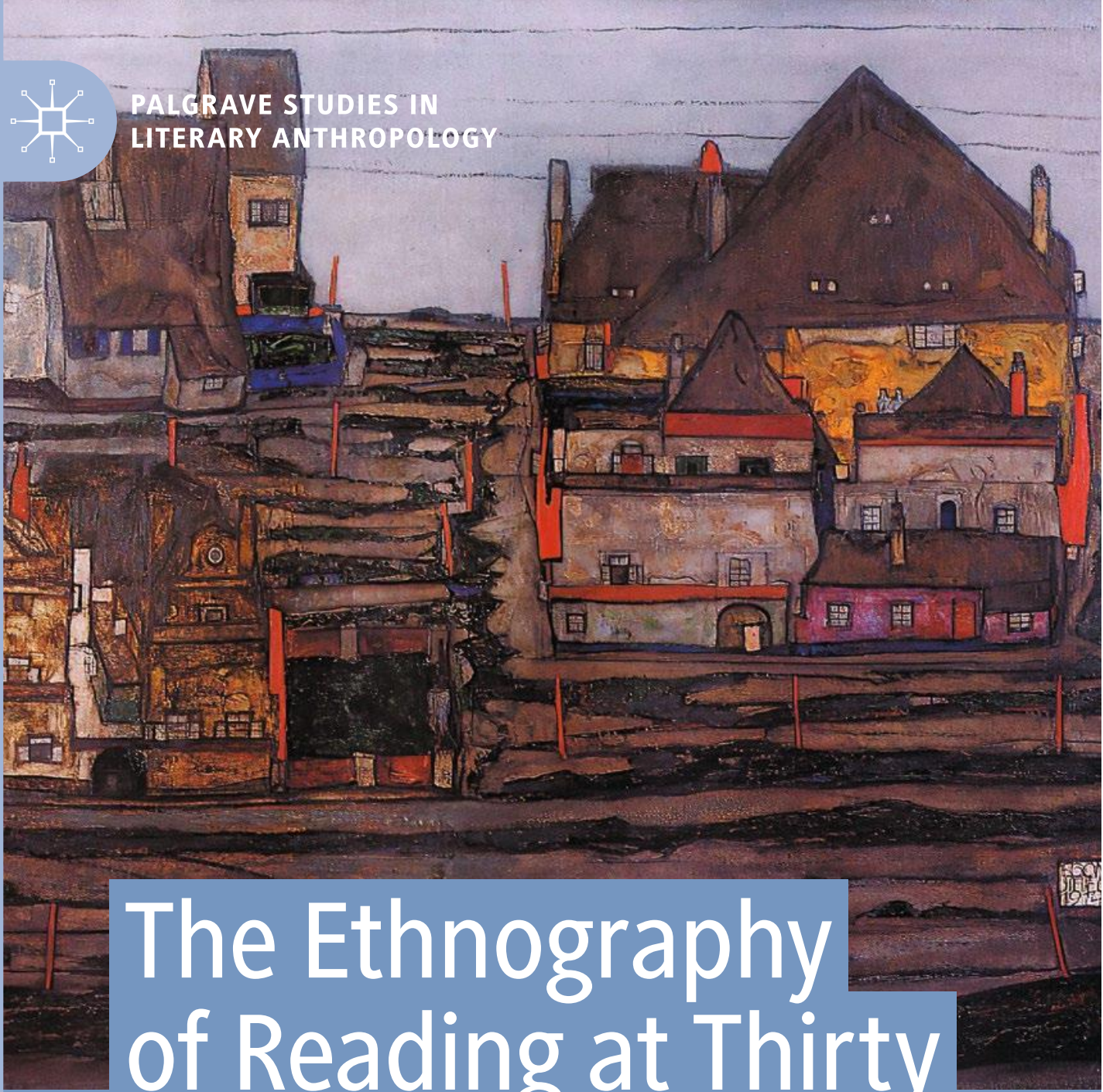




PALGRAVE STUDIES IN
LITERARY ANTHROPOLOGY



The Ethnography of Reading at Thirty

Edited by
Matthew Rosen



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Editor

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CONTENTS

1	Introduction: The Ethnography of Reading at Thirty	1
	Matthew Rosen	
2	Reading as Self-making: Using Mobile Ethnography to Examine the Contemporary Literate Practices of Middle-Class Adolescent Girls in Singapore	17
	Chin Ee Loh	
3	A Language-and-Materiality Approach to Reading: Reinvigorating Thirty-Year-Old Questions	43
	Britt Halvorson and Ingie Hovland	
4	Reading Context: On the Ethnography of Translation and Commentary	53
	Andrew Brandel	
5	A Labor Theory of Reading: Physical Hardship, Intensive Repetition, and the Value Regime of the <i>Dujing</i> Movement in Contemporary China	69
	Yukun Zeng	
6	Reading Foucault at Dusk: Politics of Philosophy in Neoliberal South Korea	89
	Shinjung Nam	

7	Brazilian Black Activists' Anthropophagous Manifesto: Reclaiming Blackness in Afro-Brazilian History and Culture	109
	Antonio J. Bacelar da Silva	
8	Cultivating Socialist Selves: Reading Trotsky Under the Specter of Capitalist Realism	125
	Ahmed Kanna	
9	Together and Apart: Shared Reading as an Embodied and Intersubjective Ritual of Resonance	149
	Charlotte Ettrup Christiansen and Anne Line Dalsgård	
10	Reading for Sharing	171
	Cicilie Fagerlid	
11	From Literary Field to Instagram Feed: Ethnographies of Reading in Delhi	195
	Rashmi Sadana	
12	Miracles of the Street	207
	Matthew Rosen	
13	The Ongoing Work of New York City Graffiti Writers During the Covid-19 Epoch	225
	Amina Tawasil	
14	Afterword: The Ethnographer of Reading, Pushing Seventy	251
	Jonathan Boyarin	
	Index	259



CHAPTER 3

A Language-and-Materiality Approach to Reading: Reinvigorating Thirty-Year-Old Questions

Britt Halvorson and Ingie Hovland

In 2019, the two of us discovered that we had both been spending hours doing archival reading about Christian women reading Luke 10:38–42. This biblical passage—which describes the sisters Mary and Martha hosting Jesus—had taken on a life of its own, quite separately, in 1920s Norway and the 1950s US. Why were white middle-class Protestant women spending hours reading and discussing, both individually and in groups, other women’s appraisals of this passage in magazines and pamphlets—and then writing up their own takes (including some where Martha was reimagined as sweeping and cooking food in suburban US homes)? What we found was that Mary and Martha presented two different examples of Christian

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piety that women in these two communities were struggling to reconcile with shifting norms for gendered labor, especially work outside and inside the home. Reading the passage was in itself an embodied activity that held possibilities for women readers, who were working as teachers, farmers, store clerks, volunteers, and caretaking for children and families, to relate in a variety of ways to Mary and Martha. Yet, both communities also emphasized that women's bodily work was a problem to be worked with and worked through *in* reading (Halvorson and Hovland 2021).

These insights about reading's irreducible ties to readers' situated identities and material circumstances led us to think about new ways to link language and materiality—or, put differently, to see reading a text as a selective and positioned material engagement with the world. Though we drew together a variety of theoretical and ethnographic works, it is arguably the path-breaking volume *The Ethnography of Reading* (Boyarin 1993a) that gave us some of the best inspiration. It laid out an approach to reading that neither sacrificed attention to the subtleties of discursive knowledge-making through language nor the lived spaces, roles, and relationships activated in reading.

In this chapter we explore how work in *The Ethnography of Reading* negotiated the interaction between language and materiality in reading and consider which questions remain unresolved from this scholarship. We briefly review some of the conceptual frameworks employed in the volume that helped to frame reading as a dynamic process of shaping meaning in a social-material context. This was a significant shift in the anthropological conversation on reading. Yet, thirty years later, we believe some of the original questions posed by this volume could be reinvigorated through recent work from the “material turn,” such as the anthropological approach to language as infrastructure or the shift to new materialism and posthumanism in literacy studies. Where have conversations on materiality as well as materiality and language gone since the original 1993 volume? What could a language-and-materiality approach contribute to some of the volume's original questions? We also want to turn the question around and ask: What can *The Ethnography of Reading* contribute to our conversations today?

REVISITING THE MATERIALITY OF LANGUAGE IN *THE*
ETHNOGRAPHY OF READING

The volume *The Ethnography of Reading* broke new ground by naming reading as a focus of anthropological attention. But, contrary to what this might imply, its project was not one of creating a new domain of analytical inquiry, per se. Rather, it is the volume's intriguing, subtle, and important insistence on the sociality of reading, or the way that reading was always already caught up in a variety of other material and political projects, that we wish to draw forward for discussion.

One of the mechanisms through which the volume's authors produced awareness of the density of material and social relations within acts of reading was through the dynamic relationship of text and context. In "Voices Around the Text," Jonathan Boyarin describes how Jewish students at New York City's Mesivta Tifereth Jerusalem "actualize" the biblical text through "images from popular culture" and "the geography of the Lower East Side" (1993c, 217). One among many memorable moments comes when a participant jokes about mishearing *tizke lemitzves* as "fistful o'mitzvahs," referencing the Clint Eastwood movie *Fistful O'Dollars* and drawing an indirect but effective contrast between the students' pious orientation to mitzvot (good deeds based on religious duty) and an outside world's attraction to money (1993c, 225). Though Boyarin does not explicitly identify this as being about language's materiality nor necessarily how it acquires meaning in relation with nearby places, such as movie houses or Wall Street, he makes clear that Jewish textual tradition is always enlivened by intersubjective ties between readers and places. Through such ties, a complex dialogue is set up between texts—"records of dialogue" themselves—and readers (1993c, 222).

The classroom scene that Boyarin richly describes also works against what Elizabeth Long in her chapter calls the modernist stereotype of the solitary reader, disconnected from their material and social relations in the circumstance of reading. In Long's analysis, influential cultural images "privilege a certain kind of reading" (1993, 181), especially its analytical and intellectual (rather than embodied or collective) dimensions. During the commercial expansions of the nineteenth century, Long notes that European paintings often portrayed women's leisure reading as a middle-class consumption role, rather than a higher-status, masculinized activity of textual production or distribution. What Long so persuasively demonstrates here is that the cultural hegemony of solitary reading is a European

modernist construction that walled up reading acts, using them to illuminate private, domestic, and interior bourgeois spaces, while preventing full recognition of their political-economic, classed, raced, and gendered qualities. She calls these ideologically hidden yet central aspects of reading its “social infrastructure” (1993, 191), a concept that encompasses elements as wide-ranging as the circulation and sale of books to the classed hierarchy of taste that may deem certain texts more “worthwhile” than others.

The material spaces and effects of reading are expanded on in other book chapters by James Baker and Greg Sarris. In Baker’s work, public Quranic recitation in Tidore, eastern Indonesia, is a way of “giving value to the written words” (1993, 107). Here, the Quranic words themselves, including foreign Arabic names, are “received” in public performances, lending shape to a communal commitment to Islam. Baker contends that uttered name lists operate similarly in other contexts where they establish indexical relations between ancestral figures and the local territory, becoming a lived form of historical memory tied to the immediate environment. In the volume’s final chapter by Greg Sarris (1993), it is the material disconnections of reading to colonized spaces that are instead examined in a Kashaya Pomo Reservation classroom in northern California. There, the author finds twenty-six K-8 children roundly rejecting their white non-native teacher’s effort to introduce a Kashaya traditional story. Sarris observes that the text provided in the classroom was written down as an encapsulated narrative, stripped of many of the stylistic and contextualizing details that would be used if it were spoken aloud. Along with the instructor’s pedagogical approach to reading, this had the effect of discouraging the students from making connections between their experiences and the story, a practice with a colonizing history in Kashaya education. In this case, in contrast to Baker’s discussion, students were disinclined to create material connections to the local environment, each other, or their ancestors, making the story an alienated material artifact.

Through this necessarily cursory look into a rich, multifaceted volume, we wish to highlight that one of the underlying themes in *The Ethnography of Reading* is attention to how reading a text dynamically inflects and shapes the lived material circumstances of readers. The chapters we discuss insist on approaching reading through what Boyarin refers to in the book’s introduction as a “field of interaction” (1993b, 2). In revisiting the volume now, we can see this theoretical intervention as an important legacy that can be fruitfully put in dialogue with the more recent “material turn.”

THE MATERIAL TURN: REINVIGORATING QUESTIONS ABOUT MATERIALITY AND LANGUAGE

As we look back at the thirty years that have passed since *The Ethnography of Reading* was published, the shift that stands out for us is the so-called material turn that has taken place over the past two decades (e.g., Bennett and Joyce 2013; Henare et al. 2007). We recognize that the “material turn” is a vague, catch-all term, and that it has the potential to be misleading insofar as anthropologists (including those writing for *The Ethnography of Reading*) were certainly interested in material objects, bodies, places, practices, and circumstances before the material turn. But we use it here to think about the broader interest that has emerged across the humanities and social sciences in elevating the material to the same analytical importance as the discursive. From this perspective, assemblages of material things and beings may shape social life as much as systems of ideas, if not more.

We are especially interested in how this renewed attention to the material has introduced a new openness to thinking about how materiality relates to language. We think this casts new light on some of the underlying themes that were explored in *The Ethnography of Reading*, allowing us to reexamine how the material and linguistic come together in events of reading. By way of example we mention two specific instantiations of the material turn here: the renewed attention to materiality in linguistic anthropology and the shift toward new materialism in literacy studies.

First, in the edited volume *Language and Materiality*, linguistic anthropologists Shalini Shankar and Jillian Cavanaugh make the case for “examining language materially” (2017, 1). By this they mean a consideration of the sensual forms of language, such as its sound, appearance, or format, as well as its embeddedness in a political economy—its material power and effects, for example, on class relations or gendered subjects. They argue that this focus on “language materiality” (2017, 1) can deepen our analyses of how the linguistic and the material do not exist alongside each other as two distinct entities in everyday human life but instead combine in processes of valuing and meaning-making. From a different angle, linguistic anthropologist Courtney Handman has also examined how language and materiality might be viewed together in an anthropological analysis. She has used an infrastructural approach to language in her work on Christian groups in Papua New Guinea, exploring how Christians relate to language and roads in similar ways (Handman 2017). The “soft”

infrastructure of language and the “hard” infrastructure of roads both enable (and disable) channels between places. Moreover, they overlay and merge into each other in multiple ways, for example, as words take on material form in order to be passed on, as speakers move, or as communication is made possible by a road. If we follow this infrastructural circulation we notice chains of media that create channels between entities as diverse as remote valleys and urban centers, Bible readers, and God.

The second instantiation of the material turn that we want to highlight comes from literacy studies. Educational researchers Kim Lenters and Mairi McDermott have observed that scholars who study literacy have recently become especially attentive to how learning to read is “an affective and embodied process emerging in a particular place” (2020, 1). This shifts our attention away from conceptualizing literacy as a cognitive act and toward a focus on the imbrication of the discursive and material in literacy processes. Lenters and McDermott explore this shift by drawing on concepts from new materialism in their edited volume *Affect, Embodiment, and Place in Critical Literacy*. While new materialism is a loose umbrella term for a number of approaches that center the material (e.g., actor-network theory, object-oriented ontology), they draw especially on posthumanism, that is, the analytical orientation of decentering human agency. Lenters and McDermott present the classroom—and, by extension, we might think here of any scene of reading—as “an assemblage of people, objects, materials, ideas, policies, practices, texts, events, and places, each with its own histories and trajectories” (2020, 4). The intersecting trajectories of these discursive and material elements create a certain unpredictability when reading happens. In this view, reading is much more than a linguistic act of decoding texts. Instead, reading is an encounter undertaken by “bodyminds” (e.g., Schalk 2018) who may find that the encounter leaves them not just knowing something new but perhaps feeling, doing, or being something new in their relations.

These brief glimpses into two instantiations of the material turn are necessarily quite abbreviated. But we hope they can gesture toward how our vantage point today, following the material turn, enables us to reinvigorate some of the original questions posed by *The Ethnography of Reading*. In our view, some of the most interesting questions take up the key ideas from the above paragraphs: How do the tangible forms of a text interact with the political process of subject formation? How does our view of reading shift if we think of it as a moment of circulation, made possible by and making possible a certain infrastructure or connection

between places? What are the affective processes of any given bodymind that is reading, and what are the effects of these affects?

Let us sketch one possible way of working with such questions by using the example of our comparative research on Protestant women reading the biblical story of Mary and Martha, described at the beginning of the chapter. Protestant women in 1920s Norway and the 1950s US drew complex connections between their lives and the figures of Mary and Martha as they read and discussed the passage in groups, facilitated by numerous written commentaries. These commentaries in turn often placed Mary and Martha, who operated as moral exemplars to differing degrees, vividly within readers' lived worlds. They might be placed, for example, in the gendered pressures of 1950s homemaking in US communities, furthering the idea that they were relatable figures. Moreover, readers were encouraged through the linguistic and narrative elements of these texts to forge certain affective relationships to Mary and Martha. They were drawn to Mary's stillness as she sat quietly listening at the feet of Jesus, a clearly "good" figure in many readings of the story. They were sometimes critical of Martha who busied herself with housework, though they still devoted, almost defiantly, considerable time and words to appreciating Martha's position. These affective stances seem to have felt empowering to many readers. But at the same time, they maintained gendered, raced, and classed hierarchies, for example, when readers defined the morality of their own housework over against the racialized, "othering" foils of "heathen" women or less nurturant mothers.

White middle-class Protestant women in 1920s Norway and the 1950s US were not simply involved in an encapsulated experience of solitary reading, in other words. Instead, their bodyminds were engaged in an act that was inseparably shaped by linguistic and material factors. These included authoritative discourses within their own communities about working women, contemporary redefinitions of more or less worthy forms of Protestant women's work "at home," the material circumstances of their daily labor, religious organizations that made possible and disallowed certain textual interpretations, and political-economic structures that made reading an act of Christian service in the world but also enabled some women more than others to devote "free" or leisure time to contemplative study. In each case, the women's reading would have been a different reading if they had not been part of particular infrastructures—such as Lutheran organizations with published periodicals—or if they had not perceived connections between themselves and certain religiously

significant places—such as “mission fields.” In sum, asking these questions led us to a language materiality approach that explored the far-reaching ways that reading is a thoroughly cultural act, both material and discursive. Creative work is required by scholars to bring all these elements back into the scene of reading, challenging the ideological cordoning off of reading as cognitive, solitary, and free of cultural and political influences.

CONCLUSION

We have concentrated on how we might pick up questions from *The Ethnography of Reading* and extend them in light of the material turn that has taken place since that edited volume was published. The book’s original questions can be reinvigorated through these new conversations, especially the issue of the relationship between language and materiality. But in conclusion we would like to turn the tables. Is there something that our conversations today can learn from the thirty-year-old volume?

The edited collection as a whole maps ways to appreciate the materiality of reading, though the contributors did not name it as such. They drew in a wide range of materiality as they sought to weave an ethnographic understanding of reading, without pausing to self-consciously disarticulate the “material” from the “discursive.” Today there may be a certain tendency to theorize these separately, partly due to the material turn, so that an examination of characters in a story might perhaps be separated from an examination of reading bodies, or an examination of plot development might be separated from an examination of sites in which reading takes place. Perhaps this is where we have something to learn from *The Ethnography of Reading*. The volume points toward how the particular linguistic-material operation of reading has the potential to integrate these theoretical conversations that might otherwise pull in different directions. The chapters handle elements as diverse as textual and intersubjective ties to local geography and popular culture, the social infrastructure of reading, read names as indexical ties to ancestors and the local territory, and dematerialized reading in colonized spaces. They show us that there might be something to be gained by not halting to define the limits of what counts as “materiality” or even to separate it cleanly from the “discursive.” Rather, their analyses of the conjoining of language and materiality encompass diverse bodies, figures and characters, concrete places and imagined spaces, handled and circulated documents and stories, and much more.

At the same time, the volume is finely attuned to the mechanisms within reading that enable or disable this interplay between language and material bodies, places, objects, structures, and infrastructures. The chapters show that some critical work is required to “[put] language and materiality together at the center of analysis” (Shankar and Cavanaugh 2017, 1). The material dimensions of reading can unobtrusively recede into the background or be pushed to the side. For example, we can gain further insight from observations in *The Ethnography of Reading*—such as in Sarris’ chapter—that certain aspects of reading practice can disincline or dissociate readers from the material and social relations of reading, arresting meaningful connections between the lively, material implications of read plots, places, tales, and characters. It is then not so much the case that the material infrastructure of reading is readily available to all—even if hidden ideologically due to the influence of modernism, as Long describes—but that specific mechanisms can selectively highlight or dim awareness of the materiality of language within acts of reading.

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