Pedagogies of the Oppressors

Patrick Shannon – Penn State University

My summers are spent driving our kids to one place or another. It used to be short trips to lessons, sporting events or friends’ houses. Now it’s to and from college campuses with all their stuff in tow or to and from internships in order to study the evolutionary genomics of corn or the contamination transport within differing ground systems. None of these activities can take place within 10 driving hours of home. Each must be negotiated singly because they occur in opposite directions from one another. If one goes to the Midwest, the other travels South or to the Northeast. As an aside, Kathleen and I (I’m married to Kathleen) can’t quite understand how two tragically hip literacy teachers could raise a couple of nerds with complete pocket protection. When the kids speak to one another in codes that they pretend to be scientific, Kathleen and I know that they are just talking about sex, drugs and rock and roll. After all, they are college students...

At the end of this summer, I drove to Grinnell, Iowa to deposit our daughter for her senior year. Pointed West, we talked about her plans for this year and next, the curious fact that Indiana has outsourced its part of I 80 to a foreign company, and the inevitable truth that Chicago will never complete its can-of-worms road system in order to permit drivers to get where they want to go without swearing. On the way back, I attended to the public pedagogy of the free radio airwaves. I use the word free loosely to mean that I did not have a subscription to private stations. Between belting out oldies lyrics along with the station disc jockeys who populate the dial, I listened
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to National Public Radio in its various forms across two time zones. Within one 13-hour jaunt, I learned four lessons that make me a modern American:

Lesson One: Consume above all else, consume,

Lesson Two: Believe experts,

Lesson Three: Romanticize the past, and

Lesson four: Civic life is boring.

Let me stop for a moment to declare my intentions for this talk. I hope to develop the argument for critical literacies as essential elements of reading education at all levels of schooling. They are necessary for citizens to participate in the governing of their lives – be they limited to what the Golden Arches mean, whether to vote for building that new school in your town, or how to understand such terms as regime change.

My route to that hope has three stops along the way.

The first stop is the notion of public pedagogy – all institutions present lessons to us concerning what we should know, who we should be, and what we should value. They use specific pedagogical strategies that are not always readily apparent, but they are nonetheless there. Sports cars are painted red for a reason, eh? Ministers give sermons. And Bill Gates talks endlessly about innovation.

Second, I’ll stop at the notion that the pedagogical strategies always involve texts, broadly defined, that are supposed to be read in a particular way. For example, the texts during my drive were aural, visual, tactile, and even gustatory. That is, I listened to chatter, songs, and reports. I looked at the bumper stickers, lane dividers, and signs. I felt the ripple bumps before the ticket booths, the cold steel of the gas nozzle, and the hot tea (because my dad told me that coffee would stunt my growth).
I tasted the sugar-laced foods in Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, and Pennsylvania, but stopped twice for salads in Ohio. I am happy to report that I did not smell Gary, Indiana as I used to when Kathleen and I worked at Purdue, and we would drive to see the Cubs play at Wrigley Field, although the steel plants are running to some capacity.

Regardless of their form, each of the texts was organized through language forms and conventions – they had a code to crack, a grammar to follow, meanings to construct, and intentions to discover.

The third stop will be to acknowledge that pedagogies and texts always represent the ideological struggles to position me and to capture my allegiance. The texts are designed for more than me, but I’ll admit that I take them personally. I used to think that taking it personally was a problem, until I recognized that others took it personally too. Our individual issues were really social problems. Now I used what C. Wright Mills (1959) called a sociological imagination.

Think about my choice of radio network – NPR has been on the Bush administration’s hit list for five years because it is assumed to project a liberal bias. As we all know, only Fox News is fair and balanced. We can examine the slants between the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal in newspapers. It seems easy to locate political ideologies within media news. It is more difficult perhaps to identify ideologies within other institutions however. Do you think of churches as ideological? Sports? Corporations? Schools? And of course, not all examples within a category fit neatly under an ideological label.

Because of this variation and the fact that these pedagogies, texts and ideologies must rely on language to carry their meanings, they are never complete or unitary.
They don’t convey a uniform message. Rather, they contain holes and contradictions that permit readers to insert themselves as active participants within the continuous construction of their identities and negotiations of social spaces. That is what makes critical literacies possible. These acts of identifying contradictions, stepping into those gaps, and bending those oppressive intentions are what I mean by critical literacies. I use the plural of literacy here because I recognize that reading and creating different types of texts require different sets of practices that vary across time and place.

Using the texts of my journey home, I hope to demonstrate how the government, courts, media, think tanks, businesses big and small, sports, and even churches use pedagogical strategies in order to re-present the world for me and to teach me my place within it. For example, throughout the day, I passed government texts composed to regulate my driving, positioning me and suggesting to me that I live in a society of laws. The standardization of the signs and the articulation system among signs (shapes, colors, symbol v. alphabet) is a pedagogical strategy meant to teach me that I am a subject of the state, equal to all others. If this were not the intent of the authorities behind the signs, then there would be qualifications. And of course, there are some official qualifications marked on signs that split speeds for trucks and cars, assign lanes only to car pools, and divert only certain drivers to be weighed.

Do you see the pedagogy here? Standardization of symbols and grammar is the pedagogical strategy selected to represent equality and uniform expectations. If we teach reading only as breaking codes and following authors’ intentions to their ends, then we obscure what’s really going on here. These laws (all laws?) are negotiated
continuously. By that I mean, no one drove the speed limit, some never left the passing lane, and some cars followed the trucks at the easy on/easy off rest stops instead of complying with the signs segregating vehicles by size. The negotiations of these law/sign/texts were mediated by patrol cars, horns, hand signals, and wrecks. Officials intended all signs to be read by all drivers, but each sign conveyed more than it stated. For example, what can be made of the 70 miles an hour speed limit in Indiana and Iowa and the 65 law in PA, Ohio and Illinois? Is it that life is cheaper near corn?

But there are seamier sides to these negotiations as well. Although the pedagogy of the standardization of symbols is meant to convey uniformity and equality, it actually hides important realities. Minorities and the poor are more likely to be pulled over by the police, they are more likely to be ticketed and more likely to receive punishment – even more severe punishment than other groups. These realities are the social life of the texts/signs – how the signs work in society and for whom. Unless we include pragmatic practices, how the signs position me and others, and critical practices, what the signs hide, within our reading instruction, then the pedagogy of standardization inhibits our recognition and evaluation of that social life. The signs oppress us, some more than others. Does that mean that I am advocating driving on the wrong side of the road? No, it means that we should advocate and engage in teaching reading to others in order that they can identify the contradictions between standardization in signs and preferential treatment in reality.

Let me try to make these points about pedagogy, texts and ideologies clearer with another example. One of the main NPR stories of that day was U. S. District Judge
Anna Diggs Taylor’s order to halt the National Security Agency’s warrantless wiretapping program that had been secretly authorized by President Bush in 2001. According to Judge Taylor, the President’s program violates privacy and free speech rights and the Constitutional separation of powers among the three branches of government. She was quoted as writing: (This is difficult to take down when you are driving).

- It was never the intent of the framers to give the president such unfettered control, particularly where his actions blatantly disregard the parameters clearly enumerated in the Bill of Rights .... There are no hereditary kings in America and no powers not created by the Constitution.

Judge Taylor employed the pedagogical strategy of displacement in which she associates President Bush’s actions with those of a king -- someone above the law. Clearly her text is meant to teach us that the President has overstepped his bounds as the story of the Constitution taught in all US schools is that it is a document intended to balance powers among branches of government in order to prevent the rise of a monarchy. The immediate response from the White House was to say the words “national security during the War on Terror” and to repeat that phrase several times within three short sentences. This is the pedagogical strategy of euphemization in which the War on Terror is to stand for the warrantless wiretapping, and therefore, to legitimize it by the association. This is a popular pedagogy of the White House as President Bush often uses the phrase “in other words”. The oral statement/text was
meant to teach listeners that we are at war, that it’s a war against terror; and therefore, the experts must take actions that are new and bold.

NPR, for its part, employed the pedagogical strategy of expert commentary to provide what it considers rational grounds for its legitimacy as a source of knowledge, not just of information. Some experts interviewed were elected officials. Democrats applauded the ruling for the most part. Republicans spoke from a news release entitled “Liberal Judge Back Dems Agenda to Weaken National Security.” Other experts were from institutions outside of government: think tanks, advocacy agencies, and universities. For example, Anthony Romero, Executive Director of the ACLU, used the pedagogical strategy of trope to suggest that Diggs’ ruling was “another nail in the coffin” of the Bush Administration’s anti-terrorism programs. Bobby Chesney, a national security law specialist from Wake Forest University stated, “no question that the ruling is a poorly reasoned decision.”

Perhaps the political ideological struggle is apparent within these texts and the pedagogies of the institutions of courts, government, and radio are too. Conservatives might suggest that simply airing Diggs’ ruling as news demonstrates NPR’s liberal bias because it undermines the war efforts. Perhaps, liberals will frost because the White House was able to present its smoke-and-mirrors justification one more time publicly. But I want to draw your attention to NPR’s pedagogy in parading “experts” before the public, as if their statements were the ends of all considerations. What is a national security law specialist? What does the category of national security entail? Why is a specialist needed? How does NPR pick specialists? Who gets to pick
them? What is the market for specialists? How might that market have an effect on what can be said? These are critical questions left unspoken on NPR that day.

I’ve mentioned some pedagogies, texts and ideologies in order to whet your appetite for critical literacies. Standardization, displacement, euphemization, expert commentary, rational grounds, and trope are not the usual names reading educators use when talking about pedagogical strategies. As Roger Simon (2001) explained, the term pedagogy extends the concept of teaching beyond the details of what information is worth knowing, what it means to know something, and what students and others might do together in order to also include the cultural politics that such decisions support. To propose a pedagogy is to propose a political vision. To talk about pedagogical practices is to talk about politics. The strategies I’ve mentioned so far and the textual means by which advocates within institutions express their visions are pedagogies of the oppressors. All seek to position us in ways that bring both opportunities and limits for our agency. Rarely do institutions announce their intentions directly and the pedagogical strategies they employ help them to legitimize their visions without full disclosure. Public pedagogical strategies put the onus on the learner because school is out, eh? That’s what critical literacies can do. They can help us with that burden.

On the road again. Billboards act as the Sirens did for Odysseus on nearly every mile of the highway. “Stop to fill up” they inveigle. Fill up in every way imaginable. The signs compete with each other near (with several alternatives listed on one sign) and far (as some invite you to drive past the close businesses in order to stop at ones distant and more exotic). The signs don’t just inform; they create as well. As I drove
I felt – not just thought, but felt – that I could use a discount pair of pants or shoes, a Krispy Krème donut, or fireworks! Some signs/texts worked simply from branding. Their logo alone evoked the vision in readers’ heads that companies worked so hard to create over time. The green circle with the white queen of beans invited me for a venti chocolate macchiato half decaf, low fat with whip for way too much money. But the pink double D was not enticing enough to stop for a sugar ring. Sometimes logos work strangely over time. In our family’s early driving trips, the golden arches meant clean, or at least cleaner, restrooms with changing tables. That story remains clearly in my head. When I see the arches now, I always steer clear. Those days are over – I’m only somewhat happy to say.

Branding and logos are a form of displacement, but they involve a different type of association. Instead of displacing one element for another in order to instantiate a single association, branding seeks to position the reader as the lead in a story of ownership and consumption. In that order, thank you. Buy, then consume, and then buy again. Just like Aldous Huxley envisioned in *Brave New World* – “End not mend” was the official slogan delivered through hypnophobia – one of my favorite terms.

The pedagogical strategy of storying is not the same thing as displacement nor is it the same as George Lakoff’s framing. Rather another psychologist is responsible for storying – the randy behaviorist John B. Watson after he left academia for Madison Avenue. Thank Watson for the piles of goodies next to the cash registers in grocery stores because “like rats in the maze, consumers reach for the items within proximity.” In 1923, Watson invented program lead-ins when he delivered a 10-
minute national radio lecture on the glands that he ended at the mouth, just before his sponsor’s commercial for toothpaste. After empirical tests demonstrated that consumers could not choose their brand by senses alone, Watson proposed that Americans “walk a mile for a Camel”, “take a coffee break with Maxwell House”, and follow the advise of the Queens of Spain and Romania to use Ponds Cold and Vanishing Cream. In each of these “stories” the reader/customer was to see him or her self with the hip, new ways of living, and of course, buy the product. We have not come a long way baby from Watson’s invention of market research.

Storying is a powerful pedagogical strategy, and I am using it for this talk, as I channel Charles Kuralt in order to put you in the drivers seat for this trip across America. It’s kind of a buddy talk and drive. I’m Thelma, and you can be Louise. We’re in this together!

Logos and slogans are supposed to evoke the storying with the least amount of institutional exposure. That happens just as Watson planned with the logo, phrase, brand becoming the stimuli and the pleasant story association resulting as the conditioned response. The S-R chain continues with the story leading directly to purchases. The pedagogical strategy of repetition of the stimulus and response connections works dramatically as we open our wallets to satisfy immediately our desires created and fulfilled by business. This is language that educators understand, but we are never as successful with the stimulus and response strategy as the advertisers who can part a fool and his money – sometimes lots of money – in 30 seconds or less. Buyer beware!
Another NPR story during my trip demonstrated just how wary a buyer must be. U.S. District Judge Gladys Kessler ended a seven-year case against tobacco companies by agreeing with the federal government that the tobacco CEOs had conspired to deceive the public about the health risks of smoking for 50 years. The judge ordered the companies to apologize publicly, admitting their conspiracy to deceive, and to stop using euphemization in order to teach the public that problems with smoking can be abated by smoking “light, low tar, mild, or natural cigarettes.” These terms were used to fool the public about what the companies had known since 1954 when CEOs met at a New York hotel to agree to the cover up. The judge described tobacco as, “The highly addictive product that leads to a staggering number of deaths per year, an immeasurable amount of human suffering and economic loss and a profound burden on our national health care system.” The Judge stated that new federal law prevented her from fining the companies the $14 billion that the feds sought.

Again NPR trotted out experts to demonstrate their legitimacy. The experts presented a couple of sides to the story. William Corr, the Executive Director of the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids applauded. Mark Smith, an R J Reynolds spokesman, stated “we’re gratified that the court did not award unjustified and extraordinary expensive monetary penalties, but we’re disappointed that Kessler found the firms had engaged in conspiracy.” Again the expert opinion is a wash, and dare I say uselessly predictable. No expert on NPR mentioned anything about the fact that the government subsidizes tobacco production through the Department of Agriculture, that antismoking education has been effective only with certain segments
of the population, and that the required public apologies would bring smoking to the public’s attention, and therefore, promote it. Since most people in the United States already know that smoking is hazardous to your health because it kills many, the apology ads will simply sell cigarettes. Although none of these opinions were heard on NRP, each was voiced within the a two minute segment on a CBC broadcast from Windsor ONT that I caught while rolling past Toledo.

In this example, we encounter the market ideology that brings much of the American right and left political ideologies together in the celebration of capitalism and its right to direct modern, and even, postmodern life. The free market worked for fifty years to the misery of millions of people and the cost of billions (estimated $280 billion in company profits and medical costs of 100s of millions). Without government regulation, even with government support, captains of industry and those who work for them put profit above people’s well being. The tobacco companies did not and do not police themselves. Decoding company statements or even the NPR banter would not reveal the deadly consequences of this market ideology; comprehension of companies’ and government’s purposeful deception makes us dupes. Only reading that would enable us to identify the pedagogical strategies the companies used would prepare us to be agents within the construction of our identities within a living democracy. And those critical reading practices are necessary for kids as well as adults because as we’ve learned recently - things don’t go better with Coca Cola or Count Chocula - even in the school lunch lines.

Without a subscription channel to carry you across the country, a driver must punch the scan button to continue constant aural stimulation. That act brings two
distinct, but somewhat overlapping, voices to the driver’s ears. Oldies but goodies songs and DJs and Christian preachers seem to rule the airwaves between central IA and central PA. They are particularly crowded around the 80s and 90s numbers on the dial. I don’t want to get in too much trouble here — so I will tread softly.

First, let me say that oldies aren’t as old as the used to be. Kurt Cobain and Nirvana do not play oldies — despite what some disc jockeys tell you. Dion and the Belmonts performed oldies. “Well I’m the type a guy, who likes to roam around” is the perfect song for driving home. As I listened to oldies, my rented Hyundai became my parents’ Ford 300, and I forgot my present in order to invoke the past. Each song invited me to forget the day’s events — 29 killed in Baghdad, France balked at leading the peace-keeping force in Lebanon — in order to remember the glories of my youth. Then, life was simple. Shoo doop be do be do, shoo doop be do be do.

The pedagogy of nostalgia is potent. Conservatives hold it as a core value. If the present were like the past, then things would be better, they say without much evidence. Well, my 1950s had American enforced regime changes as well — perhaps you remember Iran in 1953 and Guatemala — one for oil and the other for food. My 60s had American enforced regime changes in Vietnam (South not North) and my 70s had Chile. You get the picture, and remember that those pictures of nostalgia are always air brushed. The pedagogy of nostalgia has the same intention as the magician who points in one direction to hide what she’s doing with the other hand. The pedagogy of nostalgia is powerful politically. Think Morning in America (which was President Reagan’s campaign theme and is still the title of William Bennett’s non NPR talk radio show). The pedagogy of nostalgia works economically as well
because it delivers a certain demographic. Perhaps that’s why station disc jockeys
now date their oldies period for their stations, and my era only gets played before
dawn, when men my age have to get up to pee.

Radio ministers evoke nostalgia as well -- Gimme that Old Time Religion. They
teach reading directly. That is, they name, read, and explain scripture to an audience.
They promote reading because Christians must learn to read in order to be saved from
a horrid afterlife. Reading reveals God’s words, and those words solve the
teleological puzzle of human life by giving it purpose. We are here, they say, in order
to prepare to live eternally with God’s grace. But life on earth is tempting and
confusing. So radio ministers help listeners address those temptations and confusions
by naming them and locating scripture that provides answers. Because those answers
are not transparent, ministers mediate them. The mediations I listened to on my trip
were not offered as interpretations, rather the ministers spoke with and from
authority. This is the pedagogical strategy of certainty, in which text is treated as if it
were closed with a single meaning. Not a meaning reached by negotiation and
consensus, mind you, but one that identified truth. We ignore this revealed truth at
our peril.

This, I’m sure you will agree, is a bad reading lesson. Our questioning the
authority within and behind text should cut deeper than the decades old debate over
readers’ roles in the construction of meaning from/with text. The new debate should
center on the positioning work of texts and the political and economic forces that
enable that work to be accomplished. The radio ministers spoke for God. That’s a
pretty strong authority -- even for a lapsed Catholic like me. As a first generation
American of Irish decent, however, I know that there are disputes over God’s truth, even among different sects of faithful Christians. The ministers of each denomination differ on the meaning of scripture – the word of God. So we have multiple Gods with multiple truths depending on which point on the dial we select. Of course, each God has a differing amount of force behind its authority. Trying to understand how multiple Gods and multiple truths are possible is overwhelming and often sorrowful. But even among the radio stations the problem is clearly before us. And beyond the radio airwaves, Lebanon and Israel had just agreed to a ceasefire and Baghdad was still burning. The problems posed by multiple god authorities and multiple truths are clearly literacy issues with multiple texts, many pedagogical strategies, and several ideologies. Dig in at your own risk.

Truth in our field is set by science. The force behind education science, at the moment, is the federal government’s No Child Left Behind and the Education Science Reform Act of 2002, both of which state that scientifically based work is all that matters. I found it interesting, then when NPR reported that day that after seven decades of measurement and testing, scientists were preparing to vote in order to determine if Pluto were to remain a planet. What a great lesson in how language works to change truth and reality to whatever we want it to be. Clarify the definition, vote on truth, and poof Pluto’s gone. How do we explain this to children who have been taught only to struggle with the code and meanings of text and not the claims of authority, the effects of genre, and the intentions to maintain order and hierarchies? Can we tell them that science changed its mind?
The entire story revealed science for what it is – BOGSAT – a bunch of guys sitting around a table making decisions based on criteria that they deem to be important. In this instance the question might seem silly because it doesn’t appear to harm anyone except the poor shmuck stuck with a warehouse full of nine planet mobiles. But when we think about the practice – BOGSAT - to determine definitions and goals, and then, measure truth accordingly, we might identify problems. Think about the multiple sciences of proficiency in the reading proficiency levels in each of the fifty states. Students can become proficient simply by moving across state lines. Consider whether the NAEP test should be the ultimate truth? We cannot look at the pedagogy of certainty with the same eyes after the Pluto closed plebiscite. Who got to vote is only the tip of the iceberg. Who put the item on the agenda? What was their authority? What were the criteria? What does a split vote mean? Does Pluto become a half planet or a planet only certain days of the week? All that is solid melts into air.

Two stories occupied most of the air-time on NPR and other news networks during my drive. The first story announced the arrest of a suspect in the JonBenet Ramsey case. The second speculated that Tiger Woods was well on his way to winning a twelfth major golf tournament. As you might remember, JonBenet Ramsey was a six-year-old child beauty queen who was murdered on the day after Christmas in 1996. Perhaps you recall the case and the years of tabloid reporting that followed. The new suspect was arrested while teaching second grade at a private school in Bangkok, and he was to be extradited to Colorado within a week. Sound bites from Mr. Ramsey, two other relatives, the Colorado district attorney, three FBI officials,
and a homeland security officer were aired throughout the day as the story grew in size, if not, importance. In effect, the story became inescapable. When scanning, I found that even an evangelical station mentioned the arrest and finished the report with a prayer. This event grew to extreme proportions in the weeks that followed, only to be exposed as a hoax through genetic forensics.

This is a textbook example of the pedagogy of spectacle. It works in two ways. First, it creates desire around the way in which the well-to-do and famous live. They have multiple homes, expensive tastes, and interesting lives, and we do not. They have it easy or appear to have it easy, and we don't. We should envy them for what they have. Second, the pedagogy of spectacle is often to be read as a morality play in which the ways that these others live are scrutinized and judged. Here, the simple life becomes valorized because it does not lead to the moral decadence that swirls around and within the famous. The tension between these two parts of spectacle can be consuming, because we feel bad for the murder of the child, but appalled by the revelations of her exploitation as a sexual object at six. With each new element the twists and turns become overwhelming as more and more outlets move into the market to create, maintain, and feed our voyeuristic needs.

Tiger Woods is the Mozart of our times—a child prodigy whose father paraded him on the Mike Douglas Show at three to show off his swing and to perform tricks. Now 30, Woods is arguably the best golfer ever. On the first day of the PGA Championship, the news was full of the possibility that he could win that tournament.
Excuse me, but on the first day isn’t it possible for any participant to win – at least theoretically? It’s premature for the story on victory before the event happens, but there are entire sections of newspapers, journals and even television networks devoted to such speculation on sports.

Two pedagogies are at work here. The first is the pedagogy of sports metaphors. This is a broad category with probably too many sub-pedagogies possible. The text is the scoreboard that shows who won and who lost. Winners get attention and applause because the competition of sports is a metaphor for the competitions of life and survival. In this pedagogy, practice always pays off. Poise is required. Any barriers are overcome. Work hard, they teach, and you’ll be a winner. But many of the other participants practiced often as well. Many people who do not make it to the tournament practice hard. The rest of the pack, however, just doesn’t have it – even though they make terrific livings hitting balls and walking over hills and dales. Poor Sergio Garcia has never won a major tournament and has to make do with 1.5 million. And what about the American Ryder Cup team? Just forget about it – those individualist US golfers can’t pull together as a team like their European peers, eh? You see how easy it is to get sucked into this – at least if you’re male.

A second pedagogy in the Tiger Woods story is one of celebrity in which the famous are just damn fun to watch and read about. Tiger Woods is a celebrity to be sure, allowing cameras into his house to sell Buicks and watches and whatever. He travels to Dubai just to hit golf balls into the ocean off the world’s most expensive hotel island. Behind is celebrity is his golf, and he stays a bright celebrity because he wins. Other celebrities are famous for being famous. All the stories and infotainment
that surround them, teach us what can happen in America. If you become a celebrity, you can become rich and party like its 1999. Play golf, confess murder or become the American Idol, it’s all the same. Once you get the public eye, you have it made.

The JonBenet and Tiger stories occupied the news like a siege. During the early hours of the day, these stories were small, but as the day wore on (13 hours remember) these stories overtook the rest of the news. The only way out was the unthinkable - turn the radio off — something that a driver can only do on a short trip or in order to listen to a book or A Teaching Company course on CD. I have taken these private routes on occasion, but to stay public on that day was to submit to endless angles on the JonBenet Ramsey case and the possibilities of Tiger’s weekend. Their ubiquity set the day’s agenda for drivers. We were going to relive spectacle and celebrity through true crime and sports. Try as NRP might, the two verdicts – can you remember them at all after our 15 minutes of fame with JonBenet and Tiger? – pale in comparison. You don’t have to be a fan of Paddy Cheyefsky and Sidney Lumet’s vision of news in the film “Network” in order to understand the direction of this agenda. Civic life is boring in comparison to crime, celebrity and sports. The daily repetition of this agenda develops expectations and habits of mind and action that severely diminish the roles that literacy could play in our lives, leaving us less powerful in the construction of our identities and in the negotiation of public life.

As I crossed the Ohio/Pennsylvania border between Youngstown and Sharon, I recognized the overall lessons of my day in the one sided public sphere. I had been taught to consume products, services, and most of all ideologies, through a variety of pedagogical strategies and types of texts. Except for the market for gas which was
$3.20 a gallon because of a war, suppressed production, pension fund speculation, and a government that will not challenge the oil industry, no other text asked me what the hell I was doing driving past countless excellent colleges and universities to drop our daughter off in Iowa. Consume, I have been taught that lesson since birth. But should this be the signature American lesson?

Believe experts was the second lesson. If not particular experts, then believe in the idea of expertise. This is the lesson of modernity, eh? We are happy benefactors of this lesson. That is, we are experts on literacy education who believe that we should be consulted when the public considers... well... literacy education. We are puzzled when business or government bypasses our expertise. But remember, expertise is not neutral or innocent or natural as should be apparent from my examples from my day in the car. Expertise is always embedded in ideology, has a political agenda in the questions raised and forgotten, and presents itself as a closed narrative. A consequence of believing experts is a diminished confidence in our abilities to understand complexities.

All day, I was taught to romanticize the past – to long for a simpler life when everything was easier. Tell me, when was that simpler life? How was it simpler? For whom was it simpler? At whose expense? Who made the present what it is? These questions were never posed during my drive.

The most damaging lesson perhaps was the lesson that civic life is boring. My drive taught me to leave making sense of the local and its connections to the regional, national, and global to the experts, while I consume objects and ideas that make me what Nietzsche labeled “the last man,” who has no great passion or commitment to
anything on earth, who is unable to hope for the future, who merely earns a living and keeps warm. To turn away from civic life in order to crave private comforts is to abandon democracy.

Let me tell you that it’s a long way from the border to the exact center of Pennsylvania with those four lessons spinning your thoughts. It’s particularly problematic when you believe that you are personally culpable in the teaching surrounding those lessons. I don’t mean that I have anything directly to do with the lessons I’ve used as examples or the composition of the texts that delivered those lessons. While I’ll admit that I engage in school and public pedagogies constantly and that my efforts are pregnant with ideologies, I have not sold my services to the airway or roadways. Rather I’m culpable for not preparing people to live in a democracy. That is, I have not worked successfully to expand literacy education beyond decoding and comprehension in order to include the families of practices that enable readers to see how text positions them and how that positioning enables and disables them as citizens charged with responsibilities to negotiate the past, present and future around the fundamental values of freedom and equality. By not articulating ways in which these families of literacy practices are necessary elements of literacy, and not just add-ons required only for the more sophisticated literacies of the intellectual and economic elites, I perpetuate a dismissal of civic responsibilities as boring, too complex, and better left for the experts.

Fortunately, there are others who are several steps ahead of me. George Lakoff struggles with this issue from a cognitivist perspective. *Don’t Think About An Elephant* (2004) and more recently *Whose Freedom?* (2006) discuss the instantiation
of ideological frames through public pedagogies. Frances Moore Lappe (2006) takes up this topic from a sociological perspective in *Democracy’s Edge*, which describes the social practices of living democracy as opposed to the thin democracy that I described today. Kevin Phillips (2006) looks at the subject through political lens in *American Theocracy*. These are not wild-eyed radicals who pose utopian solutions. Rather they are American intellectuals from varying ideological camps who see the need for citizens to navigate institutional pedagogies more astutely or democracy will end. They encourage us to teach reading through coding and meaning resources, but also as pragmatic and critical practices. What they mean by this is that unless citizens recognize how differing types of texts work and for whom they work, the lessons I was taught during my drive will expand to occupy more and more of public space until there is little room for citizens to participate in the decisions that effect their lives.

Rogers (2005) discuss the education of critical reading teachers in *Critical Literacy/Critical Teaching*. Read the 20th Anniversary Issue of *Rethinking Schools* (2006) for a collection of educators working to expand literacy. Each of these authors remains optimistic about possibilities of literacy within a democracy even within the darkening spaces of public pedagogy. All critique and analyze the institutional intentions to close discussion and to protect and extend the present advantages for the few through thin democracy. They and I invite you to take up critical literacies as counter narratives to our present circumstances. To do so will help citizens participate more actively in the construction of their civic identities and the negotiations of free, just, and equitable social life.

My title is a play on Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogies of the Oppressed* (1970). His argument was that society’s have-nots have been taught that they are beneath the capabilities to make culture and to shape history. Freire thought that literacy could counteract those lessons in order for individuals to reinvent themselves as agents of culture and history. This he labeled the pedagogy of the oppressed. In this talk, I have attempted to reveal more about the oppressors behind what Freire called the banking theory of learning – in which ideas, values, and interpretations are deposited in readers’ minds as facts and truth.

Am I an oppressor? And are you oppressed? I am, only if you accept my words through codes and single meaning without recognizing and evaluating the pedagogical strategies I have employed, the texts I’ve used to state my case as facts, and the ideology behind my work. We all have the intentions to teach others what knowledge is worth knowing, what’s of value, and how to be. We all have a vision of
the future and what it should be. I hope that I have left my pedagogy open enough, however, for you to engage my intentions pragmatically and critically. I am only an oppressor if you have limited your literacy practices to codes and meaning, and allowed my positioning and intentions to oppress you. If we hope to end oppression, then we must engage in a social movement to promote critical literacies for all.

References


*Rethinking Schools* 20, Spring 2006.

