Review of Shimmering Literacies: Popular Culture and Reading and Writing Online

Williams, Bronwyn T. *Shimmering Literacies: Popular Culture and Reading and Writing*

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Despite historical resistance, literacy researchers over the years have acknowledged the value of exploring the potential for using texts from popular culture in the classroom. The work of widely respected professionals such as James Gee, Anne Haas Dyson, and Ernest Morrell, for example, has contributed greatly to present understandings of the value of popular culture as it relates to literacy instruction. Few studies, however, seem to address the ways new technologies and participatory popular culture inform the literacy habits of today's youth across both media and genres. With *Shimmering Literacies: Popular Culture and Reading and Writing Online*, Bronwyn T. Williams works to fill this void by examining the role of popular culture in the online literacy practices of today's students. Building upon relevant scholarship that includes Gunther Kress' exploration of literacy in the new media age, Henry Jenkins' investigation of participatory popular culture, and Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel's new literacies studies, Williams offers a sound contribution to the field. Using data collected through extended interviews with twenty-one participating first-year university students in the United States and observations of the participants engaging in online literacy practices, Williams investigates the learning that springs from reading and writing with and about popular culture in digital spaces.

Given the prominence of popular culture texts and new technologies in the lives of many

students in the twenty-first century, *Shimmering Literacies* offers valuable insights into the daily

literacy practices of today's youth—practices today's teachers must understand if they are to

effectively meet students' needs. Though popular culture and the online activities of youth are

commonly dismissed as trivial, Williams challenges such notions by guiding readers through an

exploration into both how and why online technologies have influenced youth literacy practices.

Williams' research into the varied uses of popular culture content in forums, blogs, fan fiction,

and the multimodal composition of social networking pages, mashups, and videos, for example,

illuminates students' authentic experiences wrestling with traditional issues such as audience,

rhetoric, and the social nature of literacy. With an understanding of this research and,

subsequently, students' out-of-school literacy practices, teachers will be better equipped to carry

out the important work of fostering students' literacy development.

In "Everyone Gets a Say: Changes in Audience and Community," the second chapter of

the book, Williams explores how evolving definitions of audience impact the popular culture-

influenced literacy practices of today's youth. Calling upon valuable concepts like "collective

intelligence" and "affinity spaces," Williams investigates what students can learn from an

interactive audience while writing about popular culture online. Citing participants' experiences

writing in fan forums, such as those found at *Television Without Pity*, for example, and their own

personal blogs, Williams highlights such benefits as "gaining real understandings of the role of

audience awareness in writing and the consequences of misjudging an audience" (61). The

voices of Williams' participants illuminate their understandings of the importance of considering

ethos, accounting for conventions and style, and providing evidence to support one's stance to

ensure effective composition. Moreover, Williams contends that the audience today's students

conceptualize may be very different from the audience many teachers envision. As Williams

suggests, the distant, passive audience of yesteryear has given way to an interactive audience that

talks back to the author quickly and frequently in the online environment, which has immediate

implications for discussions of audience in the twenty-first century classroom.

In addition to changes in audience, Williams explores the evolution of composition using

popular culture texts in the online world. In the third chapter, "Looking for the Right Pieces:

Composing Texts in a Culture of Collage," Williams posits, "The multimedia capabilities of new

technologies and popular culture have given students tools for composing that are changing their

ideas about genre, reading, and response" (64). In highlighting participants' practices reading

and composing content on their respective *MySpace* and *Facebook* pages, Williams provides

readers with clear illustrations of shifts in students' perceptions. Participants' reflections on

authorship, ownership, and meaning-making all blossom from and are complicated by student-

generated, popular culture-centered texts that reflect a culture of collage, bringing together a mix

of popular music, images of prominent figures in popular culture, shots of DVD and album

covers, and embedded videos. As Williams reminds us, recognizing students' changing

perceptions of literacy and acknowledging the rhetorical skills students employ when sampling

from and composing with popular culture content may open doors for conversation in the

composition classroom that many teachers have previously neglected to approach.

The fifth chapter, "A Story of One's Own: Social Constructions of Genre Online," expands the

investigation to explore the influence of new technologies and the literacy practices made

possible by participatory popular culture on students' perceptions of traditional literary concepts

such as genre and narrative. Citing the popular *Heroes* franchise, for example, Williams

highlights challenges to the notion of the stable, single-authored print text as the prominent

narrative form. In the case of *Heroes* that Williams offers, the narrative extends far beyond the

weekly television broadcast to include trailers, interviews, character biographies, graphic novels,

and games, each of which is found online and contains information not seen on television. The

"transmedia storytelling" of *Heroes* is extended further still with opportunities for audience

members to participate in the narratives. Williams identifies commentaries and fan responses

using blogs or online forums, as well as fan fiction, mashups, and machinima as participatory

options for audience members who seek to intervene in the narratives generated by mass pop

culture producers. Using varied examples and participants' voices, Williams deftly argues that

new media technologies have "increased the capability of individuals to read and write in

multiple media and multiple genres" (153).

Williams' investigation of participants' use of irony in the texts they create online is

another compelling element of the book. In the sixth chapter, "The Pleasure of Irony: Emotion

and Popular Culture Online," Williams observes "an understanding and awareness of language

use and its effect on audience" (167) in the participants' comments and uses of irony. Posting

ironic quotes and providing ironic responses to profile questionnaires on *MySpace* and *Facebook*

pages, for example, seem to assist students in minimizing the risks of emotional investment for,

according to Williams, "If you can detach yourself from a situation, pretend not to care, say you

were only joking…then you lessen the possibility of being hurt or at least letting others know

how much you have been hurt" (163). Such widespread uses of irony that serve to pre-empt

critique are indicative of participants' awareness and understanding of language use. As

Williams suggests, the findings of this particular chapter provide composition teachers with a

starting point for discussing rhetoric and purposeful language use with their students.

In the closing chapter of *Shimmering Literacies*, "What's on Next: Conclusion and

Implications," Williams considers the implications of his study and explores the ways teachers

might put students' passion for popular culture to use in the school setting. Thoughtfully,

Williams concedes that popular culture texts, when brought into the classroom, are no longer

under students' control and are saddled with new, institutionalized meanings instead. Any

teacher who has supplemented his or her curriculum with music, film, or other popular culture

texts can surely attest to Williams' admission. He does, however, remind us, "It is possible to

connect what we know about rhetoric and literacy with what they [students] are learning through

popular culture without robbing them of their pleasure in the latter" (197). Based on this

particular study, it is Williams' contention that teachers must facilitate student engagement "in

work that draws on the playful, collaborative, intertextual, and multimodal qualities of

participatory popular culture—and allow students to have some control of the nature and

direction of their projects" (197) in order to successfully adapt students' out-of-school expertise

to today's classrooms.

Williams' work investigating the role of popular culture in the online literacy practices of

today's students effectively illustrates the vast ways students make meaning and perform

identity-defining acts while engaged in reading and writing online. With the thoughts and

reflections of participating students threaded throughout, *Shimmering Literacies* details students'

immersion in participatory popular culture and their shifting perceptions of literacy. Though

popular culture texts have a history of being dismissed in the field of education, Williams makes

a valuable contribution to popular culture scholarship that is sure to compel educators to learn

more about the rhetoric of participatory popular culture and related texts, prominent influences

on the literacy practices of today's students.