

**Justin March**Book Review: *Shimmering Literacies*

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Discussed in this review:

Williams, Bronwyn T. *Shimmering Literacies: Popular Culture & Reading & Writing Online*.  
New York: Peter Lang, 2009. Print.

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In *Shimmering Literacies*, Bronwyn T. Williams undertakes a study of online literacy practices students regularly employ to explore audience, emotion, evidence, style, narrative, identity, and genre. Centered on the popular culture of television shows, movies, music and computer games, the “texts” Williams analyzes are both print-based written products and multimodal webtexts consisting of graphics, videos, and music. All of the compositions analyzed illustrate Williams' definition of literacy as “the ability to use sign systems to compose and interpret texts that communicate ideas from one person to another” (18). He seeks to discover “how the discourses and rhetorical forms of popular culture . . . [shape] students’ perceptions of reading and writing and their conceptions of audience, authorship, text, and identity” (3).

Noting the level of attention, confidence and empowerment fostered by reading and writing about popular culture in online forums, Williams sets out to dissolve the overwhelmingly negative stigma teachers commonly attribute to such content. Williams’ research suggests that students’ online literacy practices can bolster their performances in basic writing classrooms. To collect data, Williams interviewed twenty-one first-year students at a state research institution enrolling about 15,000 undergraduates. He spent at least two hours with each student, first discussing and then observing their online literacy practices. All of the students interviewed owned computers and spent several hours online daily. Williams also analyzed participatory popular culture material such as blogs, fan forums, fan fiction sites, and social networking pages like *Facebook* and *MySpace*—explaining the nature of each in detail for unfamiliar readers—to

become acquainted with the many digital texts and opportunities for online composition available to students. He does not aim to provide a comprehensive catalog of online participatory popular culture forums, since the scope of this content is quite broad and rapidly changing. Instead, Williams' goal is to examine student involvement in literacy practices focusing on participatory popular culture.

Invoking scholarship published by Henry Jenkins, Williams notes that technology has created a new relationship between the producers of popular culture texts and their audiences: audiences have become participants in online forums, not just readers of fan magazines. Widely available online interactions involving popular culture media have a tremendous impact on how university students gauge and assume authority for online texts. One of Williams' student interviewees, Ashley, shows how she is "willing both to value her expertise and to be willing to admit misreading and then work toward new and more nuanced interpretations" (41). Because the public is welcome to write and rewrite texts online—appropriating graphics, video, music, and print found elsewhere on the internet—students assume authority as writers, and they can reasonably expect their texts to be read by a large, possibly responsive, audience.

As Williams observes students' online writing practices, he witnesses the "poaching" of pieces of popular culture—graphics, video clips, songs or print—that are borrowed and recombined to engender new meanings. In one case, a student named Peter came across a *MySpace* page featuring hard rock music, action/adventure movies and video games. But a quiz entitled "What Type of Unicorn Are You?" alongside the edgier content immediately caught Peter's attention as something humorously out of place. The *MySpace* page's owner "poached" the quiz and changed its implications by contextualizing it. This practice of poaching online texts to create new meaning "is more than quotation, it is more like using a word in a sentence, in which the dictionary meaning of the word cannot account for the malleable nature of the word when it must carry meaning in the social world of writers and readers" (69). Reading and writing in these multimodal spaces begins to blur the lines between reader and writer, as "creating texts from sampled popular culture material further destabilizes cultural conceptions of

authorship” by dispelling “cultural images of the author as solitary genius creating unique and stable print texts” (88). Students engaged in writing online texts learn to be authoritative readers and authors, a goal many literacy educators seek. Students like Peter carefully consider what goes into creating their multimodal online texts; creating a *MySpace* page involves the planning and revision strategies that basic writing teachers encourage.

In Chapter 4, “Which *South Park* Character Are You?,” Williams pays particular attention to social network pages like *MySpace* and *Facebook*. While observing his interviewees navigate strangers’ social network pages, Williams finds that authoring and updating these webpages largely involves appropriating elements of digital popular culture. This requires assuming multiple identities as an author directed by innumerable readers with a variety of lenses. Williams applies Gee’s concept of affinity spaces, spaces in which informal learning takes place among those who are drawn by common interest in the subject rather than by demographic factors. Because of social networking pages’ intertextual constructions, and opportunities for multiple readings, these “highly contextual affinity spaces create contexts for interpretation that may provide one set of meaning for those within those spaces and another for those unfamiliar with the texts” (109). This kind of multimodal text generation allows students to assume identities addressing enormous anonymous audiences, meanwhile assuming identities targeting more immediate, familiar acquaintances—those within the affinity spaces—and to acknowledge that these different online masks render disparate readings. The chapter’s title comes from a *MySpace* quiz in which a quiz-takers’ answers liken them to *South Park* characters. A larger audience might be familiar with *South Park* on merely a surface level, but the more immediate audience—members of this affinity space—can make specific assumptions about the quiz-taker based on deeper knowledge of the shows’ characters. Students who assume identity and manage varied audiences in this context demonstrate literacy practices that basic writing teachers sometimes find lacking in the classroom, where students struggle to negotiate between writing to broader audiences and writing to audiences within specific disciplines.

Reading and writing about popular culture online involves multimodal narrative forms that span media. Rather than simply watching a television show, individuals can go online to read character bios, view episodes, listen to soundtracks, or even play related video games. As a result, “students now often approach the narratives created by mass popular culture producers with the expectation that they can intervene in them, take control of them, and remake the meaning and the narrative” (122). The students Williams interviewed described navigating these genre shifts between print, graphics, video, and music and compiling them into a global view of the overall narrative. Many also discussed participating in fan fiction sites, forums in which audience members expand upon the plot lines of shows or movies, rewriting events and characters’ fates. Owing to this manipulation and even re-composition of narrative derived from multiple genre experiences of popular culture texts, students “are more likely to move back and forth between genres and their conventions with ease” (153), which informs how literacy teachers approach genre concepts in their classrooms.

Williams maintains the importance of validating, rather than stigmatizing, participatory popular culture. It should not become the focus of the classroom—this would drain it of its meaning to students as low-stakes, subversive content—but popular culture should also not be deemed harmful or inane. In the process of answering Williams’ interview questions, many interviewees began to recognize the literacy exercises they were using online. Williams successfully argues that by using the multimodal reading common in online popular culture forums, educators can “create pedagogies and classroom atmospheres that allow students to engage in work that draws on the playful, collaborative, intertextual, and multimodal qualities of participatory popular culture” (1979).

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