Populism and Literacy Consciousness in Uncertain Global Times

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The political turn, the rise of a conservative form of populism in the United States, and the challenges that they represent are not exceptional; they coincide with similar volatile developments and media frenzies in Australia, France, the United Kingdom, Holland, and elsewhere. The role of various forms of literacy in these developments should not be underestimated. The media has been used to compete for, control, and guide the mind and votes of the electorate.

To understand the dynamics of multilayered textual worlds within which we are propelled, I would posit that literacy researchers are central. They have the frames (e.g., discourse analysis and communication theory, sociopolitical critical frames, and other lenses) to inform our experiences—the rhetoric, the checks and balances, and ways forward. They can unpack the world of the embodied reader and making visible the power of literacy to define or deny, democratize or subjugate, confuse or console. Enlisting sociocultural political frames, literacy researchers can peel away at the media worlds and trace the trajectories experienced or projected for different lives in a manner that is self-reflexive and responsive, befitting Freirean critical consciousness. Those choosing to be proactive can be informed by the examples offered by the increasing numbers of literacy educators who are engaging in community-based participatory research, activism, and emancipatory or transformative endeavors, including with transnational, indigenous, minority, and cross-cultural groups as allies. These literacy educators can help us address the growing concerns for media literacies: to engage in discerning decision making across these mangled rather

than harmonious times (Freire, 2006; Lakoff, 2016/2017; Simon & Campano, 2013). We are not just witnessing the political media, we are living in it—it is the air that we breathe (see Beach & Tierney, 2016; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Kress, 2003).

Literacy researchers are akin to climatologists—hurricane chasers at a time of unprecedented sociopolitical literacy developments that are unfolding moment by moment in seismic proportions. They can track the power dynamics undergirding authoritarianism, isolationism, nationalism, and privilege. They can foreground the pressure systems that perpetuate economic advantage over social support, White privilege and homogenization over diversity, individualism over collective responsibilities, law and order over activism and critical consciousness. They can help unpack the dynamics when executive privilege is challenging judicial oversight and when U.S. exclusivity, isolationism, and nationalism proceed without regard for internationalism, cross-cultural reciprocity, and global responsibilities. They can help us understand the media bubbles within which public meanings are confined and guide us on how we might disentangle and dis-embed readers from them and the echo chambers' effects.

These developments occur at a time when I see myself as more global than national as I engage with educational colleagues in different communities, schools, and universities in Asia and Africa as well as indigenous places in Australia. My passions are focused upon global uncertainties especially pertaining to sociologies of knowledges, migration, and enculturation; indigenous epistemologies; and organic forms of learner-centered situation-based education capitalizing upon local literacies and diverse knowings (Purcell-Gates, 2006; Smith, 2003).

My research is rooted in certain values: local self-determination over global

authority, integration and accommodation over subjugation and assimilation, inclusiveness rather than exclusivity. I am not an advocate of U.S. preeminence or Western bias, but I have a concern for colonial and global forces that perpetuate a domination of the West or any group over another and contribute to forms of epistemocide or disappearance of the local, especially via education that does not build upon the diverse indigenous knowings of communities for their children (Connell, 20062007; de Sousa Santos, 2013; Tierney & Kan, 2016). I fear our subordination, if not domestication, in the name of neoliberalism, standardization of curriculum, accountability, and competition. While calls for local control and school choice might purport to support diversity, I would hypothesize that these things accentuate, if not guarantee, schools as privatized sites for segregation that support the isolation of students from diverse sociocultural, sociopolitical, and socioeconomic backgrounds and that create mechanisms by which the wealthy are better resourced than less economically privileged students.

The rise of new forms of populism in selected countries may have virtue in highlighting unaddressed issues of growing inequities, the challenges faced by changes in the workforce and loss of jobs, the disorientations as some communities deal with massive migrations and other displacing global forces. But some of the current populism is quite divisive as it unites some groups of people in opposition to others, stoking feelings, provoking anger, and spreading divisiveness, oftentimes enlisting social media (including micro-targeting) for echo chamber effects.

Furthermore, I would hypothesize that the perpetuation of a "U.S. first" exceptionality and calls for sovereignty contribute to a number of other developments

(nationalism, isolationism, egocentrism and parochialism, exclusionary approaches to society and education) that are counterproductive and ecologically unsound. Such narcissistic behavior fails to recognize the importance and virtue of differences—the essential role played by a diverse ecology (Misiaszek, 2015).

For literacy educators, these developments indicate pressing issues—challenges that represent somewhat of a frontier of researchable issues, beginning with unpacking the digital bubbles of restricted text worlds that may be propelling societal divisiveness and dismissiveness. While there have been some significant advances in our research-based understandings of literacy development, our understanding of approaches pales compared with the complex concerns that have arisen. There is a strong need for peoples who are aware of the media literacies within which they exist and who can not only respond critically to Twitter, sound bites, social media, policy documents, judicial papers, and commentaries, but engage in self-reflexivity that is both contemplative of self and open to, and at times accommodating of, others. I would suggest that, to date, our pedagogies fall short of the strides that are necessary if we are to support the development of readers who are discerning protagonists across the projects in their lives. To be well-informed and engaged citizens of different countries and the world, we should develop teaching practices that befit our changing understandings of literacy, our views of the needs of individuals and society, to move beyond the echo chambers taking form across the media worlds. This is not a time to construct learners as classroom avatars nor place them in a bubble, but to pursue research and theories that address critical consciousness, responsiveness, and activism, including democratic decision making and the ability to accommodate others (Kamberelis, McGinley, & Welker, 2015; Sheehy,

Scanlon, & Roesch, 2016; Torres, 1998; Zhao & Deng, 2016).

It is a time to interrogate the raw issues of life and the world—the survival of the planet, the sanctity of the home, dystopias, displacement, and shifting responsibilities. It is a time for inquiry on communities and their consciousness on human rights—the tensions that arise when economic rationalizations seed racism, xenophobia, gender bias, and other discriminatory practices. I would hope that we explore how to engender a reflexivity as we consider democratic processes, including the balance between social supports and economic ambitions, the checks and balances on authority, discretion, complacency, and collusion.

It is a time for our aspirations for literacy to extend to ethical, transformative activism and critical reflexology in a participatory, sustainable, situated fashion in our diverse world on matters of gravity within and outside of our boxes.

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