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PROPOSING A POLITICS OF IMMEDIATION FOR LITERACY STUDIES, OR WHAT IS POSSIBLE FOR LITERACY STUDIES BEYOND CRITICAL THEORY'S MEDIATIONS?

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Theories of ideology rest on the thesis that there is a power of conformity already in place prior to experience.

(Massumi, 2019, p. 505)

Massumi's poststructural provocation informs our searching title and hones our chapter's focus: If structuralist theories of mediation give ideologies too much power, then what new concepts do poststructurally oriented literacy researchers need to practice their critiques of power? If mediation overly determines our analyses of emergent moments, then what new concepts are necessary to weaken such powers of conformity, which operate incessantly and create inequities in the diverse lives of those alongside whom we research? Working forward from these questions, our goal in this short chapter is not to rehash poststructural critiques of mediation that have developed through the latter half of the 20th century and continue through this day.² Neither do we present concepts and insights from the full range of poststructural theory that has grown through the same period of time. Rather, we rouse our propositions for continuing to attend to power in poststructural literacy research from a history of process philosophy that has moved through the philosophies of, for example, Spinoza, Whitehead, Deleuze, Guattari, and, more recently, Massumi.

Defining Key Concepts

We choose this particular line of thought for two reasons relevant to our work in this chapter. First, it has galvanized critical literacy researchers participating in a current turn to affect (Leander & Ehret, 2019). Through a Spinozian lineage of thought, these literacy scholars, as well as the process philosophers upon whom they draw, conceptualize affect via Spinoza as bodies' emergent capacities to affect and be affected. Because it is thereby conceptualized as a dimension of life—because its force diminishes or amplifies capacities to act—affect is inherently political (Massumi, 2015b). The question is not *whether* affect is political but how ideologies inflect experience through its emergent,

affective dimensions. What more moving a concept could literacy researchers desire in their efforts to open potentials for youth to read, write, speak, and make media beyond the powers of conformity that may limit such potentials, that may diminish capacities for practicing literacies and using literacies to move others?

Critiques of Critical Literacies in This Domain

Second, the implicit, and often explicit (e.g., Manning, Munster & Thomsen, 2019), critique of theories of mediation that undergird critical and sociocultural theories of literacy offers an opportunity to ask what else is possible for literacy researchers interested in questions of politics and power. Outlined briefly at the beginning of the next section, we see specific concepts this critique spawned as particularly crucial at this moment in history, where power operates more and more through logics that affect fear of the uncertain futures—futures human beings face in the Anthropocene, and in relation to global migration, weaponized social media, and technologies such as AI that touch at the core of what it means to be human and humanity's potentially diminished role in our conceptions of existence. We therefore urgently review the concepts of immanence and immediation, including their relation to mediation in the next section. We use these concepts to propose one technique for attuning to power in literacy events, conceptualized poststructurally (Ehret, 2019), and to the affective conditions through which bodies practice literacy. We then bring these concepts into relation with current work in the field in order to generate propositions for pedagogy and practice more attuned to the politics of affect.

Responses to Critiques: Immanence and Immediation

A politics of immediation orients around a concept of the political that itself must be invented anew with each occasion of experience.

(Manning, 2019, p. 10, *emphasis in original*)

A process-oriented ontology of immanence posits that what exists is existing now, in the moving, decentered relations between bodies³ affecting each other with varying degrees of intensities. In this ontology immediations may be thought of as the unpredictable gestures, made by *anybody* (see again footnote 3), that inflects experience toward this or that potential. This is why Manning argues that the concept of the political must be invented anew with each occasion of experience: What gestures, right *here*, right *now*, might disrupt assumptions about what *these* racialized youth might do with their literacies in school? What gestures, right *here*, right *now*, might open new potentials for classed youth to use their literacies toward activist ends? What gestures, right *here*, right *now*, might decenter human primacy in making meaning of the environment as a problem rather than a multiplicity of bodies to live alongside? Any answer must be the gesture operating in *this* literacy event, the immediation, the thought in the act: the answer middling.

Mediation operates through a different ontology of time that places mediation “in the middle” between “cause” and “effect”. In critical, sociocultural approaches to literacy studies, researchers investigate the mediating means in literacy events. We can think of this in a few ways, each of which inserts mediation into the “middle” between cause and effect: cultures and histories mediate meaning-making with texts; categories of race, gender, sexualities, and class mediate how bodies are read in particular social contexts in which they are practicing literacies. With mediation, the causes (cultures, histories, categories), indeed the politics, were already at stake before the event began, and critiquing the causes requires standing outside of the event and looking back. Mediation limits recourses for becoming-differently in the moment.

Affective Conditions for Relating to Futurity

Immanence allows us to ask how power works to maintain control in any set of emergent relations, and immediation compels us to act and to speculate conditions that mitigate power's ability to control and to determine in advance what is possible and for what bodies. A politics of immediation for literacy studies therefore asks how to create future affective conditions for more bodies, for *everybody*, to move and be moved in relation to texts. In the current epoch of ontopower, where the politics of preemption dominate, never has it been more important to develop our techniques for speculating more just futures beyond the critique of just-past presents. Massumi's (2015) developed the concept of ontopower from Foucault's (1978; see also, 1977) notion of biopower. In Foucault's analysis, an era of bio-power began in the late 18th century, where power came to be exercised over the "life" of communities and individuals with the aim of either "foster[ing] [it] or disallow[ing] it to the point of death" (1978, p. 138). In an analysis of the George W. Bush administration, Massumi pushed this idea further to show how states' use nebulous threat and emergency to make a future, unrealized threat affect and control lives in the present. Massumi's logic is: If we feel a threat, there is a threat, and therefore the irrational sense of an unreal threat can create a mechanism for social control (Imagine any number of T***pian threats that control policy and affect our embodied interactions).

In these current conditions, the politics of affect require relating to futurity, to the mobilization of future "facts" that affect what is possible in the present. What fears create the normative conceptions of literacy and what bodies can do with literacy?: That humanity will lose print literacy. That literacies "on screen" harm capacities for empathy. That literacies of the global south and from Indigenous communities will never be accepted as "Literacy" and so what is the point? That if we accept that literacy is a more-than-human practice, then human beings will lose their unique standing in the center of the universe. The future birth of the affective fact (Massumi, 2015a) limits the potentials for literacy, for bodies capacities to affect and to be affective through literacy events—this is the politics of affect for literacy studies.

A question that gestures toward what is possible for literacy studies beyond critical theory's mediations: How, immanently, can literacy, and literacy researchers, immediate ontopower's attempt to control potentials for more just, sustainable futures?

Implications for Research and Pedagogy: Meeting the Literature in the Middle

In the following, we take this question to current poststructural literacy research participating in the affective turn. We do so not in a review looking backward in time asking what is there, or what the literature has said. Rather, we write in relation to research that has immediated our own capacities for doing and thinking literacy differently, as well as our capacities to think how politics and power work to stifle difference through literacy events. Our review is therefore theoretically aligned with our process philosophical orientation, and it is necessarily only a partial view of the field. As we review each piece and sets of pieces, we work to relate: how does this research itself, or in relation with our present reading, produce new concepts and techniques to immediate affective conditions toward more just potentials and possibilities? We therefore hope to meet the research we review in the middle of our own experience with it and through an ethics of speculating more just, sustainable futures whenever possible.

Implications for Social Responsibility as Academics: Becoming-Otherwise

Becoming-otherwise refers to a relationality that is oriented toward futurity as opposed to a relationality already determined, fixed or idealized to fit a hegemonic norm. Extending an understanding

of relationality with immanence in mind affords pedagogical potential to immediate affective conditions for justice-oriented possibilities related to students, literacies, and classrooms. An affective lens on relationality, then, works toward affective potentials seeking to disrupt the territorialized control placed on relationality through the affective fact that subsumes the workings of so many literacy classrooms.

Ehret and MacDonald (2019), for instance, refer to the minor gestures—the undercurrents always at flow—that generate relational transformation integral to literacy practice that disrupt “major infringing upon moments with students” (p. 46) that tend to over-structure human relationality, particularly in classroom spaces. In effort to open up such an imposed, limited relationality, Zapata, Van Horn, Moss, and Fugit (2019) suggest improvisational teaching as a method for creating affective conditions that build from the immanent connections of texts, bodies, and meaning moving and working to produce student learning. An improvisational method fosters the mediation of socio-cultural practice yet also immediates the something more that cannot be fully represented or fully named. Through their research with middle and high school students, the interrelation of “feelings, connections, and confusion” (p. 181) produced the critical moments that made critical literacies possible. Positioning “critical literacy” as the intention or goal would not have been enough on its own to include the emerging responses that fostered critical thought. When affective potentials are overlooked or stifled, imposed control is apt to creep in.

As Zapata et al. (2019) demonstrate in their analysis, the affected and visceral moments “produced a new reality for students and new conditions of literacy possibilities” (p. 182). As students engaged with texts and current events around the killing of unarmed teenager Michael Brown and the local protests that followed, teachers leaned into improvisational teaching to be more attuned to affect as a part of students’ literacies. These included embodied tensions, reflexivity on uncertainty, and listening to students. Teachers were initially worried about how to attend to affect and felt connections related to justice-oriented work—the affective fact—produced through fear, worried if there is space for such critical stances in classrooms comprised of culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse students who were already labeled as “under-performing,” a worry that we believe resonates with many pedagogically. Yet they found a merging of the major and the minor: “Being with the major resources that students brought to learning not only meant reading their body language more deeply alongside their literacy work but also attending to the emotional charge produced around those resources” (p. 185), a charge inherent to relationality that flows as a minor current.

Relationality, then, extends beyond human interactions to the materials that also act on human bodies to influence how they feel, act, and make. Pushing beyond the limits of traditional writing as a linearly conceived act limited to words and paper by extending to materials that compel humans to act and make in responsive ways, poststructural literacy scholars continue to examine relationality through multimodal literacies and materials. Kuby and Rucker (2016), for instance, expand upon young children’s writing through the concept of literacy desiring, examining how children become as writers through intra-activity with materials, other children, and open-ended compositional forms.

This understanding of relationality has extended into makerspaces demonstrating affect as a “becoming through modalities” (Rowsell & Shillitoe, 2019, p. 1555). Rowsell and Shillitoe examine youths’ engagement with materials and how this produced craftivism with “what if” possibilities that open up potentials for activist creations and meanings. Craftivism is one way to push forward the critical potentials of affect through the interrelationality of people and materials as a way for new potentials to become—other than before. In their research, for example, youth analyzed games and created their own, moving them to consider structures of power and how they might reimagine things differently, “compelling young people to think beyond their everyday and to problematize work-place stereotypes as well as reassess their own projected futures” (p. 1557). Relationality

becomes significant through the time, place, and way these things and bodies come together to create the relational becoming-other.

Sense-Making Through Felt Sensations

Becoming-otherwise through relationality, however, extends beyond bodies; it is also propelled through felt intensities. These are the felt sensations that occur before language can actually represent the feeling, yet they are embodied and experienced nonetheless. These sensations are a part of our sense-making, and thus a part of literacies, and are essential for thinking about potentials of sustainable, just futures.

Pedagogically, this means attuning to felt sensations, and how these may be produced through the literacy event (Ehret, 2019). Dutro (2013) discusses the visceral potentials moving through children's literacies, often destabilizing the structures imposed on children and what stories they are invited (or not) to tell. In her work on students' trauma and pedagogy of critical witness to these, Dutro's scholarship propels us to expect the affective in students' stories. If we know stories offer a counter-narrative, how might the non-representational support a deconstruction of power and control in the literacy classroom? Franklin-Phipps and Rath's (2018) work with pre-service teachers demonstrate the ways such emergent, sense-making practices might disrupt such norms, which in their research is framed around whiteness. They attend to affect through collage-making, and how the senses attuned to these practices might support "unsticking from whiteness and sustain a becoming racially literate" (p. 146).

Sense making through felt intensities hold implications for pedagogy related to the multimodal nature of literacies. Just as bodies form relational assemblages that produce felt effects, multiple modes are always at work in literacies producing embodied, felt intensities. Johnston (2020) referred to these sensuous flows through modes and signs as a "feeling power . . . enhanced through students' meaning-making related to their own lives" (p. 196). The felt, though not always seen, cannot be ignored as an integral aspect of literacy practices. Attuning to these felt intensities humanizes literate acts, making literacy about the people who make it what it is as opposed to being about structured practices intended to box people in or shut them out. Felt intensities are always charging through us and into the world to deconstruct, dismantle, and reconfigure the structures that continue to control, impose and limit possibilities for just futures.

Reconfiguring Power

The becoming-other relationality and felt sensations are immanently produced through literacies, potentially pushing against norms, totalities, and ideal outcomes. How do these perspectives shift practices and purposes of literacy pedagogy so that power might be worked against and reconfigured for more just, sustainable futures? Leander and Ehret (2019) urge us to consider how starting with affect to disrupt the norms that impose hegemonic structures and systems might alter how we understand the seemingly stable systems that currently work against equitable relations of power.

To reposition and reimagine race, gender, and difference in relation to literacy pedagogy, Jocson and Dixon-Román (2021) discuss racializing affect "as a sociopolitical process of hierarchizing and differentiating bodies, a process that is situated in a sociohistorical and material history of colonialism that becomes flesh shaping bodily movement and intensities" (p. X). Racializing affect attunes to the relationality produced through the Black and Brown high school girls they worked alongside as they become-technologist in a technology-based high school program. This was an act toward reconfiguring the racializing affect with technology in relation with the students and how they could become-other through their "rhythm, relationality, movement, and intensities" as they engaged with literacies in the program.

Through this example, reconfiguring power is about attending to affect to redistribute power and afford equitable futures. This involves attuning to relationality, the becoming–other that is always possible, and the felt, nonrepresentational sensations always flowing in literacies.

Recommendations for Future Research and Praxis

Inherent to the literature and implications suggested in this chapter is a teacher and researcher reflexivity on affective dimensions of literacies. This involves time, space, and informed thought to reflect on the “feeling” side of things, including felt attachments to classrooms and practices that might actually hinder students’ enactments of literacies and even more so, harm vulnerable students already marginalized through normed practices (Nichols & Coleman, 2021). Humanizing literacy education with students means humanizing teachers to support them in the reflexive work of attuning to their own affectivities. This act alone is a dismantling of the control imposed on teachers’ time and demands and how it should be appropriated.

For students, implications in this chapter point to a continued examination of how Black and Brown bodies racialize affect to become–other in a way that embraces all of their sociocultural resources while immanently being moved to disrupt literacy practices overcoded by whiteness. Drawing on Ehret (2019), we ask how are students’ lives becoming with literacies? And how are those lives valued (or not) in this process and in spaces, such as schools? Affect affords a critical lens questioning power that limits desire and following how the amodal desire immanently immediates for a becoming–other to move beyond limitations of the “now” by what might be in the future.

Implications for Literacy Research

Orienting literacy to affect and embodiment awakens senses and practices in critical ways. As Burnett and Merchant (2018) have identified, locating affective intensities within literacy “troubles the idea of reading as individualised and transportable” and instead presents iconic literacy acts such as reading “as embedded in complex networks of people and things, as part of what happens from moment to moment” (2018, p. 67). Harking back to the history and lineages of critical literacy (Janks, 2000; Freire, 1993; Luke, 2004; Morrell, 2006) should remind us as literacy researchers that the politics of literacy is about the intensities of senses and affect. Disrupting racism, sexism, classism to name a few fundamental goals of critical literacy involve being in the middle of power imbalances and hegemonic forces to deconstruct, hopefully expose, maybe even if we are lucky, topple them. To enact political movements through literacy events means being in and of the world and pushing against the grain, the accepted, the powerful.

Turning to the world to frame things differently and to have more difficult conversations has allowed critical literacies, as a pedagogical movement, to create dialogic spaces. There is no one method for a politics of immediation within literacy studies; there are however some well-formed routes that have developed over time that identify some further implications and pathways. Classic critical literacy scholarship asks what and who gets privileged as definitions of literacy (Street, 1985). The field then moved from actions to spaces and temporal rhythms to locate power and privilege (Lemke, 2000; Leander & Sheehy, 2004). More modern renditions of power and politics in literacy scholarship has now shifted the conversation to objects, technologies, bodies, emotions, and experiences (Leander & Ehret, 2019).

Nonetheless, if we are to truly be critical as literacy researchers we need to do a better job reaching more marginalized perspectives in the global south and we need to listen far more to less visible populations of learners. Sitting and simmering beneath the surface of visible ideologies and injustices inherent to literacy are emotions such as anger, sadness, belonging, insecurities and there needs to be

much greater account of these felt intensities within our work as literacy scholars attuned to power and politics. In this chapter, we called for research to open up to everything, everyone, and every moment. What are routes into these felt intensities and forms of becoming? Thinking about a seminal figure within critical literacy, Freire (1993), called on educators to read the *word* and the *world*, which ultimately entails a sharp focus on bodies' emergent capacities to affect and be affected—to live literacy as immanent and immediate.

Notes

1. For perspectives from philosophy and communication studies drawn upon in this chapter, see Massumi (2019, 2020)
2. For perspectives from philosophy and communication studies drawn upon in this chapter, see Massumi (2019, 2020)
3. We use bodies inclusively of all “things” moving in an event, including human bodies, and to avoid fixed categories of human and non-human that have histories in colonialism and categorical exclusion.

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