

Community Literacy Journal

Volume 9
Issue 2 *Spring*

Article 11

Spring 2015

New Media Literacies and Participatory Popular Culture Across Borders

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Recommended Citation

Slentz, Jessica E. "New Media Literacies and Participatory Popular Culture Across Borders." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2015, pp. 104–07, doi:10.25148/clj.9.2.009294.

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New Media Literacies and Participatory Popular Culture Across Borders

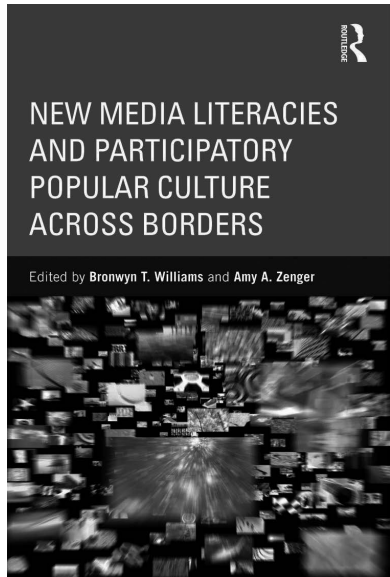
Bronwyn T. Williams and Amy A. Zenger, eds.
New York, NY: Routledge, 2012. 219 pp.

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When Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe published their collection *Global Literacies and the World Wide Web* (2000), they set out to challenge a prevailing cultural narrative of the time—the “global-village narrative” (Hawisher and Selfe 1). This narrative naively saw the Internet as an equalizing force capable of “[transcending] current geopolitical borders” to create a “connected global community”(2). The essays of that collection focused on “local” and culturally specific literacy practices affected and necessitated by the worldwide web in different communities throughout the world. In doing so, they demonstrated the “internationalness” (3) of digital literacy practices, while at the same time showing that, rather than the Internet being a tool of global connectedness, it more often “ensures that differences based on socio-economic status, color, and power are maintained, exacerbated, and reproduced, rather than eliminated” (13). As such, they demonstrated how the sites and contexts of online literacy practices are “sites of social struggle and change” (13).

More than a decade later, Bronwyn T. Williams’ and Amy Zenger’s edited collection *New Media Literacies and Participatory Popular Culture Across Borders* (2012) offers a return to international sites of web-based literacy practices, this time examining how, in spaces of participatory reading and writing online, popular culture—most specifically western/American popular culture—“provides an obvious opportunity for far ranging and more democratic contact across cultures” (Williams 25). While the significance of this “contact across cultures” is the motivating force behind this collection, it does not denote a turn towards a sort of “global-village narrative.” Instead, by using popular culture as the focus of inquiry, *New Media Literacies* investigates the myriad ways in which digital technologies, multimodal literacy practices, and popular culture together affect how people read, write, construct identity, negotiate power, and



create meaning through texts, both within and across specific cultural contexts and sites of social change.

New Media Literacies and Participatory Popular Culture Across Borders is Bronwyn Williams' third volume on digital literacy practices, and the second that he and Amy Zenger have edited together (their first being *Popular Culture and Representations of Literacy* in 2007). *New Media Literacies* expands on current scholarship in the disciplines of New Media and New Literacy Studies to examine what exactly is happening when popular culture is not only read and internalized, but also when it is experienced and appropriated globally. Williams and Zenger, joining conversations on digital literacy set forth by Colin Lankshear and Michelle Knobel, hold that the "autonomous" model of literacy as a collection of skills that must be acquired for one to read and write is inadequate as it does not take into account the social processes, power structures and performances of identity that the practices of reading and writing are connected to. Organized into two parts, *New Media Literacies* first explores how popular culture texts are read, watched, listened to, rewritten, remixed, and appropriated by young people transnationally, and then examines the ways in which the appropriation of popular culture affects how identity is constructed and performed in online spaces.

In part one of *New Media Literacies*, "New Media Literacies Across Cultures," the authors address the importance of online literacy practices in the lives and educations of young people, often focusing on educational environments. In his chapter, "The World on Your Screen: New Media, Remix, and the Politics of Cross-Cultural Contact," Williams highlights the prevalence of media convergence in the development of adolescents' literacy practices. Williams cautions against a naïve idealization of the participatory practices—that is of re-mixing and textual poaching on the one hand and the unrealistic vilification of them on the other. New literacy practices, he argues, should be approached critically since "the connections between literacy and participatory popular culture has important implications for how literacy scholars think about language, literacy, rhetoric, identity, and pedagogy in an increasingly mobile and cross-cultural world" (19). Jessica Schreyer, in "Adolescent Literacy Practices in Online Social Spaces," narrows Williams' study by looking at these new literacy practices specifically in "virtual, transnational youth communities" (61), adding "gaming" and "social networking" to the list of new literacy practices enacted by youth online. In "Digital Worlds and Shifting Borders: Popular Culture, Perception, and Pedagogy," Sandra Abrams, Hannah R. Gerber, and Melissa L. Burgess also examine gaming in online spaces, this time investigating the applications that digital games might have in the classroom and in developing academic literacy.

Part two of *New Media Literacies*, "Constructing Identity in an Online, Cross-Cultural World," focuses on the identity of the reader and negotiated agency in online spaces. In this section, the authors examine ways in which some participatory literacy practices afforded by Web 2.0 problematize traditional notions of the public/private and local/national. Mohanalakshmi Rajakumar's "Faceless Facebook: Female Qatari Users Choosing Wisely" demonstrates how the public/private arena of the Internet, which is both open and public as well as private and "inside the home," complicates the ways

that Qatari women construct identity and negotiate agency through their Facebook profiles. Many Qatari women, Rajakumar argues, use social networking as a way to express themselves in ways they would otherwise be unable to at work or at home, at the same time making careful decisions about the types of photos and language they use so as to remain within social conventions of their more local, physical communities. Rajakumar sees these conscious negotiations between the public and private and the construction and performance of identity not as markers of social pressure as some in the west might view them (133), but as a complex set of literacy practices that highlight the ways in which adolescents across the globe approach the creation of identity online.

This drawing of parallels between local literacy practices and global communities continues throughout the second part of *New Media Literacies*. It becomes clear that the “borders” of the book’s title do not only refer to language barriers, or to physical and geographic spaces (Carpenter), but also to the societal “borders” of gender (Hellekson), sexual orientation (Vicars), and power hierarchies inherent in the creation of knowledge or of popular culture itself (Cubbison and Sharma et. al). What is argued throughout these chapters is that the literacy practices involved in these negotiations of identity and agency, while occurring in local communities, by their very nature transcend the local, making participatory literacy online a “transnational” practice.

An ambitious collection that sets out to explore the intersection of new literacy practices and popular culture on a global scale, *New Media Literacies and Participatory Popular Culture Across Borders* is a cohesive collection of work by scholars from around the world. Even considering the diverse backgrounds of its contributors, *New Media Literacies* does not have the sense of disjointedness that many edited collections often do. What *New Media Literacies* does, it does brilliantly. In addition to a comprehensive resource on adolescent literacy practices online, Williams and Zenger have put together a collection of work that highlights the exciting as well as challenging and “disruptive” (1) ways in which the conversation about participatory and convergence cultures has changed in a very short period of time. When Henry Jenkins wrote *Convergence Culture* (2006) he was acutely aware not only of the “digital divide” but also of the fact that the consumer/producers of convergence culture were “disproportionately white, male, middle class and college educated” (Jenkins 23). *New Media Literacies and Participatory Popular Culture Across Borders* shows us that the literacy practices identified by New Media and New Literacy Studies are expanding to include a more diverse demographic, and that the younger generation of transnational “digital natives” is starting to have not only greater access to new literacy practices but also a greater influence on media convergence. While gestures towards the “global-village narrative” that Hawisher and Selfe cautioned against underlie some of the discussions surrounding popular culture, Williams et. al largely recognize that “globalism” itself is complicated, and self-consciously refrain from assuming fixed definitions of or binary attitudes toward the implications of technological change. There is a very conscious tension throughout the collection between how the literacy practices being analyzed simultaneously reify cultural borders and points of social access as well as serve to break them down. It is because of this tension that I would recommend this collection as a nuanced and fascinating look into literacy practices online as sites of social change.

Works Cited

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