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Review: Williams, Bronwyn T. Literacies in Times of Disruption: Living and Learning During a Pandemic.

Ashna Singh

Miami University, PhD Student, singha37@miamioh.edu

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Williams, Bronwyn T. *Literacies in Times of Disruption: Living and Learning During a Pandemic*. Routledge, 2024, 238 pages.

Ashna Singh

Miami University of Ohio

This review is structured around three central concepts that Williams develops throughout this book: affect, assemblages, and the connection between memory and identity. In *Literacies in Times of Disruption: Living and Learning During a Pandemic*, Williams focuses on the narratives of over thirty university students at the University of Louisville to examine how their literacy practices and emerging identities were influenced by physical, emotional, and structural crises. He explores how overlapping disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, racial violence and police brutality in the wake of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor's murders, and mounting environmental threats deeply affected students' literate lives. Additionally, he emphasizes how shifting material conditions and emotionally charged home-school settings altered their literate identities.

Williams frames his interpretation of students' narrative entanglements over the two-year study by building on theories of affect, emotion, and memory and analyzing their experiences with literacy instruction and digital media through the lens of "sociomaterial uses of assemblages" (14). In part, their relationships with instructors and institutions evolved accordingly. He argues that students' literate lives are inseparable from the emotional and material conditions of these crises. More importantly, we must play the *believing game* instead of the *doubting game* with the lived experiences of students (Elbow). A central insight Williams offers is that emotion is not separate from learning; it saturates *every* aspect of it. He draws on affect theory to show how emotional responses are not incidental to literacy development but firmly rooted within it. Many students reported cognitive overload caused by the constant stress and trauma of the pandemic—from anxiety and anger to burnout and disillusionment. This disruption fundamentally impacted their ability to focus and engage in academic work. These turned out to be normal and appropriate responses to extraordinary, traumatic conditions, rather than individual shortcomings or learning deficits (81).

According to Williams' findings, the blurring of boundaries between home and school spaces intensified feelings of exhaustion and burnout, particularly as students struggled to maintain academic motivation in environments filled with personal and societal stressors. Furthermore, Williams defines affective responses as emotional reactions that are embodied and often felt before they can be fully recognized or articulated cognitively (11). These affective responses shape more than day-to-day motivation—it fundamentally influences students' cognition, agency, and identities as learners and writers. Students' feelings of shame, guilt,

and self-blame when struggling with reading and writing practices often collided internally with new pandemic traumas (40-42). Rather than viewing these struggles as personal deficiencies, Williams situates them within the broader material and emotional stressors of the pandemic.

In *Literacies*, he challenges traditional binaries between home and school, arguing that the pandemic revealed the inadequacy of thinking about learning spaces as fixed or stable. Instead, students' experiences illustrated that spaces are dynamic "assemblages" (Deleuze and Guattari)--ever-shifting intersections of material conditions, emotional states, cultural narratives, and literacy practices (131). As a result, students reimagined their environments in response to pandemic demands: transforming bedrooms, kitchen tables, parking lots, and other nontraditional physical and virtual spaces into sites of learning and writing. These assemblages of space were not simply temporary adaptations; they became vital ecosystems where students negotiated their literate and emotional lives. Throughout his study, Williams observes how students developed new concepts of comfort and efficiency within these assemblages--reshaping their relationships to space, technology, and learning routines.

As students adapted to new learning spaces, they were also actively reconstructing their memories and identities, weaving together the past, present, and future. Williams challenges the notion of memory as a static archive that simply preserves past experiences. By drawing on theories of autobiographical memory, he frames memory as a fluid and ongoing process--continually shaped by students' current emotions, needs, and imagined futures (82, 90). Many students revised memories of disruption, trauma, resilience, and adaptation in order to make sense of who they were during the pandemic and who they would become (131, 136). These were not passive recollections but active, meaningful acts that shaped how students understood themselves as learners and writers. Williams pinpoints the complexity of this process, noting that memory and narrative often clash--moments of pride existing alongside feelings of failure or shame. These tensions, he argues, are not inconsistencies but markers of lived reality: "Memory is an artist as much as it's a scientist" (90). Crucially, Williams asserts that the emotional dispositions formed during this time will endure, guiding how students respond to future educational challenges and possibilities.

However, students did not face challenges solely on an individual level; they experienced ambiguous loss and emotional blending across personal, academic, and social domains. Williams illustrates how the loss of once-anticipated milestones clashed with the weight of social and political anxieties and personal traumas. Additionally, his analysis of the pandemic reveals the neoliberal ideologies that increasingly govern universities. Students in Williams' study articulated a growing sense of betrayal and disillusionment as they observed university administrations emphasizing enrollment numbers, tuition revenues, and public

image while neglecting the physical, emotional, and material needs of their student populations (76). This loss of trust is not a temporary sentiment, Williams cautions, but a significant wound that will have lasting consequences for how students relate to institutions of higher learning. Williams raises concerns about the long-term effects of student skepticism: can universities genuinely rebuild trust, or will they continue to uphold structures that alienate those they claim to serve? (220).

Toward the end of *Literacies*, Williams proposes a call-to-action for educators and institutions: we must not merely aim to return to the pre-pandemic “normal.” Instead, he pushes us to reclaim “enchantment” and revive “vitality” in education, recognizing that learning is deeply affective, embodied, and relational (213, 218). The future of education needs more than just technological adjustment. Williams argues that pedagogy must address the emotional, material, and imaginative dimensions of learning that the pandemic so vividly exposed. As students reshaped their physical and digital spaces during the pandemic, they demonstrated how learning is never disembodied: it is always tied to external and internal forces. Williams calls on educators to center these realities—designing pedagogical spaces that are attentive to the ways time, place, memory, emotion, and social connection shape students’ literate lives. Williams reminds us that “these disruptions will continue to affect students’ lives, our culture, and the affective and embodied responses in the classroom” (221). Therefore, this is not a moment for nostalgia, despair, or retreat, but an opportunity to disrupt the world around us in pursuit of more liberating forms of education. The pandemic drastically unveiled an educational system that may no longer meet many students’ needs. In *Literacies*, Williams binds together shared stories of loss, adaptation, and resilience. At the heart of it, he calls on educators, researchers, writing and media studies specialists to recognize and nurture the humanity in one another and our students. Consequently, we can continuously (re)create these spaces together for years to come.

Works Cited

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