of novel pathways — has allowed us to “arrive at new combinations of ideas and the elaboration of a conscious mental synthesis”.<sup>17</sup> Thus someone without the possibility to acquire the cultural technique of reading should not be ignored.

All this is not to say that an illiterate activity of interpretation is of less value than reading, but rather a difference of having had or not having had the opportunity to form those pathways. In this sense, reading is related to power structures that determine who can or could make use of it, possess it. These complexities in the opportunities to learn how to read are what I argue to be the most significant objection against making a blanket equation of reading to any form of interpretation. Arguing that the poor or illiterate read through images or listening can have profound ethical implications avoided by recognizing the interpretation of images and oral utterances as modes of communication with their own particularities.

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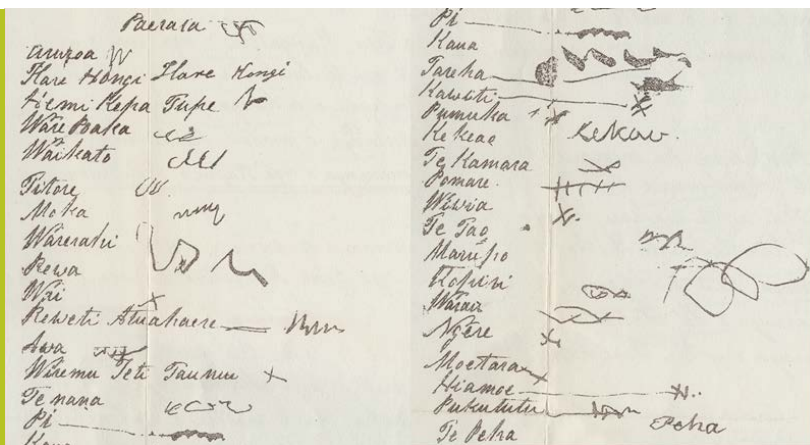
<sup>16</sup> Marianne Wolf, *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (Cambridge: Icon, 2008), 8.

<sup>17</sup> Stanislas Dehaene, *Reading in the Brain: The New Science of How We Read* (London: Penguin, 2019), 317.

## THE PROBLEMS FOR HISTORICAL RESEARCH

In his seminal *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*, D. F. McKenzie called for the inclusion of other forms of sense-making as reading by arguing that land and referents to land can be conceptualized as texts. This argument was based on how land has a textual function to the Australian Indigenous Arunta: land features not only had a symbolic significance as sacred objects, but also had a specific narrative function that coded a story.<sup>18</sup> The argument also rested on the hypothesis that Maori signatures scribbled on the document preceding the Treaty of Waitangi (a document by which the British colonizers eventually secured sovereignty over New Zealand) resembled “representations of natural features”, assenting the signatories sovereignty over their own lands and thus had different meanings than a Western signature.<sup>19</sup>

Fig. 7. Signatures which according to McKenzie allude to the landscape Archives New Zealand  
He Whakaputanga o te Rangatiratanga o Nu Tirenī  
Archival document (IA1 9/1/1a), excerpt. CC BY 2.0



The European narrative on colonization has long argued that this project was legal as it was done by signing contracts, and that it was justified because those who possessed lesser skills had fewer rights. McKenzie's view was a fair response to that narrative in that

<sup>18</sup> D. F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 39–40.

<sup>19</sup> The document preceding the treaty was called 'He Whakaputanga o te Rangatiratanga o Nu Tirenī' (Declaration of Independence of the United Tribes of New Zealand) and was signed in 1835. The treaty, which dates from 1840, has two versions: one in English and one in Maori. The latter one is not a precise translation, and thus the different interpretations on what it meant to each side might stem from the incomplete and rushed translation, or the translation might have been intentionally inaccurate. Ibid, 42, 79, 110–28.

specific context. Yet, if taken as a generalization for any period and region, his appeal can have unintended consequences for the wider history of reading.

This becomes apparent when we look at colonized areas in general and their dynamics. Once the conquering of a region had been completed, resources had to be extracted to cover the investment of colonization which required a strict work division with stark differences between most of the original inhabitants and the newcomers. Many of these inhabitants carried out manual labour and had no time to read, let alone the resources to acquire the skills or reading materials. This is not to say that there were no other forms of cultural expression and sense-making, such as festivals, the creation and interpretation of images, as well as public readings; but including these in the concept of 'reading' is counterproductive and feels artificial, as it ignores the differences rooted in systemic inequalities.

Besides seeking justice in historical narratives, equating reading to other forms of interpretation stems from the products of the printing press. In addition to books with images, printed stamps were widely available. Stamps were illustrations of well-known scenes of a story or the image of a saint which could contain some words or a prayer. They were extremely popular because of their accessibility and their appeal: they were cheap and did not require the ability to read.<sup>20</sup> Separating images from text in book history scholarship might be in many cases impossible and frankly unnecessary. Yet claiming that every consumer of stamps was reading is a step too far in the opposite direction: not only does such a use of the concept lump different activities into one, it ignores that some individuals had not been allowed to learn how to read.

As mentioned above, listening to someone read is an intricate part of the history of the activity. For various communities, reading aloud has been — and still is — a vital practice to various ends: from textual production to education and spiritual edification, as well as

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<sup>20</sup> In Spanish colonial America, stamps and devotional images were common household objects. They were also often given away after a special sermon or a celebration. Pedro Rueda Ramírez, "Las estampas o ver por papel. La llegada de grabados a tierras americanas en los siglos XVI-XVII," *Representaciones* 2.1 (2006), 35-58.





© Biblioteca Nacional de España

Fig. 8. Stamps were cheaper to produce as printers could re-use etchings from books and were easy to sell due to their low price. Most stamps do not survive due to their ephemeral nature. Jérôme David *D. Quixote maltraité des Bergers* Stamp, etching. Biblioteca Nacional de España, INVENT/80577

being a performance mode for some groups.<sup>21</sup> Reading aloud cannot simply be excluded from the history of reading, but can it be said that every person being read to is also reading? Similarly to the case of imagery, there is a problematic element in the case of sonority that complicates differentiating these activities. For example, what happens when one listens to somebody recite a poem that is not being read, but is rather learned by heart? Or to a radio programme? For many disciplines, a text is not strictly confined to written or printed words.<sup>22</sup>

Under specific contexts, listening to someone on the radio or seeing a theatre play can be considered *reading*. Historians should, however, be careful when taking the metaphorical use of reading from other disciplines into the study of the strictly defined activity of reading itself. Both these examples — interpreting visual objects, as well as listening to someone read aloud — are valuable forms of communication that enact meaning to the communities that utilize them. They attest to social practices that resemble what is done when reading is done: in every case a message is decoded. Yet the crucial difference remains in the circumstances: some individuals acquired non-natural neural pathways that allow for innovative cognitive breakthrough. Furthermore, the non-acquisition of these pathways does not owe to genetic differences, but to policies on access to knowledge transfer. Thus in some periods and regions, the access to certain kinds of information was limited due to the constraints upon the acquisition of the necessary skills.

Equating every act of image interpretation or listening to someone read aloud to the activity of decoding and making sense of a written text (i.e. reading), might seem an inclusive measure to value other communicative practices. But these practices should have an intrinsic value of their own, without being absorbed by reading. The contract that the Maoris signed was unfair as their signatures did not share the same meaning for them as

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<sup>21</sup> For some examples on oral poetry see Daniel Kane, *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) and Duncan Brown, *Voicing the Text: South African Oral Poetry and Performance* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> For example, McGann suggests that “texts, like all other things human, are embodied phenomena, and the body of the text is not exclusively linguistic”. Jerome McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 13. See also McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*, 13, 39, 61.

they did for the colonizers. Recognizing that their signatures functioned as landscape *texts*, will not make it any less unfair. Image interpretation by the illiterate is of no less value than what a literate person does by reading a book, but it is different from being able to read. Likewise, listening to a person recite a poem in a town's festival is neither more nor less of a cultural activity than reading. Highlighting the differences does not diminish other forms of communication, it only recognizes the particularities of each of them.

## THE PROBLEMS FOR POLICY

By detaching the complex process of acquiring and maintaining literacy from the activity of reading, policies which may have good intentions might fail the people whom they intend to serve. Herein lies the danger of equating different forms of interpretation as reading: ignoring inequities in other periods can blind us for the inequities of access now.

Although most countries consider literacy as being able to read and write, it can be broadly defined as the skills needed to participate in society. Because of the intricacy of our societies where laws, contracts, and knowledge are widely recorded in writing, being able to read complex texts is vital for operating in our social world.<sup>23</sup> According to UNESCO, literacy rates have never been so high. Nevertheless, 14% of adults in the world were still illiterate in 2014 (750 million).<sup>24</sup> Literacy can be further divided into low-literacy and active literacy. The former refers to situations in which the basic skills have been taught but individuals cannot understand a complex text necessary for daily life, while the latter refers to a high proficiency in reading that is used often.

In the Netherlands it is estimated that 10% of the population in 2012 (1.3 million) had low-literacy levels.<sup>25</sup> Such figures are more difficult to estimate for the whole world as

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<sup>23</sup> Stichting Lezen & Schrijven, "Feiten & Cijfers Laaggeletterdheid 2018," [https://www.lezenenschrijven.nl/uploads/editor/2018\\_SLS\\_Literatuurstudie\\_FeitenCijfers\\_interactief\\_DEF.pdf](https://www.lezenenschrijven.nl/uploads/editor/2018_SLS_Literatuurstudie_FeitenCijfers_interactief_DEF.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics, "Literacy Rates Continue to Rise from One Generation to the Next," FS/2017/LIT/45, September 2017, [http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/fs45-literacy-rates-continue-rise-generation-to-next-en-2017\\_0.pdf](http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/fs45-literacy-rates-continue-rise-generation-to-next-en-2017_0.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Marieke Buisman et al., *PIAAC: Kernvaardigheden voor werk en leven*, ROA External Reports ('s Hertogenbosch: ECBO, 2013). Stichting Lezen & Schrijven, "Veelgestelde vragen," <https://www.lezenenschrijven.nl/over-laaggeletterdheid/veelgestelde-vragen/>.

only around 40 countries have participated in an assessment of adult competencies from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and not even all of those have delivered a report.<sup>26</sup> Given the tendency of many countries to overestimate what literacy entails and the stigma that surrounds illiteracy, the real worldwide figures for active literacy might be much lower than the literacy figures from UNESCO.

While illiteracy levels seem to give a clear number of the people who have not received any sort of formal education, low-literacy levels indicate a common problem for the acquisition of literacy. Not only do people need to learn phonemes, syllables, and words to be able to read, but the skill also demands sufficient practice to reach a level that allows for the comprehension of certain complexity in texts. This step of sufficient and appropriate practice can differ for certain groups, as Maryanne Wolf's research has demonstrated. Her work has focused on developing methods for the acquisition of reading skills by dyslexic children and struggling readers. These methods require investing in interventions at the beginning of the reading acquisition process, such as elaborating a system of "core words that exemplify critical phonological, orthographic, and semantic principles", and following up on their acquisition by different learners.<sup>27</sup>

If the activity of reading is equated to other forms of interpretation and its complexities disappear from the foreground, the spreading and promotion of reading can quickly fall on easy 'solutions'. The most common programmes for promoting reading consist of spreading texts. For example, in the Netherlands, there is a reading promotion activity called *Boekenweek* (Books Week) where a book is given away to the buyer upon the purchase of another book.<sup>28</sup> In Mexico, the director of public libraries declared in 2019 the intention of his department to provide contemporary poetry books to libraries as a means to promote the habit of reading in every region of the country.<sup>29</sup> While providing engaging reading

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<sup>26</sup> OECD, "Country Specific Material, Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC)," <http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/publications/countryspecificmaterial/#d.en.489838>.

<sup>27</sup> Maryanne Wolf et al., "The RAVE-O Intervention: Connecting Neuroscience to the Classroom," *Mind, Brain, and Education* 3.2 (2009), 84-93.

<sup>28</sup> Maarten Dessing, "Nieuw merkenbeleid geeft CPNB meer focus," *Boekblad*, 15 June 2018.

<sup>29</sup> "Presenta ITC análisis de la poesía mexicana a cargo de Marx Arriaga Navarro," *Noticias Es Imagen*, 1 June 2019, <https://www.noticiasimagen.com/presenta-itc-analisis-de-la-poesia-mexicana-cargo-de-marx-arriaga-navarro/>.



material is without doubt one of the requisites to foster avid readers, this type of programme assumes that the presence of books will magically suffice to promote reading.<sup>30</sup> Yet, some people will not read because they never learned to do so. There are a variety of reasons for this, from learning difficulties to a lack of proper teaching environments.



Fig. 9. Give away books cannot tackle the problems of illiteracy.

Ali Eminov *Free Little Library, Madison*

Photograph. CC BY-NC

Researchers of literacy are well aware of the difficulties of acquiring reading skills. When releasing a recent study of different literacy campaigns, UNESCO highlighted the

<sup>30</sup> These type of programmes are also highly prescriptive, as the top decides what must be read, and can stand in the way of readers discovering their own books, thus paradoxically hampering the promotion of reading. For a French example, see Céline Zaepffel, “Jean de La Fontaine’s *Fables* and the Tradition of Both Delighting and Instructing Children,” in this publication.

“inadequate understanding of the complexity of designing and implementing successful literacy campaigns and programmes”.<sup>31</sup> Regardless, if ‘reading’ is used in book historical research for other interpretational activities, and this use is dispersed to the general public through popular scientific publications or presentations, a blind spot for the complexities of reading can develop. Although some inadequate policies might exist due to budget and infrastructure limitations rather than historical studies, scholars should reflect upon the possible implications of the language used when advising policy makers and the public in general.

### LONG LIVE THE DIFFERENCES

Although most humans can learn how to read, acquiring the skill is an extremely complex process which requires a huge investment in resources, from sufficient time to proper methods and materials, as well as well-paid teachers and continuous practice. Beneath this process lies a series of situations that are often not made explicit. Can the person afford not to work in order to learn? Is there an educational system in place where teachers are sufficiently trained to aid different types of learners? Are there spaces where people can practice? Are there tools for the short-sighted or blind? Are texts widely available? Are these situations dependent on gender or race?

The emancipatory power of reading is a trope that may have aided to its conceptual expansion to cover other activities. Yet, the power of communication in general should not be underestimated by focusing solely on reading, nor should the communal and multi-modal aspects of reading be ignored. My proposal is to remain aware of the neurological aspects of reading and the context that allows the acquisition of the skill. In doing so, we can acknowledge the different practices that surround reading without necessarily conflating every one of these acts with reading. The nuances of each practice will need to be historicized, linked to the period and place in which the activity occurs.<sup>32</sup> For example, when

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<sup>31</sup> UNESCO, “The Evolution and Impact of Literacy Campaigns and Programmes 2000-2014,” <https://uil.unesco.org/literacy/capacity-development/evolution-and-impact-literacy-campaigns-and-programmes-2000-2014>.

<sup>32</sup> David Armitage, “What’s the Big Idea? Intellectual History and the Longue Durée,” *History of European Ideas* 38.4 (2012), 500.



illiterate cigar-factory workers in nineteenth-century Cuba listened to a *lector* they were participating in a communal mode of oral reading, but it cannot be said that all of them were reading as some did not know how to. Medieval monks reading to one another were also participating in communal reading, the difference being that they were literate. In both instances, communication did not end when reading aloud stopped. The factory readings were prohibited because the texts prompted debates among the workers, while the monks would often use the oral mode as a basis for the production of texts. Highlighting the differences in both these cases does not do any disservice to the uses of reading, but rather allows us to not push aside the context that created those differences. The distinction between practices and uses may seem obvious to the extent that there is no demand to outline them. Book and reading historians should, however, be aware of the reach that their work can have. With the advent of digital and Open Access texts, scholarly works can be more easily read by non-historians. At the same time, universities and funders demand that scholars valorize their research by sharing their knowledge through more popular outlets. It is therefore crucial to be cognizant of how our terms and concepts can be received and further utilized by non-specialists.

## CONCLUSION

Concepts are never neutral. The meanings ascribed to the concept of reading are related to its different forms and manners, as well as the various practices that this activity has known throughout history. Yet the activity of reading is also beholden to power structures and policies in knowledge transfer which translate into who can or could make use of this activity, and why. In this paper I argued why certain practices related to reading should not be named 'reading' itself. Although interpreting images and listening to someone read aloud are part of reading practices, there is a neurological and contextual difference between those who are literate and those who are illiterate. Ignoring the differences can create blind spots for historical research and literacy policies. Scholars in the humanities are clear in their use of concepts. At the same time, the trade demands fine writing and the use of poetic devices. For example, calling images 'books for the illiterate' or claiming that while listening to someone read, the audience also reads are both highly evocative statements

which convey the cultural importance of reading. However suggestive, they obscure the differences between reading and other forms of interpretation, as well as the complexities of acquiring literacy. Stating the differences in modes of communication and the context that allows reading to take place can only benefit research and policy. The wonders that reading can afford should be highlighted, but so too the complexity of acquiring and maintaining the skill.

Andrea Reyes Elizondo is based at Leiden University where she covers the double function of PhD candidate at the Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society (LUCAS) and researcher at the Centre for Science and Technology Studies (CWTS). Her dissertation seeks to reconstruct the possibilities of reading in a society by looking into the context of this cultural technique and the elements that influence it. Her geographical area of research is New Spain during the eighteenth century. Andrea holds a BA in Communication Sciences, a BA in Dutch Studies, and an MA in Book and Digital Media Studies.