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Why the Politics of Literacy? – Guest Editors’ Introduction

CHELSEY HAUGE

Independent Scholar, USA

JENNIFER ROWSELL

Brock University, Canada

The history of this special issue takes us back to the richness of conversations and the feelings of solidarity that we experienced during a symposium held at Brock University in October 2017.¹ What stood out during the event was not so much ideas, although there were many good ones, but an *esprit de corps* felt by the group about the future of literacy research in politically charged, media-driven times. There were papers on the politics of literacy and inclusion, collaborative partnerships and spaces, feminist and participatory youth cultures, affect, and arts methods. There were artists, Indigenous prayers accompanied by movement, and a range of maker activities. It was a memorable event filled with conversations inspired by varied histories and epistemologies, and many of the above themes are present in articles featured in this special issue.

The rationale behind foregrounding the *politics* of literacy in the special issue resides in our desire to maintain an overall sense of activism and political action around and within notions of literacy. The phenomenon of being moved by change unites all of the articles and visual essays within the journal issue. A core text guiding all of the papers, implicitly or explicitly, is Sara Ahmed’s (2017) *Living a Feminist Life*. It is our ambitious hope that this special issue contributes to larger movements for change (Campbell, Pahl, Pente, & Rasool, 2018; Facer & Pahl, 2017; Ranciere, 2010; Tuhiwai Smith, Tuck, & Wang, 2019). Thinking about Ahmed’s (2017) affirmation of the 20th century feminist mantra that “the personal is political” (p. 3), as editors

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Correspondence Address: Jennifer Rowsell, Faculty of Education, Brock University, St. Catharines, ON, L2S 3A1; Email: jrowsell@brocku.ca

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of this special issue, we hope that it creates a more textured sense of how people express political convictions through literacy in their everyday lives. Like Ahmed (2017), who says “feminism is wherever feminism needs to be. Feminism needs to be everywhere” (p. 3), we have witnessed the politics of literacy in environments that tend to be bracketed off from the political, such as domestic spaces, community hubs, remote classrooms, and higher education policies. In this sense, feminism is not gender-specific or even human-specific (i.e., it can be posthuman and more-than-human as seen in the work of Braidotti, 2013, and Barad, 2007). Feminism is a lived practice that everyone can engage in; it is about retracing and rewriting histories, being aware, informed, and engaged, and supporting people on the margins. Ahmed (2017) speaks of reorienting worlds and putting different slants on things. One example is watching who we cite and being mindful about decentralizing historically privileged knowledge in our citations in order to highlight scholarly practice that is explicitly decolonial. In other words, citational politics is one medium or avenue through which we can accomplish such reorientations; we must vigilantly watch who we cite. Living a feminist life is about how we challenge, question, and contest the ordinary. Literacy studies has a history of spearheading such efforts of contestation (Luke & Woods, 2009), and the research spotlighted in this special issue pushes forcefully for this conviction and for more politically charged literacy work.

Confronting Changes and Sweaty Concepts

Confronting changes seems like a relatively clear call to action. Considering the massive shifts that have occurred over the last decade in both political climates and the ways in which global and digital networks shape our lives, this special issue explores how these changes affect young people and how young people respond creatively to and engage with issues of social justice and politics. Young people are engaging in creative conversations and actions at the local and global levels which significantly impact politics, social environments, and ways of living, and in this issue authors explore these concerns from an interdisciplinary vantage point.

But what about *sweaty concepts*? Ahmed (2017) applies the term “sweaty concepts” to concepts that are identified within situations. For instance, key terms and concepts in literacy such as Brian V. Street’s theory of *literacy as a social practice* emerged from sweaty concepts such as *maktab* literacy practices or autonomous literacy practices as he observed people across contexts in Iran (Street, 1995). It is the figurative apple falling on your head that hits researchers in the midst of fieldwork (Ahmed, 2017). These are beautiful and generative moments that take place all too seldom. Sweaty concepts emerge, according to Ahmed, when we are pulled or stretched out of our comfort zone: “a sweaty concept might come out of a bodily experience that is trying” (2017, p. 13). There are some sweaty moments within this

special issue, when researchers describe and theorize moments that feel different, out of their realms of experience, maybe even uncomfortable; these moments can elicit broader implications about the nature and properties of literacy.

Young people today appear relatively comfortable and at ease with confronting change and navigating sweaty concepts – generally speaking, that is. Media and digital worlds sometimes make change easier because people become more opaque and less visible behind screens. Certainly, many young people have come together in various formations to produce arts-based knowledge and share in collaborative social justice efforts; others looking at literacies have pointed to the capacities to critically consume, produce, disseminate, and intervene with information as constitutive of literacies (Mirra, Morrell, & Filipiak, 2018). At the same time, young people are increasingly leveraging hybrid strategies including but not limited to writing, art-making, speaking, and using social media to intervene in diverse political challenges (e.g., globalization, politics, education, gun safety). Their actions urge us to consider how ever-more diverse groups of young people are pushing the boundaries of literacy, equity, and civic engagement to effect positive change. Materiality, we argue alongside the scholars in this special issue, is distinctly woven through young people’s activism in ways that evidence entrenchment in contemporary global networks and the knowledge and capacity to intervene in dynamics of inequity. In particular, gender, race, and Indigeneity show up as framing the conversations and lives of young people invested in change.

This special issue brings together an interdisciplinary group of scholars to reconsider how we might frame theories of literacy to examine social justice issues in young people’s lives, especially inequalities arising from race, gender, sexuality, class, and other aspects of identity and experience in the context of global digital networks. Central questions asked in the issue are: What new concerns regarding globalization, power, and equity have emerged for scholars working in the traditions of young people’s activism, and arts-based production, given the intensive prominence of global networks, flows, and relationships in shaping the lives of young people? What kind of updated framework for multiliteracies and youth-led social justice can account for the relations of power along lines of race, sex, gender, class, and location that have historically structured knowledge? How might scholars reframe the debate around youth organizing as a response to injustice to one that more carefully attends to creative forms of engagement and global relationality? These questions inform the structure and content of this issue as indeed they guided our conversations in October 2017. Ahmed talks about feminism as sensational and pushing against injustices; questioning power and privilege brings agency and life to research and these ideas are threaded throughout the issue.

In the issue, we respond to the tumultuous political moment that defines our world. Significantly, we wish to highlight the ways in which young

people engage creatively and aesthetically with counter-narratives and in the production of what might be termed equity or justice. We respond to the calls of queer and feminist theorists of color (i.e., Muñoz, 2009) to locate a hopefulness in persistent engagement outside of dominant tropes of engagement. Beginning in the early 2000s with the Occupy movement and expanding through a multiplicity of organizing efforts and activist engagements led chiefly by young people, this special issue traces a set of responses to dominant political norms.

The People and Research in this Special Issue

We were very fortunate to have Wendy Ewald attend the two-day symposium and share part of her exhibition on a revisit to Labrador, Canada entitled *Pekupatikut Innuat Akunikana/Pictures Woke the People Up*. By way of history, Wendy Ewald visited Sheshatshiu, Labrador in 1969 as a young woman, and took a series of photographs. She revisited decades later in 2007. At the symposium, she shared contrastive photographs alongside the photographic philosophies that have made her famous. In the special issue, Ewald concentrated on the notion of “politics” and designed a visual essay based on another research study entitled, *An Immigrant Alphabet*. Building on the trope of learning words and written language through alphabet primers, Ewald recognized that the alphabet could be an allusive medium for immigrants to explore experiences that they had over the course of their immigration. Working with teenagers at Al-Bustan Seeds of Culture, which is an arts and education program in Philadelphia, Ewald divided the alphabet into parts and placed students in groups to choose words that represent the letters their group was assigned, after which students drew out their ideas visually. For instance, a young woman named Malika from Uzbekistan chose “A for Amerika: a country where everything starts first.” The three female teenagers presented in Ewald’s photo essay personify the imperative outlined in Ahmed’s feminist manifesto to reorient the world and put issues on a slant. Ewald was a key figure at our symposium and her international work pushed us to think about literacy in more political ways.

After Ewald’s photo essay, we move on to an article by Kate Pahl whose scholarship on co-researching with youth has strongly impacted the field of literacy studies. In the article, Pahl argues that it is essential to see literacy through young people’s communicative practices. What makes the article forceful is both the research data from her fieldwork in Rotherham and Sheffield, and the wide breadth of her knowledge of the field and the diversity evident in her citations. Rather than seeing literacy as static, and connected to specific writing and reading practices, Pahl ascribes to a “what if” quality, that sees literacy as expansive and located in the realm of the “not yet.” Pahl beautifully focuses on moments of *recognition* (her italics) by youth when they are seen and heard. To do this, she draws on more process-

oriented theory such as the work of Brian Massumi (2011) to elicit moments of becoming and research *with* young people as opposed to *on* young people. She consistently grounds her work in young people's activities across a range of spaces and presents them as crucial processes of engagement, and this tendency is certainly apparent within the article.

As a fitting transition from Pahl's article on co-research with young people is Diane Collier's article, which spans across three different research studies across ages and spaces and walks readers through her journey into co-research and participatory methods. There is an openness, honesty, and rawness to Collier's work, in that she does not tie things up neatly with a bow. Rather, Collier isolates the knots in her thinking and takes the reader through how she worked out participatory methods. In her research and writing, Collier tries as much as possible to tell the story that children most want to tell (rather than a story that matches research questions or aligns with an objective). She does so with an ethical stance, in that she is miraculously able to tell the story that children and youth want to tell while at the same time protecting them in the telling of it. As she says, "in my research, I have tried to work with an openness to how others – often children – might understand research processes and how they might direct what is happening as well as provide interpretations and direction." As she moves through her early research and subsequently elucidates two more recent studies, Collier illustrates how she moved into co-research. Drawing from Ahmed again, Collier show us the sweaty concepts that are etched within her fieldwork and data.

Building on Collier's co-research, Curran Katsi'sorókwas Jacobs places us within a participatory research study with youth engaging in digital experiences. Building on her own story and memories of her father telling stories about her heritage as a part of the Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) people, Jacobs moves to her present-day work as a scholar and educator, and reflects upon a learner named Maren, whom she values greatly. This young woman reminds Jacobs of her own infusion of identities. Further, the literacy practices in which Maren engages are influenced by colonial history and infused with the understandings from each respective community and history to which she belongs. Lifting out Maren's story, Jacobs elucidates how the multimodal nature of contemporary literacy allows space for youth to express themselves in ways other than writing, but also encourages them to develop writing skills as a means of not being left out. Like all authors in the issue, Jacobs powerfully shows that young people develop their own terms for literacy based on their interests, passions, and backgrounds and so often these influences do not align with traditional notions of academic literacy. Reflecting on Maren's art, Jacobs alerts us that the art is not explicitly representative of her Indigenous identity. One aspect of her identity that Maren makes clear to Jacobs and others is that she identifies as Kanien'kehá:ka.

Mining the connotative and allusive nature of art, Michelle Honeyford, Timothy Beyak, and Felix Sylvester Hardman move into higher education and their educator inquiry group to push against normed beliefs and convictions about categories through material engagements. Working from a core text, namely a drawing by a participant named Felix, Honeyford and Beyak draw out the power of inquiry by unraveling issues of power, privilege, and normative values. Applying Jocson's (2018) framework of youth media texts as *pedagogy*, as *assemblage*, as *place-making*, and as *critical solidarity*, the authors examine artifactual data (Felix's drawing) to illustrate how they operationalize Jocson's framework. Using heuristics like a triangle diagram, the inquiry group thinks about big ideas, engages in recursive meaning-making, and recognizes the complex, contentious, and challenging aspects of questioning their own knowledge and assumptions. As the article nears its end, the author team starts to forge some sweaty concepts dealing with text as place-making which draws attention to place and reorienting colonialist histories. Through creative and critical literacy practices, critical solidarity involves youth not only confronting change, but challenging indoctrinated worldviews.

From this critical gaze, we move into the force of an activist article titled *Armed with Love*. To be sure, Anne Crampton's article arms us with love as a quality that permeates an experience (both emotionally and bodily) as an immersive state of being fully engrossed in activity or work (Dewey, 2005, p. 339). Crampton's detailed ethnography in two high schools in the United States paints a vivid picture of young people's efforts to be agentive in formal schooling. As Crampton notes, artistic responses often result from feelings and passion – sometimes to make or enact a change. Both of the teachers Crampton spotlights had explicitly stated activist goals in their classrooms and their pedagogical planning revolved around disrupting the status quo. There are resonant phrases in Crampton's beautifully written article. One phrase in particular sticks out to us: "armed with love these students produced 'documentaries that have a life outside of the classroom'." Strongly influenced by the affective turn in literacy, Crampton illustrates how the emotional and affective qualities of their literacy experiences are inseparable from their activist productions and performance of resistances.

The article by Chelsey Hauge and Kate Reid uses performance and arts methods to work through cancer treatment, and more broadly, find a voice that reorients practices of representation. In the article, the authors examine how Hauge works with her friend Reid to multimodally represent Chelsey's journey through breast cancer. The purpose of this paper is to explore the potential of artistic practice to counter dominant narratives and amplify unheard voices. It profiles an arts-based project which enabled both authors to tell stories in multimodal ways – to illustrate how creative practice can serve as a site for counter normative storytelling. *Breast Cancer Pink* is both an artistic artifact (a song with an accompanying music video) and an arts-based project that narrates the story of Chelsey's experience of queer, young

adult breast cancer and her reaction to certain elements of “pink culture.” Reid applies Goodson’s (1998) notion of “storying of self” where constructing and making sense of one’s identity is an emergent process, that is, an “ongoing process of self-building and self-negotiation... an ongoing project of storying and narrative” (p. 6) in relation to a particular culture. Engaging in collaborative ethnographic songwriting, the authors compose narratives that reflect and archive particular life experiences of the individual(s) in song, allowing them to story “a contemporary snapshot of an ongoing process” (Goodson, 1998, p. 10) of identity-building and sense-making within a given culture. Connecting strongly with Ahmed (2017), the authors transact with the idea of *making* a feminist survival kit. They wanted to *queer* cancer, relying on a feminist conception of literacy as the capacity to identify and articulate a feminist account of one’s own experience, and to share that experience in the community with others. *Breast Cancer Pink* is a queer, feminist project of survival. It is a project that exemplifies multimodal literacy engagement that moves across mediums, evidences intentional engagement with the world, and queers breast cancer normativity. There is no question that this article aligns strongly with Ahmed’s efforts to put a different slant on the other, thereby reorienting our gazes.

Sara Schroeter’s article, the final article in the issue, moves expressively into disruptive pedagogies to unsettle colonialist paradigms embedded in curricula for a century. Her year-long ethnographic study in a high school in British Columbia offers a framework for understanding disruption as productive movement in literacy. Drawing on theories of the body and embodiment, Schroeter illustrates how youth of color are read in various places and space, and how race creates a spatial quality of difference which she relates to Hall’s (1996) notion of the floating signifier. Applying drama techniques in a grade nine classroom, Schroeter closely examined categories assigned to individuals such as “girl,” “boy,” “Black,” and “White.” She says, “the way Tournesol [one of Schroeter’s participants] and others answered my question indicates that the youth were aware of racial signifiers and discourses during their interactions; circulating logics about racial categories never disappeared.” There is such a democratic feel to what Schroeter describes in her article – young people in this classroom have what Ahmed describes as “snap” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 189). Racially diverse youth like Tournesol are painfully aware of racial signifiers, and their reactions embody Ahmed’s claim about the nature and origins of snap: “If a snap seems sharp or sudden, it might be because we do not experience the slower time of bearing or of holding up; the time in which we can bear the pressure, the time it has taken for things not to break” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 189). When young people push back at stereotypes, they begin to enact evolutions that should be encouraged, and relatedly, the snap constitutes a sign a freedom and agency.

As a coda to the special issue, we have included an evocative and deeply meaningful visual essay by Peter Vietgen. Vietgen’s visual essay, entitled “Soaring Eagles,” looks at a research study with Indigenous youth at a

historic location known as Soaring Eagles in the Niagara area. Kelsey Dick, herself an aboriginal teacher, worked with Vietgen and a group of Indigenous youths over the course of the project to take a critical look at Truth and Reconciliation in Canada's history and to address the question, "*What is truth? What is reconciliation?*" The visual essay is a personal look at what we know, what we don't know, and what we must do to move forward while respecting the past. Within the essay, Vietgen demonstrates how students used a variety of materials to explore and express their interpretations of the Calls to Action stated in the Truth and Reconciliation Report.

Conclusion: Feminist Living and Working Alongside Youth

As we have discussed, this collection of papers contributes to what we might call hopeful, participatory and youth-led movement for change (Campbell et al., 2018; Facer & Pahl, 2017; Ranciere, 2010; Tuhiwai Smith, Tuck, & Wang, 2019). Taken together these pieces re-present personal knowledge as political engagement in the world. The pieces dive deeply into the literacy practices that enable us to witness political sensibilities in our everyday lives – especially in spaces that typically are voided from the political. In this special issue, we observe multiple ways in which literacy practices enable the remediation of knowledge – and therefore power – in classrooms, healthcare spaces, and multigenerational communities. It is the potential for multimodal literacies to enable the remediation of knowledge and power in which we locate a sense of hopefulness for young people, change, and scholarship on a politics of literacies.

One thing that emerged from our many discussions and interactions over the two-day event about the politics of literacies was the creative, disruptive, and ultimately hopeful ways that young people make meaning. Whether it is adults in an inquiry group or children working with family photos or Indigenous high school students combining different media and materials to represent their feelings about the Calls to Action stated in the Truth and Reconciliation Report, the special issue works across studies with a common goal of dismantling power and inciting political awareness. Across the papers and projects, we identify a unifying strand around engagement with the material practices that enable us to hear and witness young people in their political engagement, whether that engagement manifests as the production of creative literacies or the refusal to participate in everyday schooling or other practices that feel constraining.

It is here, in the intentional intervention into the world – be it through creative production or research methodologies and practices – that we locate what we have termed a politics of literacies aimed at nurturing scholarly ideas that demand deep engagement with creative practice and political sensibilities in the quotidian lives of young people.

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