

CRITICAL GLOBAL LITERACIES

Bogum Yoon, *Column Editor*

Robert J. Tierney proposes that all reading should involve global meaning-making, examining sociopolitical systems, and engaging in activism.

Redefining Reading as Global Meaning-Making

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Defining our reading as global may seem foreign; it should not. Reading is a form of cultural study and engagement. Global readers are akin to researchers positioning themselves, grappling with their identities as they scrutinize the text themselves and the cauldron of global sociopolitical forces involved. They examine events, settings, characters, and issues from different perspectives as they observe and participate aesthetically, vicariously, efferently, and critically. Such can occur from picture books to graphic novels, from realistic to historic fiction, across fantasy and science fiction, nonfiction, media productions including films, the Internet, social media, news releases, opinion pieces, or writings by politicians.

Global meaning-making involves weighing information from multiple informants and multiple sources: various exchanges with

friends, colleagues, and others—being sure to do so reservedly and respectfully. It entails a form of shuttle diplomacy shifting from passive readings to proactive engagements for, with, and behind others—being an ally and advocate interrupting the systems, practices, and dispositions that might objectify, commodify, exploit, or nullify diversity. It extends to being an activist with, but respectful of, the cultural ways of knowing and doing of others. From a planetary perspective, it entails having spaces for multiple voices or a multitopia that advances unity, diversity, eclecticism, and respect without bending to uniformity or suppression (Tierney).

Take readings of James Baldwin's novel *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Baldwin's story moves readers across multiple perspectives, cultures, and worlds. It is not just a story of love between an African American couple and within a family as told by a daughter and wife. The book is a story of society, of humanity, of intolerance, and of unconscionable racism. It involves a story that engages readers in complex social dynamics across people, families, communities, and cultures. Readers are bringing their own selves and their societal

experiences into play especially as they contemplate the events and forces in play. Coupled with timeless classics such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, the poems of Maya Angelou, speeches such as those by Martin Luther King Jr. or songs such as "Glory" by John Legend and Common, teachers can provide platforms that build cultural awareness, transform cultural interactions, and spur social actions.

Similarly, we can consider some of the powerful Indigenous historical novels such as Eric Willmott's *Pemulwuy: The Rainbow Warrior* or Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu*. The former recounts Australian Aboriginal resistance to British occupation and a story kept invisible both to outsiders and across generations of Australian immigrants. The latter examines the riches of Aboriginal life, the impact of colonization in contrast to what is and could be today. Or, take *Home* by Larissa Behrendt, a modern-day account of the author, an urban Aboriginal, visiting her place of heritage in a remote rural area where her community experienced horrific treatment. For Australian readers such as myself, these

texts might serve as antecedents on the systemic forces of racism and colonization that shape us culturally. For North American readers, *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America* by Thomas King may provide a similar platform, especially coupled with other Native American novels.

At times our complacency and parochialism may be interrupted quite directly. Indeed, moving to the forefront of our society are (1) concerns over local and global terrorism, (2) the rising White supremacist movements, (3) the consequences of interconnectedness with global media, and (4) the debates around the precipitousness of hate speech from tweets to blogs (e.g., YouTuber Pewdiepie) or tied to political policy speeches (e.g., US President Donald Trump).

For example, many of us were abhorred by the divisiveness and violence of the recent populist movement—especially attacks across racial, ethnic, and religious lines. We were stunned by the rise in the White supremacist movement and the news of the Australian White supremacist who killed some fifty New Zealanders of Muslim faith in March of 2019. In contrast, we often find resonance with the reactions of the community and some of those taking a lead against such behavior and their motives. Certainly, among the most poignant moments occurred with the comments by New Zealand's Prime Minister Ardern in sharp contrast with the vitriol and negativity around migration

elsewhere in the world. As she stated, the victims of this shooting are us, not aliens: New Zealand “is their home. They are us” (“Christchurch Mosque Shootings”).

As with other global affairs, this horrid event triggered discussions of xenophobia in communities around the world, including classrooms, media, town meetings, and informal conversations. For some, it entailed interrogating the White supremacy movement, the growth of anti-Muslim sentiment, and the spread of nationalism—scrutinizing how these developments are fueled by certain political factions and policies. For others, it spurred contemplating the role of media conglomerates, including Facebook and YouTube, as vehicles for trafficking hate speech—specifically through their failure to balance profitability with social responsibility, free access with censorship, and cultural diversity with respect. Some New Zealanders questioned whether or not the country was as inclusive as it had been purported to be. Issues of firearms also resurfaced, and Prime Minister Ardern introduced legislation to revamp New Zealand gun laws.

Australia interrogated its current role in advancing racism and the conditions for White supremacy. Adolescents reckoned with the role of social media, including the norms with regard to language used on certain sites. The United States examined the president's role and use of social media in inciting the event. Globally, xenophobic attitudes, especially

Islamophobic prejudices, were interrogated, and matters of responsiveness and responsibilities (especially moral and humanistic) to one another remotely or in our immediate worlds were brought to the fore. The event beckoned discussions of prejudice and terrorism as well as discussions of immigration through graphic novels such as Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* or Libby Gleeson's *Mahtab's Story*.

English teachers might delve into sociopolitical developments, the nature of such events, and some of the transcultural, border-crossing, and displacement issues represented. In the classroom, they might have adolescents undertake to do the following:

- Probe sociopolitical currents
- Contemplate self and positionalities
- Engage with multiple viewpoints and meanings across time and space into, beneath, and beyond
- Move from connoisseur to activist—bridging, disrupting, leveraging, and provoking

Perhaps my proposition for critical global reading may seem an overreach. But my bold proposal is that global meaning-making should be integral to all reading; it should be deemed a timely planetary necessity. I am positing that global readings involve engagements that are more far-reaching than discussions of global matters and comparative analyses;

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they involve readings of ourselves and our worlds in the company of other readers and cultures. It involves reading the systems at play that limit or liberate, nurture or destroy. Critically oriented global meaning-making is not passive but action-oriented, requiring us to act responsibly and for change. Our readings can afford forms of transformative engagements that

spur at least allying with those who support an eclectic and nurturing world who advocate for the oppressed to challenge the systems that are cultural and planetary affronts to diversity. [EJ](#)

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