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## **Towards a Global Critical Literacy: Literature, Community Engagement and the Global Commons from an American Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

What does it mean for a student to be critically literate in the Twenty First Century? How do we teach critical literacy within university humanities programs in the United States? And what are the implications of critical literacy for the conception and praxis of the global good? Using Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams' conceptions of critical literacy, I outline a pedagogical approach to literature and cultural studies that offers a conceptual space for students to imagine and engage with ideas of the global good. From the perspective of student learning, this approach to community engagement offers students opportunities to "read" their own social context critically and engage with, as well as, contribute to various local, national and global communities in meaningful, material ways. But what is important is that in doing so, such contributions come from the starting point of disciplinary knowledge, rather than from a problematic volunteerism or service framework that are often associated with the term community engagement. A critically literate approach to community engagement enables students to understand how literary studies can enrich an understanding of their global context in ways that other disciplines cannot and, therefore, the type of knowledge that the field produces. Drawing upon concrete examples of student learning from a range of university classes in which I have employed this pedagogical approach, I conclude that the student learning experience that results from such a process is qualitatively different—both with respect to the sorts of knowledge that students' produce, as well as the dispositional affects it engenders in students' lives. Such a learning experience holds the promise of achieving Raymond Williams' vision of adult education as a process of "building social consciousness" and "real understanding of the world"—a substantive critical literacy for a globalized world.

### **Introduction**

There is a prevailing trend toward globalism in American Higher Education today. We see this through prestigious universities like NYU, Cornell and John Hopkins opening campuses around the world in an effort to compete in, what has become, a new globalized Higher Education marketplace (PBS, 2008). We see this through state universities like UCLA and Berkeley accepting increased numbers of international students—and the high student fees that they generate—as a means of balancing their budgets in response to decreased state funding (Economist, 2014). And we see this through the ubiquity of various articulations of the "global" in university descriptions, course offerings and research centers, as universities seek to brand and position themselves as a, "global network university," (Times Higher Education, 2013) able "to serve the changing needs of a global society" (California State University, 2015). This trend, of course, is part of a much broader trend of economic, political and cultural globalization that forces us to reconceive the university today, as Henry Giroux (2004) has done, as enmeshed with neoliberal globalization. Within this neoliberal context of globalization, universities increasingly conceive of their institutions as competing for students within a global marketplace, and conceive of their role as educators to prepare "students to succeed in today's global economy" (AAC&U, 2006). Various claims of globalism become, within this context, a means to attract students by promising them a

place within such a neoliberal globalized world, thereby reinforcing the inevitability of this narrative of globalization that echoes throughout students' everyday lives.

Twinned with this trend toward globalism within American Higher Education is an almost as robust trend toward community engagement. Indeed, as Karen MacGregor (2014) reports in a recent *University World News* article, community engagement has become an important dimension of the global university marketplace. MacGregor (2014) suggests that the "growth of civic engagement and social responsibility is also increasingly reflected in the way universities market themselves," and that while "previously, many institutions highlighted opportunities for students to have a great experience on campus, with fellow students and professors. Now, they try to distinguish themselves from competitors by highlighting connections to their neighborhoods, the cities that surround them, and how students have opportunities to participate" ("Rapid growth in university engagement worldwide," para 26). These twinned trends come together within the influential Association of American Colleges and Universities that regards both globalism and community engagement as foundational to their vision of a liberal American university education for the twenty-first century (AAC&U, 2008). To be global and to be engaged in the community then; this appears to be the trajectory of American higher education today at the institutional level.

But, as the American university become remade as "globalized," "community engaged" institutions, largely driven in these directions by university administrators and market driven responses to globalization, the question becomes, are these two trends compatible with each other? After all, there are profound and numerous contradictions between the neoliberal globalized university and meaningful community engagement—the shift of emphasis away from local students universities toward higher paying international students; the often-conflicting interests of multinational companies (that play increasingly prominent roles within campuses) and local people and environments; the encroachment of private companies upon the global academic knowledge commons, to name but a few. Given these contradictions it is easy to become cynical and regard the trends of globalism and community engagement as the empty signifiers of marketers; evidence of education's entanglement with what Henry Giroux (2012) calls the "new regimes of privatization, commodification, and consumerism" that suggests the conceptions of the global public good that they produce to be nothing more than a cheap trick of branding: the academic parallel of a BP environmental commercial in the wake of the gulf spill. (p. 4) Indeed, is it even possible to conceive of a global commons within academic institutions that appear to be—at the institutional level at least—unaware of, or unwillingly to acknowledge such contradictions and complexities of their avowed objectives?

Yet these sorts of contradictions are not unique to the contemporary American university but are, in fact, faced routinely faced by to all world citizens in their everyday lives: they are contradictions produced by globalization. As numerous theorizers of globalization have shown, the conditions of globalization are such that there is no outside from which to escape it, resulting in even the seemingly most mundane aspects of our lives connecting to various complex global networks. Consequently, we face a myriad of complex globalized contradictions everyday—from the food that we eat, to the clothes that we wear, to the culture that we consume, to the air that we breathe and the changing climate around us—whether we are aware of the global ethical complexities of their production or not. Any resistance to the neoliberal vision of globalization, as well as any conceptions of alternative trajectories to it, must then be forged *within* the

complexities of our present global context, as Hardt and Negri (2009), and others, have indicated.

Seen from this perspective, the contradictions and complexities at the heart of the American Higher Education's trajectory toward globalism and community engagement might turn out to offer excellent opportunities for student learning in ways that university administrators are unable to imagine. Rather than elide these contradictions and complexities—as uncritical university promotion and branding of these trends does—encouraging students to critically experience and think through them can be a productive way of exploring the global commons in all its complexity, as well as for students to reflect upon their own subject positions within it. Reframing our present historical context of higher education in this way, offers recourse to the disempowerment that faculty often feel in the face of recent transformations of the university that appear to be driven by powerful global forces out of their control. Instead, the question becomes, how might faculty reclaim these trends of globalism and community engagement within the classroom in order to produce knowledge, experiences and outcomes that articulate and enact a more meaningful version of the “global good”—or better still, the “global commons”—than neoliberal conception peddled by university marketing brochures?

### **From The Global Good to The Global Commons**

The challenges and contradictions facing Higher Education in today's global context have not gone unnoticed by UNESCO (2015) and their recent report, *Rethinking Education: Towards a Global Common Good?* aims at outlining an alternative to the neoliberal trajectory of Higher Education. Although education has been largely understood within the framework of the “public good” in international development discourse, UNESCO rejects this framework that “has its foundations in market economies,” in favor of a conception of the “common good” (UNESCO, 2015, p. 77) The concept of the “common good” is understood as a collective endeavor that is inherently “common,” both in its production and benefits: It is a concept that goes beyond the “public good” in three important ways. (UNESCO, 2015, p. 78) First, it challenges the individualistic logic of the “public good”—that emphasizes individual consumption of higher education—and instead asserts that it is not only “the ‘good life’ of individuals that matters, but also the goodness of the life that humans hold in common.” (UNESCO, 2015, p. 78) Hence, the recent shift in Higher Education toward the individualistic consumption of “learning” and utilitarian skill acquisition is seen as problematic, because it widely neglects the “collective dimension of education as a shared endeavor.” (UNESCO, 2015, p. 78) By contrast, regarding Higher Education within the framework of the global common good reaffirms a vision of education expressed by Raymond Williams (1989) more than fifty years previously, in which, “we must emphasize not the ladder but the common highway, for every man's ignorance diminishes me and every man's skill is a common gain of breath.” (p. 13-4) Second, the common good must be “defined with regard to the diversity of contexts and conceptions of well-being and common life.” (UNESCO, 2015, p. 78) Hence, the “common good” should not be confused with what Immanuel Wallerstein (2006) calls, “European Universalism,” that imposes a singular vision of the good by those who control the most force, as was the case in the history of European colonialism. And finally, if meaningful diversity and collectivity are to be achieved, then they must be done so through an inclusive participatory process. This means placing the concept of the “common good” beyond the public/private dichotomy and conceiving of “new forms and institutions of participatory democracy.” (UNESCO, 2015, p. 78). Hence, Higher Education would need to resist

“current policies of privatization without returning to traditional modes of public management.” (UNESCO, 2015, p. 79) The result of rethinking education as a “common good” would be “a humanistic education and development based on principles of *respect for life and human dignity, equal rights and social justice, respect for cultural diversity, and international solidarity and shared responsibility*, all of which are fundamental aspects of our *common humanity*.” (UNESCO, 2015, p. 14)

Based upon these principles, the report calls for a “humanist” approach to education that employs dialogical approaches to learning (such as those of Martin Buber and Paulo Freire), as well as community engagement to achieve its outcomes. (UNESCO, 2015, p. 38) Given this educational vision, community engagement functions quite differently within UNESCO’s pedagogy to the market-based role described by the *University World News*. Indeed, UNESCO conceives of “partnerships with community associations and non-profit organizations” as a means of countering “current trends towards the commodification of public education.” (UNESCO, 2015, p. 81) From UNESCO’s perspective, the objective of community engagement is not a method of branding the university in order to attract students in a global marketplace but, rather, of re-establishing education as the responsibility of “society as a whole” not the purview of governments or market forces. (UNESCO, 2015, p. 81) Community engagement becomes, in this way, a method of reframing education as part of the global commons and empowering students to participate in it as such. These are, of course, lofty goals and, as is typical of these sorts of reports, UNESCO provides few details and specifics of how these goals might be achieved because the report aims to “aspirational and inspirational” —more visionary manifesto than pedagogical blueprint. (UNESCO, 2015, p. 14) Consequently, the report concludes with a series of questions that aim to foster further debate and to stimulate educators to chart the way forward themselves. One such question asks; how might the report’s humanistic educational vision be realized through educational practices: how might we imagine bringing these lofty ideas of a global common good—that is collective, diverse and participatory, and that strengthens partnerships between the university and community organizations—into the classroom?

Needless to say, this is a daunting, complex question that faces a number of challenges for any educator willing to address it. Perhaps foremost amongst these challenges is how to approach the frame of the global in a way that disarticulates neoliberal globalization from UNESCO’s conception of the global commons. Neoliberal globalization hinges upon the vision of the world advanced by Margret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the 1980’s that transformed the world by deregulating global markets and promoting free market capitalism around the world. A founding narrative of this vision of the world, expressed by Margaret Thatcher, claims that is no alternative to this trajectory of the world; that neoliberal globalization is inevitable and, therefore, beyond the control of the world’s citizen’s. Thatcher’s claim later became known as T.I.N.A. and served an instrumental role toward advancing neoliberal policies around the world. This imprint of neoliberal globalization is evident in the *University World News*’ article on global education that outlines a new global marketplace in which universities must now compete. As Henry Giroux notes (2004), the result of this transformation of the American university is twofold: an erosion of “social visions of equity” (p. 1) in favor of individual consumption and a shift in educational goals away from “social needs and democratic values” towards the “market interests” of supplying labor for this new global economy. (p. 2) Both of these shifts run contrary to the vision of global education put forth by UNESCO.

While there are obvious ways that the distinction between neoliberal globalization and the global commons can be made from a content perspective, there are also more subtle ways that the experience of the world that neoliberal globalization produces might be reproduced in the classroom. From an experiential perspective, one of the hallmarks of neoliberal globalization is a sense of vast forces transforming individual lives, the university and the world—thus appearing to confirm Margret Thatcher's claim that we have no alternative to this trajectory of the world. It is not difficult to see how experiencing the world in this way can lead, as Giroux contends, to a turning away from social visions of equity and toward individualized consumption: it is an experience of the global that produces a sense of the world being moved by forces that are *out-there*, rendering subjects passive consumers or observers of the world. Unfortunately, this framing of the global as somehow *out-there*, diametrically opposed to the local situatedness in which students find themselves, is common to numerous humanities courses that are variously categorized as *world* or *global* within American universities. The categories of world literature, cinema and music can often appear like an exotic display of neatly packed cultures at a Las Vegas buffet, to be tasted and consumed by students throughout the course. The problem with this framing of the global as *out-there* is that it misses how our present global context brings the world into our lives and, consequently, how this new global connectivity forces a rethinking of the relationship between locality, culture and identity. To approach the "world" as *out-there* misses this sense of how the global is experienced *within* the local (and vice versa) and runs the risk of students conceiving of the global as somehow distant from their everyday lives—something that they are not part of and can only consume. Such framing of the global not only exoticizes it and reinforces traditional conceptions of the nation but also, and perhaps more perniciously, disempowers students from conceiving of themselves *within* it. Hence, such an approach is antithetical to the educational vision of the UNESCO report, because it conceptually alienates students from the global commons, rather than encourages them to conceive of themselves as sharing and participating within it.

Moreover, this *out-there* sense of the global is often reinforced for students by what John Tomlinson (1999) describes as, "the sheer scale and complexity of the empirical reality of global connectivity" that "defies attempts to encompass it." (p. 17) On the one hand, attempting to account for too many cultural, economic and political dimensions, or too broad a range of different contexts runs the risk once again of overwhelming students and making globalization appear an *out-there* phenomenon that precludes any sense of agency or participation. On the other hand, too reductive an approach that frames the global within a single master discourse is equally problematic because, as Tomlinson (1999) points out, it suggests a "logic that unlocks all else." (p. 17). Hence, students might reduce the complexity of globalization to a '*it all boils down to this*' narrative of globalization that not only runs counter to the empirical realities of globalization but, also, to UNESCO's learning outcome of recognizing "the diversity of contexts and conceptions of well-being and common life" of the global commons. (UNESCO, 2015, p. 78)

Tomlinson (1999) offers recourse to these problematic ways of approaching our current global context by suggesting, "it is something we can only grasp by cutting into in various ways." (p. 17) Hence, a better way of approaching our present global context "would be to identify the specific way of describing the world that is contained within an economic, a political, or a cultural discourse, and to try to draw out an understanding of globalization within these terms, whilst always denying them conceptual priory: pursuing one dimension in the self-consciousness recognition of multidimensionality." (Tomlinson,

1999, p. 17) The metaphor of cutting in is equally pertinent for thinking through the spatial conceptualization of our present global context. Contrary to an *out-there* approach to the world, cutting into the global from student's own contexts allows them to map global connectivity from their local contexts and, therefore, to see themselves as part of complex global connectivity. This is important because it provides a qualitatively different learning experience that enables students to approach the global commons in three important ways. First, it enables for the possibility of participating as agents in the global commons, rather than consumers of global culture. To participate *within* the world is, by definition, to be involved with others in doing something and is, therefore, a fundamentally collective rather individualistic approach to the global. Second, cutting into the global from a student's own local context not only enables them to engage with the global in ways that are not distant or *out-there*, but also to recognize what they do, and do not, share in common with others. Such an approach encourages students to provincialize rather than universalize their own worldviews, as well as to reflect upon their own subject positions within the world. Lastly, encouraging students to both conceive of themselves as participates within a global commons empowers them to conceive of alternative global trajectories to neoliberal globalization, offering recourse to the narrative of T.I.N.A, which hinges upon framing a particular global future as inevitable by foreclosing critical thinking and obfuscating other possible futures.

### **Towards a Global Critical Literacy**

The approach toward global learning advanced thus far advocates for cutting into the global from the classroom outward in order to offer students the possibility of reflecting upon their own subject positions within it, as well as to conceive of themselves as agents within this world—to feel themselves as participants within a global commons, rather than passive recipients of neoliberal globalization. What needs to be fleshed out now is how the humanities and community engagement can contribute toward this objective. In thinking through this problem, it is instructive to turn to a cultural director of UNESCO forty years prior to the most recent report on rethinking education, Richard Hoggart. Before working for UNESCO during the 1970's, Hoggart was leading British intellectual whose concept of "critical literacy"—a founding concept within the field of British Cultural Studies—provides a productive framework with which to approach UNESCO's current educational vision. In keeping with the current report, Hoggart is very much concerned with the importance of education toward achieving a democratic society but, in so doing, further emphasizes the role of aesthetic production and evaluation within this process. Although Hoggart does not use the exact term *critical literacy* until sometime after the publication of *The Uses of Literacy*—a text that is widely acknowledged as establishing the field of cultural studies and to which "cultural literacy" is often inaccurately sourced—the concept remains an implicit theoretical foundation of that seminal work. Hoggart's initial title for *The Uses of Literacy* was *The Abuses of Literacy*: a title that captures the counterpoint to *critical literacy* and indicates what Hoggart saw as the shortcoming a basic linguistic of definition of literacy in the emergent age of mass media and consumer culture. Hoggart makes the case for a new approach to literacy in the following way:

The fact that illiteracy today as it is normally measured has been largely removed only points towards the next and probably more difficult problem. A new word is needed to describe the nature of the response invited by the popular material I have discussed, a word indicating a social change which takes advantage of and

thrives on basic literacy. All this needs to be considered with special urgency today because it is in continuous and rapid development. (Hoggart, 2009, p. 309)

Writing in 1950's Britain, Hoggart is prescient in describing an emergent form of capitalism that thrives upon a literate (in the most narrow sense) audience to consume the "myriad of voices of the trivial and synthetic sirens" of mass-produced, consumer culture. (Hoggart, 2009, p. 291) For Hoggart, the problem with such a culture was that it led to "a mean form of materialism" and a general decline in the cultural experience of British working class life (Hoggart, 2009, p. 292).

As recourse to the cultural deterioration that consumer mass-culture represented, Hoggart (2009) regarded good literature as chief amongst the forms of culture to provide a "more nourishing fare." (p. 291) The distinction between good literature's ability to provide "more nourishing fare"—as evidenced, for example, by the "richness of texture" (p. 210) that a writer such as George Eliot can muster—and the "cheap gum-chewing pert glibness and streamlining" that "mark mid-twentieth century popular writing," indicates that one aspect of developing a critical literacy hinges upon the issue of cultural value (p. 209). For Hoggart the ability to discern cultural value has implications beyond the concerns of canonicity and was important because it, in part, determines the richness of working class-consciousness. Perhaps most significantly, Hoggart (2009) saw critical literacy as the means by which British working class might wake from "the hypnosis of immature emotional satisfactions" that consumer culture promotes (p. 293). In this respect, critical literacy is seen as the new front of battlefront of British class politics, because the "difficulty now lies less in the material lack of working people" (Hoggart, 2009, p. 291) than with the much harder to realize problem of cultural and "spiritual deterioration" (Hoggart, 2009, p. 293). In other words, critically literacy is offered by Hoggart as a method of resistance to post WWII capitalism in Britain that, despite improving the material standard of living, impoverished working class life more insidiously through the logic and aspirations of mass consumer culture.

Hoggart saw critical literacy then as a way of reading that connected the aesthetic to the social and political, and that provided resistance to a society "being conned" by an authority—a theme that Hoggart (1998) develops in a much later work, *The Tyranny of Relativism* (p. 13). In this usage, the ability to determine value is seen as crucial to the democratic process because a functioning democracy requires meaningful participation by a public who are able to make informed, reasoned decisions. Yet Hoggart argues that contemporary popular culture has had the opposite effect on the British public by teaching them how to be cultural consumers, while eroding their ability to think critically. This has produced a leveling in British society that is not the harbinger of a more egalitarian society but its antithesis: a "tyranny of relativism," which has produced a population unable to make ethical or, meaningful, political decisions (Hoggart, 1998)

While Hoggart's conception of critical literacy was influential in popularizing the term, it was also theoretically rather limited in its Leavisite emphasis upon critical literacy's evaluative function. Consequently, although Hoggart is widely associated with critical literacy, it was Raymond Williams who later developed it more fully as a concept. Williams shared Hoggart's broad social and political perspective but, despite sharing Hoggart's literary training in the Leavis/Cambridge tradition, developed his understanding of the concept in explicit opposition to this tradition. In particular, while Williams utilized the Leavisite emphasis upon the aesthetic dimension of culture and its

methods of close reading and attention to form and genre, he also rejected what he regarded as the subservience of this approach. As John Higgins (1999) notes, such subservience arises from the class norms inherent to the type of aesthetic evaluation that critics like Leavis and I.A Richards performed, which remained unexamined because aesthetic judgment was conceived as a detached process—somehow above and beyond the social and political world (p. 175-6). The Leavis tradition of aesthetic evaluation is subservient then, because the critic must submit herself to the rules of the literary establishment upon which these aesthetic judgments are made; but it is also subservient because in doing so, the critic must remove their background and subjectivity from the process. As Williams observes of his own training in this method:

“what you were told to do is forget yourself, to forget your situation, to be in a naked relation—but with your training of course—to the text; while the text itself was similarly taken out of all its conditions and circumstances.” (as cited in Higgins, p. 176)

As a corrective to this method, critical literacy was not simply a question of developing the critical evaluative capacities that Hoggart emphasizes, but something much more powerful: it was, as John Higgins identifies, the “force of Williams work as whole;” a critical literacy that aimed to make learning part of social transformation through the development of a “social consciousness” grounded in a “real understanding of the world.” (as cited in Higgins, p. 176) This sense of critical literacy is a much more active and dynamic process than the passivity of evaluation, revealing how Williams (as well as the field of Cultural Studies he helped create) regards critical literacy as a method for reading the world (not just literature) as a text: the reader does not escape from the messiness of the social and political world to the aesthetic realm, as in the Leavis tradition, but rather seeks to examine the complex interplay between the two. To be critically literate then, is to understand how both literature and the material world are shaped by particular historical constraints and conventions; but it is also to understand how literature attempts to articulate desires and social possibilities that have yet to be realized.

In recent years, as Melissa Gregg (2002) notes, much criticism of William’s work has centered upon his rather parochial, British outlook that appears out of touch with today’s global context. Nevertheless as Gregg notes, despite such criticism, there remains much that is valuable in Williams, not least his critically literate approach and the underlying “humanist motivation” that gives force to his work and makes it compelling. (p. 276) The task then, is not to dismiss Williams’ work as outdated but, rather, to update his work in light of recent developments in cultural theory. Toward this objective, Greggs finds Paul Gilroy’s concept of *planetary humanism* useful in apprising Williams’s work for our present moment in ways that also mesh well with the goals of the UNESCO report. For Gregg (2002),

In contradistinction to those who would consider a return to humanism either regressive or inconceivable, Gilroy provides concrete measures for uncovering such an impulse to enable a workable, relevant and caring political project. He believes ‘the recurrence of pain, disease, humiliation and loss of dignity, grief, and care for those one loves can all contribute to an abstract sense of a human similarity powerful enough to make solidarities based on cultural particularity appear suddenly trivial’ (Gilroy, 2000, p. 17). Confronted with the sufferings of others, there is a certain identity able level where a response only explicable as



human comes into effect. Gilroy urges us to recognize this as the precious force for political practice, rather than older constructs such as nation, race or culture. It is our fixation on these increasingly outdated, increasingly inaccurate analytic concepts which holds us in the 'heterocultural present' rather than hastening a more promising 'cosmopolitan future' (Gilroy, 2000, p. 335) (p. 280).

The version of humanism articulated by Gilroy is, as Gregg (2002) goes on to note, "more embracing planetary consciousness than Williams could foresee. It also appreciates the multifarious nature of politics and power in these times, and the strategic need for diversity of action in realizing a counter hegemonic movement." (p. 278) In this way, Gilroy builds upon the concepts of critical literacy and a transformative humanism that underpin Williams work by accounting for the increased complexity of our current global context, thereby enabling the conceptualization of a global critical literacy able to address some of the educational challenges put forth by the UNESCO report. To be critically literate is, from this new global perspective, to understand how both literature and the material world are shaped by "older constructs," such as race or nation, in order to develop real understanding of the world; but it is also a process of "hastening a more promising 'cosmopolitan future'" that has yet to be realized by developing a new global social consciousness, grounded in what Gilroy (2000) calls "that crushingly obvious, almost banal human sameness" (p. 29). Or put more simply, a new, global critical literacy not only analyses the world, but also produces new forms of global solidarity and hope.

### **Engaging Global Critical Literacy**

It is important to recall that the concept of critical literacy was first developed whilst Hoggart and Williams were working as lecturers within the Workers Education Association (WEA) during the years preceding and following WW2. Their students were all working class adults who worked during the day and took literature classes at night. The act of *engaging with the community* was, therefore, foundational to the concept of critical literacy itself; it was not the exporting of an academic conception of culture and literature to working class communities but, rather, developed by Hoggart and Williams *within* the community and only later trafficked to the university. What is now called British Cultural Studies in the United States is, therefore, fundamentally an approach to culture and literature that emerged from community engagement, despite this genesis being widely overlooked in American universities today.

Indeed, today the social method of reading literature that Williams, in particular, developed has now become so common place in studying and teaching literature that it is easy to lose sight of the challenge that this approach represented to the academic establishment in Williams time. For instance, in a recent article Susan Bruce (2012) makes the point that in many literature classes learning occurs through the instructor juxtaposing different texts, or parts of a text, and encouraging students to gain insight and make meaning through "comparison exercised in a process that presupposes a community of reading." (p. 57) As Bruce (2012) explains,

The fundamental strategy of the diptych, which involves an invitation to make meaning by reading from one side (or text) to the (or-an) other, revising first conclusions by testing them against new perspectives, and acknowledging, at some level, that our ability to internally construct these meanings by the thought of others." (p. 67)

The teaching of literature, therefore, results in students understanding that reading is never quite the solitary process it at first appears, but rather one that is implicitly “a communion in another (‘s) conversation.” (Bruce, 2012, p. 67) Students learn, in short, that aesthetic productions emerge from particular historical and cultural contexts, and that how they are received, interpreted and given meaning is similarly shaped by a complex context of relations. The indebtedness of this approach to transformation of literary studies that Williams helped shape is obvious, suggesting that much of what the teaching of literature already does today is foster the sort of critical literacy that Williams advocates. If this is so, then the obvious question becomes why bother with community engagement if students are already learning to be critically literate?

There are a number of important ways of responding to this question. First amongst these is that, as I have previously articulated, both Williams and Hoggart developed their conceptions of critical literacy within British working communities. Praxis was not narrowly defined in this formulation but was, as Williams’s notes, “the desire to make learning part of the process of social change itself” (as in Higgins, 1999, p. 176). Exporting critical literacy from the context of British working class adult education of the 1930’s and 40’s to the professionalized American university of the twenty first century loses much of the force of this impulse. Consequently, contemporary ideas of community engagement become valuable as a way of reconnecting students with the original socially transformative goals of cultural studies, as well as the material conditions of class that are often highly abstracted in contemporary cultural theory and that run the risk of becoming delinked from actuality in student learning.

More important still, meaningful community engagement, that connects cultural texts to lived material conditions, holds the promise of challenging what Williams terms the *critical spectator*. Williams conceives of the critical spectator as a troubling tendency within the development of cultural studies, in which critics assume that “by an act of intellectual abstraction” that they place themselves above “the lived contradictions” of the society or individual that they are analyzing—thereby avoiding putting their own subjectivity or position into question. (as cited in Higgins, 1999, p. 159). Williams regards this tendency to be not only a misguided theoretical position in cultural and literary analysis that runs counter to his cultural materialist approach but, more perniciously, to be complicit with a new conformism. In this regard, Williams views the critical spectator as complicit with the rise of the New Right of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan because, as John Higgins (1999) notes, both deny “the social materiality of the human subject” (p. 159) According to Williams the result of the new conformism is to reinforce the idea of the sovereign subject that underpins the ideology of the New Right. As a response to this tendency, significant community engagement can offer students possibilities that confront their own potential tendencies to adopt positions of critical spectatorship, by challenging them to see themselves as part of a particular issue or context, rather than abstractly distanced or removed from it. An important aspect of this sort of learning experience is its affective dimension that has significant implications for Gilroy’s conception of planetary consciousness; itself a concept in which solidarities are based upon affects, such as dignity, care, humiliation and pain. Much of community engagement’s force comes from engaging with actual people and material contexts that produce such affects, and a qualitatively different learning experience that is unable to be replicated in the classroom alone.

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As a way of illustrating these points in more detail, it might be useful to offer concrete examples of how community engagement produced global critical literacy in specific learning contexts at California State University, Los Angeles. These classes were part of a broader “Storying Wyvernwood” project in East Los Angeles that included one graduate and one undergraduate class in literature, one undergraduate and one graduate class in creative writing, as well as a general education classes on Human Rights and Literature. Inspired by the “Storying Sheffield Project” at the University of Sheffield in England, “Storying Wyvernwood” was developed with community partners in an attempt to represent the culture, history and individual lives of the residents of the historic Wyvernwood Garden Apartments in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles. The community is historically, architecturally and culturally significant within Los Angeles as the first garden-style apartments designed and built in Los Angeles in the 1930’s. Despite its historic significance, Wyvernwood currently faces the threat of redevelopment as the gentrification of downtown Los Angeles spreads its way east into Boyle Heights. Currently, the residents of Wyvernwood are predominantly low-income, Chicanos and Central American immigrants who would effectively be usurped by the “new urbanism” of downtown Los Angeles— a predominantly white, high-earning, creative industry demographic, with whom the contested term gentrification is widely associated. In response to this redevelopment of the 80-acre site into “luxury condos,” several community organizations—including La Committee Esperanza, The Los Angeles Conservancy, and East Los Angeles Community Housing Coalition—mobilized to resist, as well as offer alternatives to the “new urbanism” vision for Wyvernwood.

Coupled with this local context of redevelopment, students were also exposed to a second context of land right battles in Ecuador through a visit from YASunidos, a grassroots organization of indigenous Yasuni who were resisting oil drilling and redevelopment of their ancestral lands. Representatives of the group visited the CSULA classes following their participation in the 2014 United Nations climate summit in New York. In addressing students at CSULA, YASunidos’ resistance to the proposed redevelopment of their lands was impressively global in its appeal, arguing that “the oil dependency imposed on us...further aggravates global warming, environmental destruction, puts the lives of people in involuntary isolation...and threatens not only the future of Ecuadorians but also that of humanity.” (web ref) Taken together, Wyvernwood and YASunidos offered students concrete examples of the conflict between the global commons and neoliberal globalization, as well as numerous possibilities for tracing global forces outward from the campus into the world and vice versa. Students were given a variety of assignments in these courses that ranged from creating short documentary films, to creative writing, to reflective research essays. All assignments required students to slice into globalization through cultural representation and storytelling in ways that connected their lives and local contexts out into the world and vice versa. As a collective culminating activity, students organized an event on campus to showcase their research and creative work, celebrate the culture of the community with its members, as well as to offer a public space in which to debate the complex issues of globalization and the global commons within Los Angeles and the world. The event took place over an afternoon in the center of campus and featured traditional Mexican folk dancing, a local Chicano rock band, a panel discussion about gentrification, speeches from community members, an exhibition of student research and community artworks—and gained widespread media coverage on local and national television, radio and print media.

Throughout the project, students produced a range of excellent work that achieved a number of different learning outcomes, but what will be focus on here are a couple of qualitative examples of how the version of global critical literacy advanced in this paper was achieved. Particularly striking were the ways in which students reflected upon and challenged their positions as “critical spectators” within the university, thereby enabling them to move beyond framing the world as an object of study and toward participating within it. For example, one student wrote a poem based upon her experiences and interviews at Wyvernwood that juxtaposed distinct voices: the voice(s) of community members and the corporate voice of the proposed “New Wyvernwood.” Reflecting upon her poem and experiences at Wyvernwood in her research paper, the student is able to meta-reflect upon her training in literary theory and, more specifically, the epistemological crisis of representation that postmodern theory has raised in her previous reading. Of this, she writes:

As I sit in a graduate seminar room, I repeatedly witness this “epistemological crisis” when my classmates and I attempt to give something a “name” and immediately follow up with a rationale of how using that term is problematic...How do we then move from these analyses that only offer us “negative” knowledge to a way of understanding something we *don't already know*? Moving outside of the textual world into the material one while being a part of the Wyvernwood Project offered me another way to understand post-modernity that did not result in the same beaten down conclusion. Instead, this project allowed me engage with others who experience the postmodern world as a material reality instead of from a privileged distance. Doing so uncovered ways to transform the human text—the one of lived experiences—into the written form in order to reroute the ways we currently makes sense of this unreadable world.

The passage indicates a deep understanding of the limits of poststructuralist theory as a negative hermeneutic. While this insight is not new in and of itself, what is impressive is how the student uses the tools of literary theory she has learned to arrive at this insight and then begin to think through the theoretical dead-ends she had previously arrived at. Moreover, the student is able to use this insight to connect her academic learning of poststructuralism at CSULA to the community that surrounds it, contextualizing the university as a site of interpretation (its “privileged distance”) as well as a source for demystifying what had previously appeared “an unreadable world.”

The student goes on to conclude that

this process of listening, inquiring, recording, writing, and rereading gave me a new way to understand and analyze language. Doing so allowed me to discover how literary works can take on forms of their own which called attention to the way language itself can challenge other dominant discourses...these kinds of practices allow students of English to utilize their skills in a way that has an impact outside of the classroom. While not all English classes can serve as a way to uncover the social injustices in the world, projects like these help to show that language dictates not just how we understand the world, but how we *live* in it.

There is not only a deep meta-awareness of the relationship between literary discourse, the academy and the community at work here but, more importantly evidence of a significant dispositional shift in the student's awareness. The “privileged distance” between the academy and the world has now collapsed and the student arrives at a new

insight of how her academic knowledge of literature can help “challenge dominant discourses,” before resolving that “language dictates not just how we understand the world, but how we *live* in it.”

This is a very powerful insight for a literature student to have and one that suggests that—to use a phrase currently in vogue within pedagogy discourses—the experience had a “high impact” upon both her learning and subjectivity. The idea that language shapes how we live in the world is, of course, one that demonstrates a highly sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the field of literary studies, but what is more important is not the insight itself, but rather how the student arrived at it: through her own experience, her own reasoning and, most importantly, from having her ideas inspired, challenged, rethought and reframed by the world around her. There is a qualitatively different texture to this process of student learning and writing that, although not easily measured by the usual metrics of student success, is precisely what Hoggart and Williams saw as foundational to critical literacy: a literacy that is able to hold the rigor and aesthetic dimensions of literary studies in a critically productive relationship with the broader world in order to demystify it and, therefore, offer recourse to their fear of mass consumer culture eroding our ability to make meaningful value judgments. Moreover, underlying these comments is a different tone than typically encountered in student writing, there is a strong affective dimension to the writing that recalls the force that Gilroy’s identifies as foundational to planetary consciousness. The voice that emerges suggests not only a sophisticated intellectual understanding but also, just as importantly, engagement with diversity (“engage with others who experience the postmodern world as a material reality”), agency (“to transform the human text”), and new possibilities (“did not result in the same beaten down conclusion”).

The ability of students to challenge their subject positions as critical spectators in the academy was evident in a range of student writing, but what also accompanied these insights were attempts to think through alternative participatory processes. For instance, in reflecting upon helping to organize and present his research at the campus event, one student wrote:

I initially thought oral history taking was a reporting function, and that my job was to document, and pass on essential components of the personal narratives of Wyvernwood residents. What emerged in the process was the understanding that my job was not so much to tell “their story” and to interact with, and in fact, become a part of the story. The enrichment of this research experience was constituted in developing a relationship with the community who lives there, and being part of a process that left us all richer for the experience of getting to know each other better...The actual event was wonderful because I felt our campus was larger than the function of students consuming education...I imagine many who came from Wyvernwood, had never been to our campus. I also imagine many may return now. I am not done exploring what I learned about Boyle Heights or Wyvernwood either.

The theme of collapsing distance between the academy and the community—of challenging the critical spectator—is echoed here in a more personal register. What is interesting, however, is that this student identifies this collapsing to have occurred in three different ways: between the campus and the community, between the individual student and the community and between the storytelling process and subjectivity. Significantly, the student’s response to the story telling process not only challenges his

initial assumed role as an objective observer of the community, but also goes beyond mere identification with the community. Rather, the affect described here is one of a deep empathic connection: the student is able to conceive of himself as “part of the story.” In this sense, students are both being exposed to new narratives and frameworks through which to understand their feelings, as well as being encouraged to question these narratives and recognize them as complex, contingent and, at least in part, socially produced. Providing a context in which students can have these sorts of experiences of empathy enables them to experience embodied ways of telling collective stories and seeing narratives of land redevelopment and other social issues, not as distant, inevitable narratives over which they have no control, but as producers of alternative narratives.

The affective dispositional shifts that the student describes—“the relationship with the community” “getting to know each other better” “felt our campus was larger than the function of students’ consuming education”—are all dependent upon the actual experience of engagement. For this student, these empathic experiences are coupled with the development of a deep critical literacy that enables him to use the class readings to self-reflect in the following way:

I am clearer that I am not as transparent I as imagined I could be. That my perspective colors the things I conclude, and my interaction with people I interview, how they react to me personally, and what I select to include or exclude, all contribute to a bias that is not in fact negative, but must be acknowledged.

Here the student is able to use his knowledge of the role of a narrator in fictional texts to contextualize his own perception of the world. The feeling of “becoming part of the story” is coupled with a newfound self-knowledge that recognizes himself as the narrator of his story about the world. This new knowledge leads him to conclude that he is not the “transparent” window to the world that he had previously thought himself to be. He is in, other words, applying the sorts of literary analysis we undertook in the project to the world around himself and, as a result, engaging in deep learning. But what is significant in this process is that the student does not then take the easy way out by concluding his own lack of narrative transparency inevitably leads to the sorts of weak cultural relativism that Hoggart rallied against. Rather, the student recognizes that this lack of transparency must be acknowledged while remaining committed to “learning more about the value of certain realities that have to be understood to be seen.” The student’s newly honed critical literacy leads him to conclude that “Wyvernwood could appear to the untrained eye as a slum,...a housing project” and to ask “what other communities of value might I or others be misreading?” Like the first student, critical literacy here serves toward demystifying the world and, in so doing, does not evade the issue of cultural value but, rather, enables the student to see it in places where it might have previously been overlooked. The experience of attempting to represent Wyvernwood and its community aesthetically expands the student’s way of conceptualizing value and beauty, offering new possibilities for experiencing and conceptualizing Los Angeles beyond oversimplified images of “slums,” or narratives of redevelopment.

These insights and experiences, emphasized thus far, were connected to a more global frame when students were asked to reflect upon themselves as agents within Gilroy’s hope for a cosmopolitan future—as emergent global citizens. One student was able to connect the local community of Wyvernwood to the Yasuni in the distant

Ecuadorian Amazon through the concept of home. Her essay asked, “spaces and places, what do they mean to identity? Is identity shaped by the spaces inhabited? What constitutes a place versus the blank canvas of space? What does space and place mean contextually in considering the forces that act on our identities individually and collectively?” and concluded that “space is not just a geographical location of a place in time; it is a collection of people and memories.” The concept of “home” becomes, for this student, a way of producing a powerful sense of the sort of commonality and solidarity between East Los Angeles and the Yasuni that Gilroy calls for, enabling her to think through a very different human-centered narrative of the use of space around the world from the economic narrative of neoliberal redevelopment.

Other students engaged directly with the concept of “global citizenship” in ways that demonstrated a strong understanding of the realities of our current global context, as well as emergent global possibilities for its future. For instance, one student recognized that while historically it had made “sense to divide the world up into pieces,” on a “a purely human level it does not make sense because we all are extremely similar on the most basic levels. We are all inhabitants of Earth and we would all be affected if anything happened to it. Being a global citizen means being aware of this fact, that we are all on the same team, the human team—the earthling team.” Many students echoed this sense of an emergent global solidarity but in so doing, did not conflate solidarity with homogeneity. By engaging with, and accounting for, a diverse range of people in their projects, students were acutely aware of cultural and material differences as well as human commonality, and thought through the distinction between the two to reflect upon their own subject positions within the world. As one student articulates it, “this class has opened the door to a group of people that I would otherwise have no knowledge of and, as such, it has reminded me of the vast diversity of human experience. It has made me more conscious of others, and it has certainly made me think about superficial judgments we make that are founded in cultural biases. “

To “slice” into global complex connectivity from a particular locality and through a particular framework then, offers students a chance to recognize both commonality and diversity in the world. It offers them participatory opportunities to see others as being symbolically significant to their lives, and for being in the world collectively, as well as for acting in it as such. These ways of seeing and being in the world are not predefined by the educator but, rather, emerge through students’ own inquiry and development of a globally reflexive critical literacy. The humanities are crucial to this endeavor as they offer students ways of thinking through and re-imagining the humanistic values as human dignity, respect for life and equality that are at the heart of the UNESCO educational vision of the common good. At the same time, the opportunities for real and meaningful engagement with actual, local contexts provides opportunities for students to experience and enact the values of social justice, international solidarity and shared responsibility, all of which UNESCO (2015) also conceive as “fundamental aspects of our common humanity” (p. 14). If we are to “take higher education back” from the clutches of neoliberal globalization as Giroux implores then, we need to challenge students to create knowledge *within* the world, as member of a global commons, rather than as critical spectators or consumers of global culture. In this way, new global consciousness, solidarities and values of agency and hope can be produced through concrete pedagogically praxis as, hopefully, have been demonstrated here.

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