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GRASSROOTS STRUGGLES FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN CENTRAL AMERICA.

LYNN HORTON. COLORADO UP, 2007

Reviewed by Susan V. Meyers

A community literacy perspective is necessarily local, as scholars in our field work to unpack the histories, values, and practices of community actors engaged in a variety of literacy-based activities. Recently, however, several scholars have begun to call our attention to the “limits of the local” (Brandt and Clinton *ctd.* in Street 79). While ethnographic projects that seek to document specific manifestations of literacy are important, these descriptions need to consider the broader—and often global—contexts that impact local communities and their literacy constructions. If we neglect these wider contexts, the danger is that we will accrue an exhaustive list of local case studies without considering the complexity of global-local interchange (Street 80). In many such cases, however, a consideration of global-local interaction requires an interdisciplinary understanding not simply of literacy theory and practice but of historical, economic, and political forces as well.

Because of the importance of a globalized, interdisciplinary perspective to community literacy studies, new works like Lynn R. Horton’s *Grassroots Struggles for Sustainability in Central America* are useful compliments to our work in community literacy studies. In her new field study, Horton describes three local communities’ efforts to economically stabilize themselves and to participate in the larger national and international markets that impact them. These communities—set in rural areas of Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama—each find themselves at a nexus of tradition and change, working to adapt to outside economic and cultural influences that they cannot fully avoid, while at the same time struggling with the potential loss of the traditional community values that have sustained them up through the twenty-first century. Important questions of Horton’s work include “What truly qualifies as *sustainable* development?” and “Is large-scale economic development ultimately helpful or harmful to local communities?” Closely related to these questions are issues of community conditions themselves: “What is the material, political, and educative base of each community, and is this base sufficient in order to support significant economic growth and successful change?”

Horton’s answers to these questions are significant not only because of what they posit about economic development but also for what they imply about literacy theory and related policy. In her review of development discourses, Horton argues that dominant discourses, emerging primarily from Europe and the U.S., have worked persuasively to suggest that the economic growth resulting from projects sponsored by NGOs, the World Bank, and other international funding agencies has improved the standard of living for even the poorest members of countries like those in

Central America. Such discourses, however, rely on an uncritical model of development that assumes, like commensurate autonomous models of literacy (Street 77) that development functions identically across contexts. If a country's GDP grows, then it is assumed that the nation is flourishing. However, Horton's analysis of local conditions in Central America suggests otherwise. While NGO-sponsored projects were not universally negative, they were in the best cases complex and in the worst cases detrimental to local communities.

Horton's site on the Osa peninsula—historically one of the most remote and ecologically pristine areas of Costa Rica—demonstrates the complexity surrounding one of the root ideas related to sustainable development:

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the environment. As ecotourism has accelerated in the area of the Osa peninsula, two related issues have emerged. First, it has been crucial to protect the land, as through the creation of national parks, in order to regulate visitation and land use. Second, the increase in tourism undoubtedly creates economic opportunity in

the region. In the case of land protection, Horton describes the measures that the Costa Rican government has taken in order to protect its natural resources, so as to create a long-term sustainable tourist trade. In relation to the latter issue, however, the government has been less regulatory. As a result, the development of tourism in the area has functioned according to the natural trends of a capitalist market. That is, those citizens—or, in many cases, foreigners—with capital have been able to develop a few monopolizing businesses, such that the socio-economic structure of the area has become more stratified. In contrast to dominant discourses that describe the universal merits of economic growth, the growth of the tourist industry in the Osa peninsula has consolidated in the hands of a few. As a result, Horton argues that environmental conservation, while an important component of sustainable development, is neither autonomous nor neutral. In contrast to much idealist rhetoric surrounding the importance of the environment to sustainable development, it is often a means to economic growth—equitable or not—rather than an end in itself.

In a related story of socio-economic stratification, Horton outlines the formation of the town of Miraflores in northwest Nicaragua during the 1980s. Developed out of Sandinista agrarian reform movements, the town of Miraflores united inhabitants of the region who had been living under oppressed conditions working for wealthy land owners and gave them

collective land to farm themselves. Uniting collectively, and influenced by the revolutionary rhetorics that dominated at the time, Miraflores residents established a working agricultural base for subsistence living. Over time, however, the modest but stable settlement of Miraflores attracted the attention of NGOs, who assisted residents with the capital to improve their home and lands. Influenced by this foreign aid, Miraflores residents eventually voted to divide their lands, dissolving the cooperative that had sustained them for a decade. As a result, the social fabric of the town has shifted away from collective action toward individual self-preservation. While some families have improved their standard of living, those residents with the lowest levels of resources and education—most particularly women—remain skeptical about the wisdom of converting to private land holding. Instead, they believe that the state should intercede in order to ensure that all citizens receive adequate resources to keep them above the absolute poverty line. In this section, then, Horton identifies the ways in which historical circumstances can bring a community together, or divide it. While international intervention in Miraflores has raised the overall production of the area—and the standard of living of more than a few—the community has likewise stratified, and it has lost its collective identity.

Horton's final site, an indigenous area in southern Panama populated by the fiercely preservationist Kuna, demonstrates once again the inevitable impact that large-scale development has on local communities; but the Kuna likewise present an example of a community that has strategically worked with outside influences in order to protect its own interests. The root of these dynamics for the Kuna began with the extension of the intercontinental highway moving down from Panama City into deeper regions of the jungle in southern Panama, including areas close to the Kuna's traditional lands. Once their lands became accessible to domestic trade and development projects, the Kuna faced a variety of threats to their traditional way of life, from loss of land to the pressures of the individualistic capitalist market structure. The Kuna, however, neither succumbed to outside influence nor withdrew from it entirely. Instead, Horton argues, they made savvy choices in order to appropriate neoliberal discourses of sustainability so as to make the case for their own land claims. While this work did meet with some success, it has, however, likewise shifted the Kuna culture as work with dominant parties has required some members of the community to spend time in Panama City and elsewhere in order to educate themselves in the tools and interests of broad-scale development. This migratory pattern is an element that impacts increasing areas of Central America, Horton argues, to the effect that traditional values of local communities, like the Kuna, are becoming threatened. For instance, while the Kuna are an egalitarian community that prizes its collective identity, dominant sustainable development models often promote contrasting values of individual land ownership. So, while the Kuna have worked strategically to identify and appropriate the liberalist persuasion of dominant sustainability discourses, both migratory practices and top-down development projects do threaten to break apart their

traditional socio-economic structure. In this case, then, economic growth is not necessarily positive to the local community. Rather, the Kuna learn to manage what they must and resist what they can.

As she states early on, Horton synthesizes her three case studies by reminding us of the importance of questioning the ideological underpinnings of dominant discourses like those that currently promote sustainable development projects, particularly those that are sponsored internationally and are delivered top-down in local communities. In cases like the Osa peninsula, such projects may raise the overall economic productivity of an area, but they do not necessarily impact all local community members equitably. Rather, as in the cases of Miraflores and the Kuna, the social fabric of individual communities stands to change dramatically, most particularly from a collective orientation to an individualistic one. Because of the complexity of the development outcomes, community members continue to question the value of development in general, at times voicing regret about changes that have occurred, and at times actively resisting such change. At the very least, then, Horton insists, sustainable development, like literacy itself is very much a contested concept (Street 78). More specifically, the alternative grassroots discourses that local communities construct question the implicit goal of neoliberal economics, absolute growth, because that growth does not necessarily benefit them as promised. In many cases, economic growth in Central America has increased socio-economic stratification thereby threatening local community values on collective identity, community autonomy, and appreciation of nature as an end in itself. A better model for true sustainability in the region, then, would be one that is “linked to community empowerment built upon a material base of support, critical consciousness, and a capacity to act collectively” (Horton 146).

The lessons that Lynn Horton draws about sustainability in Central America are important reminders for literacy scholars interested in local communities’ experiences, particularly as they interface with dominant institutions. To begin with, Horton’s analysis is a firm reminder of the complexity of global/local interactions. Moreover, as she argues, it is not enough to simply critique dominant structures; it is equally important to identify the ways in which local communities interact with, and often resist, dominant values and paradigms. As Horton demonstrates through her description of the Kuna, for instance, local communities often find savvy means of analyzing dominant institutions and working within them toward their own ends. Rather than identifying victims within a system, then, it would be more prudent for us to work in the vein that Horton does: unpacking the complexity of global/local interactions, particularly the ways in which local actors construct the strategies of their own self-protection. In many cases, as Horton’s work suggests, both formal and informal avenues of education are necessary to this process, as is cooperative interaction and/or collective identity. Finally, however, Horton leaves us with an important question that likewise relates to literacy endeavors: As outsiders studying



the phenomenon of communities that so often are not our own, how can we glean the true complexity of their (often subtle) interactions; and, equally important, how can we broadcast these scenarios and lessons to ever wider audiences?

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