

## **Encouraging transformative and creative learning in adult literacy education through artistic literacies**

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*Artistic Literacies (AL) can be a catalyst to creative, imaginative, and potentially, transformative learning (Blackburn Miller, 2020). Artistic literacy texts include storytelling, creative writing, popular theatre, music, dance, poetry, fiction, or memoir, and visual art. Creative possibilities for diverse adult literacy learners can open when artistic literacies are integrated across the disciplines. This paper will highlight the way that transformative learning theory can enrich our understanding of artistic literacies and adult learning processes. Connections to transcultural literacies, affective (emotional and social) literacies, and environmental literacies within the context of adult literacy education will be explored. Visual art is used to highlight key dimensions of transformative learning and multimodal literacies. In multimodal learning, written-linguistic modes of expression interact with oral, visual, audio, gestural, tactile and spatial patterns of meaning (Kalantzis and Cope, 2012). For example, visual literacies can encourage the exploration, analysis, interpretation, and expression of artistic forms that include painting, sculpture, collage, photography, graffiti art, mobile art installations, protest art, and film.*

*Transformative learning and multimodal learning disrupt singular conceptions of literacy to enable multiple entry points (e.g., aesthetic, narrational, experiential, intrapersonal, etc.) for creative learning and multimodal literacy development.*

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## **Exploring artistic literacies through the lens of transformative learning theory**

How can the different strands of transformative learning theory inform our understanding of multiliteracies? How can artistic literacies open new possibilities and opportunities for adult literacy learners? Are there specific teaching and learning strategies that can mobilise reflection, analysis, and creativity within the context of artistic literacies?

Transformative learning, as originally conceptualized by Mezirow, is a process “by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of references (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8). It is a deeper level of learning that is holistic, creative, and dynamic. Individual change and collective social action can be emergent or epochal. Artistic literacies tap into emotional, contemplative, intuitive, symbolic, and contemplative modalities of learning. Multiliteracy theory (Kalantzis and Cope, 2012) and transformative learning theory (Mezirow, Taylor, and Associates, 2012) emphasise complexity, critical thinking, multimodality, and creative learning processes. Masny (2006) emphasises that “literacies are about transformation” and involve creative learning processes that focus on “becoming:”

*Literacies are about texts that take on multiple meanings and are manifested as visual, oral, written, and tactile. They constitute texts, in a broad sense (for example, in music, music score or a symphony; in art, sculpture; in physics, an equation; in architecture, a museum) that fuse with region, gender, race, culture, and power, producing speakers, writers, artists, and communities. In short, literacies are about reading the world*

*and self as texts (p. 151).*

Adult literacy educators play an important role in mobilising and creating a learning climate that is dynamic and evolving. Transformative learning theory enriches our understanding of multimodal literacies by exploring adult learning processes. In particular cognitive, emotional, imaginative, and social dimensions of learning are highlighted. The relationship the adult learner has with other learners, texts, and the capacity for creating “new worlds” is explored. Elizabeth Lange (2015) uses the term “the ecology of transformative learning” (p.28) to highlight the way theories from different disciplines dovetail and inform theories of transformative learning. Systems thinking, emotional intelligence, constructivist theories of learning, depth psychology, cultural studies, and critical pedagogies enrich our understanding of transformative learning. Theoretical perspectives of creativity are consistent with varied descriptions of transformative learning processes. Personality traits associated with creative individuals include curiosity, open mindedness, nonlinear thinking, flexibility, and the ability to appreciate different perspectives (Sternberg, 2003.) New paradigms of knowledge emerge through a dynamic of play, invention, and exploration. The different streams of transformative learning highlight, in unique ways, cognitive, affective, experiential, and imaginative facets of learning that encourage personal agency and social change (Taylor and Cranton, 2012).

### **Encouraging empathy, perspectives taking, and transcultural literacies**

Artistic literacies are increasingly important in a time of “superdiversity” (Vertovec, 2022). Adult literacy learners from culturally diverse backgrounds who have unique learning styles and talents would have opportunities to access different modalities of expression (Magro, 2019). Each year, Canada welcomes over 500,000 newcomers from diverse parts of the world. Globalisation, geopolitical shifts in power, conflict and war, environmental deterioration, perceived economic prosperity, and improved quality of life make countries like Canada a desirable place. A transcultural approach to adult literacy learning values the skills, knowledges, cultural traditions, and talents of newcomers who have often had the experience of living in different geographic locations, speaking multiple languages, and working in different settings. Resettlement is also a learning journey involving adult learners’ ability

to navigate multiple transitions and adaptations to new languages, cultures, legal and educational systems and social contexts. Formenti and Hoggan-Kloubert (2023) write that “learning in a migration society embraces not only transformative needs of migrants undergoing the process of new orientation and integration but aims also at developing a vision of a new inclusive social model grounded in diversity, multiple belongings, and recognition” (p.114).

John Dirx (2001) writes that “personally significant and meaningful learning is fundamentally grounded and derived from the adult’s emotional, imaginative connections with the self and with the broader social world” (p.64). Storytelling and popular theatre are artistic ways of knowing that tap into adult learners’ experiences and imagination. The arts create a “kind of liberating space by assisting people in seeing past the psychological, social, and culturally imposed boundaries of their life worlds” (Hayes and Yorks, 2007, p.91). Embodied and dramatic arts can open boundaries across cultures, faiths, and worldviews. Winnipeg based Sarasvati Productions presents popular theatre to encourage personal agency and collective social change. Artistic director Hope MacIntyre (2024) emphasises the importance of “taking art out into the community and making sure stories from a wide range of backgrounds are showcased” (personal correspondence). *New Beginnings* (2017) is a play featuring remarkable stories of newcomers to Manitoba. Both professional actors and members of the newcomer communities participate in writing, developing, and presenting the play. Personal agency enables the participant to create new texts. In many cases, the newcomers fled persecution, imprisonment, displacement, and death from countries such as Zimbabwe, Sudan, Syria, and Afghanistan. *New Beginnings* featured music, stories, mural art, and dance performed by newcomers to Manitoba. According to McIntyre, some of the newcomers are gifted storytellers. She emphasised the value of community theatre as a way of empowering adult learners to share their ideas, create mural art, and develop drama scripts that reflect their experiences. Reaching out to the community encourages awareness and empathy; misconceptions about newcomers are challenged and new openings for communication and inclusion are made.

Artistic literacies ignite imaginal, symbolic, and affective dimensions of learning. Dirx (1997) refers to “learning through soul” as an “interface where socioemotional and the intellectual worlds meet, where the inner

and outer worlds converge” (Dirkx, 1997, cited in Mezirow, 2000, p. 6). Essential literacy skills such as listening, speaking, writing, reading, viewing, and representing interface with each other in complex and holistic ways. Magro (2019) explored the way adult educators integrated transcultural and multimodal literacies in teaching English language arts and related disciplines. Teaching Biology, Psychology, Art, and English in an adult learning centre in Winnipeg, Anne-Marie describes her classes as linguistically and culturally diverse. She explains that part of her work involves “helping students make sense of their learning experiences and move ahead with their lives. Connection and meaning I would say are the two most important parts of learning” (Magro, 2019, p.138). Anne-Marie conceptualises her role as a challenger, researcher, role-model, facilitator, and guide. Creative teaching, from Anna-Marie’s perspective, involves engagement, challenge, curiosity, and exploration. She explained that visual art is a universal language that transcends verbal language:

*Paintings tell a story. Goya’s work is a powerful commentary about the tragedy of war. It is also about resistance and courage. It makes some of my students feel uncomfortable, but I challenge them to look more deeply at the underlying narrative. I connected this art with Ishmael Beah’s (2012) A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier. We read this book out loud together as a class. The students are often amazed to read about Ishmael’s journey from despair to hope. I encourage them to connect the theme of courage and resilience to their own lives (Magro, 2019, p. 139).*



Francisco Goya (1746-1828) *The Third of May*, 1814, The Prado Museum, Madrid, Spain, Public Domain. By Francisco Goya - The Prado in Google Earth: Home - 7th level of zoom, JPEG compression quality: Photoshop 8., Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=22615690>

Anne Marie shared her students' artwork based on Indigenous myths and legends. She used the art of the Indigenous Norval Morrisseau as a catalyst to inspire the students to think imaginatively. Quotations from Morrisseau's mystic writings as well as copies of his paintings like "First Meeting" (1992) and "Loon Spirits Transforming" (1994) were a foundation for writing and illustrating their creation myths. Anne Marie emphasised the value of exploring "life-lessons" and "universal journeys" through visual imagery, myths, storytelling, and poetry.

Steven teaches adult literacy learners Grade 12 English and History in Winnipeg. His class completed an inquiry project that explored the themes of identity within the context of colonisation in Africa, India, North America, and Australia. Steven's ethnographic approach encouraged adult learners to explore questions such as: "What happens to people when their languages, cultures, beliefs, and lifestyles are dismantled? How are identity and belonging impacted?" Learners also had opportunities to read and view a range of films such as "Rabbit

Proof Fence” (2002) and “Amazing Grace”(2006) and literary texts that included Chinua Achebe’s (1958) *When things fall apart*, Richard Wagamese’s (2012) *One native life*, and Ta-Nehesi Coates’ (2015) *Between the world and me*. These teachers’ insights highlight the potential of using diverse multimodal texts that can lead to creative expression and significant personal learning.

Transformative learning may be encouraged through close observation and reflective attention to imaginative engagement with “emotion-laden images” found in visual art, poetry, and compelling works of fiction and non-fiction” (Dirkx, 2012, p. 58). A text (visual art, drama, memoir, etc.) might trigger a “disorienting dilemma” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22) that challenges individuals’ preconceptions, beliefs, and assumptions. Mezirow (2012) observes that “inspiration, empathy, and transcendence are central to self-knowledge and to drawing attention to the affective quality and poetry of human experience” (p.75). The process of “meaning making” reflects the individual’s relationship “both with the self and his or her sociocultural context” (Taylor, 1998 cited in Dirkx, 2006, p. 7). Through self-examination, dialogue, critical reflection, and experiential strategies, individuals may adapt and integrate this new information to extend their meaning schemes.

Fiction and memoir also provide a rich source for understanding individuals’ journeys of transformation. Jarvis (2006) writes that “fiction offers scope for imagining alternatives—different resolutions to familiar problems, alternative lifestyles, and moral choices.... the process of trying different viewpoints is part of the formulation of a new perspective” (p.76). Earlier, Louise Rosenblatt (1938) wrote:

*No matter what the form—poem, novel, drama, biography, essay—literature makes alive and comprehensible to us the myriad ways in which human beings meet the infinite possibilities that life offers.....The reader seeks to enter into another’s experience, to glimpse the beauty and intensity that the world offers, to fathom the resources of the human spirit, to gain understanding that will make his own experiences more comprehensible, to find molds into which to pour his own seemingly chaotic experiences. (pp. 6-7).*

Themes of identity, power, belonging, family, and relationships can be explored through familiar 19th century texts such as Charlotte Bronte’s

(1847) *Jane Eyre* or Henrik Ibsen's (1879) *A Doll's House*. These texts can be juxtaposed with contemporary texts such as Tara Westover's (2018) *Educated* and Isabel Wilkerson's (2020) *Caste*. Contemporary memoirs such as *Last Girl on the Train* by Nadia Murad (2017), *Prisoner of Tehran* by Marina Nemat (2007) and *Slave* by Mende Nazer (2005) highlight journeys of physical, emotional, and spiritual growth and transformation. The women in these memoirs showed exceptional courage and resilience amid life-threatening circumstances. Essential questions that include: To what extent are women's experiences influenced by socio-cultural norms? How are experiences shaped by the intersection of race, gender, social class, and power? When visual art complements written literary work, learning experiences can be enriched. Adult learners can create a visual map or diary that reflects the emotional growth, setbacks, dreams, and accomplishments described in the memoir. A painting such as William Holman Hunt's (1853) "The Awakening Conscience" can be compared to other artistic depictions of women throughout different historical time periods. Interdisciplinary links between literary works and psychology, history, gender studies, and world issues can be explored with multimodal textual analysis. Learners could write about the theme of gender and power by exploring well-known paintings such as Eugene Delacroix's (1864) "Women", Jan van Eyck's (1434) "The Arnolfini Portrait" and William Quiller Orchardson's (1864) "The Marriage of Convenience." Researching the sociocultural and historical context of any given painting can be a catalyst for discussion and the development of new knowledge.





William Holman Hunt (1827-1910), *The Awakening Conscience*, 1853, Tate Gallery, London, UK. Public Domain. By William Holman Hunt - <https://www.flickr.com/photos/gandalfsgallery/5626470779>, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=760459>

## Visual grammar, multiliteracies, and creative possibilities

Visual reading includes essential skills of image interpretation and analysis, visual perception, a knowledge of visual grammar, and effective visual to verbal or written communication. A key tenet of multimodal literacy development is that “modes of representation” extend beyond language and are developed through different modalities that include visual, auditory, tactile, oral, and gestural (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 32). From this perspective, learners become researchers, artists, and designers of texts. Kress and van Leeuwen write that “the new realities of the semiotic landscape are brought about by social,

cultural, and economic factors” and “by the intensification of linguistic and cultural diversity” (p. 36). Artistic elements such as representation, composition, symbolism, motif, line, shape, pattern, and colour comprise dimensions of visual syntax and grammar. Developing the metalanguage of visual communication can enrich adult learners’ ability to interpret, describe, and analyse a work of art. Probative questions include: What do you see/notice in this painting (or related text)? What makes you say that? Look more closely. What else do you see? What ideas, thoughts, and emotions are expressed by the artist’s use of a particular colour, brushstroke, symbol, motif or design? What broader meaning about the world might the artist be making? What additional information can be learned when you explore the ideological, historical, and sociocultural context of the painting (or sculpture, abstract design, photograph, etc.)? The interpretation of a particular image is also fluid and dynamic. Meanings can be negotiated, revised, and transformed (Serafini, 2014). Like transformative learning processes, multimodal literacy development encourages an extension of knowledge, a deeper analysis of ideas, perspectives sharing, and a transformation of meaning perspectives that impact personal agency and collective social action.

Exploring alternative perspectives through visual art can encourage imaginative and critical thinking. Paintings can inform paintings and paintings can inform poems in new and compelling ways. “Reading” visual art, challenges viewers to look at symbols, metaphors, archetypes, and narratives in paintings. Kalantzis and Cope (2012) assert that just as “words, phrases and sentences collect, represent, and communicate our thought so do visual images but in different ways” (p.251). Figurative language like simile, imagery, and symbolism can be compared to the artist’s use of colour, brushstroke, and artistic medium and style. Perception, close observation, and individual interpretation are involved in the analysis of both written and visual texts. Adult learners are inspired to think imaginatively when they have opportunities to creatively connect multimodal texts to important themes in their own lives.

### **Exploring the language of intuition and sensory experience through visual art, poetry, and related texts**

Ekphrasis or poetry inspired by a work of visual art is another example of the power of imaginative and creative thinking. John Keat’s (1817)

“On seeing the Elgin Marbles” was based on the beauty and power of the Greek sculptures from the Parthenon that depicted scenes from the epic battle of the Centaurs and Lapiths. Amy Lowell’s (1915) “Venus Transiens” was inspired by Sandro Botticelli’s (1482) “Primavera”. Anne Sexton’s (1962) “The Starry Night” was inspired by van Gogh’s (1889) painting of the same name. Each poem and art images reflect “innerscapes” that can lead to imaginative insight and significant personal learning. A painting such as Pascal Dagnon Bouveret’s (1903) “On the summit” can be a catalyst to complex interplay between emotions and thoughts. Affective literacies such as empathy, awareness, motivation, and self-regulation that form emotional literacy can be encouraged with visual images that challenge learners to explore complex personality traits that may be revealed in a particular portrait. Madeline Miller’s photo essay “Circe” carefully integrates visual art images that depict specific scenes from Book 12 in Homer’s *The Odyssey* (7th century BCE). Visual and verbal texts offer breadth and depth; in addition, they encourage imaginative thinking and creative expression. David Wandera (2016) explores image-language entwinement in his work with secondary students in Nairobi, Kenya, but his research could easily apply to adult learners. Using whiteboards, students visually represented the symbols, themes, and imagery in Robert Frost’s poems “The Road Not Taken,” “Mowing,” and “Home Burial.” Nuanced visual and annotated interpretations of travel, the expansive land, and nature were made. The creative synergy generated with “intermodal communication” helped students to develop expertise and in the oral exams, they “excelled in their ability to explain thematic and contextual connections and in recalling specific details from the poems” (p.8). Wandera noted that students’ development was “indicative of Mezirow’s “transforming habits of mind” which is a core component of transformative learning” (p.320).



Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret (1852-1929). *On the Summit* (1903). Private Collection. Public Domain. Courtesy: By Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret – <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2012/19th-century-paintings-no8847/lot.70.html>, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=93178252>

**The art of post-impressionist painter Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) can be seen as visionary and transformative. Each painting reflects a brilliant sensitivity that van Gogh had to his natural surroundings and the mysteries of the cosmos. The bold colours and brush strokes that van Gogh used reflect intense emotional states. In his letters to his brother**

Theo, van Gogh reveals his insights and reflections on nature, people, and landscapes. He writes:

*The effect of daylight, of the sky, makes it possible to extract an infinity of subjects from the olive tree. Now, I on my part sought contrasting effects in the foliage, changing with the hues of the sky. At times the whole is a pure all-pervading blue, namely when the tree bears its pale flowers, and big blue flies, emerald rose beetles and cicadas in great numbers are hovering around it. Then, as with the bronzed leaves are getting riper in tone, the sky is brilliant and radiant with green and orange, or more often even, in autumn, when the leaves acquire something of the violet tinges of the ripe fig, the violet effect will manifest itself vividly through the contrasts, with the large sun taking on a white tint within a halo of clear and pale citron yellow. (Vincent van Gogh, 1890, Auden, Letters, p. 39).*

van Gogh's skills of close observation and attention to landscape and people can be a catalyst to learners' own creative multimodal learning experiences.



Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) Vincent van Gogh, *Olive Trees with the Alpilles in the Background*, 1890, Museum of Modern Art, New York City. Public Domain. By Vincent van Gogh - Unknown source, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=21821>

In *A symphony of possibilities*, Michelle Zoss and Katherine J. Macro (2019) provide diverse examples that detail the way learners' creative writing abilities can be strengthened when visual art is used to complement the written text. A body biography, for example, challenges students to visualise key themes and personality traits of characters from a literary work. A life-size outline of a body is drawn and in different sections of the body, learners create a visual and written portrait of the character(s). Colours, quotations from the literary text, symbols, and motifs can be used to express the conceptual, analytical, and thematic dimensions of characters in a complex novel. Aspects of the social, cultural, and historical context of the literary can also be featured. A sculpture may represent a theme from a particular novel. In analysing John Steinbeck's (1947) *The Pearl*, the authors describe a student's wire sculpture of ceramic pearls to represent the main character's obsessive need to find "the pearl of the world" that could bring security and wealth to his family. In exploring a novel such as Oscar Wilde's (1890) *The picture of Dorian Gray*, learners might be inspired to draw a character portrait revealing the desires, fears, and internal changes of Dorian at different points in the novel. Comparing different artists' representation of Shakespearean characters from plays like *The Tempest*, *MacBeth*, and *Hamlet* would encourage a critical reading of visual texts. Visually representing Shakespearean text through collage, painting, sketching, tableaux, and mime could encourage invention and creation rather a passive engagement with texts. Zoss (2019) provides examples of the way murals and large-scale visual projects/installations can be catalysts to creative and imaginative thinking and writing. Transmediation, or the act of translating meanings from one "sign system" (Siegel, 1995) to another, supports learners' ability to engage in critical and reflective thinking as they recursively move forward and back in creating new texts through drawing, writing, and dialoguing. An exploration of painter-poets' works such as William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=7882932>) and Evelyne De Morgan's mythological and spiritual paintings that complement her poems provide opportunities for learners to look at the way different literary forms express the inner life and imagination.



Evelyne De Morgan (1855-1919), *Demeter Mourning Persephone*, 1906. The De Morgan Centre, London, UK, Public Domain. By Evelyn De Morgan - [1], Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=30643549>

### Exploring the hidden narratives in visual art

The job of the artist is always to deepen the mystery” Francis Bacon (1909-1992). Understanding the complexities of cultural diversity is a key defining feature of multiliteracies. It is vital to explore the way visual images and related texts function within larger socio-cultural and political contexts (Serafini, 2014). Educators can encourage a cross-cultural appreciation of art by introducing art from different geographical, social, and cultural backgrounds. Poems, folktales, myths, and legends can be integrated with artistic creations from different

cultures. In *Calliope's Sisters*, Richard L. Anderson (1990) draws upon psychology, cultural ethnography, art history, and anthropology to present a comparative analysis of art from Asia, Africa, North and South America, and the far north. Anderson (1990) writes that “by looking at others, we gain new perspectives on ourselves—on the society that bore us and on the psychological terrain that constitutes our own minds” (p.200).

Art can be a catalyst to challenge, trouble, and transform existing ways of thinking that may limit or constrain. Canadian Indigenous painter Kent Monkman (1965-) emphasizes that art should not only be about presenting images of beauty, but rather, it should function to challenge and critique social systems. Drawing on the panoramic paintings of Caravaggio, Delacroix, Rubens, and Picasso, Monkman recasts the visual art of the “great masters” with an aim to provoke critical thinking about the impact that colonialisation had on the Indigenous people and the natural environment (Bascaramurty, 2017). Monkman’s (2018) art exhibit “Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience” (<https://moa.ubc.ca/exhibition/shame-and-prejudice/>) can be a catalyst to open, critical conversations about racism, cultural genocide, and the resilience of Indigenous people (Magro, 2019).





Attributed to Jacques Guillieme Luciene Amans (1801-1888), *Bélizaire and the Frey Children* [painting] (1837), Metropolitan Museum of Art Public Domain. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/898196>

Exploring examples of the way art can be used to explore “hidden” and underreported stories of historically marginalised groups can encourage transcultural learning. Guillieme Lucienne Amans’ (1837) *Bélizaire and the Frey Children* (above) has been the focus of important discussions about the way in which art can illuminate, hide, or distort historical information. After a family bought the painting, the image of Bélizaire was erased and then later recovered. Why? What narrative of

power, privilege, race, and oppression is revealed in this rare painting? Research found that B elizaire was an enslaved adolescent tasked to take care of the Frey children. The elegant beauty and tranquil setting are a dramatic contrast to B elizaire’s life and the fact that he could be “bought and sold” at any time (Eaton, 2023, p.1).

Esi Edugyan (2021) describes the impact of colonisation and the intersection of race, gender, and class in her book *Out of the sun: On race and storytelling*. Her book weaves together visual art, cultural studies, and African histories. Edugyan explains that “if empathy and understanding are to occur, we must first acknowledge the vastly unequal places from which we speak, the ways some have been denied voices when others are so easily heard” (p.2). With reference to John Martin’s famous painting “Dido Elizabeth Belle and her cousin Lady Elizabeth Murray,” Edugyan writes that “Dido’s portrait dredges up questions of how human migration, both forced and chosen, has shaped the West for centuries. In her inescapable gaze, she seems to say, we have always been here” (p.18). Edugyan analyzes the innovative work of contemporary African American artists like Kehinde Wiley (1977-) from a critical race perspective. Wiley’s paintings record “inner stories” and “stories of the heart” (Wiley, 2021, in Edugyan, p. 36) that can revise troubled histories that have been erased or not fully recognised.



David Martin (1737-1797), *Portrait of Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsay and Lady Elizabeth Murray*, 1778. Scone Palace, Perth, Scotland. “<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=13677095>” by Wikimedia is licensed under Public Domain Mark 1.0.



Robert Seldon Duncanson (1821-1872), *Land of the Lotus Eaters*, 1861, Stockholm Palace, Stockholm, Sweden. By Robert Seldon Duncanson - scan of painting, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=6663182>.

African American artist Robert Seldon Duncanson's "Land of the Lotus Eaters" may have been inspired by scenes in Homer's *Odyssey*, but the message he conveyed in his painting was one of hope that centuries of enslavement would end, and a brighter future (represented in the lush detail of his painting) would emerge. A critical reading of these artistic texts that may be juxtaposed with memoir and history can lead to new understandings and knowledges.

### **Keeping the wonder: Exploring environmental literacies through art and related texts**

In *The dream of the earth*, Thomas Berry (1988) writes that individuals have lost a sense of empathy, wonder, and reverence for the earth. Environmental, political, and social crises in our world today reflect "decisions and priorities" that do not affirm a reverence for life. An "agenda for the ecological age," notes Berry is rooted in a greater awareness of the interconnection of ecosystems, nonviolence, and healing (p. 220). "Deep transformation" from a planetary worldview involves a radical paradigm shift in thinking, feeling, and acting.

Inspired by the writing of Berry (1989), O'Sullivan (2002) asserts that all systems of education should consider a larger vision that includes planetary health and wellbeing. A knowledge of the bio history of the community where individuals live is also critical. O'Sullivan (2002)

writes that a transformative shift involves:

*Our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationship with other humans and the natural world; our understanding of the relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender; our body awareness, our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of the possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy (p.xvii).*

Transformative learning, from O’Sullivan’s perspective involves critique, creativity, vision, and adventure; learning is “embraced as a journey” that is “deeply ecological and integrative” (2012, p. 176). Along similar lines, Maynard and Simpson (2022) ask what it means to try “to build worlds that affirm, rather than destroy life” (p. 25). Ancestral knowledge, note the authors, is “grounded in diversity and based on consent, sharing, respect, and minimising one’s impact” (p. 199). Environmental literacies encourage meaningful and empathic connections to the natural world. Learners develop the knowledge, skills, and motivations that would enable them to creatively solve current environmental problems and prevent new ones (McBride, Berkowitz, & Borrie, 2013, p. 4). Mark Graham (2007) describes ecological themed art as being grounded in the interrelationship between “the physical, biological, cultural, political, and historical aspects of ecosystems” (p.234). Environmentally themed visual art and poetry can be catalysts to dialogue, awareness, and positive change. Critical questions, exploring alternative narratives, and re-visioning systems can inspire innovation and change that ultimately works to protect the fragile web of life. Eco-art can create a “counter narrative that disrupts dominant settler colonial and capitalist views” of nature (Walter, 2023, p. 681). A socio-cultural transformation that supports the protection and flourishing of diverse life forms has the potential to emerge.

Environmental artist Agnes Denes created “Tree Mountain-A Living Time Capsule” (1992-1996) in Ylöjärvi, Finland (<http://www.agnesdenesstudio.com/works4.html>). For Denes, art can be a unifying force that might be a catalyst to creative problem solving within an ecological context. Eleven thousand trees were planted by eleven thousand people in an intricate pattern based on a mathematical formula that would effect a change in perspective based on the position of the viewer. The trees are planted in an intricate mathematical pattern based

on the pineapple and sunflower design. The High Line Park in New York City was built on an abandoned railway near 34th Street. Revisioning abandoned and derelict spaces involves imagination and the ability to think across disciplines such as art, urban design, architecture, and ecology.

Examples of creative eco-art projects include illustrated journal notebooks describing walks in nature with close observations to the landscapes as well as indigenous flora and fauna, nature photography, visual diaries, creating community gardens, mapmaking of the local topographical environment, and cultural journalism. Cultural journalism “aims to connect [adult learners] to the cultural life of their community through local histories, stories, traditions, and the artefacts and performances of local cultural production” (Graham, p.38). These types of experiential projects involve both research and discovery that will help build empathy and awareness of the local ecology and bioregion. Mapmaking as an interdisciplinary learning activity/experience can build learners’ visual thinking abilities and ecological awareness. Given that many adult learners have experienced multiple experiences of migration, dislocation, and relocation, inquiry and experiential learning activities that involve mapmaking can help them to become familiar with a new community. Environmentally themed murals, posters, and public art can become a “third space” where literacy learning is situated, contextual, and authentic (Boyd & Brock, 2015). Salas and Pennington (2015) discuss a community literacy project where participants created vibrant murals that reflected the community’s beliefs in social justice, integrity, and historical perspective. The artistic images went to the “soul and fibre” of the community (p. 53). Robert MacFarlane (2015) emphasises the importance of imagination and transformative change that can be inspired through poetry and visual art. He writes that “we need a glossary of enchantment for the whole earth which would allow nature to talk back and would help us listen” (p.32). Poetic language can shape perception and breathe new life into natural phenomena such as mountains, rivers, and prairies. Nature themed poetry by William Wordsworth, John Keats, John Clare, Emily Dickenson, Wendell Berry, and Margaret Atwood can be juxtaposed with landscape paintings. Learners could be inspired to create their own poetry and develop their own artistic vision of restoring the grandeur of nature closer to home and in other world communities.

The Anthropocene age denotes the deleterious impact that human beings have had on the climate, geology, and precious ecosystems (Greene, 2023). A critical reading of 19th century landscape paintings such as John Frederick Kensett's image of Lake George and the Hudson Valley, for example, could reveal the way the historical and cultural landscape over time. How have the geography, the people, the animals, and the environment changed throughout the centuries? Providing different interpretations of visual texts can also encourage critical thinking and perspectives taking. When looking at Kensett's painting, Indigenous artist and historian Bonney Hartley (Stockbridge-Munsee Mohican Nation) sees a cherished view and "a sacred landscape" in "the Muhheacanitcuk" (Hudson River) that has been impacted by colonialism. Hartley explains that more efforts are needed to "protect burial places and other sacred sites" of her Mohican ancestors that "cultivated bountiful harvests and enjoyed tranquil canoe journeys" (Hartley, 2024, p. 2).



John Frederick Kensett (1816-1872). *Hudson River Scene*, 1857. Oil on canvas, 32 x 48 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. From: [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org) Courtesy: Metropolitan Museum of Art (open access website). Gift of H. D. Babcock, in memory of his father, S. D. Babcock, 1907 (07.162). By John Frederick Kensett - This file was donated to Wikimedia Commons as part of a project by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. See the Image and Data Resources Open Access Policy, CCO, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=57365605>



Cole Thomas (1801-1843), *Lake with Dead Trees (Catskill)*, 1825. By Thomas Cole – The Athenaeum, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=183063>

The art of Thomas Cole can be explored from a critical ecological perspective. Cole's paintings highlight the transcendent beauty and mystical grandeur of nature. The lush and verdant forest scenes depicted in some paintings contrast to his painting of images which highlight the tree stumps resulting from felling or fire. Research into the topography and geography then and today can be a starting point for a comparison. The contrasting images of life and death in paintings like Cole's (1825) "Lake with Dead Trees" can lead to important discussions about ecological conservation and steps that need to be taken to restore the grandeur of nature. Learners may be inspired to write multimodal texts that include poems and illustrated environmentally themed essays.

## **Conclusion**

Adult literacy development is a tapestried journey of learning. More than ever, adult literacy learners need creative and critical competencies to navigate a complex world. Multiliteracies and transformative learning acknowledge diverse learners' lifeworlds. Both perspectives highlight personal agency, perspectives taking, critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity can lead adult learners to imagine and design "new social futures" (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 20). The artistic texts featured in this paper demonstrate the potential for adult literacy learners to make meaningful interdisciplinary connections between literature, psychology, cultural studies, history, and environmental sustainability. In this context, adult literacy learners have opportunities to be researchers, facilitators, collaborators, and artists who continue to expand their skill repertoire across different learning modalities. Art galleries, museums, theatre venues, and design studies can become important sites for multimodal learning. Intuition, empathy, imagination, and knowledge extension can be inspired when adult literacy learners have opportunities to explore, experiment, apply, and create. Social, cultural, historical, and environmental lenses of learning can be enriched when artistic literacies complement written and oral texts. By integrating the rich myriad of texts and resources that artistic literacies offer, adult literacy education will continue to evolve and transform.



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