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*Coming up for Air:  
On Reading in a Global Pandemic*

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**Abstract:**

The thought of breath grips the world as climate change, racial injustice and a global pandemic converge to suck oxygen, the life force, out of the earth. The visibility of breath, its critical significance to existence, I argue, is made evident by poets. To speak of breath is to lodge ourselves between birth and death and requires sustained, meditative, attentive study to an everyday yet taken for granted practice. Like breathing, reading is also a practice that many took for granted until the pandemic. This keynote address engages the affective and/or poetic dimensions of reading left out of theories of literacy that render it instrumental and divorced from the life of the reader (Freire, 1978). I suggest that scholars of literacy, in every language, begin to engage a poetics of literacy as attending to the existential significance of language in carrying our personhood and lives. I also argue that our diminishing capacities to read imaginatively and creatively have led to the rise of populist ideologies that infect public discourse and an increasingly anti-intellectual and depressed social sphere. Despite this decline in the practice and teaching of reading, it is reported that more than any other activity, reading sustained the lives of individuals and communities' during a global pandemic. Teachers and scholars might take advantage of the renewed interest in reading to redeliver poetry and literary language to the public sphere to teach affective reading. Poetry harkens back to ancient practices of reading inherent in all traditions of reading. It enacts a pedagogy of breath, I argue, one that observes its significance in our capacity to exist through the exchange of air in words, an exchange of vital textual meanings we have taken for granted as we continue to infect our social and political world and earth with social hatred, toxins, and death. In this address, I engage fragments of poetry by poets of our time (20<sup>th</sup> century onward) that teaches us to breathe and relearn the divine and primal stance that reading poetry attends to and demands. More than any other form, "poetry," Ada Limon (2011) claims, "has breath built into it" (para. 8). As such, reading poetry helps us to breathe when the world bears down and makes it hard for us to come up for air.

**Keywords:** affect; breath; poetry; pedagogy; subject formation; coronavirus pandemic; literacy; reading

## **S'approcher pour l'air : au sujet de la lecture en période de pandémie**

### **Résumé :**

L'idée de la respiration s'empare du monde alors que le changement climatique, l'injustice raciale et une pandémie mondiale convergent à aspirer l'oxygène, la force vitale, de la terre. Pour ma part, la visibilité du souffle, son importance primordiale pour l'existence, est mise en évidence par des poètes. Parler de respiration, renvoie à se placer entre la naissance et la mort; ce qui exige une étude attentive, soutenue et méditative d'une pratique quotidienne tenue pour acquise. Comme la respiration, la lecture est également une pratique que de nombreuses personnes tenaient pour acquise avant l'avènement de la pandémie. Ce discours d'ouverture mobilise les dimensions affectives et/ou poétiques de la lecture qui ont été écartées des théories de l'alphabétisation qui l'instrumentalisent et la séparent de la vie du lecteur (Freire, 1978). Je suggère que les chercheurs en alphabétisation, dans toutes les langues, commencent par s'engager dans une poésie de l'alphabétisation qui tienne compte de la signification existentielle du langage dans le transport de notre personnalité et de nos vies. Je suggère également que la diminution de nos capacités à lire de manière imaginative et créative a conduit à la montée des idéologies populistes qui infectent le discours public et une sphère sociale de plus en plus anti-intellectuelle et déprimée. Malgré ce déclin de la pratique et l'enseignement de la lecture, on rapporte que, la lecture, plus que toute autre activité a permis aux individus et aux communautés de tenir le coup pendant la pandémie mondiale. Les enseignants et chercheurs gagneraient à profiter de l'intérêt renouvelé pour la lecture afin de raviver l'affection pour la poésie et le langage littéraire auprès du public. La poésie renvoie aux pratiques anciennes de la lecture inhérentes à toutes les traditions littéraires. Elle met en œuvre une pédagogie du souffle, je crois, qui observe sa signification dans notre capacité à exister par l'échange d'air dans les mots, un échange de significations textuelles vitales que nous avons pris pour acquis alors que nous continuons de dominer notre monde politique et social, ainsi que la terre, de haine sociale, de toxine et de la mort. Dans ce discours, j'aborde des fragments de poésie par des poètes de notre temps (à partir du 20<sup>siècle</sup> dernier) qui nous enseignent à respirer et à réapprendre la position divine et primale que la lecture de la poésie attend et exige. « La poésie, plus que toute autre forme littéraire, a du souffle en elle » affirme Adam Limon (2011, para. 8; traduction libre). En tant que telle, la lecture de la poésie nous aide à respirer lorsque le monde s'effondre et qu'il nous est difficile de reprendre notre souffle.

**Mots clés :** affect; souffle; poésie; pédagogie; formation du sujet; pandémie du coronavirus;

alphabétisation; lecture

Perhaps love is  
emptiness & fullness  
silence & hearing  
the still pause between  
the heart's systole & diastole,  
spirit-filled breath  
in the grammar  
of our sentences.

(Sameshima & Leggo, 2013)

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