

The Literacy Myth in the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives

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Abstract

One of the central endeavors in contemporary literacy studies is to interrogate traditional definitions of literacy and deconstruct literacy myths. The Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN), a publicly accessible online repository for literacy narratives, implicates itself in this effort. This essay examines instantiations of the literacy myth within literacy narratives and the archive itself. An analysis of the content and design of the DALN offers insight into how the archive provides contributors both subversive and traditional frameworks for understanding literacy and literacy narratives. Then an examination of three digital literacy narratives in the DALN demonstrates how a combination of narrative analytics can be directed towards revealing constructions of the literacy myth in the telling and meaning-making of individual lives.

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1. Introduction

One of the central endeavors in contemporary literacy studies is to interrogate traditional definitions of literacy and deconstruct the literacy myth. The Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN), a publicly accessible online repository for literacy narratives, by its very nature implicates itself in this effort. The DALN was first envisioned by Cynthia L. Selfe, H. Lewis Ulman, and Scott DeWitt of The Ohio State University in 2005 as a site of an historical preservation of personal narratives about “literacy practices and values” (personal communication, 2011; DALN homepage). Recently, because of the archive’s scope—it contains over 2,800 literacy narratives¹ from a diverse range of contributors in terms of nationality, race, ethnicity, age, class, and educational background—and because of its Institutional Review Board approved status, researchers, teachers, and scholars have looked to the archive as an academic research tool. Notably, the archive was not initially designed to prioritize research needs, as the OhioLink Digital Resource Commons, which is intended to preserve, protect, and provide access to materials produced by Ohio’s public colleges and universities, funded it (Digital Resource Commons, 2011).²

Because the DALN was founded and is facilitated by rhetoric, composition, and literacy scholars, it could be easily misidentified as an academic research archive and thus subject to critiques of the narratives’ validity as qualitative research data. Although originally not intended to function as a research tool, Ulman is attempting to make the archive

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¹ The DALN contained 2,842 narratives as of January 1, 2012.

² This source largely limits the scope of what the funding can be used for. OhioLink privileges providing taxpayers with access to the work done by public universities over customizing design and data infrastructure for particular projects (Digital Resource Commons, 2011).

more functional for researchers through the addition of new search features and data infrastructure.³ In a forthcoming collection, the DALN Consortium⁴ will demonstrate how to effectively use the archived literacy narratives by revealing their constructedness through narrative analysis.⁵ I suggest that connecting this narrative analysis to the literacy myth will explicate how the narratives in the DALN, both individually and collectively, contribute to or challenge cultural beliefs about literacy. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how the DALN and the inherent nature of literacy narratives hail narrators into literate identities framed by the literacy myth. Ultimately, I provide an analytic that, when applied to literacy narratives and the DALN, reveals instantiations of the literacy myth in both the archive and its narratives.

2. The literacy myth

Literacy studies scholar and social and cultural historian Harvey J. Graff first defined the literacy myth in his 1979 historical study of literacy, *The Literacy Myth: Cultural Integration and Social Structure in the Nineteenth Century*. Along with John Duffy (2007), Graff later gave a succinct explanation of the myth:

The Literacy Myth refers to the belief, articulated in educational, civic, religious, and other settings, contemporary and historical, that the acquisition of literacy is a necessary precursor to and invariably results in economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and upward mobility. Despite many unsuccessful attempts to measure it, literacy in this formulation has been invested with immeasurable and indeed almost ineffable qualities, purportedly conferring on practitioners a predilection toward social order, an elevated moral sense, and a metaphorical “state of grace.” (p. 41)

Part of this myth is the inability to define literacy, what it means to possess or attain literacy, and what literate individuals are supposed to accomplish with literacy (Graff, 1991, p. 323). Instead, literacy becomes a norm that does not have one accepted definition or one set of implications. Nonetheless, the literacy myth is used to dominate those who are classified as illiterate, functionally illiterate, academically illiterate, or any other number of classifications. Graff’s work is significant not only in the identification of the literacy myth and the practices of domination that use the myth, but in his historical tracking of factors like ethnicity, race, age, and sex that are the true “origins of illiteracy” (Graff, 1991, p. 56).

Graff’s historical work on literacy as well as the theoretical work of New Literacy Scholars has made literacy researchers aware of the existence and pervasiveness of the literacy myth and led to the investigation of these problematic understandings of literacy in recent scholarship. Yet, because of American entrenchment in individualism, the pervasiveness of the bootstraps mentality, and psychological processes that push us to seek order and causality in our world, western society continues to be invested in the belief that literacy is a guarantor of success in all areas of life. Thus, narrators operating in this paradigm tend to frame their literacy narratives in relation to the literacy myth, and literacy narratives must be understood both as a site of revelations about the literate lives of narrators as well as demonstrations of personal and cultural investment in the literacy myth.

The former scholarly investment in the literacy myth is partially the result of a constellation of literacy studies, including those of great divide theorists, who claim oral or “nonliterate” cultures are less civilized than traditionally literate cultures and literacy learning improves cognition (Havelock, 1982; Goody & Watt, 1963; Ong, 1982). These research conclusions were then contested by other literacy researchers like Scribner and Cole (1981), who, after studying the oral culture of the Vai of Liberia, concluded that learning to read and write does not reprogram the brain to function at higher cognitive levels in all endeavors. Other germinal studies by Gough (1968), Finnegan (1973), and Heath (1983) reject the great divide theory, eventually leading to the emergence of New Literacy Studies (Barton, 1994; Gee, 1996; Street, 1993).

³ Currently, the archive is a folksonomy that is searchable by keywords in the full text, abstract, series, author, title, description, keyword, language (ISO), mime-type, sponsor, and identifier. The archive can be browsed by date submitted, author, title, subject, and collections, which currently consist of A Comprehensive Collection, African-American Women University Professors, Community Literacy, DALN Advisory Board Members and Staff, Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Contributors, Editors Picks, For the Love of Literature, OSU FYWP AU2009, OSU FYWP AU2010, Social Activists, and Undergraduate Students of Color. Ulman is currently working on building alternative search tools.

⁴ The DALN Consortium is made up of the DALN founders and other scholars, teachers, and community members who work with the archive.

⁵ See the new Computers and Composition Digital Press publication, *Narrative Theory and Stories that Speak to Us* (The DALN Consortium, 2012).

Despite these theoretical challenges to the great divide and the literacy myth, the national imaginary of literacy is still informed by these old understandings of the role and functions of literacy. Thus, when narrators position themselves in relation to literacy, they still rely on these oppressive and outdated understandings of literacy. This common narrative positioning, combined with aspects of the DALN that reinforce these myths, necessitates literacy researchers interrogate the role literacy myths play in the narratives and the archive. Otherwise, researchers imply a “neutral stance” on literacy, which J. Elspeth Stuckey (1991) explained is a detrimental assumption that makes literacy “a system of oppression that works against entire societies as well as certain groups within given populations and against individual people” (p. 64). For several decades now, literacy scholars have focused on exposing what Stuckey indicted by examining literacy’s inability to “guarantee desired ends” and “inoculate against discriminations of various kinds” (Brandt, 2001, p. 5). It is this focus that must now inform the study of literacy narratives and the DALN.

3. Literacy narratives

John Duffy (2007) called literacy “both a means for imposing these rhetorical identities, but also for resisting and reimagining them in ways that may open new political, social, and economic possibilities in the world beyond the classroom” (p. 201), and Jacqueline Jones Royster (2000) asserted that literacy functions “rhetorically as part of the sociocultural fabric of our lives” (p. ix). Literacy, in other words, is a significant component in rhetorical constructions of individuals and society. The study of literacy, as Graff (1991) argued, “illuminates the dynamics of society and provides penetrating insights into how its processes function” and provides “one way of confronting directly the literacy myth, the value assigned to literacy, and its place in social theory” (p. 19).

Representations of literacy in narratives, then, may serve as screens through which to interrogate these “dynamics of society” as well as the identities people are hailed into by expectations for literacy narratives informed by the literacy myth. However, this is not to suggest people are simply “dupes,” but are simultaneously agentive and constrained by these societal structures (Giddens, 1979, p. 25). Still yet, just as Giddens’ actors’ “own theories of the social systems which they help to constitute and reconstitute in their activities may reify those systems” (1979, p. 25), literacy narrators’ constitution and reconstitution of the literacy myth in their narratives reify the literacy myth and all of its attendant social ills.

If we consider DALN contributors within this framework, we must acknowledge that they are to some extent conscious of how they are creating their narratives and the ideologies they are invested in within the context of their narratives. Nonetheless, narrators may not be completely aware of and intentionally selective of the cultural beliefs embedded in the structure and content of their narratives. Thus, narrative analysis takes up the task of recognizing both intentional and unintentional representations of a narrator’s investment in cultural beliefs and myths.

By studying this rhetorical relationship between literacy, society, and individual identity through the analysis of literacy narratives, researchers can reveal how each acts upon and is acted upon by one another and how narrators portray their own understandings of those interactions (Selfe, 2011). Although narrative scholars theorize that “present-day identity construction is marked by fragmentation and diffusion, a lack of coherence, and the disappearance... of ‘grand narratives’” (Kraus, 2006, p. 104), research on literacy narratives shows that grand narratives, like the literacy myth, are prevalent, as are other “little narratives” that, when studied, reveal narrators’ positioning of self, literacy, and culture in their stories (Alexander, 2010; Carpenter & Falbo, 2006; Moje & Luke, 2009; Peterson & Langelier, 2006; Williams, 2003/2004).

Nonetheless, what narratives reveal about culture cannot be taken as totalizing, for it is impossible to “fix a culture in place and time, ‘picture’ it in an overview, name it ‘in a word,’ or reduce it to an allegory of anthropological theories” as, Kathleen Stewart (1996) claimed “essentializing moves of modernist culture” attempt to (p. 25). Thus, culture, “a wild, politicized oscillation between one thing and another,” is not fixed and cannot be understood as such in narratives (Stewart, 1996, p. 20). Instead, representations of culture and identity can be analyzed for what they reveal about individual and cultural perceptions in one narrative moment. This understanding of the “in the moment” nature of the representations in narratives is key to narrative analysis.

The construction of literacy narratives is further complicated by the fact that narrators are not only self- and culturally-positioned (Foucault, 1972; Kraus, 2006), they are positioned by their audience and the context in which their stories are elicited. Thus, narrators must negotiate multiple identities or “different, multi-layered, belongings” (Kraus, 2006, p. 109) that respond to each of these different demands. These multiple layers of positioning require multiple analytic lenses and “a decisive shift from “what does narrative tell us about the constructions of self?” to “how do we do self

(and other) in narrative genres in a variety of sites of engagement?” (Georgakopoulou, 2006, p. 128). Answering this question necessitates an analysis of both the narrative structures present in the DALN narratives and an analysis of the elements of the DALN (the site of engagement) that evoke stories with those particular narrative structures. Richard Bauman (1986) explained that such an investigation on both “narration and interpretation... provides a productive basis for an integrated framework that comprehends narrated event and narrative event within a unified frame of reference” (p. 6). This joint analysis must be done with the understanding that “all ‘interpretation’ in the narrower sense demands the forcible or imperceptible transformation of a given text into an allegory of its particular master code” (Jameson, 1982, p. 58) and is in turn another layer of cultural inscription.

Underlying all of these concerns within the study of literacy narratives is that the purpose of composing a literacy narrative is routinely characterized as an opportunity for narrators to “think about what literacy has meant in their lives, what it has meant in others’ lives, and what, imaginatively conceived, it could mean for everyone” (Fleischer, 2000, p. 69). And the genre of literacy narrative is treated as one that can “contribute to the larger public interest” (Brandt & Cushman, 2001, p. 44) in its revelation of “critical incidents” that reflect cultural values (Clifton, Long, & Roen, 2012). When narrators interpret composing a literacy narrative as more than a meaning-making process specific to one moment, but as a process of discovering self-truths, as Cathy Fleischer (2000) noted her students did (p. 70) and when researchers interpret literacy narratives as accurate representations of reality, they implicitly endorse the literacy myth (Daniell, 1999; Eldred & Mortensen, 1992). Ultimately, this unquestioning presentation of the literacy myth as truth can potentially harm both narrators and audiences, who by nature of the literacy narrative genre are being implicitly asked to join the narrator in their beliefs (Brodkey, 1987).

4. The literacy myth in the digital archive of literacy narratives

As the DALN is open access and digitally available worldwide, it provides a potential space for subversion of the grand narrative of the literacy myth through little narratives from people across a wide spectrum of literacy and cultural backgrounds, experiences, and ideologies. These little narratives can coalesce, as Jennifer Clifton, Elenore Long, and Duane Roen (2012) noted, creating or demonstrating “publicly relevant situated knowledge.” Gloria Anzaldúa (2004) posited this as a noteworthy property of personal narratives—they are a space for creating not just individual stories, but re-envisioning “the group/cultural story,” “turn[ing] the established narrative on its head, seeing through, resisting, and subverting its assumptions” and ultimately, “provid[ing] new narratives embodying alternative potentials” (p. 103). However, for narrators themselves to do such subversive work in their narratives, they must “examine their literacy experiences as critical acts of inquiry” which Susan DeRosa (2002) claimed is one provision of the literacy narrative genre that can help students (and in the larger context, all narrators) “use writing [or other forms of narrative] to effect change in their worlds” (p. 3, 11).

This opportunity for subversion and effecting change is enhanced by the archive’s digital nature. Digital mediation has affordances that other mediums do not: “People can exert their own powerful agency in, around, and through, digital literacies. In particular cultural ecologies, some individuals may even confound society’s expectations regarding race, class, age, and gender (Hawisher & Selfe, 2004, p. 644). Digital literacy narratives offer contributors a vernacular gateway to the literacy narrative (Banks, 2011; Hull & Katz, 2006; Kinloch, 2010), disrupting the experience of literacy narratives as academic. Instead it welcomes art, history, rhetoric, and civic activism as potential characteristics of a type of storytelling that “reinterprets” and “remixes” narrator’s sources of information, drawing closer connections between personal experience and history (Banks, 2011, p. 79). In *Harlem on Our Minds*, Valerie Kinloch (2010) related the experiences of two of her student mentees she claimed “questioned meanings of community, gentrification, and activism by defining literacy through multimodal forms, shared writings, and classroom and community presentations” (p. 19), which she saw as a tribute to their use of varied literacies like “oral language, multimodalities, to computer and visual literacies, and, among other things, performances.. [which] help us acquire voices and critical agencies” (Kinloch, p. 9). This example, in particular, points to the subversive possibilities of digital literacy narratives and thus demonstrates that the modality of the DALN implicitly urges contributors to challenge or counter the literacy myth.

An analysis of the specifics of the content and design of the DALN may offer insight into how the archive provides contributors both subversive and traditional frameworks for understanding literacy and literacy narratives. An entry point into this examination is the title itself, the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives, which often must stand alone: When archive collectors are soliciting narratives, they may not have the resources from the website to explain what literacy, narrative, archive, or even digital mean. Because the name must describe the major characteristics of the

archive, it is both specific and laden with academic jargon. Yet the goal of the archive is not to be an academic research tool, but a public repository for individuals to preserve stories about their literate lives. For people not familiar with this language, the title can be both bewildering and intimidating. In addition to containing potentially alienating academic terminology, the word “literacy” instantly evokes thoughts of its inverse—illiteracy—and all of its negative connotations. This dilemma is one that was brought to Ulman’s attention by a DALN contributor who said in his literacy narrative that he wished they [the DALN] wouldn’t use that term “literacy,” revealing that he recognizes and deplores the problematic cultural myths about literacy that inevitably manifest when the word appears, regardless of its context (Ulman, personal communication, 2010).

Yet it is difficult to imagine an alternate word that would sufficiently describe the archive. Ultimately, the DALN is limited by terminology. One similar archive for comparison is StoryCorps, an oral history project that collects stories on any topic from an individual’s life (About Us). The simple name reflects the breadth of the project; unlike the DALN, the topics on which individuals can speak on are not limited to literacy. While a similarly simplified name for the DALN could ostensibly be Stories about Reading and Writing, such a simplification would limit the scope of the DALN and not match its characterization of a literacy narrative — “a collection of items that describe how you learned to read, write, and compose” (*What is a Literacy Narrative?*). This third element of their definition—compose—encompasses a range of encoding activities, from creating digital film shorts, to comics, musical scores, e-mail and text messages, and even activities like skateboarding or mowing the lawn (Burke-Cabados, 2009; Selfe, 2009). The DALN’s definition of reading also includes nontraditional forms such as reading landscapes, clothing, or any one of the countless objects that can be read as a text.⁶ Thus the name represents a varied and nuanced definition of literacy, one that surpasses traditional ideas of literacy as mainly school-based, or centered on reading literature and writing academic essays.

The DALN currently does not provide either scholarly or popular definitions of literacy but relies on its narrative prompts, example narratives, and narrative topics to explain what it means to tell a literacy narrative. This implies a definition of literacy, presumably shying away from limiting contributors’ notions of literacy by defining it. However, in the DALN Consortium’s upcoming publication, Selfe explains the Consortium defines literacy as “a broad range of reading and composing activities, including writing, that take place both on and offline, but are always situated in dynamic and fluid social systems, laden with rhetorical choices, and shaped by ‘historical circumstances, individuals’ lived experiences, and particular situations for writing’ (DeRosa, 3)” (2011, Introduction). This definition of literacy is clearly evinced in the broad range of literate activities included in the DALN.

Despite the Consortium’s nontraditional and progressive definition of literacy and multiple examples of different types of literacies, the visual design of the DALN still reinforces traditional notions of literacy as print and academic. The website features four images that repeat on the homepage and each internal page: two stacked books, the top one open as if it is being flipped through; a hand scanning a book in Braille; a woman reading a book beside a moving subway train; and the tip of a ballpoint pen. Admittedly, each of these images depicts very traditional literacy practices—reading books (three images) and writing with a pen. This representation of literacy is one that Selfe is dissatisfied with and is in the process of altering to represent nontraditional or multiple definitions of literacy. She explained that the design was limited by the funding provided by OhioLink and DSpace, as well as the founders’ design and technological know-how (personal communication, September 12, 2011). This difficulty highlights one common issue in the field of composition and digital media: scholars are limited in their production of digital media by their knowledge, ability, and time constraints. Moreover, funding is not allocated for this type of production in the way, for example, as Ulman pointed out, the sciences are given support for laboratory assistants (personal communication, September 12, 2011). In the case of the DALN, these limitations have privileged a traditional definition of literacy that may unintentionally limit the intended audience’s conceptions of what literacy is and thus what a literacy narrative can be about. This encourages narrators to position themselves in relation to easily accessible grand narratives about literacy such as the literacy myth.

In keeping with its visual representation of literacy, the DALN initially appears to support a traditional definition of literacy in its textual explanation of literacy narrative: “a collection of items that describe how you learned to read,

⁶ This broad conception of literacy is supported by Selfe and Ulman, who review submissions to the archive before uploading them. The two criteria that they require from literacy narratives is that they are, first, clearly about literacy, as the archive defines it and, second, are in the form of a narrative, and not simply reflections about what literacy is or isn’t. The definition of narrative that guides their review process is informed by Phelan and Rabinowitz’s (2005) definition— “‘somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose that something has happened’” (qtd. in DALN Consortium, 2011, Introduction; Selfe, personal communication, 2011).

write, and compose” (What Is a Literacy Narrative?). The key word here is “learned.” This word directs contributors towards a story of literacy learning as static, as occurring in a limited period or periods that can be clearly delineated from times that did not include literacy learning experiences. However, the rest of the site encourages both larger and smaller narratives about many different literacy events and practices, and not all of them learning, such as “Tell a story about reading as an adult. What kinds of things do you read for work? For fun? For education? With friends or family?” (Step 1). Nonetheless, some of the prompts such as “Tell a story about how you first learned to read when you were a child” (Step 1) may suggest literacy is a skill attained in one definable time period instead of portraying literacy as an ever-evolving process or activity. This type of question can inspire “success” literacy narratives that draw conclusions that may not “logically follow from earlier stories in their literacy narrative” (Alexander, 2011, p. 623) in order to fulfill what contributors anticipate are the desired types of narratives for the archive—those that affirm or speak to the literacy myth in some way.

A supplemental document on the DALN provides more literacy-related questions such as those about demographics, early and school age literacy exposure, and other miscellaneous questions that are much more specific and detailed. One of Selfe’s favorite questions here is “Can you tell us a story about a time when you felt illiterate?” because she believes in its potential to reframe how narrators conceive of themselves as literate persons, inspiring stories from an unusual point of view (2010, personal communication). All of these questions are culled from or inspired by established practices of interviewing within the field of literacy studies and, more broadly, the tradition of collecting oral histories as an ethnographic method in various disciplines. The DALN resource page even provides scholarly articles on the theoretical history of this form of research and the praxis of conducting oral or life history interviews.

Literacy scholars, historians, anthropologists, folklorists, and other scholars who use oral histories recommend that rather than interpreting narratives as factual evidence, researchers reference artifacts that can confirm or support the stories told by research subjects (Angrosino, 2002; Bauman, 1986; Mortensen & Kirsch, 1996; Stahl, 1989; Truesdell, 2002). This common method in oral history collection recognizes that “sometimes the narrator’s digressions will provide the most interesting and important material” (Angrosino, 2002, p. 42). However, because of the nature of the DALN, the type of fact-checking oral historians do is often not possible or, at the very least, difficult. Some DALN contributors choose to remain anonymous and others who provide their identity may not be responsive to requests for further participation in research. It would also be difficult, limiting, and contrary to the goals of the DALN to impose stricter parameters for contributors. Thus, the narratives in the DALN do not always serve as the reliable artifacts for research seeking to reveal realities about literacy.

As I mentioned, the DALN is sometimes critiqued for this very reason. Founders Selfe and Ulman admit that the DALN does not meet the positivist criteria for research methodology (personal communication, September 12, 2011), but again, they are not operating within a framework of scholarly research. Selfe and Ulman argue against dismissing the narratives in the DALN because they are not traditional sources of data because they are important additions to “a rich understanding of literacy” (Ulman, personal communication, September 12, 2011). Although the DALN provides various questions and prompts to help generate narratives, as a general policy, Selfe recommends that instead of conducting interviews, literacy narrative collectors ask for contributions in narrative form with few interviewer interruptions in order to privilege the story the narrator wants to tell rather than the story the collector wants privileged. This method does not privilege fact over the nature of story-telling, where, Deborah Brandt (2001) claimed, events may be told out of sequence and connected in meaningful ways that may not have been obvious at the time of the event, and thereby a story is created. It is this narrative structure that allows narrators the agency to tell whatever story they choose, but simultaneously makes these artifacts in some ways unreliable. However, the more the archive is used for scholarship, the more interviews are conducted in place of solicitations for uninhibited narratives.

As for their recommendations for using this data, in no way do Selfe and Ulman suggest researchers make generalizations about literacy from the data of the DALN. Rather, they explain the narratives may not be evidence of facts about literacy in people’s lives, but evidence of “the language and narrative structures people use when they talk about literacy” in the particular context and time of this telling (Ulman, personal communication, September 12, 2011). Ulman and Selfe clearly do not want to contrast narratives and historical or scientific “fact,” thus suggesting that narratives are fiction and other forms of data are fact, because everything is rhetorically presented and requires interpretation. Selfe explained, “storytelling is a rhetorical act; that’s been built into it. We [researchers] want to lose control,” (personal communication, September 12, 2011), and Ulman added to this that “if you want to do literacy research in the form of a structured questionnaire, do it. The type of meaning that you would get from that sort of

research or census data is different from the meaning you make from personal narratives” (personal communication, September 12, 2011). This framing of the DALN makes no apologies for its non-academic methodology, as it shouldn’t.

Because the DALN was not built to be an academic research tool, Selfe and Ulman locate the responsibility for its use as such as that of the researcher. If a researcher is using the DALN to make large claims about literacy, they must do the work of triangulating data, gathering useful data samples from the DALN’s massive stores, and learning to look for patterns that do not just fulfill a “preconceived hypothesis” but that emerge from “the threads that link diverse people together and make like people diverse” (Ulman, personal communication, September 12, 2011). This inside look at the rationale for the nature and methodology of the DALN adds nuance to a researcher’s understanding of how its creators envision its use as a research tool as a secondary matter. It, therefore, does not support reifications of the literacy myth, but points to the complexity of literacy and the literacy narrative event.

5. Applying narrative analysis to literacy narratives

As we have seen so far, studying how narrators construct their reality is not only revelatory about the individual’s “construction of self,” but also about the “construction of [the narrator’s] culture” (Bruner, 1991, p. 77). Jens Brockmeier (2001) extended this theory of narrative as cultural construction, claiming that narrative models are “cultural moorings of individual identity construction,” “dialectical hinges between individual and society” that “help the individual to re-invent the culture in their minds” and “bind the individual into culture” (p. 70). Thus the narrative models are not only places for culture to be expressed, but places for individuals to inscribe themselves in cultural models like the literacy myth. Using narrative analytics to interpret narratives individually and compositely can unveil what those constructions of selves and cultures are.

Here I will demonstrate how to examine instantiations of the literacy myth by applying these narrative analytics to three video literacy narratives I collected for the DALN. I selected these three self-identified Appalachian graduate students as part of my work on Appalachian literacy and identity. These narratives are particularly rife with evidence of positioning in contrast to and in congruence with specific dominant ideologies of and about Appalachia and the literacy myth. Ideally, such an analysis would incorporate other examples of these dominant ideologies appearing in other narratives, but for the purposes of this article I have restricted myself to a discussion of the narratives I collected.⁷ In their narratives, these students demonstrate how complicated their choices are for participating in or being invested in myths about literacy and Appalachia. Despite pushing back against these myths in their narratives, they also demonstrate that they must work within the limits of the myth as enforced by their home communities and academic communities in order to be successful in both places.

For the Appalachian graduate students in this study, the literacy myth holds great power: They, their families, and their home communities all often simultaneously ascribe to the literacy myth and view it as antithetical to their way of life. Thus it places these students in a double bind, which encourages them to embrace and challenge, reject, or complicate the myth. Because these Appalachians ascribe to the literacy myth does not make them entirely misguided about the power of literacy. As Graff (2010) explained, myth is, in fact, reality-based and has some truth to it (p. 638). However, the myth is imbued with the ideologies of “those who sanction it and are invested in its outcomes,” in other words those who are in power within hegemonic structures and use it to oppress those who are disempowered already (Graff, 2010, p. 638; Graff, 1990, p. 19). These Appalachian students have seen first-hand how hegemony is reinforced through the literacy myth, and thus they struggle not to be marginalized by the myth nor fully ascribe to it because they recognize its power to reinforce hegemony.

5.1. *Collecting the narratives*

The methods I used to collect these literacy narratives illustrate the functionality of the DALN as a research tool. The DALN’s IRB approval enabled my own collection and analysis of these narratives within a short period of time, a useful affordance for scholars, teachers, and students. There are numerous methods of collection that can be used to

⁷ For other similar narratives or discussions of literacy ideologies held by and about Appalachians see Donehower (2007), Donehower, Hogg, & Schell (2007), Donehower, Hogg, & Schell (2012), Fedukovich (2009), Heath (1982), Locklear (2011), Mortensen (1994), Powell (2007), Puckett (1992), Sohn (2006), and Webb-Sunderhaus (2007).

contribute to the archive. Some narratives are contributed as part of assignments for composition or other university courses, many are collected at conferences, events, community collection initiatives by scholars from Ohio State and other universities across the country, and others are unsolicited contributions from people who want to independently provide their narratives without the assistance of DALN collectors.

The literacy narratives analyzed here are part of those that I have collected for a graduate course and later as an extended research project. I chose to use these narratives here, as opposed to narratives that were collected or contributed without a particular research agenda in mind, to illustrate one potential method for exerting control over both the collection and analysis of narratives in the archive. As is becoming more frequent practice in the scholarly collecting for the archive, I chose narrators who could speak to particular issues I research and were easily accessible to me at the time. Although this method of collection could be critiqued as a sample of convenience, it demonstrates the archive's affordance of low threshold research, an element of the archive that is not to be slighted. The technology I used to collect these narratives is also low threshold. As is commonly used by DALN collectors at conferences and other events, I used the internal iSight camera in my MacBook. This and other low threshold technologies such as the audio or video recorder on a Smartphone can also record digital data that can be saved in multiple formats and archived in the DALN, again revealing of the significant affordances for researchers. Collecting audio and video narratives also allows for linguistic and visual analysis.

After seeking out and contacting potential narrators, I primed them for specific narrative prompts about my research agenda, much in the same way the "What is a Literacy Narrative" page primes contributors to think about literacy in specific ways. I tried to focus on one basic set of narrative prompts and modify them or adding new questions according to narrators' responses to previous prompts. I asked the following questions of three of the students:

- Could you tell me your name, age, where you're from, and a little bit about your educational background?
- What does the term Appalachia mean to you?
- What does the term Appalachian mean to you?
- Do you identify as Appalachian?
- Could you tell a specific story about how being Appalachian has affected you as a student?
- Could you tell a specific story about how being a student has affected you as an Appalachian?

These questions are clearly leading and assume that these narrators have experienced conflict between two identities—Appalachian and academic—and that these identities are even distinguishable or fundamentally different. However, I found this arbitrary construction useful for evoking stories that drew upon conflicts (real or imagined) between different aspects of these narrators' identities and life experiences. Although I was not looking for it at the time of collection, upon analysis I realized that throughout their narratives were identity claims based on assumptions about the truth and/or falsity of the literacy myth.

This post-facto realization illustrates that although collectors may use narrative prompts to direct responses, these prompts still permit spaces in the collection of narratives for other small stories or threads that run throughout the whole narrative. Thus, despite Selfe's recommendation to allow narrators to tell stories without much direction or questioning from the collector, we collectors frequently have a research goal or interest in mind that we pursue through directed prompts or follow-up questions. What is important, as Selfe and Ulman note, is that we ask for not just summative responses from narrators, but stories that illustrate their claims. Thus, when I questioned narrators about the Appalachian and academic identities, I asked them to tell specific stories about experiences that illustrate how their identities affect one another. Furthermore, as their narratives progressed and invariably moved in new directions, I refrained from pulling them back to the original question, instead asking for further explanation of tangential threads.

5.2. *The narrators*

Lauren is a 24-year-old doctoral student in her third year in the genetics program at North Carolina State University. She is from Wallace, a small town in north central West Virginia, and received her undergraduate degrees from West Virginia University in Morgantown. At WVU, Lauren participated in the McNair Program, a federal TRIO program designed to prepare undergraduate students who are first-generation students with financial need or part of an underrepresented population for graduate work by providing research and scholarly opportunities (About, 2010).

Lauren, born and raised in West Virginia, the only state completely located within Appalachia, identifies as Appalachian (Dembeck, 2011).

Jesse is a 24-year-old master's student in his second year of studies in the Department of English at The Ohio State University. He lived in Berkeley Springs, West Virginia, which is in the Eastern Panhandle on the border of Maryland and Pennsylvania, for 14 years. He also attended West Virginia University and participated in the McNair Program, which he was surprised he was qualified for even though he was a first-generation college student. Although he was born in Illinois and raised in Indiana for the first 10 years of his life, he sometimes identifies as Appalachian (Potts, 2011).

Sara is a 23-year-old master's student in Rhetoric, Composition and Literacy in the Department of English at The Ohio State University. She was born and raised in Harriman, Tennessee, which is in northeastern Tennessee, which she claims is "in the wasteland between Nashville and Knoxville." She describes her high school as geographically near a school ranked third highest in high school dropouts and there being "something about the quality there." She attended Maryville College, Roane State, and then Ohio State. Sara relates her background and educational experience as her impetus for studying Rhetoric, Composition and Literacy Studies in her Master's program (Pierce, 2011).

5.3. Analyzing the narratives

Jerome Bruner (1991) explained that narratives are attempts by individuals to ascribe meaning to their lives (p. 70). Through evaluating specific events and placing "those sequential events in terms of meaningful context," the narrator creates a self whose agentive powers become, as it were, the gravitational center of the world" (1991, p. 71, 76). In literacy narratives, this meaningful context is often the cultural belief in the literacy myth, even if narrators are not cognizant of that positioning. Because the literacy myth attaches literacy to success, literacy narratives often contain a growth narrative, characterized by a combination of the role of narrator with the role of protagonist. The point of the narrative is to show how the two characters "fuse and become one person with a shared consciousness" as the protagonist grows and transforms over the course of the narrative (Bruner, 1991, p. 69). This narrative of growth requires that a specific objective be achieved and implied as the goal from the beginning of the narrative, demonstrating the narrator's "desires, beliefs, and so on" led to specific transformative activities (Bruner, 1991, p. 70). As literacy scholars like Brownwyn Williams and Kara Poe Alexander note, growth is implied by the structure of these literacy narratives because they tell a story that moves the "less literate" protagonist to the "more literate" narrator, thereby implying that increasing literacy ability or skill is "progress."

The narratives of Lauren, Jesse, and Sara demonstrate this progress narrative. All first-generation college students, they each explicitly credit their Appalachian and working-class heritage as having a significant positive impact on the course of their life and the development of their interests, thus constructing their background as part of their destiny. All three speak of the many positive aspects of Appalachian identity, including family and community support, strong work ethic, and appreciation of education, all of which reinforced their belief in the power of literacy and education to improve their lives.

The characteristics of narrative demand that narrators not recount every single event in their lives. Thus there are many possibly formative events that narrators like Sara, Jesse, and Lauren exclude. In addition, memories are not completely accurate and usually cannot be verified in the context of the DALN narratives. Of course, in addition to fallible memory, people intentionally choose specific memories to include, excluding those that do not serve what they deem the import of the story, creating a portrait that can never fully depict the complexity of their lives. Thus many possible narratives about literacy may never come into existence because they do not fit into the story the narrator sees as culturally valued—the story of literacy's unquestionable power in the lives of individuals. In fact, Alexander (2011) found in her study of student literacy narratives that 79 of the 80 students composed success narratives regardless of racial or socioeconomic differences, which she interpreted as evidence that "that students see their literacy path as a journey to success" (p. 616).

Although the meanings that the narrators ascribe to events in their lives reveal the literacy myth at work, they are also undoubtedly grounded in reality. Of the three, Lauren and Sara, both from more impoverished areas of Appalachia,⁸ narrate their educational backgrounds as disadvantaged, a categorization they construct in relation to how they perceive

⁸ In 2005, Appalachia had a per capita market income of 25% less than the national income. In Appalachian Tennessee, it was \$21,036 and in West Virginia it was \$21,339. Appalachian regions in states such as Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, New York,

the preparedness of their college classmates from different parts of the region and country. Both Lauren and Sara attribute this deficit to being both from poor areas where they were not exposed to people with university educations or professional careers. In fact, Lauren explains that she didn't even know she could go to graduate school until she did a work study in an immunology lab through the McNair program, which is the only external influence Lauren credits in her narrative for exposing her to educational opportunities beyond those she learned about in her home community.

Whereas events such as Lauren's revelation about possibilities for her future may often be characterized as the turning point in her narrative, I apply the framework of what Clifton, Long, and Roen (2012) call "critical incidents" here and throughout the other narratives. A critical incident is the demonstration of the impact of a high stakes event that connects the teller's knowledge to the larger public's knowledge. These incidents are considered critical because the teller deems them so; they illustrate a moment when the narrator perceives something in their life has gone awry. When these critical incidents "raise traction" with the audiences' experiences, they move these private matters into the public realm of social justice (Clifton, Long, & Roen, 2012). Lauren's realization of what opportunities education offers seems to be constructed as a critical incident in the telling of her life. Although this is not an incident of something going awry, I argue that it is an instance of Lauren's perceptions of the world being challenged; thus, it is critical for her attribution of meaning to her life. Lauren's critical incident also points to the more expansive issue of social justice in her story—there are significantly lower percentages of educational attainment in Appalachia in comparison to the rest of the nation, a fact supported by statistics from the Appalachian Regional Commission⁹. Also significant to Lauren's constructed identity is where she places agency among the characters in the narrative. Lauren seems to partially credit her success and exposure to educational opportunities to the McNair Program and thus constructs the educational system in Appalachia as an obstacle to overcome, which for her was only achievable through institutional support. Thus, Lauren attributes agency to forces outside herself, her family, and perhaps even the Appalachian region, all of which her narrative implies throughout are not in possession of "the ineffable qualities" (Graff and Duffy, 2007, p. 41) that come with literacy attainment.

Sara constructs her critical incident in similar ways, invoking the literacy myth to explain that her pursuit of higher education was to allow her to leave her hometown and improve her life, saying she believed "college will get me out... I can't screw up going to college. It's gonna make things better. It's gonna allow me a way out. So really wasn't just the notion that you could just leave. So it was you have to have something to allow you to leave."¹⁰ Thereby Sara not only positions literacy as a guarantor of success, she positions it as the only means to success.

Individuality is another element that narrators in Western culture attempt to demonstrate in their stories because if a narrative consists of "all 'givens,' then there is no individuality, no modern Self" and narrators become mere reflections of their culture (Bruner, 1991, p. 71). Pursuing this desire for individuality, narrators focus on stories they deem "exceptional" and "worthy of telling" because they emphasize the narrators' unique qualities as "new, deviant, special, or interestworthy," (Bruner, 1991, p. 71, 73). Thus the narrators take a rhetorical stance that attempts to construct a world centered on themselves (Bruner, 1991, p. 76). Because the literacy myth is a widely accepted cultural construction, it seems to follow that in order to make themselves exceptional narrators they would position themselves in contrast to the myth. However, the desire for demonstrating exceptionality is limited by the desire to position themselves in congruence with culture and traditional roles in society (Bamberg, 1997, p. 336). Although narrators wish to stand out, it is typically only within the boundaries of success as determined by the literacy myth.

Sara narrates her own exceptionality with the story about her mother, a factory worker, whom she credits for instilling "hillbilly bootstrappin' it" mentality in her at a very early age. Although Sara was teased by her schoolmates for having what she describes as "less of an accent" and for being very dedicated to her studies, she was praised by her teachers and other adults. She positions herself as academically exceptional in her home community. Thus the mythic benefits offered by literacy are reinforced by the praise of the adults in Sara's life. Despite the encouragement she received from her family and community, Sara notes a lack of educational resources to support her academic goals. In telling a story

and Maryland all had higher per capita market incomes. Mainly areas of Central Appalachia had similar or lower incomes (*Appalachian Region Income Report*, 2011, p. 1, 5).

⁹ From 2005–2009, in Appalachian Tennessee, 79.6% of the population had a high school diploma or more compared to 84.6% of the nation; 19.5% of the population had a Bachelor's degree or more, in comparison to 27.5% of the nation. In West Virginia, all of which is located in Appalachia, 81.6% of the population had a high school diploma or more and 17.1% of the population had a Bachelor's degree or more. In Appalachian Kentucky, 70.9% had a high school diploma or more and 12.6% had a Bachelor's degree or more (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2010, p. 30).

¹⁰ For ease of reading, I have eliminated all oral hesitations and restarts from the narrative transcriptions.

about her high school honors English class, she contrasts it to what she perceives as the standard honors courses, noting that they only “read two books a year” because of the teachers’ assumptions that students “weren’t gonna do their reading outside of class.” Then Sara positions herself and her fellow students in opposition to the teacher’s assumptions about them, noting that when their course fell short of their expectations, they resolved to take composition at the local community college. However, she also claims exceptionality among the other students, claiming that while the others said they would take the course, she “was the one that did it.” This story of exceptionality demonstrates her own positioning of literacy as denoting superiority in intellect and perhaps sheer willpower.

Sara offers another larger sphere in which she and her story are exceptional by contrasting it with the story of her friend whose family did not think a graduate degree was a worthwhile pursuit and cast her friend as the “black sheep.” When Sara was accepted to Ohio State, she says “they wrote an article about me in the local paper with my picture in it. You know, talking about how I was going to grad school. So very different reaction. When I talk to people [at home]... they were just kind of amazed [by her academic success].” It appears here that her community was exceptional in the extent to which it ascribed to the literacy myth. Her community not only admired Sara for her literacy, it placed her in what [Graff and Duffy \(2007\)](#) referred to as a “metaphorical ‘state of grace’” (p. 41).

Yet it seems Sara complicates this exceptionality when she describes her encounters with people outside her home community. She says of the educational discrepancies she noticed in college:

When I was a junior, I was still taking some of my 100 level things, and I had friends who were freshman who went to public schools in wealthy areas or had gone to private schools, and saying “Oh this is so easy. We were doing more than this, you know, in high school.” And I’d say, “This is the hardest thing ever for me.” I didn’t even have, like, study skills.

So despite her hard work and exceptional (at least in her hometown) success in academics, she was still at a disadvantage, an observation that complicates the literacy myth by adding varying degrees of literacy and connecting them to varying degrees of success. While in high school, it seems Sara’s view of literacy was less nuanced. You were either academically successful or unsuccessful. Thus the ramifications of the literacy myth could have taken on more significance for Sara, despite her hard work and exceptional success in one community, her environment and background still limited her access to all that she was taught literacy had to offer. This provides another complication of the literacy myth, which often encourages the assumption that those who want or seek literacy can have it. Sara’s story illustrates that is not always the case.

In addition to locating real material deficits in Appalachian life, the narrators also tell their experiences of outsider stereotypes and prejudices about the region, especially in terms of literacy. Even though she is a geneticist, Lauren narrates her experience with regional linguistic discrimination: people regularly comment on her accent and her academic colleagues joke with her about incest. When asked if she internalized those stigmas, she admits “I actively changed the way I spoke,” but claims she doesn’t know why. By following this statement with stories about people commenting on her different accent and her colleagues making incest jokes, it appears that she sees the accent as a link to the negative stereotype that she does not wish to be associated with. To compound this problematic, Lauren as, I would guess, an academic, realizes the problem with trying to disassociate herself from her heritage by changing her accent and feels “embarrassed” to admit to doing it. So not only does she narrate shame about her accent, she also tells of shame for changing her accent to pass as normal in academia.

Although Jesse does not believe he is marked as West Virginian by “a noticeable accent,” he notes that his graduate school classmates undercut his authority as a student or scholar because of his Appalachian background. He tells the story of one student telling him that he couldn’t understand high [literary] theory because he was from West Virginia, to which he sarcastically responded with an emphatic Appalachian accent “Isn’t it amazing how they let us poor country boys into the same school as you?” Here he challenges strict definitions of literacy and who can be literate.

I identify this story as an example of a micronarrative, a space for subversion of the macronarrative. Similar to Jean-François Lyotard’s grand and little narratives, Gergen and Gergen’s theory of macro- and micro- narratives distinguishes between macronarratives, stories that span long time periods, emphasizing the import of historical and cultural events, and micronarratives, stories of a brief period of time in the life of an individual that may permit “a lesser degree of strain to behave in a way that is coherent with the past” ([Gergen & Gergen, 1983](#), p. 264). These smaller narratives are a space, as [Lyotard argued, for diversity and subversion of grand narratives, which he defines as broad culturally accepted theories of how the world works \(1979\)](#). I argue that the literacy myth is one such grand narrative that can be affirmed within an entire literacy narrative, but also negated in smaller narratives within whole literacy narratives. It is these

little narratives that Georgakopoulou (2006) championed as “a way out of celebratory, idealizing and essentializing accounts that have tended to see narratives as authentic and uncontaminated accounts of self” by “enabl[ing] the shift from the precious lived and told to the messier business of living and telling” (p. 125), a business whose complexity, I argue, is beyond the scope of what the literacy myth can capture.

In this micronarrative about his academic literacy being challenged because of his regional identity, Jesse takes a strong position in relation to the other characters in his story—those those who both jokingly and seriously stereotype and denigrate Appalachians—and, I believe, forms an even stronger identification with West Virginia through these critical incidents. It was not until the end of his first year as a graduate student in Ohio that he reaffirmed his West Virginian identity by tattooing the state outline on his back, again suggesting the reaffirmation of the ability to maintain multiple identities. However, in a later portion of the narrative, Jesse also constructs himself in contrast to his mother and by proxy Appalachian identity, who he believes changed her accent and quality of writing since she moved and lived in West Virginia for some time, which he attributes to her “accept[ing]” or “internaliz[ing]” some of the Appalachian label.”

Jesse seems to internalize these stigmas himself to some extent and feel the tug of the literacy myth, explaining that he often “get[s] the urge to correct” the “grammatical mistakes” his family makes, but he doesn’t, delineating between his home and academic discourse communities, saying “I never do [correct their grammatical mistakes] because I recognize, you know, that’s not the world I’m in right now. I have to belong in this world.” Interestingly, Jesse seems to recognize that Appalachian is a dialect, as he references a linguistics’ professor of his who made that argument on the Bill O’Reilly Show and received much disapproval.¹¹ However, he still calls the way his family speaks as having “grammatical mistakes.” I argue that this speaks to the intensity of his double consciousness about the literacy myth and his regional identity. While he intellectually realizes that Appalachian is a language system just as valid as any other, he has so internalized the stigma of Appalachian dialect that he still feels it is incorrect rather than different. His urge to correct his family may stem from his belief that speaking standard English is a sign of literacy or intellect, which according to the literacy myth, are guarantors of so many benefits. Thereby, his instinct to correct them may arise from a desire to help them.

Lauren and Sara also exhibit gaps in the literacy myth evinced through micronarratives about the strain that being academically literate places on their familial relationships. In many ways, Lauren and Sara effectively became outsiders to their own families and communities when they develop academic identities. Thus they are in this borderland where they must negotiate conflicting identities, which are partially characterized as such by their relation to literacy. Lauren tells a small story that exposes those tensions between her multiple identities or facets of her identity, explaining that when she goes home for the holidays, her empirical understanding of nature conflicts with her family’s religious beliefs:

I definitely feel like I have to hold back. I can’t explain everything. It is so specialized, and there was a particular incident, um, over Christmas.... I was explaining to my sister and mom how DNA works, basically.... and my mom’s sister-in-law had heard me saying all this and so like two nights later on Facebook, my sister was like “Do you see her Facebook status?” And I was like “No, what do you mean?” She was like “You should go look at it.” She was like “I think she was listening in when you were talking about DNA, and stuff.” and she had put as her status “I’m more than just amino acids. God created us”... my family is pretty religious, and I am not any longer. So that’s definitely changed since going to undergrad and now especially in grad school.

In this passage, Lauren constructs her education as a barrier to her relations with her family. It appears that she views their misinterpretations of her explanation of DNA as the result of discrepancy in educational levels. So in this small narrative, Lauren offers an instance in which a member of her family does not uphold the literacy myth. They do not believe that morality necessarily follows from academic literacy. In fact, it is just the opposite. This type of literacy can lead people astray, strip them of their identity, and result in sacrilegious beliefs. Yet for Lauren, this academic literacy, which has led her away from her previous religious beliefs, although not explicitly given value, is implicitly constructed as growth, as demonstrated in the last portion of her narrative. Thus, Lauren demonstrates her own investment in the literacy myth here, despite her family’s contention for beliefs arising from her new literacies.

¹¹ Kirk Hazen of West Virginia University appeared on *The O’Reilly Factor* in 2001 after controversy surrounding a claim he made in an interview with *The Charleston Gazette*. The claims were standard linguistic explanations of how language works: all dialects are rule-based and there is no Standard English.

Sara and Lauren neither condemn nor valorize what they understand as the Appalachian way of being; instead, they signal the importance of awareness of multiple options. Sara implies that she wants to respect the Appalachian way of being, but still says she experiences ‘a kind of a mourning’ for the people from her home who she believes have limited choices in life due to their educational opportunities. Sara is again recalling the literacy myth, but complicates it, not blaming those from her hometown for not succeeding the way she has while also realizing that there are other ways to be successful.

Like Sara, Lauren narrates both a love and appreciation for her home and the people there, saying Appalachia is “who I am.” Although holding onto her roots and not “getting above her raisin” is posed as an imperative by members of her home community, Lauren seemingly values her regional heritage as part of her intrinsic identity. At the same time, she notes that she no longer has similar values as those she sees in Appalachian culture, at least in her “particular small hometown.” Using the word “frozen” to describe people in her home community, Lauren hints that she sees progress, movement, and knowledge as goals diametrically opposed to what she sees in Wallace, West Virginia. However, she restricts herself from calling this a “deficit,” framing it more as difference, perhaps in a nod towards social justice moves that recognize and validate vernacular literacies and knowledges as equal to academic ones. Though Lauren may still feel the effects of the cultural investment in the literacy myth, this portion of her narrative reveals her awareness that it is a myth, that literacy does not necessarily guarantee economic success and moral elevation.

My preliminary insights drawn from what these graduate students reveal in their narratives is that they struggle to reconcile the literacy myth with the material realities of their lives. Their micronarratives illustrating the problem with the gaps between Appalachia and academia are in some ways a rejection of the implications of the literacy myth. Literacy does not ensure success, morality, and a whole host of benefits when the literate person is attempting to negotiate multiple cultural codes that define all of these benefits differently. Yet the narrators also reveal their own investment in the grand narrative of the literacy myth throughout their narratives, an investment that served as their motivation for achieving academic success and encouraging other students to do the same. For these narrators, definitions and myths of literacy and how they feel about them are always contentious and shifting.

6. Conclusion

The DALN Consortium explains the salience of literacy narratives to the study of identity-shaping constructions like the literacy myth: Narratives “are laden with cultural understandings that help form the matrix of consciousness” (Literacy Narratives and Cultural and Historical Context). In this article I have provided a framework for analyzing one aspect of that cultural conscious—the literacy myth—as it appears in literacy narratives and the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives. It is my hope that such a framework can grow to demonstrate the complexities between other grand narratives like the literacy myth and the smaller narratives that challenge us to question them. In the concluding piece of the DALN Consortium’s exhibits, James Phelan offers an explanation of what makes narrative so “appealing” that speaks to the varied and complex ways a literacy narrative can both ascribe to and challenge the literacy myth:

It can offer concrete details about characters, events, settings, and about the web of connections among these elements. This thick description has the potential to give us a richer understanding of the big picture painted by the narrative. On the other hand, we want that big picture, and, indeed, the effective storyteller’s shaping of the material is designed so that the big picture will emerge powerfully. The paradox can be expressed in this way: narrative both thickens and thins; it adds complexity even as it strives for explanatory power. Its appeal is to be found in both the concrete and the abstract.

Using this framework of narrative analytics and the literacy myth, I have highlighted areas where the research, archiving, and analytic strategies of literacy scholars can improve, thereby enhancing both our own and others’ understanding and representation of literacy. It is essential to remember that each time literacy is presented as a guaranteed cure for poverty, criminality, social immobility, and immorality, other negligible factors are ignored or never even named, and individuals are unjustly blamed for problems arising from social inequalities and differences.

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