

Captain Beefheart's Piano: Confessions of an Unrepentant Illiterate

by
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I want to make a confession. I am illiterate. I cannot read ... music. Yet, I have passed myself off as a musician. I have earned money playing music on the pretext that I knew what I was doing. But here and now I admit that I am a fraud. I've tried to learn to read musical notation. I guess I'm not totally illiterate when it comes to musical symbols. I can find the notes on one of those charts and name them. I know there are 8 notes. And there are spaces between some of these notes and they're called sharps and flats. I'm not sure what this means. I know that the way the note is written on the lines, with a tail or without, hollow or filled in has something to do with time and how long the note should be sustained. But I have no idea how this actually works out in a piece of music. I am not alone either, indeed the world is full of informally educated people doing all sorts of things they do not understand structurally and for which they lack credentials. In the rural community where I work for instance many vehicles are maintained and repaired by people who are not mechanics, plumbing is done by people who are not plumbers, wounds are treated by people who are not doctors, trees are felled by people who are not loggers and the list goes on. In spite of credentialism and professionalization, in my rural community the idea that only the formally certified can do complex work is known by the term: bullshit.

So what is wrong with me? Why can't I learn to read this musical symbol system? When I've tried, I go a short distance and then get discouraged. It doesn't seem to improve my playing. The thing is that as a folk musician I have developed an illiterate proficiency with my music. To be drawn into the musical world on paper slows me down and diminishes the quality of what I can do. For instance, I don't play the piano, but I do understand that the white keys are whole notes. I also understand that in the key of "C" all the notes of the scale are major notes. Using triads I can make chords with my left hand that sound a little bit like the guitar chords I make. I also know that the minor chords used in the key of C most of the time are A minor, E minor and D minor. I played around with the keyboard and realized that I could make these minor chord triads using white keys. So if I pick out a tune on the white keys with my right hand, and form the foundational chords I use on the guitar when I play something in the key of C with my left, I can make it sound like music. If I practice I can actually get it sounding pretty good. I was playing at this a few years ago at a resort. When a woman came up to me and asked me how many years I had studied piano, I was reminded of an interview with Captain Beefheart from some years ago. The interviewer wondered why his most recent album had taken a whole week to make. Beefheart usually only took a day or two.

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Captain Beefheart's response was that it took so long because he had to learn to play the piano.

While it hasn't stopped me from earning a little bit of money playing, or deriving a great deal of pleasure from making music, there is a lot my that illiteracy prevents me from doing. The more I play and listen, the more I understand this. I grew up in a musical universe that was limited. I now listen to almost nothing I could play myself because I can see the simplicity of the recurring patterns. An understanding of music theory, good foundational training in finger positions, scales, arpeggios, and the ability to sight read would have put me in a place where I could do a lot more sophisticated music-making. I would not have to rely so much on auditory memory for instance if I could transcend my musical orality and actually 'read' music. It took me 30 years to see this. Why? There are lots of answers I might construct but I think it was mainly because of the social landscape that produced me as a musician. To participate in the country, folk, blues, and rock and roll music requires no formal music literacy, at least in the sense of being able to read music on paper. In fact, having to use a chart is very often demeaned in the circles in which I learned to play. Music was about orality, it was about listening, it was about absorbing and producing sound and it was about being part of a community of players. It was about the immediacy of voice, a voice that is not trained, but natural, authentic and from the heart. This is how it is understood by insiders, but I would argue that this too is a literacy. Learning how to read and interpret a song and how to write in a genre is an important and complex form of literacy.

Ironically, I can write these words because of my own literacy and the way this literacy allows me to detach from the community of practice that is my musical surround. What I'm saying here might be interpreted in this community as a kind of betrayal, an act of turning my back on friends who not only play these genres of music, have established reputations and skill within them and who love this music we make. My literacy has changed this experience for me. I see it all differently. I have membership in other discourse communities that are critical of these informal, folk spaces and the literacies and practices they represent. Literacy in this sense is connected to the great disembedding described by social theorists for the last century and more. It is a set of intellectual tools that mobilizes us and allows us to fly here and there. This is its power. This is also its tragedy.

Literacy is complicated. At the same time literacy is implicated in mundane life practices that necessarily involve the manipulation of symbols. It is then principally important that literacy educators build strong bridges between habitual life practices and symbol systems that map and potentially expand those practices. Unfortunately, it seems to me, by drawing sharp distinctions between those who are and who are not literate many people who claim to promote literacy unintentionally end up promoting something else by defining literacy as some sort of mastery of decontextualized skills. At the same time there are many of us "illiterates" who define ourselves outside the formal elite spaces of the world on paper. I understand this from my experience in my musical community which relies on orality and memory to produce and reproduce its musical traditions. I expect that there is something similar going on in other language communities that function without the "crutch" of a highly developed facility with abstract symbol systems. What might have been useful to me at an earlier point in my music "career" is a kind of instruction that would have recognized and built on my

facility rather than trying to correct bad habits and write them over with a fundamentally different approach to the study of music. Why is it so difficult for so many teachers to see an idiosyncratic folk style not as one possible literacy amongst many rather than an illiteracy and the object of reform and correction?

Illiteracy

Literacy is a good word. We live in a knowledge society where language and symbol systems cry out to us to be read. Illiteracy, on the other hand, is not a good word. In some accounts illiteracy is a source of private shame and a barrier to competitiveness. It shouldn't exist, and there are systematic ways to fix it. In fact, preventing and treating illiteracy has become a very big business and the problem of illiteracy is individualized. We see the advertisements featuring individuals whose lives have been transformed by literacy. Literacy is the problem of autonomous individuals who are vigorously encouraged to improve themselves and their societies. It is an intellectual illness that must be cured both for the sake of the individual and for the sake of population health.

In other places illiteracy is understood as an ideological smoke screen used by powerful interests to camouflage structural social inequality and blame the victims for their own condition. Here illiteracy is imagined either as bogus (everyone is in some way literate), or as one mechanism of inclusion and exclusion. Bourdieu (1984) uses the term symbolic violence to describe the way that language practices in school reproduce winners and losers by subtly operating in the institution as the “native tongue” of already privileged social groups. Literacy is, in this view, a social practice and people living in different communities have different literacies. Just as the knowledge, practices, possessions and lifestyles of identifiable groups are privileged, so too are the characteristic literacy practices of particular social groups. It is no secret for instance that literacy levels, as they are currently constructed and measured, are powerfully associated with social class privilege.

In still other places, illiteracy is one face of a kind of social deviance that has arisen historically from a regime of discipline and surveillance that requires individuals to introspectively evaluate and construct themselves. In Foucault's (1979; 1980) analysis the school is part of an institutional complex that arose essentially in the 19th century to control and form populations principally by creating imagery around normative human nature and then teaching individuals to mirror it. In Gatto's (2003) terms, we no longer torture to discipline, we run schools. Through boring routine, surveillance and by making the student the object of his or her own self-critical gaze, modern schools actually accomplish what the whips never could. Other critics such as Postman (1993), Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) and Giroux (1999) contend that mass media have essentially taken over as the core education system in contemporary capitalism.

Each these views, in different ways, sees illiteracy as a remnant of other times or a scourge of other places. Illiteracy is vestigial and retrograde. Literacy is modern. Literacy means a better life and opportunity. It stands for economic growth and modernity. Literacy means access and inclusion. Literacy, like cleanliness, is next to Godliness. Literacy also represents, in many ways, the freedoms of liberal democracies. It is no surprise that the Taliban, the quintessence of abusers of women in the Western

media, are regularly shown to keep girls and women from learning to read. Fox News, the tabloids and Dr. Phil will undoubtedly benefit these people immensely.

There **was** illiteracy in our own society before universal schooling and libraries. There **is** illiteracy in those “third world” or deeply marginal urban/rural places (read: inner city/backwater, cf. Popkewitz, 1998) that have not yet caught up with us. In an important sense, literacy has come to us along with other aspects of industrial capitalism. “We” are the middle classes whose own power, privilege and position depends on formal education and advanced literacy skills, or what my skeptical working class rural friends call, once again: bullshit. It is ridiculous for people to have to be certified to do what they have always done. And experienced fisherman having to “write navigation papers” to captain a boat, or an experienced sawmill operator needing to have lumber stamped by and inspected in order to sell or build with, is another. Bullshit is represented in this instance by tests to be passed which have no relevance to the practice they purport to certify and which define vernacular, place-based knowledge as insufficient or just wrong. As time passes it seems as though more and more everyday practices require certification. To identify with the world of useless education (Cottom, 2003), senseless certification, litigation and other sophisticated literacy games is to lose track of what is understood to be common sense. As a fisherman friend likes to put it, “when education came in, common sense went out.” Certain forms of illiteracy then are worn as a badge of honour representing a way of being in the world that does not require textual subterfuge to know how to accomplish important things. Another important side-bar here is the sense that schooled literacies do little to develop those urban/rural places, or peripheral regions, but rather they contribute to brain drain and youth outmigration (Corbett, 2007). Goody uses the example of the way that the development of literacy in Ghana actually promoted outmigration, principally to Europe.

What David Olson (1996) calls the “world on paper” is the principal locus of information transmission and reception across space and time and the principal means of social surveillance and control. As such, literacy is both a personal possession and a social toolkit. It is a prerequisite for participation in employment and in state processes (elections, censuses, tax-filing, accessing services, etc). To be excluded from the data bases that regulate our credit and access to money is a kind of digitally marginalized homeless life. Those who are illiterate have no fixed intellectual address. They are outside the frame of contemporary living.

Literacy is also code for development, and this is even more powerfully the case in the contemporary context of globalization, radical mobility and what Zygmunt Bauman (2000) calls liquid modernity. In liquid modernity nothing is fixed, everything is in flux, tradition and order are vanquished by the ubiquity of novelty and change. Adapt or perish. Life is a personalized project and a complex individual reading and writing exercise. Indeed, to be literate is to be able to participate in the creation of a unique yet functional project of the self representing what I call standardized individuality (Corbett, 2008). Today literacy is no longer reported as the achievement of a certain grade level in school. To be considered literate, an individual requires a bank of skills which are carefully tested by national and international surveillance organizations like the provincial and state departments of education, national educational monitoring bodies and the OECD. Literacy levels are held up as the litmus test of development both for societies and for individuals. When I think about development, I sometimes think about

one of those instamatic Polaroid cameras. The picture is taken and the image slowly clarifies. Well, in Canada and in 25 or so other “advanced” societies the Polaroid is thought to be fully developed; we have a 98 or 99% literacy rate. Then there are less developed countries with only 60 to 80% literacy. A 50% literacy rate is often cited as a prerequisite for “development” or for becoming like us. Then there are places where the picture has just been snapped and literacy rates are 20% or less. They may or not make it. The picture may be smudged or destroyed by any number of problems. In this view, to be part of a society where literacy is established and a practical necessity is to be modern.

At the level of the individual the same metaphor holds, the acquisition of literacy (or literacies) has been complicated by new technologies, information networks, and by transformations in global capitalism that have redefined how and where work is done. As structural changes have swept through advanced capitalist countries, individuals within those countries are said to be challenged by new literacies introduced by the so-called knowledge society. Since the 1980s, it has no longer been sufficient to be part of a society with a modern education system to be considered literate. Literacy is now an individual achievement which needs to be proven and measured. Indeed, it is now a commodity which can be measured within a society and, indeed, within an individual. And so we have seen the OECD and governance bodies evaluating the functional literacy of particular populations. Typically these populations are found wanting. The same is generally the case when the lens is operated at the micro level where students and even adult citizens are evaluated in terms of their possession of defined “amounts” of literacy.” As such, literacy is not a personal possession, a part and parcel of being human, of defining our humanity through intellectual discovery, curiosity and creativity; it is a quantifiable social good which reflects the quality or functionality of the society. As a consequence, the literacy crisis is now a ubiquitous feature of contemporary education and social policy discourse.

Today when we think about the idea of illiteracy at the individual level most of us imagine a life that is restricted, furtive, desperate and fraught with danger. Those who are illiterate cannot effectively navigate common social interactions of a range that I probably do not have to invoke for you. They are said to be easily manipulated. The illiterate are constructed as individuals, who through some fault of parenting, of the school system, or of their own personalities, have failed to acquire the most basic of basic life skills. They will struggle to find work. They will struggle doing daily tasks like finding their way, reading signs and cooking. They will poison themselves by drinking cleaning products or taking medication whose instructions they cannot read. Whether or not there are any documented cases of this actually happening is beside the point, the illiterate are in trouble ... and they are trouble.

I wonder about all of this, particularly the notion that people who do not possess high level print literacy are, as individuals, easier to manipulate. Maybe. I have absolutely no doubt that the global and national demographic that has low literacy levels also lack social power and are subject to manipulation because of this. However, some of the most astute people I have known have very limited print literacy skills. They are better for it. The ability and the inclination to read the popular press, Noam Chomsky argues is an essential part of the deep indoctrination required of the middle classes in advanced capitalist countries.

The story of Jacques Demers the NHL coach who hid his illiteracy from his employers, his children and nearly all of his acquaintances is one recent case in point. Demers has become an ambivalent and oddly pathetic hero. He is constructed (and constructs himself) as disabled because he lived most of his life hiding his struggle with the world on paper. He is a hero because he saw the light and decided to use his public profile to raise the profile of illiteracy (and to promote his autobiography which is a best-seller in Quebec). He is interestingly not seen as heroic for beating the system that seems to require print literacy of most of its members. But is Demers' situation either uncommon or pitiful? I think this is a tough question, in part because literacy is so embedded in contemporary culture and in part because literacy is so difficult to define. There are obviously many things that Demers can do. He has, for instance written a book. Ghost-writer notwithstanding, the book contains his ideas. He has made millions of dollars and his book will make him more. He needed support with print and he got it from his wife. In his social world, the world of high level professional sport, he undoubtedly possessed mastery of relevant symbol systems. He could read the texts he needed to read, and when he couldn't, he got help. This is pretty much what I do. I cannot read many texts--musical or otherwise--which in particular communities are easy. Many of these texts and the symbol systems in which they are written are irrelevant to me.

The very idea of literacy or "not being able to read" begs the question: "not able to read what?" I think it also raises questions about the relationship between being literate and being able to do things in the world. Some years ago Hull and Schultz (2001) pointed to the gulf between studies of literacy that focus on life out of school and those which focus on schooled literacy as well as various attempts to use anthropological and ethnographic methods to develop contextually sensitive language pedagogies. Bringing together these two relatively distinct strands of literacy research remains challenging to contemporary literacy researchers. The imposition of international, national and subnational mass literacy testing schemes (NCLB is perhaps the most powerful example) have created conditions in schools where literacy is increasingly defined in terms of discrete skills and test-situation performances. Program and assessment schemes under the rubric of mass educational projects such as NCLB actually redefine what counts as literacy in technical terms. As a result, more and more illiterates are being "discovered" in the same sense that William Ryan (1971) famously described the discovery of "savages" in the American inner cities. By defining a particular set of life practices and literacies as deficient, powerful gatekeepers discursively produce a growing number of illiterates. As Foucault and Bourdieu have shown, there is nothing innocent or objective about any of this and language-definitions-labels are a crucial means of violence in contemporary societies.

So Who Is Illiterate?

How many illiterate people are there in Canadian society? How do we know? Well, our leaders have come to reject the idea that Canada has 98 or 99.9% literacy. We are now told that a significant portion of our population lacks the literacy skills needed in the modern world. The gold standard for adult literacy measurement is the OECD Adult Literacy Survey. The first survey was conducted in 1994 and reported in 1995. It defines literacy in terms of a five point scale of functionality ranging from 1 = can't read much of

anything and is likely to poison a child by misreading medicine bottles, to 5= highly sophisticated level of reading skills.

There are a number of questions here. What is now called functional illiteracy is a serious moral panic with its requisite coterie of moral entrepreneurs including the OECD, UNESCO, researchers, professional specialists, bureaucrats, think-tanks, teachers, volunteers, and various for-profit private literacy tutoring/training operations. We are now told that some 40% of adult Canadians are functionally illiterate, or operating below level 3 in the OECD literacy survey classifications. But unable to function where? At 40%, one would expect the hospitals to be full of over and under-dose cases, treated by people who themselves are suspect when it comes to reading the fine print. The streets should be full of dysfunctional people wandering aimlessly about unable to find work.

I actually did a study in rural Nova Scotia in which I asked around 150 people who attended two rural schools about the literacy challenges they faced in their everyday lives. Virtually all of them reported being up to the literacy tasks they faced at work and at home on a daily basis. The “where” that the 40% are allegedly unable to function is a fictional landscape that is always emerging, call it knowledge society, call it the IT revolution, call it the new economy. You can even call it Neverland, because as soon as it arrives it is already receding into the mist as a new space emerges in which the 40% or more will be dysfunctional once again. Are they dysfunctional because they cannot read and write well enough using the literate tools of the day? *Are they deficient because they are aging in a world in which age and experience are useless?* Or are they dysfunctional because the modern worker can never be allowed to rest easy or feel adequate.

I have a friend who lives in rural Nova Scotia and who was part of the sample in the first OECD adult literacy survey in 1994. He described to me the visit of the interviewer who arrived on the doorstep to assess his literacy. First of all, he had a hard time understanding what it was the interviewer was trying to do. Despite the fact that she kept repeating that the interview wasn't a test, everything else about the encounter felt like a test. My friend said, “it was just like being back in school, somebody asking a bunch of questions I didn't understand and couldn't care less about. I didn't do very good,” he said. So I asked him, “did the interviewer ask you about what you were reading?” “I don't read nothing,” he said. “Then what are those magazines by your chair?” I asked. “Oh, that's just fishing stuff,” he said. “The *SouWester* [a local fishing industry magazine] and the *Clare Shopper* [a local buy, sell and trade publication] and stuff about boats and engines.” Then he started to tell me that he was looking for a new engine for his boat and was thinking about different hull designs. And off he went into an area in which he has expertise, actively does research and is a passionate learner. The OECD assessment faded into the background and we started to talk about my friend's literacy. His literacy, symbolic competence, enthusiasm and interests were entirely missed by this assessment of his ostensible literacy. Indeed, the assessment was not about his way of being literate so much as it was about how poorly his literacy fit with decontextualized official definitions of what counts as literacy to the OECD.

So while he probably couldn't reach much beyond level 2 in the OECD survey of adult literacy, he was powerfully literate in places where his interest was engaged. Does he possess the abstract literacy skills to meet the demands of the global market? Is he functional? Can he be useful to contemporary capital? Well, this is a good question, but it is not a question that defines his literacy. Is there a crisis in Canada when around 40% of

Canadians fall below level 3 in the OECD literacy level categories? Or are there simply people whose literacies are off the radar of the skills assessments? Is literacy so multifaceted and nuanced that trying to capture and measure it is like trying to measure the quality of love-making, or parenting (Postman, 1993)?

There have been a number of developments in the study of literacy which build upon anthropologist Keith Basso's (1974) idea that literacy is multifarious and is better understood as multiple literacies. In the anthropology of literacy Heath's (1986) work developed the idea of multiple or situated literacies that depend powerfully on the social position of the actor. This work in many ways mirrors the explicitly social class focused foundational work on language and other life practices of Bernstein (1977) in the UK and Bourdieu (1984; 1990) in France. One perhaps more directly pragmatic example is the ongoing attempt to use the vernacular language of students in curriculum which has been a foundational pillar of the Whole Language movement. Another is the development of the New Literacy Studies movement in Britain and in the United States (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2000; Street, 1993). The more we learn about people's actual everyday literacies, the more we realize that literacies are proliferating and changing at a rate we can hardly track let alone assess. Our literacies are formed and enacted in the widely variable contexts in which we live. Our literacies are our lives.

The Deficit Model

The whole enterprise of measuring literacy these days seems to me to operate on the basis of a deficit model. Workers, older people, rural people, *inner city dwellers*, people from poor countries, etc. need to be brought up to speed to be useful in the context of industrial capitalism. How they are literate is of little interest to the OECD in its adult literacy assessments. In other words, the folk music of vernacular literacies, or what Mike Rose (2004) calls "working intelligence," is constructed as beside the point. These folk performances are nothing but noise, they say, or perhaps even silence representing skills and capacities which are missing. How to raise marginal populations up to meet the particular literacy requirements of the emerging service and technological industries is what is constructed as the problem. The workers are always under-skilled, too set in their ways, like Demers and me, too stubborn to embrace their deficiencies and modernize. We are not unlike the proto-industrial workers described by E. P. Thompson (1963/1968) in *The Making of the English Working Class*: lacking in discipline, unable to get accustomed to the routine of the clock, prone to taking too much drink, incessant socializing and honoring Good Saint Monday whenever possible.

As short publicity video on the UNESCO website makes the point very well. In this video literacy is a powerful tool of individual salvation. The child arrives as a bedraggled waif with his hand out to the (rich?) man. Instead of money the man gives the boy a book. Then power of the word transforms this boy into well-dressed, clean-cut lad who returns and shows the rich man what he has achieved, demonstrating his worth. The man smiles at the boy. He is a good boy; he has learned. Literacy opens the world up to the young man. Indeed, there is something here. Literacy can indeed open up the world. It can, but whether it will or not for individuals in particular circumstances is a good question. The British Raj educated and rendered literate a large cadre of Indian

bureaucrats and police to facilitate colonial exploitation. The same thing happened in much of Africa.

Obviously, the kind of practice-based, local literacy I am defending here has significant limitations. As one of my colleagues pointed out to me recently when I was ranting about literacy tests, in a globalizing world it is probably not a good idea to dismiss the importance of understanding broad spaces. Furthermore, the most powerful literate hooks for young children seem to be the kind of text that take them far away from their local lives and the limitations of their social circumstances and even their physical bodies (witness Harry Potter). Literacy has many faces, many uses, and many effects. Literacy is also developing as rapidly as new technologies create the affordances for its spread through blogs, social networking sites, gamer communities and other spaces which are growing and changing more rapidly than educators, social analysts, researchers and commentators can map let alone analyze or control.

There is a tension in the study of literacy between those scholars and activists who are interested in raising people up and those interested in understanding literacy in practice. The way many people tend to think about literacy today is powerfully influenced by the former, because they have the money to promote their cause and to frame the issue. Important too has been the highly problematic development of generic quantitative tools to measure complex human processes like literacy. An analysis of the development of this form of educational thought is another paper, a book or two, if not a life's work. The point is that the analysis of literacy now, more than ever is used as a lens to explain power differentials between and within societies. Why are certain societies and spaces within societies thought to be underdeveloped? Is it really because their populations lack literacy skills? Or is it because these countries and sub-regions have been cheap resource troughs for the industrialized world. Why is it that the very societies that have the highest literacy levels tend to be the same ones that create the most per capita environmental damage? There are a lot of unanswered questions here. It is entirely possible that the way that formal literacy allows its possessors to abstract themselves out of concrete places at the same time allows them to disregard and abandon those physical geographies to exploitation. On the other hand, it could well be that the ability to take the role of the other and to imagine other possible worlds is fundamental to understanding the complex problems facing so many contemporary physical human environments.

Such questions expand our definition of literacy beyond basic decoding and encoding toward one of meaning-making in a world that is increasingly textually complex. Many literacy theorists today speak of multiliteracies or the ability to read many different forms of social text. New literacies (e.g., text messaging, multifunctional cell phones and other portable communication devices, blogs, podcasting, streaming video) are all developing new ways of making meaning, where institutional education is pretty much always two steps behind. To make another confession, in many of these new literacies I operate at level one or two. Interestingly, at least some of these technologies have actually been adopted faster in some places that have been considered "underdeveloped." Last summer I visited a relatively isolated rural village in the north of Botswana near the Zimbabwean border where I was struck by the omnipresence of the cell phone and text messaging. These new multiliteracies and other key "reading the world" literacies (e.g., ecological literacy, scientific literacy, political literacy, mathematical literacy, physical literacy, and musical literacy) are largely ignored in the

fragmented way literacy is understood by the OECD ALS and by educational bureaucracies. To quote my friend Leo Elshof:

Our curricula tend to reinforce the isolation of these literacies, to treat them as entirely independent “things” further fracturing any sense of holistic or interdisciplinary understanding of today’s problems. Today’s emphasis on what is measured in schools (Math and Literacy) is a case in point (Elshof, 2007).

The deficit model misses the point on a number of levels. Literacy and illiteracy are features of particular social conditions. People learn to read what they have to learn to read in order to survive in social contexts. And survive we do, complete with our literacy levels.

Last Thoughts

I do believe however, that literacy is potentially an instrument of social change and empowerment as Paulo Freire (1970) suggested many years ago. I think this is why he advanced the claim that learning to read the word must be closely associated with what he called “reading the world” or the interpretation of social and political conditions. This is where literacy can be something other than a mechanism that maintains existing structures of power and privilege. I think there is evidence to suggest that literacy can challenge oppression. But at the same time there are many examples of instances where literacy has been used to further exploitation of vulnerable people. But even this is complicated. One critique of Freire’s seminal Marxist work in literacy is that he and his followers dismiss indigenous knowledge, denigrate non-western cultures and promote a vision of social progress that is not essentially different from that of George Bush and the neoliberals. Such a critique really challenges us to think hard about what literacy is and how it relates to culture and lifeways. It also challenges us to think about multiple literacies and the way in which these literacies operate in real places many of which demand skill sets that do not include much fluency with written text.

I think the real literacy crisis in North America is not that people cannot read (whatever that means), but that some 80% do not read books for pleasure. I recently did a survey of high school students in a community in Southwest Nova Scotia. To the statement, “reading books is something men in my house do for pleasure,” less than 10% of the students responded at level 4 or 5 on my Likert scale. For women, pleasure reading it was around 37% at Likert 4 or 5. My second concluding thought comes out of a recent visit to southern Africa. There I was amazed by the way that ordinary people manage to survive on so little. I expect it takes tremendous skill and complex literate abilities for the average South African to exist on 10 rand (\$2)/day. I would like to see the people from UNESCO who made this video plunked down in the Capetown Flats on 10 rand/day with their level 4 or level 5 proficiency on the Adult Literacy Survey and see how this skill level translates into a quality life. I have a sneaking suspicion that the first boy in the video would survive better and longer than the second one. But then what do I know; in such a world I too am illiterate.

And let's face it, for many people, perhaps the majority of people living in the world today, there are multiple other literacies much more immediate and consequential than the ability to read a canonical or "basic" collection of printed words. Most of us are in fact, making it up; like Captain Beefheart, we are constantly learning to play new instruments without formal training. Anyone who has fallen in love, nurtured a child, watched a parent die, *or* decided to do a bungee jump, understands this. It is in experimentation and risk-taking that we invent ourselves in ways that enrich our lives. As Bauman (2001) has showed us, chronic uncertainty, ambivalence and the contemporary search for authenticity in experience serve as a counterpoint to the managed horror of the Holocaust and the police state.

In the end perhaps it is the mundane, joyful folk sloppiness of an illiterate bricolage that most of us use to survive the challenges we face. I continue to wonder if this quotidian poesis that has produced us and our culture can be presented, respected and developed in schools. Sennett (2008) encourages us to understand and take seriously this embodied and highly skilled multifarious craftsmanship (Sennett's gendered language, not mine) that cannot be easily described in language, and essentially dispense with notions of ability which I would argue do little more than set up further binaries (gifted/challenged, etc.) and gradient scales (test scores and course grades) to contribute to the violence and competitiveness of contemporary schools.

Can we celebrate our multiple illiteracies and seek to understand how the practices they represent have formed cultures, societies, communities, families and individual lives? Can we recognize that most of us are competent in the context of the lives we lead and that perhaps schools could seek to come to understand this vernacular competence rather than overwrite it? Historically there have been concerns about schools producing "schooled" graduates who are competent only in abstract symbol manipulation. This fear mirrors a parallel concern that "unschooled" graduates will have only vernacular competences. Of course, both extremes of this binary are fictional. Few if any people in advanced capitalist societies can read nothing. McDonald's golden arches have seen to this. A much more interesting question is, what do individuals situated in specific contexts need to read? I tend to believe that it is only when we erase the literacy/illiteracy binary that illiteracy will disappear perhaps to be replaced by a democracy of situated practices, and even more interesting and unashamed, non-hierarchical, hybrid third-spaces than those which are already emerging anyhow.

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