New Media Literacies and Popular Culture Across Borders [Book Review]

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New Media Literacies and Participatory Popular Culture Across Borders

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Title: New Media Literacies and Participatory Popular Culture Across Borders
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New Media Literacies and Participatory Popular Culture Across Borders, edited by Bronwyn Williams at University of Louisville, USA, and Amy Zenger at American University of Beirut, Lebanon, both professors of English, is a volume about shifting literacy and cultural practices of students in today’s digitally mediated world. Similar to many books on digital literacies, this volume pries open the need to understand the changing dynamics between author-text-audience and text-context. A chief difference is in its explicit rendering of participatory popular culture in cross-cultural contexts to offer unique perspectives from seven countries, including Australia, Lebanon, Nepal, Qatar, South Africa, Turkey, and the United States. The volume distinguishes itself by combining three important areas of scholarship (participatory culture, literacy and writing, and globalization). The editors begin with an introduction to frame two parts that make up the volume: (a) how online popular culture travels and intersects with students’ literacy practices and (b) the ways in which identities are (re)shaped through particular negotiations with people and technologies across borders. The two parts complicate local-global binaries.

Part One illuminates examples of popular culture such as videos, television shows, manga, games, and memes. Throughout the chapters, we see patterns that point to globalization, the pace and intensity of technological change, and implications for education, including students’ negotiation between the academic and the popular. In Chapter Two, Bronwyn Williams presents digital technologies as simultaneously influencing and influenced by the transnational movement of popular culture, making a case for innovative pedagogies in order to serve future generations. In Chapter Three, Amy Zenger examines two videos produced by university students in Beirut. She champions the literacies embedded in the production as valuable in traditional educational environments, a theme that resurfaces in Chapter Six “The ‘Popular’ Turkish Academy,” by Tüge Gülşen. The stories, identities, and social aims of the students emerge on their own with a strong message that flips the adage from “think globally, act locally” to “think locally, act globally.” Other chapters address how privileging particular types of literacies closes doors to a variety of learners. In Chapter Four, Cheng-Wen Huang and Arlene Archer illustrate the multimodality in manga and argue that a crucial skill in “surviv[ing] in the workplace of the twenty-first century” is the ability to “design” (p. 58). Similarly, in Chapter Five, Jessica Schreyer rejects the hierarchy assigned to different types of literacies and as such makes the case for online literary practices of adolescents to be embraced in the classroom. In Chapter Seven, Sandra Abrams, Hannah Gerber, and Melissa Burgess echo the need to recognize students’ perceptions of text and experiences in multi-user virtual environments and video games. The idea of “play” is put forward as central to effective learning. In Chapter Eight, Lynn Lewis shares a study of participatory memes and notes that “speed culture” plays an increasing role in identity construction.

In tandem with the previous chapters, Part Two delves into how new media users employ popular culture to read and construct identities online. Particularly resonant in this section is the concept of “glocalization.” The fluid and dynamic shaping of identities reminds us of the notion of entanglement or rhizomatic assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) that suggests (inter)connections permeate physical and virtual space. It is within interweaving “scapes” (Appadurai, 1996) where queering, transgressive, and subversive practices become possible. We see these practices unfold across the chapters in very complex ways. In Chapter Nine, Mohanalakshmi Rajakumar reveals the choices Qatari women make in creating faceless Facebook pages to adapt local cultural traditions and confront Western-centric interpretations
in their public profiles. In Chapter Ten and Thirteen, the authors discuss fan communities’ efforts to respond to television shows. Laurie Cubbison explores tensions between producers and fans as a way to bring audiences together. Similarly, Karen Hellekson considers the practice of fansubbing, a specific form of remixing in which fans subtitle foreign-language video to guide the narrative. An analysis of a German-language soap opera Verbotene Liebe reveals the splicing together of footage to set a particular storyline between two gay characters (Christian and Ollie). Fans create a “Chrollie” fandom and test the boundaries of audience participation in production and authorship. In Chapter Eleven, Ghanashyam Sharma and Bal Krishna Sharma discuss Nepalese youth’s increasing access to global popular culture. They note changing literacy practices that allow for building community and for negotiating different forms of knowledge that also challenge traditional hierarchies. In Chapter Twelve, Mark Vicars voices the importance of exploring online identities using an interpretative queer lens. A specific look at “literacies at texts” in gay male communities underscore the (inter)connections of participatory cultural practices as a constant becoming. Lastly, in Chapter Fourteen, Rick Carpenter brings home the essence of the volume by interrogating the material spatiality of text. A case study of Albanian women living in the U.S. is illustrative of how place-identity influences literacy practices.

For us, the deployment of new media literacies as highlighted here is not only provocative, but also serves as an extension of our own engagement with the topic. We had an opportunity in a semester-long course to build on exciting areas of study (new media, new literacies, and media literacies) to conceptualize “new media literacies” and to put theory to practice by espousing an ethos of collaboration, participation, and distributed expertise (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006). What transpired was largely influenced by trending or contemporary examples of popular culture, tinkering with digital media technologies, and communicating across space-time to achieve different purposes. The teaching and learning process built on the entangled relations of participants and contexts in which they were working. In our case at that time, the context was local and situated within the urban Midwest (but that is not to say that discursive moments were devoid of experiences from elsewhere). We mention this point here to place emphasis on the value of New Media Literacies. Its focus on global flows of culture has advanced our thinking toward the idiosyncratic uptakes of online popular culture in local, translocal, and transnational contexts. Notable across the chapters are the different semiotic, rhetorical, and cultural resources that, while not without tension, demonstrate the fluid and dynamic ways students at the secondary and tertiary level communicate, create, appropriate, and disseminate information with desired social aims.

There will be continued flows, exchanges, and interactions between and among students across the world. For us, what is most striking in New Media Literacies is the wide array of literacy and cultural practices with “intriguing juxtapositions” and “unusual connections” (as heralded by the editors) important to understanding an emerging field of study. Given our interests in social justice and education, the insights push us to examine the link between new media literacies and youth participatory politics (Cohen & Kahn, 2012). Our differences as people within cultures, across borders, with different means of accessing and using digital media technologies will remain integral to understanding the range of new media literacies and participatory popular culture we have yet to encounter. The take up of those differences—the nuances, the connections, and at times the contradictions - is the gem one will find in this volume.

References


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