



Affect, embodiment and place in critical literacy: Assembling theory and practice

Edited by Kim Lenters and Mairi McDermott, Routledge, 2019, 246 pp., USD 55.95 (ebook), ISBN 9780429027840

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BOOK REVIEW

Affect, embodiment and place in critical literacy: Assembling theory and practice, edited by Kim Lenters and Mairi McDermott, Routledge, 2019, 246 pp., USD 55.95 (ebook), ISBN: 9780429027840.

Affect, Embodiment and Place in Critical Literacy: Assembling Theory and Practice is a notable contribution to bringing theory and practice together in literacy education by offering a posthuman approach to literacy practices. It engages with the posthuman assemblages of affect, ethics, sensation and place in literacy practices to emphasise that learning is an affective and embodied process. It also attempts to aid the teachers in the field of literacy education to explore the complexities of classroom and literacy learning by enabling them to employ posthumanism in their classrooms and to realise that the curriculum is an always-emerging relational process.

The authors were a part of three reading group meetings followed by a three-day workshop organised by the editors. During these meetings, the texts of Comber, Nicholas and Campano, Zapata and Van Horn, Ehret and Hollett, and Waterhouse, which deal with the concepts of place, materiality, technology, etc., were discussed by all the participants of the workshop to understand the ideas of posthumanism (see p. 13 for more details on the texts). This exercise introduced all the contributors of the book to posthumanism and literacy education. After the workshop, each literacy educator was paired with a researcher to work on a particular theme that reflected their shared engagement with posthuman theories and emergent practices and write up their work as a chapter. This approach brought together the perspectives of a researcher and a literacy educator, elevating the book's credibility. The book, in addition to articulating the concepts of posthumanism, offers case studies that bridge the gap between theory and practice due to the amalgamation of the perspectives of researchers and literacy educators.

The book comprises 24 chapters, of which 13 are contributed by literacy educators and researchers, and the other chapters of which include the introduction to each section of the book by the editors and chapters that act as a guide to aid readers in understanding the various posthuman literacy approaches engaged in those 13 chapters. The book is divided into four sections named 'Plateaus,' under which chapters are grouped that relate to the theme of the plateau. Each plateau begins with an introduction to the theme and some remarks by the editors to contextualise the experiences and approaches shared by the authors in the chapters. In addition, chapters called 'Orienting Maps' are placed between plateaus to guide the readers concerning the 'reading and understanding of posthuman literacy approaches' (p. 14) in those chapters. This kind of chapterisation is experimental as it does not require a linear reading. It enables the readers to navigate through the book in a modular fashion which might be favourable for readers who want to read the book in segments. For instance, in orienting map 1, the editors introduce the readers to theories interconnected with posthumanism that are referenced in the chapters of the book, such as assemblage theory. They also define numerous posthuman concepts encountered throughout the book, such as agency, bodymind, intra-action, etc., in alphabetical order (see p. 20). This enables the reader to understand the concepts, emergent practices and experiences shared in the chapters with clarity, as presenting just the case studies without articulating the theoretical concepts might make the process of sense-making difficult for the readers. The book also includes 'Travellers' Review' in the conclusion plateau, which offers the outsider's perspective of the workshop delivered by two emerging scholars who participated in the reading group and gives an account of their reflections from the workshop.

The book's overall structure might seem complicated, but it is done with the intent to ease the intellectual engagement of the reader with the text by enabling the reader to move between plateaus and orienting maps in any order the reader prefers. The editors have also created signposts (for

example, see p. 6) in the book to guide and position the readers during their journey. Additionally, the book offers definitions of terminologies throughout to facilitate an easy and undisturbed exploration for the reader. In most chapters, there are boxes with key points, prompts and questions for the reader to contemplate, which enables the readers to reflect and apply the learned posthuman concepts in their classroom practices. These attributes make the book more engaging and facilitate the readers' actions and responses about reorienting literacy research and practices. These prompts also equip the readers to seek and encourage the potentialities hidden in classrooms, which the editors refer to as 'mess and chaos' due to its unpredictable and political nature (p. xiii).

Literacy is constantly transforming with respect to change in the material world. This transforming literacy opens up space for various theories, such as posthumanism, to understand better the nuances of current literacy education. For instance, affect is a form of unconscious knowing or a gut feeling that precedes reasoning and articulation; embodiment is a tangible form of an idea, and, in this context, it is a process of understanding oneself through one's body. These posthuman concepts, such as affect and embodiment, expose contemporary literacy practices with newer perspectives. Posthumanism views learning as not just knowing (epistemological: mind) but being and doing (ontological: body). These workings of the mind and body operate alongside, indicating that 'being/doing/knowing' are entangled and connected inseparably (see p. 8) in onto-epistemological terms, thereby breaking the binary between body and mind. The chapters deal with concepts such as materiality, agency, affect, place and assemblages that affirm this posthuman viewpoint of discrediting the dichotomies such as body/mind, nature/culture, human/animal and subject/object through relationality.

Plateau I deals with 'Moving with Sensation and Affect.' The contributors chart various classroom practices and experiences involving the senses and the affects created by the sensorial assemblages. For instance, the art venture carried out by Bartlett and LeBlanc, called Project-Engage, explores the materiality of junk by creating a sensorial assemblage, which is an arrangement of materials, music, memories, people and histories that are not only about learning information but a result of the affective responses of the students. It also explores the experience of place by positioning students as active agents who intra-act with place to bring about a change. These attributes have significance beyond the mere completion of the activity (chapter 1). Waterhouse and Chaudhuri use a graphic novel in the affective reading classroom for adult learners from a materialist standpoint. The 'sepia-toned' artwork, the 'leather-look' cover of the novel, and the vintage-looking pages were actors of the assemblage, enabling an affective reading. An affective reading classroom focuses on semiotic and affective responses of the learners rather than just literal descriptions of the images from the novel. The authors affirm that a socio-materialist view, taking into consideration the constitutive entanglement of social and material aspects, will enable us to examine the potential of the material object to affect the learning process, thereby asserting its effective contribution to language learning (chapter 3). 'Yes-Anding' (a practice exercised in improvisatory theatre) and 'Body-Storming' (which, unlike brainstorming, where the brain is doing all the work, focusses on bodies that encounter multiple possibilities of materiality that surround us) are two creative practices introduced in chapter 4. These practices affirm the concept of 'becoming' (p. 21), which enables continuous transformations in the act of learning. That is, if a classroom is considered an assemblage with various actors such as teachers, learners, technology and material objects coming in and moving out in time, the learning gets emergent in that spatiality and temporality. Similarly, these practices also affirm the concept of 'sociomaterial' (p. 74), which fosters an understanding of the contingent and agential relationship among people, place, materials and other resources for vibrant classroom planning. Ehret and MacDonald encourage listening to 'Minor Gestures' (affective moments that cannot be measured, such as the tensions of a classroom, the simple act of caring that are driven by human relations and not by protocols at that given moment in time), which can enable teachers to build transformative pedagogical relationships with learners by participating in the classroom intra-action and being affected by it (chapter 2).

Plateau II deals with 'Becoming Worldmakers with Ethics and Difference.' The contributors explore sociomateriality, place, lived experiences, multiplicity and relationality. This plateau looks

beyond the existing practices of literacy classrooms by taking an ethical stand in revealing the potentialities of exploratory practices that are presented as case studies. Thiel and Pelling (chapter 5) explore the notion of boundaries and space as a potential force in shaping literacy possibilities by climbing Nose Hill. Through an experience of executing the task (climbing the hill), they establish that making boundaries is a relationally engaging process, and 'with each new boundary comes a new set of ethical considerations and new potentials' (p. 95). Similarly, Spring and Huddleston (chapter 9) build on Massey's (2005) 'throwntogetherness' (where readers and texts collide in a shared space) (p. 139) to work on questions of identity in literacy education. This exploration repositions texts with the agency or what Bennett (2010) calls the 'thing power'. Thing power is the agentic ability of an entity (human/non-human/material) to affect other entities when in relation. Therefore, these practices explore the ability of texts to act upon the posthuman assemblage of a literacy classroom and identities.

Aukerman and Jensen (chapter 6) discuss the significance of multiplicity and relationality by exempting the strict evaluation process in the classroom, inviting a range of perspectives and ideas generated by learners and indulging in 'everyday sensemaking' (p. 106). The authors use the 'Bag of Belongings' (p. 108) as an everyday sensemaking activity in classrooms to broaden the understanding of what we perceive text to be and exercise relationality in classrooms. Similarly, Nicholas and O'Sullivan (chapter 8) explore literacy teaching as an act of coming together of all participants of the classroom assemblages that include students, histories, texts, materials, instructors, etc., collaborating and competing with one another. This establishes the interdependency of assemblages to challenge the forms of instruction, assessments and evaluation for equitable education. Merchant and Devender-Kraft (chapter 7) illustrate the shifting identity as an outcome of 'interactions with materials, texts, educators and other students in surprising and often unpredictable ways' (p. 116).

In plateau III, the chapters are grounded in asking the 'just-right-question' (p. 161) and the magnitude it holds in literacy learning. The chapters suggest that asking the right questions can affect the classroom's trajectory with numerous possibilities for engagement. They chiefly focus on relationships concerning curriculum and place. For instance, in chapter 10, Whitty and McKay deal with the biographies and histories of places and communities, linking them with literacy practices through stories. This is made possible due to the multimodal characteristics of places, communities and histories that can be incorporated as stories. Similarly, Hirst and Burnett (chapter 11) consider the relational aspect between students and places. They explore the literacy practices that move beyond learners and learner-centric approaches by looking at place as a resource that is multi-layered in its relation to the people and things that surround it. The notion of place is fluid and complex because it is constantly becoming and constructed through relations. The shifting identifications with the place become a resource in literacy learning. Chapter 12 adds to the notion of place as a resource by delving deeper into critical space-place and material pedagogies through exploring art installations in school environments. These aesthetic installations transform the school environments and cause relational awareness as the learners engage with them. Such practices are done to foster meaningful curriculum encounters with place. On the other hand, Perry and Seel (chapter 13) theorise the significance of relationships in an intra-acting classroom space. They assert that teachers' relationships with their learners are more crucial than just the teacher-subject-learner (subject-centred) relationship. This is because the teachers, subject and learners are a part of the interdependent classroom assemblage and focusing on the subject by negating the learners will affect the learning process.

Plateau IV (conclusion) has two chapters contributed by two budding researchers, referred to as travellers, Miriam Ramzy and Gina Ko, under 'Traveller Review.' These travellers journeyed with the authors and witnessed the workshop, where they were introduced to posthumanism and literacy. The anecdotes of their journey throughout their participation in the reading group and workshop were shared in this review. The review also mentions insights of the travellers in terms of how this experience has reshaped their teaching practices.

The book explores the ideas and concepts that are not evident or often overlooked in the study of literacy practices and invites a posthuman approach in addressing these lapses to better account for the intricacies of literacy practices in the classroom. It centres on three key concepts—*affect, embodiment and place*—to bring together posthumanism and literacy through exploratory classroom practices that bridge the existing gap between theory and practice, which can facilitate effective literacy learning. The fact that the book invites posthumanism as a theory to explore literacy practices without predetermined expectations makes it generative and yields new perceptions of literacy practices through presented case studies. This suggests that a theory can function in two different ways. Firstly, it can help the practitioners articulate the practices inside a literacy classroom through reasoning. Nichols and Campano (2017) affirm that taking a posthuman theoretical stance ‘provides new dimensions that help better account for the complexities of the classroom’ (p. 55) by giving significance to those occurrences which might be overlooked otherwise. For instance, the agential nature of a text or a material is in the learning process. Secondly, exploratory practices in the classrooms can also lead to the generation or expansion of a new theory, such as posthumanism in the field of literacy education. This book is a prime example of such experimentation.

The book enables the readers to understand the possibilities of posthumanism and its implications in the constantly changing terrain of literacy education through the various case studies produced by literacy educators and researchers who worked collaboratively on their shared engagement with posthuman theories and emergent practices. It functions as a guide to literacy practitioners for implementing posthuman practices in their classrooms. Also, the interdisciplinarity of posthumanism and its relevance in the present conditions, including the field of education, makes this book a valuable contribution to improving and remodelling educational practices in current conditions.

The conception of literacy has been shifting continually and is perceived as multimodal meaning-making associated with the spatial, audio-visual, gestural and other modes of communication, which is intersectional about socio-cultural contexts rather than just linked with the ability to listen, speak, read and write. In these terms, the book extends the scope for curriculum development that is informed of the present scenario of the 21st-century classroom with technological advancements and post-anthropocentric perspectives. The book facilitates the creation of curricular materials that enable educators to rethink various possibilities for literacy teaching that surpass conventional education and equips the researchers in the field to reflect on the implications of their research for literacy practices in classrooms.

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