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Emery Petchauer

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From Yaktown to Your Town: On Well-Connectedness and the Shape of Literacy Networks

by Emery Petchauer, Ed.D.

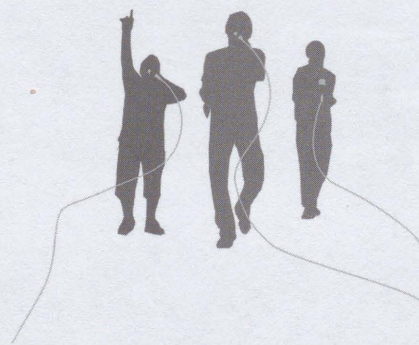
The ties, tethers, and vectors among us are a subject of mediation in Nick Sousanis's (2015) *Unflattening*. Written as a graphic text, the work is an expansive meditation on how we construct knowledge, ourselves, and just about everything else. The chapter titled "Vectors" houses a full-page sequence with the following action playing out in panels: illuminated by a spotlight, a string puppet reaches up behind its head, gathering the strings attached to its back in one hand while holding a pair of scissors in the other. After cutting itself free from the strings bound to its back, the puppet slumps to the ground—free—only to fall out of the spotlight, away from its shadow, and off the page into darkness. The text along these frames reads: "To set ourselves free, we cannot simply cut our bonds. For to remove them (if we could) would only set us adrift, detached from the very things that make us who we are" (p. 134).

This focus on attachment and freedom continues on the adjacent page: a dense drawing of intricate and interwoven ropes connected through pulley systems. The page conjures images of climbers ascending and descending facades with ropes, and sails on boats harnessing energy from the wind via expertly attached lines and pulleys. Drawing from Bruno Latour (2005), Sousanis accompanies these images with the following text: "Emancipation does not mean 'freed from bonds' but well-attached. The strings stay on. By identifying more threads of association, we are better able to see these attachments not as constraints but as forces to harness" (Sousanis, 2015, p. 135).

Detroit organizer and philosopher Grace Lee Boggs, along with husband James, frequently alluded to ties, tethers, and vectors while outlining more humane ways to live in times of change (Boggs & Boggs, 1974). Grace Lee Boggs frequently spoke and wrote of critical connections over critical mass and of the need for



**Emery
Petchauer, Ed.D.**



emergent practices. A common reference point for Boggs was Margaret Wheatley's (2006) statement: "In this exquisitely connected world, it's never a question of 'critical mass.' It's always about critical connections" (p. 40). By taking this position, Wheatley (and Boggs) urged a shift away from a Newtonian perspective that focuses on incremental change due to a proportional relationship between effort and impact. Instead, they argued for a quantum perspective that presumes any action works in combustion with a series of complex and interwoven systems. The former is filling a glass with water: quantity. The latter is baking bread in an oven: chemistry. A number of emergent art/activism collectives such as Complex Movements, The Aadizookaan, People in Education, Verses (Watson, 2016), and others in and around Detroit have been guided by this paradigm shift.

What does this paradigm shift mean for literacy, literacy learning, and English language arts classroom teaching? How should literacy and literacy learning be well-attached, not with constraints but with forces to harness? I allow these questions to push my thinking in this piece. Ultimately, I arrive at what I think are practical recommendations for educators to make literacy and literacy learning well-attached and critically-connected to arts assets in their communities. Concepts from Actor-Network Theory (ANT; Fenwick & Richard, 2010) and insights from Yaktown Sounds move me to these answers.

An after school space around hip-hop arts and expressions, Yaktown Sounds is an evolving community of practice at a community center in Pontiac, Michigan—halfway between Detroit and Flint. A rotating group of community artists and I have facilitated Yaktown Sounds since 2014, orienting our actions mostly around DJing and beatmaking. I take cues from Ruth Nicole Brown (2013) and resist calling Yaktown Sounds a “program” since many nonprofits and educational groups imagine youth of color through deficit lenses and, consequently, build programs to fix them. Yaktown Sounds is an evolving community of practice more interested in figuring out how to find, connect, and leverage the assets around us than expand, grow, or be legible to people outside of Pontiac. You won’t find much about Yaktown Sounds by googling it. In fact, maintaining a type of illegibility is an aesthetic and (dis)organizing priority that guides us (Brown, 2013; Irby & Petchauer, 2012). This priority does not undermine our desire to be well-attached because visibility and connectedness are not identical. Visibility can support well-connectedness, but they are not the same thing. Yaktown Sounds is a key site of learning I will draw from throughout this article to unpack literacy networks and well-connectedness.

Literacies,

Encumbered and Connected

Literacy learning and practices exist in networks of humans and nonhuman objects in various clumps, nodes, hubs, and configurations. This perspective on

literacies coheres with sociocultural and New Literacy Studies (e.g., Hull & Moje, 2012) and its focus on literacy practices in social contexts. Yet, my language underscores the unevenness, connectedness, and evolving nature of literacies in networks. Like the webs that spiders spin, these configurations have different shapes and properties. Some networks are dense like the crisscrossing of cobwebs. Others are more open like the broad segments of circular orb webs. Some networks have strong relational ties among people, and others have weaker ties. The shapes and properties of networks scaffold the kinds of supports, channels of new information, and affordances available (Granovetter, 1983). These network shapes in which literacy practices exist are never stable, always shifting.

Allow me to play this out: an English language arts teacher enters a classroom and by doing so, enters an existing network with students. Other teachers, school leaders, and community members are also configured in this network with different strengths of relational ties among them. The trajectories of these people are never stable, always in motion. Literacy learning and practices birth, evolve, and sustain among the members of these networks. Crucially, these networks are comprised of more than humans. Objects, tools, procedures, platforms, technologies, and policies equally matter. A set of textbook anthologies, a class set of novels, Google Classroom platform, a pen, state standardized exams, Common Core State Standards, hand-held devices, and much more are also part of this network in which people create, teach, and learn literacy practices.

Questions of well-connectedness push us to consider certain aspects of these networks. One consideration is that nonhuman/posthuman objects such as those above are equal to humans and act upon one another (and us) with influence and agency (Fenwick & Richard, 2010). Consider the impulses most of us feel upon seeing our smartphone or the Facebook app icon on a screen. We feel called to grab the phone and check something, *anything!* Or, closer to the English classroom, consider the impulses youth feel (or don’t) in response to a particular book, writing journal, blank Google document, and particular people (real or fictitious) in the

classroom space. Actor Network Theory pushes us to consider how these objects have agency and are agents networked with us. Questions of well-connectedness make us consider all of these items and ourselves as connected agents acting upon one another in a network of relations.

Questions of well-connectedness also lead us to recognize how clusters of agents (again, humans and nonhumans) become densely connected in networks and for what affects. Another example on the ground: English teachers, students, Common Core State Standards, Michigan Student Test of Educational Progress (M-STEP), and teacher evaluation policies are separate entities. Yet, these specific items move together—exerting mutual influence upon one another—in a solid configuration. No single item moves without the others. Latour (1987) calls configurations such as these *immutable mobiles*: things acting upon one another from having “developed enough solidity to be able to move about and still hold their relations in place” (Fenwick & Richard, 2010, p. 18). Most immutable mobiles that English teachers find themselves in are created outside of their control. Educators fall into existing immutable mobiles, dense webs of sorts, created long before them.

Some immutable mobiles become configured in such a way where all relations in a network must flow through them at some time (Fenwick & Richard, 2010). Turning once again toward Latour (1987), these are called *obligatory points of passage*. The M-STEP is an obligatory point of passage for all students in Michigan. For many 9th graders and their educators, *Romeo and Juliet* is an obligatory point of passage. For preservice English teachers in Michigan, the Michigan Test for Teacher Certification (MTTC) is an obligatory point of passage. As with immutable mobiles, English teachers fall into relationship with most of their obligatory points of passage. Unlike Sousanis' (2015) string puppet, our goal cannot be to cut ourselves free from the agents in these networks. Literacy and learning exist in these webs of relations. The goal is to read the threads of association around us (a kind of networked literacy) and work intentionally to become *well-attached*.

Injustice, Violence, Freedom, and Liberation in Networks

Attention to injustice, violence, liberation, and freedom continue to evolve in English education (e.g., Baker-Bell, Butler, & Johnson, 2017). English educators and scholars most frequently attend to these issues at the level of language (e.g., Baker-Bell, 2013), pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017), and text (e.g., Tuck & Reollet, 2016). Network configurations also enact violence, oppression, and hold the potential for freedom and liberation. One function of oppression (economic, racial, settler colonial, etc.) is to sever and extract opportunities, ideas, information, and resources from some groups. School racial segregation pre-*Brown v. Board of Education* worked in this way because it cut-off access to education resources for Black communities. This type of violence can simultaneously sequester resources for the benefit of other groups or sections of a network, as it did for White communities pre-*Brown*. American home loan discrimination (i.e., redlining; Massey & Denton, 1993), resource extraction in the African continent (Rodney, 1972), and other systems of violence work in similar ways.

Violence happens in networks not only by severing resources and opportunities from groups, but also by allowing tools and ideas of oppression to circulate. Historian Edward Baptist (2016) illustrates this point through his work on the intra-American slave trade. Baptist shows how the refined network among U.S. enslavers allowed them not only to trade and sell enslaved Africans but also for enslavers to exchange cruel and torturous methods of extracting labor. Networks also play into the current public reassertion of white supremacy via the Alt-Right. The Alt-Right has used online networks to distribute their ideas, cultivate sympathy, and mobilize themselves.

Injustice and opportunities in English classrooms also operate though configured, uneven, and evolving networks. The texts, characters, subjects, and technologies students have opportunities to encounter in classrooms are organized in networks. The incredible success of Angie Thomas's (2017) young adult novel *The Hate*

U Give and its subsequent ban in Katy Independent School District of Texas by Superintendent Lance Hindt illustrates this point (see Rosenfield, 2017). The book—along with Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely's (2015) *All American Boys*, Nic Stone's (2017) *Dear Martin*, and others—has given students opportunities to wrestle through racial violence on their own terms, not the terms of adults. I see the evidence of this access and impact through the community of hashtag chats on Twitter like #ProjectLITChat, #NCTEchat, #Educolor, and, of course, #TheHateUGive. Superintendent Hindt's decision to ban the book may be seen as ideological, protective, racist, or something else. But, thinking about the shape of this literacy network, we can see that Hindt functions as an obligatory point of passage. His decision ruptures the shape of the literacy network, severing students from an agentic object (the book) and its wider community of readers.

If violence and oppression operate at networked levels, so do freedom, liberation, and opportunity. Any successful social movement operates at the level of network: timely sharing of information that is crucial to mobilizing people. The inner workings of the Montgomery Bus Boycott are proof positive of this point, and the potential success of the current #WeChoose campaign for community controlled schools will succeed or fail within networks ("Journey For Justice," n.d.). My definition of freedom in this context, once again, pulls from Sousanis' (2015) images of connectedness. Freedom is not the absence of connections. It is the presence and availability of humane connections and opportunities within a network. In other words, freedom is not every student reading *The Hate U Give*; freedom is every student having the option to read it, and be in a community with other readers who are experiencing the book.

Literacy networks that cultivate freedom are able to change in response to obligatory points of passage that sever resources and opportunities from students. Hashtags such as the ones mentioned above are tools of well-connectedness that can work in these ways. They create new paths of connection and threads of association through a network (digital in this case), and

by doing so, change that network. In the case of Katy ISD banning *The Hate U Give*, the network initiated by the book's hashtag allowed not only for the news of the ban to travel but for educators and librarians to respond to this ban, even by donating and sending copies of the book to Katy, TX for youth who attend schools in the district (see Johnson, 2018). Such a move creates well-connected points of passage around the superintendent and schools themselves as the primary networks through which youth can encounter texts.

These kinds of networks are not limited to schools, but encompass the broader array of actors in the community as well. Like passing a talking stick around a sacred circle, objects with the potential to act upon us in humane ways travel through these kinds of networks. The less restriction to these paths of travel, the greater the opportunities for freedom and well-connectedness. As seems to be the case in Katy ISD, sometimes the literacy networks organized by schools restrict these freedoms from students, thus underscoring how important it is for educators to have a vision of literacy that expands beyond the school networks.

From Yaktown to Your Town

In these final sections, I outline some of the ways that I work toward well-connectedness in the community artists network around Yaktown Sounds. As I suggested earlier in this article, two necessary thinking tools around networks deal with their openness/density and the strength/weakness of relational ties among members (Granovetter, 1983). Still like spiders' webs, the ideal shape and properties of these networks depend upon the specific need. For Yaktown Sounds, the need is to have an ongoing and evolving network of artists who can create alongside youth. An open network of both weak and strong relational ties is what will result in this outcome. My use of the preposition *alongside* is crucial here since it helps put youth and community artists in co-creative relationships that ultimately give youth the opportunity to lead.

Community Artist Assets and Dilla Time

The most crucial agents in the network of Yaktown Sounds are creative people in and around town. I

consider anyone who makes, creates, or produces sounds or words a potential literacy stakeholder who should be networked with Yaktown Sounds and affiliated youth. The economic demands of life in the United States (particularly in postindustrial cities like Pontiac) seldom allow for young adults to create with and invest in youth on a consistent basis. Unless one works in a youth-service sector, it is difficult to sustain ongoing collaborative ties between youth and creative adults. The job hustle is real. As is the case across hip-hop aesthetics, I accept this rupture as an ongoing and emergent quality of the network with useful affordances (Petchauer, 2015). Starting from this recognition, chronological time (i.e., *chronos* time) is not the ideal organizing temporal frame. Volunteer schedules, programs based upon 10-week timeframes, and other chronological, linear concepts of time tend to bend networks away from community artists and everyday folks trying to survive through capitalism.

Instead of chronological time, Yaktown Sounds tries to operate by *Dilla Time*. J Dilla (James Yancey), the late Detroit music producer, is revered by music and hip-hop fans for many reasons, but particularly because of the profound manipulations of time in his beats. Naming and describing Dilla Time, Dan Charnas says it is “essentially what happens when ‘straight’ song elements are put deliberately into conflict with ‘swung’ song elements” (Schwartz, 2017). Straight-time is like a box rolling down a hill; its 90-degree edges hit at regular and predictable moments—like classes or programs in schools. Swing-time is like an egg rolling down a hill; its oblong shape creates a speeding-up and slowing-down of motion and time. What Dilla Time means to Yaktown Sounds is that we expect swing-time signature of life (swung most by economic demands on community artists) will collide with the straight-time of community center programming. This means that the arrival time and frequency of community artist involvement will swing in and out of the regular scheduling of the community center or education space. This collision of times, in our conceptualization, does not prevent community artists from being involved. In fact, it is a strength. When a community artist can return to the space after having been gone for a period of time, their return brings new

energy and creates fruitful opportunities for them to share new skills, experiences, and wisdom with youth. A kinetic, evolving network can be an energizing network. At Yaktown Sounds, we understand that networks are always in flux, time signatures of life can conflict with one another, and that community assets will literally get in where they can fit in.

The conflict between artists’ time demands and school schedules often keep them from existing as literacy stakeholders and working alongside students and teachers. This conflict requires a different arrangement of time, such as collaborations that are not bound, for example, to a five-week unit or a community artist being in a classroom every day of the week. Such straight-time collaborations can be beneficial, but they also pinch-off artists and other potential literacy stakeholders from education spaces. Given these limitations, it is important to consider what opportunities can generate at the intersection of conflicting time signatures. How must an educator’s vision of community connection change in light of the particular time signatures community artists live by? How might an educator’s planning change to allow a community artist or related network asset to be involved? These kinds of questions push educators to consider how different conceptions of time expand or construct opportunities for connectedness.

Hack the Algorithm: Prospecting and Recruiting

Changing the shape and functions of literacy networks means constantly prospecting and recruiting potential literacy stakeholders. The purpose of these ongoing activities is to surface existing agents and potential threads of connection to the network. For me, Yaktown Sounds and the English education program at Michigan State University are the primary nodes. For many educators, their classroom and students are the nodes. Daily and weekly routines create well-worn patterns of interaction among people in networks. These patterns shape who we encounter and do not encounter. For me, often times when I step outside of my weekly routine and attend a hip-hop show or music producer showcase, I encounter new community artists who might become networked with Yaktown Sounds. New networks facilitate new connections. Over time, however, the weekly

and monthly patterns can limit opportunities for identifying and recruiting new agents into our networks.

One tactic to step outside of these daily patterns is to hack the algorithm of various social media platforms. In general, the algorithm of Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms is built on affinity. Facebook and Twitter often suggest that we friend people who appear “like us” via our data profile. (These affinity algorithms create dangerous political echo-chambers as well). For me, my data profile pulls educators, scholars, people in my geographical location, or friends of friends into my recommended pool. I’m sure the algorithm is more complex and insidious, but in general, this is how I experience it. A simple and effective way to identify and recruit potential local agents is to create a new social media profile and exclusively follow artists in your geographical location. The algorithms driving social media connections refine themselves quickly. Upon following one potential literacy stakeholder in your location (e.g., a rapper, poet, writer, music producer), the algorithm pushes more your way. The budding network is not made of strong and enduring relational ties, which is fine. Weak relational ties are better for soliciting new information, resources, and opportunities (Granovetter, 1983).

In this digital network of weak ties, educators are in a position to start observing and interacting with artists and other literacy stakeholders in their community. What kinds of creative products do artists create? Which artists also post on social media about their community or seem to be thinking about their community? Though not necessary, is there evidence that any of them have experience working with youth? These kinds of questions and observations in digital spaces are not about stalking community artists. Rather, the questions are about prospecting artists and other potential literacy stakeholders who can be brought into the network.

For Yaktown Sounds, I’m prone to recruit artists in my community who already seem to have an interest in and concern for the generation younger than them. I see evidence of interest and concern through the local news stories they share or the comments they make,

even if those comments are laments about how “lost” the current generation of youth are. Though a well-worn deficit trope, comments such as these often come from a place of care, which is a valuable starting point. I resist the impulse to shut out artists who use profanity in their music or who craft narratives not often acceptable in classrooms. Since I position artist to create alongside youth much more than perform in front of them (and in an out-of-school setting), these school-based concerns are rather moot for me. Educators working in school settings may have to navigate these tensions differently.

Solidarity and Labor Swaps

In my experience, community artists are receptive to educators who reach out, give a short introduction of themselves, and invite the artist to come and observe what is going on in a low-stakes context. For community artists who have experience teaching, sometimes this first point of contact is about having a conversation toward collaborating on a potential project. As an example of what this initial contact can look like, below is a Facebook message I sent to a Sean Preston, a Pontiac hip-hop artist, after interacting with him on social media for a few months. Although we had not met in person at the time I sent this message, I recognized his passion for Pontiac in his song/video “Burden for My City” (Preston, 2017) and other social media posts.

“Peace fam, me and a friend run this after school beat making program at the Baldwin Center on [day and times]. Wanted to invite you to come chill with us and the youth sometime if you’re able. My cell is [number]. Shoot me a message!”

The low-risk invitation does not ask the artist to make a presentation, perform, or do anything beyond come and be in the space. If/when artists eventually take this offer (as Sean did about one month later), it gives youth and current collaborators an opportunity to see how this new person holds space and interacts with everyone there. After a new artist visits, I’ll often ask youth what they thought of the person, and that feedback shapes my ideas going forward including how to involve them. Some artists come through once, others a few times, and still others become frequent collaborators. Networks are evolving, ever changing.

Some of these initial contacts develop into more in-depth collaborations in the form of a skill-share, summer program, or unit. Education institutions often ask artists to give their skill and labor without compensation, which is unethical. So, these in-depth collaborations require thinking through what it means to be in solidarity with one another and different forms of compensation, especially if the collaboration takes place in a school or asks the artist to take part in something the teacher designed. Labor swaps, a practice the #RaizUp in Detroit introduced me to, are a useful framework to think through compensations. In labor swaps, collaborators do an inventory of what kinds of labor they can offer and exchange with one another. This inventory is unique to the individual, their skills, and abilities. The question, "what does each of us need that the other one has?" guides this process. My own inventory as an educator allows me to offer tutoring, editing, proof-reading, and other related services. As an accomplished DJ, I can also offer to DJ an artist's performance or create a mixtape of their music for promotional purpose. As a professor connected to institutions, I can also provide access to other networks that many artists might not have. I also have a great deal of knowledge that I can share, such as how to write a grant proposal or start a program. Labor from each of these three categories—skills, access, and knowledge—have been relevant to labor swaps I have made with artists. In the instances when educators have money to compensate artists, the conversation should still be around this kind of exchange economy, with money positioned as one potential exchange among others. Occasionally, access to a new or larger network (such as school district or university) is more valuable to an artist in the long term than a \$150 honorarium. Entering into a conversation about what kinds of labor and services we can exchange with one another creates opportunities to see what partners have, value, and need.

Conclusion: Stepping Out into Threads of Connection

Literacy practices and learning exist within a network of people, objects, and relationships among these actors. These networks are dynamic, evolving, and

unfolding over time. As agents in these networks, educators have the capacity to shift, alter, and work within these networks to make literacy learning well-connected. In this piece, I have focused on efforts toward making Yaktown Sounds well-connected to community hip-hop artists in and around Pontiac, Michigan. Of course, hip-hop is only one of many reservoirs that educators can draw from to reshape literacy networks. I challenge educators to take deliberate steps out into the network of assets around their classrooms to identify threads of association. These steps can be literal: attending an art opening, a music showcase, a poetry reading, or something else for this specific purpose. As most of us tell our students, being in the room is half of the battle. These steps can also be digital: strategically prospecting and recruiting community artists via social media interactions. As these actions reshape networks toward collaboration, it is crucial to have conversations about labor, expertise, and compensations. Labor swaps are a generative tool for having these conversations, developing solidarity, and avoiding exploitation. These practices help create new threads of association that reshape literacy networks toward freedom.

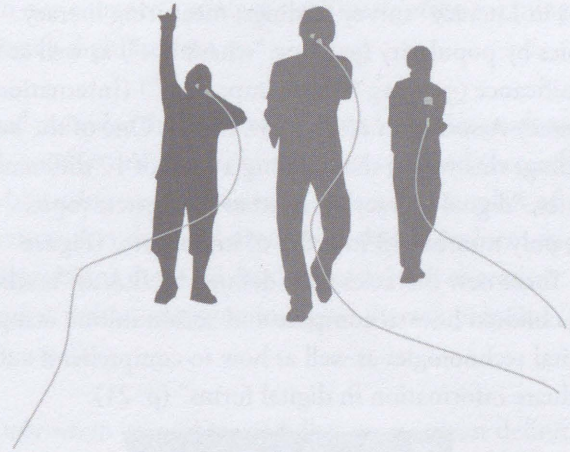
Notes

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Author Biography

Dr. Emery Petchauer is an Associate Professor in the departments of English and Teacher Education at Michigan State University, where he also coordinates the English education program. A former high school English teacher, he has nearly two decades of experience organizing urban arts spaces. He can be reached at Petchau1@msu.edu.