

Embodiment and literacies: teaching, learning and becoming in a post-world

Introduction

The development of this special issue overlapped with a pandemic that continues to shake the world, reminding us of the interdependence of humans and nonhumans, of bodies, objects and entities. In these past months, our material bodies have been abruptly threatened by illness, physically distanced and reconfigured in virtual spaces that shone a glaring spotlight onto long-known social and economic inequities. Close to the completion of this project, as the Black Lives Matter movement continues to swell and collide with existing social structures and systemic inequities, that spotlight has called attention to the ways certain types of bodies are dehumanized through daily microaggressions and outright violence. Although we have been writing about bodies for nearly 10 years, when we proposed this special issue, we believed our theoretical, methodological and pedagogical promotion of embodiment and literacies was still a nascent concern to the vast majority of educators around the world. Globally mobile youth, bodies stuck in refugee camps and in-between borders, youth transacting with scripted curricula and alienating textbooks and teachers having to navigate curricular changes that governed their bodies and the teaching body (Kontovourki *et al.*, 2015) – all made the examination of bodies relevant and necessary.

We did not expect that in a matter of months, bodies everywhere would be redirected into virtual spaces, covered in masks and gloves for everyday transactions, remain uncovered as declarations of autonomy and repudiation of communal practice and well-being, discriminated against *more* overtly, weaponized and feared. We did not expect bodies to rise to such a prominent place in global discourse, though it is clear to us that bodies have always been sites of vulnerability and resistance, both ontologically and materially. For many, the realization that our bodies are not immune to rampant contagion, nor are we past the practice of judging a body's skin color, has once again destabilized what *was assumed to be true* or established. Silent and vibrant, bodies have always been the material entity through which we experience the world, citing institutional histories of injustice and inequity in accessing social goods and services. The COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter movement reminds us that, across the globe, bodies continually negotiate recognition and struggle to matter. Then, so, we write this introduction to a special issue reiterating a long-held assumption: bodies matter.

We argue that, at the current moment, body mattering is both timely and urgent. Because bodies matter, so does the embodiment of literacy. In this sense, we define an embodiment as follows:

Broadly, embodiment refers to an ontological, experiential and/or material quality, expression or representation of discursive reality. The term *embodiment* is used widely to describe what happens through, by, within and to the material body. Some scholars use the term for a general description and macroanalysis; others use it to refer literally and specifically to the human body in parts or constituted as a whole (Johnson *et al.*, 2020).

Understanding literacy as embodied counters the simplistic binary of mind over body (cf. Enriquez *et al.*, 2016). It also necessitates that literacy pushes past its conception as a set of cognitive skills or socially situated meaning-making practices to be reconfigured as material bodies, subjective feelings and produced identities, intra-acting across non-human materials, spaces and times, emerging and becoming while risking and affirming recognition. This



reimagining invites researchers and educators to examine different ways bodies matter in literacy teaching and learning; to wonder how literate bodies (of educators and learners) are simultaneously disciplined and disciplining; feeling and affective; impossible to represent but also possible to present anew; and thus, mobile and indeterminate (Johnson and Kontovourki, 2016). Bodies matter in literacy teaching and learning but also across domains of doing and being that is always material and materialized, “stabilize[d] overtime to produce the effect of boundary, fixity and surface we call matter” (Butler, 1993, p. 9). In effect, we invite you to consider literate bodies as not only acting and feeling objects but also as sites where humans, materials and ideas entangle to make up particular meanings of literacy, of pedagogy, of people and to potentially re-matter.

Tracing bodies and literacies in a post-world

In recent years, bodies and embodiment have become more visible in literacy research. In a special issue on “Literacy(ies) and the Body,” published in *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* in 2011, Guest Editor James Albright (2011) identified three ways in which the body could inform the teaching and learning of literacy: by attending to the affective nature of textual engagement that destabilizes the mind-body split, by understanding this effective nature as resting upon relationality with texts and people significant to readers and by considering issues of power that are inherent therein. In the years past the publication of that special issue in 2011 and our edited volume in 2016, bodies and embodiment have been used in different ways in literacy studies. For instance, Mills (2016, p. 139) suggested that the “practical accomplishment of literacy” is made possible through the body and the senses, as well as through movement, touch, gaze, gesture and posture. She suggested that literacies are understood as sensory, alluding to the ways in which sensing bodies are loci of information and means to read, write and make meaning with any kind of print-based and/or digital tools (books, pens, tablets, cameras, machines) across physical spaces, at the same time that they incorporate typified ways to engage in the social and cultural world.

While this reveals a notion of a mediating body, sensing and moving bodies emerged in the work of researchers from different theoretical perspectives. Stornaiuolo *et al.* (2017) coined the term “transliteracies” as a framework to examine how people make meaning in interactions with other people, things, texts, media and contexts by moving across or through spaces, times, modalities and languages, while also attending to the ways in which such mobility might be constrained. Showing, for example, how a student is sent by a teacher in a lab to work on digital devices, but within the constrictions set by school policies dictating which platforms to use in school, Stornaiuolo and colleagues suggest that literacies may be seen as emerging across bodies, materials, texts and discourses that are mobile and unfold moment-by-moment but also incorporate patterns about what becomes privileged in interaction. In affect theory, notions of moving *with* are essential for centering attention on energies that emerge in an assemblage; a coming-together of heterogeneous stuff (bodies, things, words, signs) that are held together and pulled apart in durable formations but also in new possible becomings (Ehret and Leander, 2019). In this view, texts and words, tools and things and human bodies are all entangled, reciprocally affecting and being affected, as meanings emerge that are not known *a priori*, compel sensations which cannot be rationally described and are already implicated in the drawing of boundaries and exclusions (Ehret *et al.*, 2016; Ehret and Leander, 2019). In the making of a digital text or the recitation of a poem, literacy becomes of the sensations felt, the movements across spaces, words, humans and materials that produce multiple possibilities of things, people and boundaries in becoming. Relevant for considering literacy then are questions of *what a poem is becoming, lived out in relation to other energies, captured in lived movements; or, how human*

bodies, cameras, chairs, staircases, print-based text ideas create new meanings but also draw boundaries around what a multimedia text could possibly become. From a socio-material perspective that focuses on relationality among bodies and things, the examination of such questions means that we are constantly interrogating what goes on, not only seeking out different potentialities that may emerge in the flow of activity but also acknowledging that particular arrangements of bodies and things may endure and favor the performance and reproduction of established ways of being and doing (Burnett and Merchant, 2018; Burnett *et al.*, 2020). Attention to possibility, multiplicity and emergence are paid mostly in posthumanist, new materialist understandings of literacies, where the human body features as one among many more-than-human agents in intra-actions that produce truths, realities, pieces of knowledge and literacies (Kuby and Gutshall Rucker, 2016). Examples of literacy becoming from this perspective focus not on what children and teachers do on and with materials (use books to read, pens to write, paints to represent emotions and experiences), but rather on the agency that flows among – for example – movement in physical space, sounds, sticks, writing materials, people and cultures (Hackett and Somerville, 2017; Wargo, 2015). Recognizing that political imbalances emerge in such assemblages, scholars and researchers argue that pedagogical change can be effected not only when acknowledging the assemblage but also by reconfiguring assemblages to enable different webs of relations among human and nonhuman bodies that constitute sensemaking in literacy classrooms (Lenters and McDermott, 2020; Thiel and Jones, 2017).

We read the above as reflecting broader trends in the social and humanist sciences to reconfigure human agency, politics and ethics, by thinking anew ways of being, knowing and doing (Barad, 2003; Davies *et al.*, 2013; St. Pierre, 2014). Then, we see these as signs of and context for a post-world, namely, one where movement, multiplicity, intensity, resonance, contingency and emergence are all that is possible, as agency flows among humans, nonhumans and materials in unknown and often unexpected ways. Because those entanglements are also sites where cruelty, boundary-making and exclusion might be practiced (Enriquez, 2014; Medina *et al.*, 2014; Muhammad and Haddix, 2016), we suggest that literacy in this post-world can be thought of as a process of the boundary (re)making, of coming-togetherness and othering, especially when the space that people and things work to occupy or the movements that they make are ignored, othered, distanced, rendered impossible (and unintelligible; do not matter).

Defining the embodiment of literacies

In this view of post-world literacy, we see the embodiment of literacies or embodied literacies, as bringing together bodies that move and limbs that matter, that feel and are emotive, that cross space-time to deem social and institutional histories relevant (or not) to the assemblage. It is in this sense that we continue to view embodied literacies as simultaneously disciplined and disciplining; feeling and affective; impossible to represent but also possible to present anew; and thus, mobile and indeterminate. This view of literacy constitutes an assemblage of doing and becoming, where the human body may be decentered to assert different possibilities: it is part of flowing assemblages of stuff, discourses and people where the agency is dispersed among its constituents, but it is also a constituent that can engage in the examination of the assemblage as constitutive and constituted (Davies, 2018). This understanding of de-centeredness incorporates the possibilities of being literate and doing literacy that emerge momentarily in an assemblage but also alludes to poststructural understandings of the decentered subject as discursively constructed even if potentially unfixed (Butler, 1993; Hagood, 2002; Hey, 2006; Beucher *et al.*, 2019).

We propose this understanding of embodiment concurring with [Nichols and Campano's \(2017\)](#) position that understanding agency as distributed across humans and nonhumans in the assemblage should not distract us from the ways such distribution is uneven. As [Lindgren \(2019\)](#) observed, assuming a flat ontology, where there is little distinction between different types of subjects, organisms and matter, figures children as the embodiment of flexibility and transformation through their multiple becomings with the world; while this is an alternate to one-size-fits-all approaches, it can also obscure the consideration of basic ideological assumptions like notions of rights as relating to specific categories of existence (e.g. social class, ethnicity, race, gender). Following a similar line of reasoning, [Hackett et al. \(2020\)](#) asserted that viewing literacy and language practices as always embodied, placed and political relies on an understanding of the body as unbounded, leaky and dispersed and yet deeply implicated in the immediate moment and in the ways memories, histories, political discourses and historical trajectories are constitutive of bodies. We propose then that embodied literacies can describe potentiality and constriction, newness and sedimentation, inclusion and exclusion as concurrent possibilities, especially in institutional places like schools and school-like classrooms.

Imagining embodied literacy pedagogies

This is a notion of embodiment that maintains that discourse, historicity, inscription and border-making may coexist with variance, emergence and multiplicity. We argue that this is a way to foreground criticality as part of the ethicopolitical project of thinking literacies and literacy pedagogies anew. We consider this necessary not only because of the overt violence and continued injustices against minoritized or marginalized youth but also because school literacy curricula continue to prioritize print-based texts and mental processes of reading, writing and teaching, and thus exclude childhoods and literacies in manifold subtle ways ([Dernikos et al., 2019](#); [Nichols and Campano, 2017](#)). This special issue, thus, contributes to attempts to foreground the body and embodiment as sites of critical engagement and humanized/ing action ([Beucher et al., 2019](#); [Garrett et al., 2019](#); [Perry and Medina, 2011, 2015](#)). Following [Davies \(2018\)](#), we are, thus, urged to think of ways in which assemblages of humans, stuff and words are mutually implicated in “unethical practices” and to consider how our habitual emotions, embodied practices and material bodies operate in ways that sustain, ignore or unsettle “humanity’s inhumanity” by learning to be/live/breathe from the internal way that the existence of the other implies (p. 125).

This may be possible when weaving together multiple meanings of the body to engage in multifaceted readings of literacy practices like writing in school. As [Woodard et al. \(2020\)](#) suggest, this involves tracing how, for example, school writing “is produced *from* and *by* bodies, is experienced *in* bodies and does work with and *for* bodies” (emphasis in the original, p. 10). [Lenters and McDermott \(2020\)](#) suggest the consideration of post-critical literacies as ways to move beyond critique and toward ongoing commitment and action, attuned with students to myriad practices of literacy. Embodiment expands logo- and verbo-centric notions of critical literacies to include affectively charged moments in a context that defy rationalist rubrics, deconstructive activities and render classroom norms for critical literacy visible. Unplanned play, humor and contradictions across bodies, things, audiences and norms for critical literacy present opportunities to see and hear embodied critical literacies unfolding daily in local, sometimes classroom contexts ([Johnson and Vasudevan, 2012](#)).

Authors in this issue build on and beyond this understanding in productive ways, underscoring the critical roles school adults and researchers play in recognizing literacies. Working against logocentric reading policies and standards that are pushed down on early

childhood classrooms, *Daniels* draws attention to the ways youth choreograph hand movements producing affective atmospheres with dynamics. Early literacy teachers and researchers inhabit roles where norms reside in their embodied responses to youth thereby imbuing teachers with a unique power to sanction these embodied, playful, atmospheres as literacies. *Schmidt and Beucher* relate how three Black girls, one laptop, hoodies, discourses of race and emotions intra-act across an elementary school classroom digital composition project, producing shifting subjectivities and alliances. Their portrayal recasts Black girls' intra-actions typically misrecognized as disruptive or off-task classroom "behaviors." *Dernikos* argues for teacher attention to white supremacist underpinnings of what literacy *sounds* like in school – norms that privilege silence over noise, knowing over being, rationality over emotion. What results is a teacher who refuses to know and instead continues to return and engage; attuned, curious, enchanted. *Pennington, Wohwend, Davis and Scott* echo this invitation to dwell in an afterschool artspace, historicizing an adolescent girl's embodied performances as outer-space alien making pottery with pliers – a play that rides the boundary between threat and artist as discourses of school violence circulate widely.

While post-work challenges the centrality of human agency, this issue on embodied literacies endeavors toward praxis. To this end, authors trace methods and pedagogies for embodied literacies in a post-world; artistic, improvisational, collective projects with the potential to provoke and evince possibility across the boundaries of human and non-human bodies. *Crampton and Lewis* illustrate how teaching artists in high school English classrooms can catalyze embodied literacies that include new forms of participation seemingly foreclosed by *histories* of participation. Taking history, things and feelings into account makes ethicopolitical dimensions of encounters with difference in the literacy classroom possible. They explain how:

Admitting that we cannot know the other becomes an ethical, "proper" correction to this improper closeness and, yet, in a difficult balance, we must draw close enough to continue to feel something for/with our others. Thus, emotional engagement (proximity) combined with criticality (distance) makes responsible action possible (p. 4).

Lenters and Whitford conceptualize critical literacy as a critical "encounter" where sixth-grade *learners* are transformed. In contrast to the traditional textual terrain (i.e. texts or material contexts) of critical literacy pedagogies that emphasize distance, deconstruction and critique for critique's sake, they offer classroom improv as a posthuman assemblage. Their critical literacies become embodied, transformational encounters with differences that lead to worldmaking – always possible to transform. Encounters are ephemeral, perpetual, infinite, and therefore require a return. *Stutelberg* underscores how encounters are often undetectable until they produce enough tension to invite new ways of seeing and listening to relations across feelings, things and humans – methods she explores with nine English Education female teachers through a post-human iteration of Collective Memory Work. There, boundary work of embodied critical literacies necessitates intentional returns to past encounters where educators and youth might imagine and build impossible futures. World-building as literacies and the norms for their recognitions are "tied to conceptions of teaching and learning that reside at the historical and cultural core of white, colonial, patriarchal institutions and roles as teachers" (p. 19), even though teachers have the ability to productively invade those boundaries.

Along with these contributors, we assert that bodies can no longer be detached from our work in literacy classrooms. A global pandemic, a groundswell of protests against police brutality, the physical barricading and detention of refugees, the rending apart of families, all against a long-standing backdrop of mandates about where people can go, what they can

say and when they can move have thrust bodies to the fore of our daily concerns. Examining the inextricable relationship between literacy and embodiment tunes us into the silence, choreography, dwelling, closeness, distance, risk-taking, violence and possibility that surrounds and occupies us as we teach and learn.

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