

De/constructing Literacies: Considerations for Engagement

Natasha Mansur

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Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

De/constructing Literacies: Considerations for Engagement

by Amélie Lemieux

Peter Lang Publishing, 2020, 144 pages

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Review by:

Natasha Mansur

Columbia University

In *De/constructing Literacies: Considerations for Engagement*, author Amélie Lemieux examines the relationships between phenomenological hermeneutics, affect, and post-humanist thought through studies conducted on literacies in secondary and post-secondary contexts (p. 3). The studies involve evolving conceptions of literacies, visual culture, arts-based research, and consideration of reading engagement beyond quantitative measures and in terms of contemporary technologies and media. In Chapter 1, “Literacies as Engrenages or How Phenomenological Hermeneutics Impact Literacy Studies,” Lemieux opens the discussion by exploring the role of phenomenological hermeneutics in literacy studies, bringing into the conversation how the famed text, Barthes’ *The Death of the Author*, has placed the key to reading on readers themselves. The first chapter lays the foundation for Lemieux’s argument for post-humanistic multimodal literacies, and the ways “post-humanism reshapes the ways humanities think about education...and challenges Western concepts such as ‘writing,’ ‘reading,’ and ‘literacy’ as separate entities” (p.7). The author exemplifies the theoretical literature through ekphrastic poetry, “which

corresponds to a produced, verbal, or written materialization of a visual representation;” Lemieux delineates the relationship between object and walking as “representations through language as expressive fictions” (p. 13). Including five moments of poetry titled “Walking, Traces, and Relational Oscillations of the Once Spoken” and accompanying photographs, Lemieux evokes “dynamic representations of feelings-in-the-moment” through poetry about walks in the snow, the silence, and reflections on “the colonized land” and “who gets to pass and who gets stopped?” (p. 12).

Mapping plays an evocative role in the concepts discussed, both in how “objects exercise relational power” (p.15) and that “the act of mapping surfaces the intensities of reading as an immanent practice and develops a rhizomatic cartography for it, and engages and positions the self as an ontological self in the world” (p. 15). The two projects considered in the book, the study on high school boys’ reading engagement, and the Little Free Library project, thus, both rely on mapping in different forms.

In Chapter 2, “De/Constructing Reading Engagement,” Lemieux considers the rich theoretical basis for considering engagement as a “feature of social imagination and empathy” (p. 24). She also examines how “cultivating aesthetic experiences” that are “bendable, perceptual, contextual, and relative” and “cumulative with regards to meaning” can “breed the conditions for reading engagement through reception, regardless of the mode of the reading and response” (p.27). The chapter amplifies the need for considering pedagogical practices beyond standardized testing: the author notes that “reading engagement can be understood through the awareness of, and attention to aesthetic experiences, which are developed in different spaces of transaction (e.g., fictional activity, literary imagination) and discussion (social aspects of sharing the experiences)” (p. 48).

In the third chapter, “Illustrating Reading Engagement: Indicators, Meaning-Making, and Beyond,” the author introduces the study that explores the qualitative data and analysis on which chapter 4 is based. The study is based on Canadian high school male students’ reading engagement patterns that emerge as “they respond to narratives using a mapping strategy” which allows them to categorize their reactions in terms of emotion, reflection, taste, perception, judgment, expectation, etc. (p. 64). Boys are specifically chosen as participants as they typically fare worse as readers in comparison to girls (p. 64). The chapter describes the indicators of reading engagement, namely, “fantasmical activity, mimetic coherence, visual realization, exercise of axiological judgment, encountering malaise, confusion, and/or surprise, realizing of the aesthetic impact of texts, and feeling

of empathy toward characters” (p. 66) that are used to analyze the student responses. Teachers may find chapters 3 and chapter 4, “Mapping Reactions across Students,” to be more relevant to their daily classroom practices for gauging reading engagement.

Chapter 4 details 11th grade students’ experiences of a mapping exercise that Lemieux terms creating an “aesthetigram.” Aesthetigrams are “phenomenologically grounded maps that describe the moment-by-moment lived experiences and reactions of humans reading, making, viewing and interacting with artworks;” as such, they are “self-learning tools for students” and can “guide educator-researchers in their teaching” (p. 67). The aesthetigrams are composed by students in a literature class of a private school in Montreal over a six-week period. The students read one of the concluding scenes, titled, “Letter to my Son,” of *Incendies*, a play by Wajdi Mouawad, that details a mother’s forgiving words despite the son’s abuse. The students also watched a film based on the play and repeated the exercise. 8 students’ response tendencies in the form of their aesthetigrams and commentaries are presented followed by the author’s analysis of the students’ “traces of reading engagement” (p. 78) and their reactions to the film excerpt.

In chapter 5, the author considers visual literacy and visual culture in education and anthropology, offering insights into “mobile material encounters” through the Little Free Library (LFL) Project, a “sustainable place for sharing books” (121) that offered both “tangible and intangible community-objects” (p. 127). Built on the author’s observation of the many books that are abandoned in hallways and other areas of McGill University, the project embodies “post-human phenomenology,” through... a “crafting for the public good in terms of public literacy access...holistically and organically” (p. 126)

A weakness of this book is that it may not be accessible for emerging scholars due to the dense writing style utilized and a sufficient background required of the subject at hand. Some of the chapters may be better suited for advanced level graduate students and research scholars who already have a good grasp of the theoretical intricacies of phenomenological hermeneutics which are the foundation for the studies considered in the book. Nonetheless, *De/Constructing Literacies: Considerations for Engagement* is a comprehensive examination of the nature of literacies and their multi-modalities, reading, and measuring engagement for young readers. Especially helpful for educators, the monograph offers innovative ways to consider new classroom practices to address challenges in literacy for secondary school readers in pragmatic and meaningful ways.