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What is the meaning of a safety pin? critical literacies and the ethnographic turn in contemporary art

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What is This?

'What is the meaning of a safety-pin?' Critical literacies and the ethnographic turn in contemporary art

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Abstract
In this contribution we address the concept of *critical literacies* by analyzing how symbolic representations within subcultures can be understood as an engagement with specific literacy practices. For some time now, cultural studies researchers with an interest in literacy have depended upon ethnographic methods to document how members of subcultural communities mobilize literacy practices to achieve critical ends. But the extent to which ethnography actually grants researchers access to subcultural perspectives on literacy has come into question. In this article, we aim to problematize and thematize the ethnographic perspective on literacy in general – and subculture as a situated literacy practice in particular – by critically assessing contemporary art practices that focus on the representation of subcultural identities. We therefore specifically look at artwork by Nikki S. Lee, who focuses on subcultures in her work through 'going native performances'.

In his seminal work *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* Dick Hebdidge (1979) discusses elaborately the meaning of symbols such as the safety-pin in punk subculture that emerged within the British working-class youth of the 1970s. Strongly embedded in the

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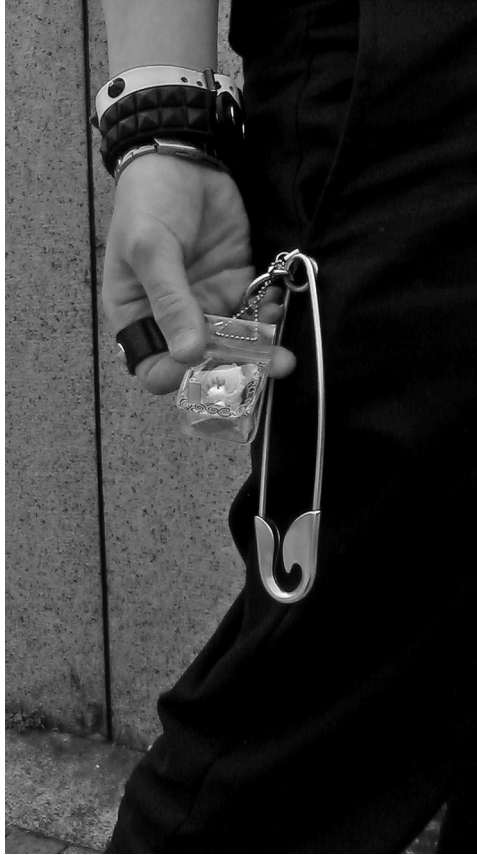Email: Kris.Rutten@UGent.be

Figure 1. Scattering of the fragile cherry blossoms. An van. Dienderen 2008.

Birmingham school of cultural studies and inspired by the work of Stuart Hall (Hall et al., 1976), Hebdidge studied how, on the one hand, the use of symbols within subcultures was recuperated by the conversion of subcultural signs such as dress and music into mass-produced objects and how, on the other, subcultural behavior was labeled as 'deviant' behavior. Introducing an ethnographic perspective for studying youth culture, Hebdidge described the style of punks as a form of *bricolage* (the appropriation of the safety-pin as a fashion statement), as a form of *homology* (the use of the safety-pin as a recognizable icon) and as a *signifying practice* (the use of the safety-pin as a display of 'otherness'). Hebdidge's reading of punk subculture was one of the first examples of a cultural studies engagement with youth cultures and his reading, of course, needs to be confronted with uses of similar symbols in different contexts. In Figure 1 we see a young girl who attached an oversized safety-pin to a *kawaii* (cute) figurine. Such subcultural behavior is common at the Harajuku Bridge (also called Jingu Bashi) in Tokyo, where young girls flock in weekends to expose their fashion styles, often influenced by manga and anime. It is remarkable that an ordinary object such as a safety-pin can grow into an

icon within punk subculture and – much later – is still used across several cultural spaces creating 'meaningful' practices for youngsters around the globe.

In this contribution we want to address the concept of *critical literacies* by analyzing how symbolic representations within subcultures can be understood as an engagement with specific literacy practices. For some time now, cultural studies researchers with an interest in literacy have depended upon ethnographic methods to document how members of subcultural communities mobilize literacy practices to achieve critical ends (Cintron, 1998; Mahiri, 1998; Moje, 2000). But the extent to which ethnography actually grants researchers access to subcultural perspectives on literacy has come into question. At the same time, literacy studies researchers with an interest in culture have increasingly turned to (popular) literacy narratives – novels, plays and films – for critically assessing or engaging with the *myths* or *templates* about literacy that circulate in (popular) culture at large. From an ethnographic perspective, these literacy narratives are often approached as stories that document 'rites de passage' as individuals discover and embrace particular cultural identities and reject others.

In this article, we aim to problematize and thematize the ethnographic perspective on literacy in general, and subculture as a situated literacy practice in particular, by critically assessing contemporary art practices that focus on the representation of subcultural identities. With this contribution we thus aim to further the work within literacy studies that takes the 'detour of culture' to critically assess the situated nature of literacy practices. As Mortensen (2012) convincingly argues, there is 'a tendency in literacy studies – call it a disciplinary "disposition" or "attitude" – to claim ownership of the question: Does literacy have consequences, and if so, what are they?' We concur that 'there is nothing intrinsically bad about asserting disciplinary expertise … except when we fail to see that others outside of [these] disciplinary and institutional spaces are also engaged in discerning, even theorizing, what literacy is and what it does' (Mortensen, 2012: 770). In what follows, we will explore how the 'ethnographic turn in contemporary art' (Foster, 1995) helps to 'denaturalize and make strange what [we] have learned and mastered' – which is the New London Group's (1996: 86) programmatic statement for literacy studies – but at the same time we will underscore the necessity to focus on the power and politics of these representational practices. Specifically, we wish to flesh out the particularities of what an ethnographic perspective might entail (or not) for studying literacy in relation to art practices by focusing on the work of contemporary artist Nikki S. Lee.

Performing literacy

Within literacy research, there has been an increasing focus on literacy as an engagement with language in specific educational contexts (Gee, 1991; Graff, 2003; Lea and Street, 1998; Willinsky, 1990). From this perspective, literacy acquisition is approached as a process of socialization situated in the context of the power structures of society and institutions. Duffy describes literacy as 'the rhetorical struggles of competing people, cultures and institutions seeking to impose meaning and establish authority in contexts of everyday life' (2004: 26). Such a rhetorical conception of literacy implies a focus on 'the influence of a particular rhetoric on what [people] choose to say [and] … acknowledg[ing] the influence of rhetoric on what people refrain from saying and the

expressive possibilities that are foreclosed to them' (Duffy, 2004: 227). This critical perspective on literacy starts from and elaborates on more recent perspectives within new literacy studies, 'including the view of literacy development as *ideological*, as a *product of discourse* and as an *expression of historical change*' (Duffy, 2003: 40).

Duffy (2007) argues that literacy develops along *cultural* pathways, but at the same time also along pathways that can be characterized as *personal, institutional, transnational* and *historical*. A critical perspective can connect these different pathways by approaching literacy development as 'a response to the symbolic activities of institutions, cultures, groups, or individuals' (Duffy, 2007: 200, quoted in Mortensen, 2012). Following this line of argument, James Gee introduces a broad perspective on literacy to indicate a whole 'way of being' (Gee, 2005). People have to learn to use different kinds of literacies in society and so become members of different interpretive communities. To participate in a specific interpretive community we need a particular literacy or an *identity toolkit*. This metaphor implies we also have to pay attention to the *cultural tools* (signs, symbols, artifacts) by and through which we create meaning (Vygotsky in Wertsch, 1998). Gee stresses that literacy is all about 'language and *other stuff* which includes body language, gestures, actions, symbols, tools, technologies, values, attitudes, beliefs and emotions' (2005: 7).

All these tools are used to create a socially meaningful role in a socially meaningful play. Indeed, to become a member of a specific group, we have to learn 'how to act and talk so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize' (Gee, 1991: 1). Starting from such a description of literacy as a *tool*, Elizabeth Moje (2000) has studied the literacy practices of subcultures, specifically of 'gangsta' adolescents. In her article '"To be part of the story": the literacy practices of gansta adolescents', she addresses the question of what these 'unsanctioned' literacy practices *do* for adolescents: 'Are they simply acts of resistance? Or do adolescent gang members … use literacy as a way of exploring possible worlds, claiming space, and making their voices heard?' (Moje, 2000: 651). Combining insights from new literacy studies with the work from cultural studies theorists such as Fiske and Grossberg, Moje studies how unsanctioned literacy is used not only to resist and divide, but also to identify: 'to make meaning about the events in their everyday lives' (2000: 654). In *Angels' Town: Chero Ways, Gang Life and the Rhetorics of Everyday*, Cintron (1998) explores – from a similar perspective – a project in rhetoric of public culture with a Mexican-American community to show how people make sense of their lives through cultural forms and how the work of anthropologists is in itself culture-making. Focusing on institutional and vernacular literacy practices, Mahiri (1998) reveals in *Shooting for Excellence: African American and Youth Culture in New Century Schools* the dynamics of effective learning both on the basketball court and in the classroom.

These examples show that studying literacy also implies studying how the symbols of popular culture are used to create 'affinity spaces' (Gee, 2005) – sites for performing literacy practices among peers – based on specific identifications and communicative patterns. Relating subcultures to 'style', Barry Brummett describes style as a 'complex system of actions, objects and behaviors that announces who we are, who we want to be considered akin to. It is therefore also a system of communication with rhetorical influence on others' (2008: xi). Indeed, 'cultural theories have problematized the notion that

people simply respond to the conditions around them by resisting or accommodating experiences … people use popular cultural texts and experiences in unpredictable ways to make sense of and take power in their worlds' (Moje, 2000: 654).

Literacy narratives as ethnography

The anthropologist Tim Ingold states that to describe something as a tool 'is to place it in *relation* to other things within a field of activity in which it can exert a certain effect' and that to name a tool is to position it within a story: 'considered as tools, things *are* their stories' (2011: 56). Starting from a description of literacy as tool, Gee indeed argues that narratives are an important source of inspiration for a critical reflection on literacy, because:

> people make sense of their experience of other people and the world by emplotting them in terms of socially and culturally specific stories … which are supported by the social practices, rituals, texts and other media representations of specific social groups and cultures. (1999: 2)

These so-called literacy narratives are:

> places where writers explore what Victor Turner calls *liminal* crossings between worlds. In focusing upon those moments when the self is on the threshold of possible intellectual, social and emotional development, literacy narratives become sites of self-translation where writers can articulate the meanings and the consequences of their passages between language worlds. (Soliday, 1994: 511)

Literacy stories or narratives give us an ethnographic perspective on literacy since they:

> let us look at reading, writing or speaking as unusual when, like an ethnographer, the narrator assumes that something as seemingly natural as learning to write in school is not a neutral event but is itself a meaningful social drama. (Soliday, 1994: 514)

We agree with Soliday, who writes: 'the ethnographer shares with the novelist … one of narrative's most traditional uses … making the common event uncommon and hence defamiliarizing quotidian reality' (1994: 514). Janet Tallman (2002) describes the difference between the ethnographer and the artist as 'somewhat artificial' because in many ways 'they are similar':

> Both attempt to put into words the results of their observations and their ruminations on what they have observed. Both tend to stand apart, consciously marginalized vis-à-vis the cultures they describe, self-alienated, disciplining themselves to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. (2002: 22)

From this perspective, fictional literacy narratives (novels, plays and films) have been increasingly used in literacy research and in education to reflect upon traditional views of literacy (Eldred and Mortensen, 1992; Trier, 2001, 2006; Williams and Zenger, 2007). Trier (2001, 2006), for example, problematized students' traditional views on literacy through the study of popular films.

The extent to which an ethnographic perspective actually grants access to specific (subcultural) literacy practices has of course already come into question. Less concerned with the possibilities of accurately representing the 'other' and his practices, the ethnographer nowadays aims at comparatively relating his own cultural frame to that of an 'other' so as to describe an interactive relation. Ethnographers look, furthermore, at cultural practices in which attention is paid to self-reflexive, intersubjective description, where one relays engagement with a particular situation (experience) and the assessment of its meaning and significance within a broader context (interpretation) (Kwon, 2000: 75). The idea that one actually can 'go native' and 'blend in', so as to completely integrate and participate, has been criticized as exoticism. Yet the stress on ethnography as an interactive encounter is of crucial importance as 'the informant and the ethnographer are producing some sort of common construct together, as a result of painstaking conversation with continuous mutual control' (Pinxten, 1997: 31). In this article, we want to problematize and thematize the ethnographic perspective on literacy in general, and subculture as a situated literacy practice in particular, by critically assessing contemporary art practices that specifically focus on the representation of subcultural identities and that can be analyzed as literacy narratives. We will therefore look at artwork by Nikki Lee, who focuses in her work on 'going native performances'.

Can (literacy) performances become 'native'?

From the mid-1960s onwards, ethnography has had a substantial influence on contemporary art practice, when several (conceptual) artists focused on cultural structures and processes (Lippard, 2010: 25). Hal Foster (1995) referred to this as 'the ethnographic turn in contemporary art'. According to Kwon, art projects through the 1980s and 1990s:

> self-reflexively incorporating within the work an acknowledgment of, and critique of, uneven power relations enacted by and through representations, can be seen to share ethnography's concern to deconstruct the production of knowledge and the constitution of the authority of that knowledge. (Kwon, 2000: 76)

Over the past few years many art events have been organized that bear significant similarities to ethnography, not only a focus on cultural processes but also in their theorizations of representational practices (van. Dienderen, 2012: 174–5). Artists such as Nikki Lee, Bill Viola, Francesco Clemente, Jimmy Durham, Cindy Sherman, Kara Walker, Lothar Baumgarten, Kutlug Ataman, Francis Alÿs, and many others indeed share with ethnography and cultural studies a concern for the 'politics of representation' (Schneider and Wright, 2006: 19).

Nikki Lee is a Korean-born, New York City-based artist who became renowned through a photographic series titled *Projects* (1997–2001) in which she asked to be photographed as part of different (sub)cultural groups. The *Projects* series presents a visual representation of subcultural communities, in which Lee's own blending within these groups refers to her ethnographic activity. The titles of her work are rather self-explanatory such as *Hispanic, Exotic Dancers, Yuppie, Hip Hop, Lesbian, Skateboarders, Punk, Young Japanese (East Village)*. In these photographs she presents herself as a member of

Figure 2. *The Punk Project, 1997.* Nikki S. Lee. Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins and Co.

such different groups, apparently having performed different 'rites de passage' and mastered particular talents to be accepted as such. You can see her on a city bench as a punk girl in the arms of a punk boy, enjoying an intimate moment, which seemed to be shot spontaneously (Figure 2). Stylistically, these photographs exemplify a lack of concern for high standard photography, asking friends or passers-by to point-and-shoot.

As argued above, several scholars within critical literacy studies have argued that 'becoming literate' can be described as 'performing rites de passage', which indeed is the salient characteristic that makes Lee's work appealing. We therefore claim that the *Projects* series alluding to different 'rites de passage' for blending in with specific subcultural groups can indeed be described as *literacy narratives*. Figure 3 shows Lee in a car in a group of several hip hop youngsters, signing and body talking. Throughout the photographs in the *Project* series, Lee is like a chameleon, who adopts different roles, physically connected to members of different communities, and 'blending in' seemingly without effort. Through costume, pose, style and make-up she appears in the photographs as one of 'them'.

Figure 3. *The Hip Hop Project, 2001, 1.* Nikki S. Lee. Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins and Co.

Indeed, it is precisely this intimacy and these experiential qualities that give the viewer the feeling of experiencing 'otherness' through the illusion that 'painstaking conversation with continuous mutual control' has taken place (Pinxten, 1997: 31). As Kwon observes, 'what she really delivers is "experience", evidence of an encounter with the "other" that satisfies the general "longing for the referent" and the desire for a proximate relation to the "real" in the majority of her art audience' (Kwon, 2000: 86). However, how can the viewer really be guaranteed that Lee has had an interactive or proximate relation with these 'others'? What 'proof' is there in the picture of such an engagement other than the stylistic conventions of a snapshot picture, which the viewer decodes as a moment of intimacy? Indeed, Kwon states that:

> the snapshot aesthetic verifies, even guarantees, the imagined authenticity of Lee's experiential engagement with the subcultural community of her choice … the snapshots function to falsely signify 'intimacy', a quality of extended engagement normally based on deep knowledge, rapport and trust. (2000: 86)

The visual production of the picture as a snapshot that serves to validate such proximate relations, points certainly to Lee's artistic authorship. Although her photographs have this amateurish feel with the date and time on each shot, the suddenness and seemingly 'unstudied' poses of the subjects, it is a conscious choice to select those visual elements that create the narrative Lee wishes to convey in which she indeed has 'gone native'. Yet, paradoxically, in this narrative the 'real' interactive experience and process of Lee has no place. As viewers we do not have any notion as to how Lee actually produced her proximity other than the visual 'amateurish' picture. The subcultural communities in Lee's photographs serve as décor for Lee's performances. Yet, as viewers we don't have any insight as to what 'the subcultural other' might feel, think, experience

when Lee entered their world. Lee gives the illusion of presenting experiences with otherness, but gives no insight as to how these experiences actually were produced: how did she 'go native', how long did it take, what type of interactive and proximate relationships have occurred, how was the image taken, etc.? We concur with Smith who argues that:

> such an emphasis on the end-product rather than on process and experience undermines the claims to ethnography that her work portends, and, more importantly, shifts the balance of power and authority in Lee's favor.… While the *Projects* images hover between being professional and amateur, composed and spur-of-the-moment, they do not demonstrate shared ethnographic power so much as they shore up Lee's autonomy and challenge her subject's agency. (2011: 216–17)

Through the illusion of an ethnographic practice, 'guaranteed' by the specific documentary conventions of the snapshot, Lee presents photographs of subcultural communities in which experience should support the processes of identification she claims to present. However, when we actually take a look at what kind of concept Lee offers on such processes of identification, the result is far from what any ethnographic understanding might involve. Through these images the viewer is not so much attracted by the particularities of the several subcultures, nor does s/he perceive any relation with the 'complex mixture of the shared historic experiences, social proscription, and political motivations' that form identity, 'nor does it express political and social empathy with the groups that are infiltrated' (Smith, 2011: 209). Instead the *Projects* photographs:

> offer up identifications as hollow emblems. They embody the postmodern notion of the commoditized identity wherein tradition is one among many attributes used to gain cultural capital and lure economic investment. Indeed, Lee's *Projects* reinforce poststructuralist ideas of identity-formation as merely socially constructed, which then leads to the understanding that identification is merely a matter of choice. (Smith, 2011: 209)

Kwon also contends that 'such work abstracts subcultural communities as fashion tableaux … it reduces the crisis of identity to a game of costume changes' (2000: 58).

However, it is exactly the performance of these 'rites de passage' which is the prominent characteristic that makes Nikki Lee's work an interesting starting point to reflect upon the 'liminal' crossings that are part of processes of literacy acquisition. We can look at her work as offering a critical and even a comic frame on being a member of a specific subculture, which is often regarded as a very serious and at the same time a natural state of being. This is as true for youth subculture as it is for the academic community (which can be seen as a subculture in its own right). By presenting herself as a chameleon she caricatures how the membership of a particular community is also 'merely' about knowing the proper codes, about being able to perform the part. Indeed, a caricature can be described as 'a portrait, or other artistic representation in which the characteristic features of the original are exaggerated with ludicrous effect' (Smith, 2011: 184). The caricature is reinforced by the fact that Nikki Lee plays with repetition throughout these projects and that we 'recognize' her as seemingly 'blended in' within all these different communities as if there is nothing to it, which puts the notion of authentic membership into perspective. Her work thus offers opportunities to defamiliarize and make strange

what it implies is 'real' and 'authentic' – indeed, by 'making the common event uncommon and hence defamiliarizing quotidian reality' (Soliday, 1994: 514).

From this perspective, literacy narratives also offer opportunities for showing how the process of 'becoming literate' is a 'rite de passage' that has as much to do with learning the right codes that count in a specific interpretive community as with cognitive skills and capacities. In his book *Clueless in Academe*, Graff (2003) elaborates on this idea by examining how, for example, academic literacy can be demystified and how students can be invited and encouraged to join the academic conversation: 'Somehow, somewhere, young people need to join, if only part-time, the club we belong to. That's more important than the particulars of what they learn' (Graff, 2003: 22). For Graff, succeeding in higher education implies learning to think and to communicate in analytical ways, learning academic discourse, in other words, learning what he calls the academic 'argue-speak'. Graff's argument is that students first need to play (or even 'fake') the academic identity to be able to 'become' part of the academic fac community. Furthermore, as Woody Allen's *Zelig* argues: 'It is safe to be like others.' Not surprisingly Zelig has been described as a precursor to Lee's *Projects* (Godfrey, 2000).

At the same time, however, these perspectives raise several questions. For example, we have to ask ourselves if students should just transform themselves into 'like-minded peers'. The question is, using Graff's metaphor of academe as a club, whether students can (and should) become members of the club just by accepting its rules. This process is very complex because we can hardly list all the codes we need to participate in a particular community. We can question whether we can reduce the rhetorical 'moves' that count in academe to the concrete set of templates that Graff (2007) proposes in his college writing textbook *They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academe.* Furthermore, the idea of education as socialization into a community (or club) is also problematic because all social systems are dominant meaning systems and therefore always ideological. Can students indeed 'go native', as Lee claims to do in her *Projects*, just by playing the part and by 'pretending' to be part of the club? As viewers we seem to be confronted with images that stimulate us to join Lee's game –like the 'Where's Waldo?' moments, when viewers are encouraged to '[spot] Lee and decod[e] her masquerade' (Dalton, 2000: 47). What *Projects* offers is a look at Lee's performances and experiences without any relation to interpretation, which is what participant observation would offer and, according to Kwon, testifies to the 'overevaluation of "personal experience" as the basis of true and reliable knowledge about culture and the self' (2000: 75–6). Smith agrees that it is Lee who is 'the *Projects*' subject and object; she is the visible constant that can be found in all of the images, the authoritative tie that binds it together' (Smith, 2011: 230–1). As the artist who is the central figure of all her artwork, Lee ultimately creates a narrative about Lee's authorship and does not shed any insight with regard to what the process of shared ethnography might entail.

There is another question of where and how 'literacy' comes into play. Turning her gaze on different subcultural communities and photographing these moments, which testify as a proof of Lee's blending within such communities, has brought Lee enthusiastic praise from the art market and art critics for her 'going native performances' (Kwon, 2000: 84). Other critics appreciate the way in which she creates 'presentations of others who are potentially within herself' so as to present 'endless possibilities for self-alteration'

(de Brugerolle and Cotter, quoted by Kwon, 2000: 84). Her work has a particular appeal precisely because of the *experiences* she promises to offer with the 'other'. Indeed, Lee is not creating a dialogue *within* a community but addresses the viewer as member of the interpretive art community:

> Lee's project ultimately seems less directed at sub-cultures than at a contemporary art audience.… A shared and secret understanding springs up between artist and viewer: we are not like the people with whom she appears and we can recognise the subtlety of the joke. But while flattering, this complicity lulls the viewer into a kind of snobbery. These photographs reveal a widespread indulgence of stereotypes … (Godfrey, 2000)

This of course raises a number of critical questions such as: who is the audience for these images, what are the codes they need to understand in order to see these images as 'natural', and to see Lee's performances in those pictures as potentially authentic. It needs to be taken into account that artgoers and artcritics as such are in a 'difficult' position with regard to reading these pictures and analyzing them in terms of their alleged faithfulness to what 'real' subcultural codes might be.

Conclusion

By opening up traditional views on literacy, the new literacy studies has convincingly developed a sociocultural perspective for understanding literacy acquisition *also* as a process of socialization. Moving away from a focus on literacy development as a natural and neutral process to a focus on literacy as a highly situated and contextualized practice opens up possibilities for showing that dominant literacy is only one choice among many different 'literacies'. At the same time, the notion of literacy as a form of 'transformation' is also increasingly problematized. We concur with Mortensen (2012) that:

> it is fair to say that today many scholars in literacy studies echo some version of Graff's (1979) critique of the 'literacy myth', insofar as they reject the claim that, on a macro-social scale, literacy causes modernity, or that, on a micro-social level, it improves individuals' economic standing, [however] there remains in the field a yearning for literacy to have nameable consequences. (2012: 770)

The (problematic) notion of literacy as transformation has been elaborately discussed in a number of critical analyses of the representation of the Pygmalion template in literacy narratives such as *My Fair Lady* (Eldred and Mortensen, 1992) and *Educating Rita* (Verdoodt et al., 2010). By focusing on transformations and 'rites de passage', these narratives 'dramatize' the tension that arises in moving from one interpretive community to another, and problematize what it implies to 'fake' the identity of a specific community.

In this article, we addressed the concept of *critical literacies* by analyzing how symbolic representations within subcultures can be understood as an engagement with specific literacy practices. At the same time, we problematized the ethnographic perspective on subculture as a situated literacy practice by critically assessing contemporary art practices that focus on subcultural identifications as their object of 'study'. We specifically looked at artwork by Nikki Lee, who focuses on subcultures in her work through 'going

native performances'. The analysis of Lee's *Projects* reveals that the ethnographic narrative appeals to many as a guarantee of an 'encounter with the "other" that satisfies the general "longing for the referent" and the desire for a proximate relation to the "real" in the majority of her art audience' (Kwon, 2000: 86). The audience appreciates the fact that Lee creates such a narrative, in which she underscores the possibility of blending, of 'going native', confirming Lippard's statement that 'the rather utopian notion of "reciprocal ethnography" has been widely embraced' (2010: 25). However, as ethnographers for some decades have stated, such utopian notions are part of exotic fantasies. Without wanting to dismiss reciprocal ideals, what an ethnographic perspective can offer is the importance of interactivity, where one not only stresses the focus on experience but relaying it to interpretation so as to overcome the 'overevaluation of "personal experience"' (Kwon, 2000: 75). Although Lee's work cannot be used as an example of shared ethnographic power, paradoxically, by not exploring the processes and experiences of 'others', or not expressing empathy with the groups that she infiltrated, which is what an ethnographic perspective focuses on, the viewer (and us) become all the more interested in understanding and experiencing these 'others'.

Of course, we are aware that there are many different readings possible of Lee's work and we do not claim to have provided a 'definitive' reading of her work. For example, the question arises of whether the ethnographic practice that is represented in the pictures also makes her 'art' ethnographic as such. It would take us beyond the scope of this article to address such questions in detail. Our aim was rather to re-theorize ethnographic inquiry's value in studying the performance of literacy in subcultural settings by engaging with the work of Nikki Lee and by positioning her as an artist-ethnographer. From this perspective, Lee's *Projects* offer an interesting starting point to reflect upon literacy acquisition as a 'rite de passage', thereby offering opportunities to denaturalize identifications within specific interpretive communities. At the same time, Lee's work needs to be critically assessed, specifically with regard to the ethnographic claims that are being made in her work, so as to raise several issues concerning the power and politics of representing subcultural identities. Our analysis therefore aims to be an example of studying literacy 'at the intersection' of cultural studies and literacy studies, thereby confronting 'a vision of literacy programs that make assimilation secure and complete' with 'a version of literacy that, short of political revolution, always results in the unfinished, the displaced' (Eldred and Mortensen, 1992). Indeed, the ethnographic turn stresses that the world and our identity are not constant, so we are obliged to 'redescribe' or 'restory' it constantly (Rorty, 1989). Analyzing art practices can play an important role in this process. Indeed, as Lanham states, 'to take only one example, a body of critical thinking in the twentieth century argued that art's job was to defamiliarize experience, to make it new by making us see it in a new way' (2006: 26). And James Clifford has similarly described the task of the ethnographer as a 'cultural critic, a defamiliariser and juxtaposer' (in Coles, 2000: 55).

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