

THE FIRST MONSTER MUTATION

Sliding Into Summer

Jaye Johnson Thiel



It is that time of year again.

The “almost-the-end-of-the-school-year-but-not-quite” time of year.

My body feels summer approaching before signs start to materialize, and I begin to eagerly anticipate the humidity breathing down and across my neck and then—



like a flash of lightening in the night sky—
Summer emerges.

The sun holds onto the sky a bit longer than days before. Spring rain makes way for flowers, and the sweet smell of jasmine pierces my nose. Heat gradually pushes and expands red ethanol mixtures up the glass body of thermometers, flirting with

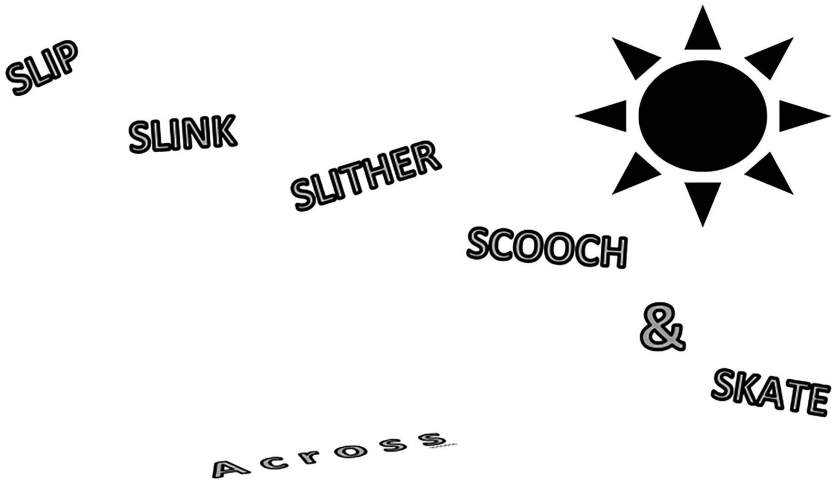
temps past 80 degrees Fahrenheit. School marquee broadcast end-of-the-school-year talent shows and graduation ceremonies. Field day events are illustrated on the sun-kissed faces and arms of tie-dye-wearing teachers and students alike.

I daydream of beaches, BBQs, and backyard adventures at the Playhouse (a community learning center where I codirect research and enrichment activities). I'm eager for late-morning rising, late-afternoon thunderstorms, and late-night television. I yearn for peaches, watermelons, and tomatoes right off the vine. There are so many things I crave about summer that, by this point in the season, a mashup of Rossini's "William Tell Overture" and Alice Cooper's "School's Out for Summer" plays in my head as I hum along to music of the season.

Yet every year the refrains of summer are drowned out too soon by social media newsfeeds and inboxes filled with articles and crowdfunding pleas crafting and feeding a literacy monster that encroaches upon the lives of young folks and risks gobbling summer right on up: the narrative of summer slide.

Summer slide is defined as "the tendency for students, especially those from low-income families, to lose some of the achievement gains they made during the previous school year" (Colorado Department of Education, n.d.). Like the humidity after a summer rain, this definition stifles me—especially the part where it calls out families who experience economic inequities, families like the one I grew up in.

When I envision summer time and sliding, I picture all the ways young people might



a smooth surface. I think of metal slides, plastic slides, water slides, Slip N' Slides, mudslides, but I DO NOT think about metaphorical slides that have to do

with the ways in which young folks get to be literate outside of school spaces—that is, not until my inbox and social media newsfeeds are saturated with reminders that along with the frogs croaking and fireflies lighting and crickets chirping, there is a literacy monster lurking not too far behind.

Growing up, June–July–August were the months when the social constructs of time melted away, evaporating into the heat that radiated off the Southern asphalt. During summer, the world afforded me time to notice it in ways that the walls of a school building did not. I could

DIG RUN CLIMB PLUCK ROLL
 DIVE SINK SWIM
 HIDE SEEK JUMP RIDE BOUNCE
 SING AND...

S L i d E

Yes, we had books in our house. And yes, sometimes we went to the library. And yes, we even had a bookshelf to hold the books that deficit-oriented narratives about families like mine would have you believe we didn't own. As a lover of the written word and the magical escape of a well-crafted story, I found time to sit with traditional texts during the summer months, but perhaps not as much as during the school year. I was too busy reading with the world in other ways—like reading summer harvests from seed to fruit and from fruit to freezer so we had food in the fall and winter. Or reading choreography from music videos so my friends and I could reenact them on the porch roof of the old house on our rental property that had fallen to the ground. I read the woods to make hidden forts that held all my secrets and live out make-believe narratives read and crafted during the school year (perhaps an early form of fan fiction). I could be found reading the sun so my skin wouldn't burn, the ground to avoid stepping on snakes, and the pond to snag a catfish. I read rocks to find bugs for my collection and flowering weeds to make dandelion crowns. I learned all the ways the more-than-human world and I could compose together during the summer—and just one of those ways involved traditional books.

It isn't that I think offering books to children in the summer is a bad thing. Quite the contrary. Each week at the Playhouse we host a Backyard Book Club where neighborhood folks are invited to come read and write with us if they so choose. And many of the neighborhood young folks do. Books can be beautiful, magical things, and I fully believe that books have the power to open pathways to new and different worlds both figuratively and literally. (As can working with fabric, clay, paint, dirt, creeks, etc.) But they can also produce a material-discursive (Barad, 2007) reality that chips away at the dignity and rights of young people while simultaneously constructing them as not enough.

According to my research, the first mention of "summer slide" was in 1906 in an article written by W. White and printed in *American Education* titled "Reviews Before and After Vacation." 1906! Let that sink in. Over a century—providing ample time for a deficit perspective about children and working-class/working poor families to gain an ecological stronghold in the material-discursive productions of summer activities. A Google search offers pages (8,260 hits at the time I wrote this chapter) of online resources that reference White's article, a myriad of educational summer programs and research reports that seem to all champion traditional summer academics as a strategy to keep summer slide at bay. Each of the 20 links I opened and read made some type of general reference to targeting families experiencing economic inequalities (i.e., "families living in poverty") and generally positioned these families as being less engaged in "meaningful" summer activities. But what worlds do these constructions make for folks who grew up like me? Who gets to decide what "meaningful" summer activities are? Let's think about the ways the summer slide literacy monster might potentially wreak havoc by exploring their possible productions . . .

If you want to think about the ways this literacy monster potentially produces young people, go to page 118.

If you want to think about the ways this literacy monster potentially produces literacy tools and practices, go to page 120.

If you want to take time to map out the production of this or another literacy monster, go to page 124.

Literacy Monsters Nipping at the Heels of Young People

Too often well-meaning folks come into working-class communities ready to “do good” by attempting to change everything it is that makes the young people and these spaces who and what they are. Rather than “doing good” the monsters they create in these spaces often exploit trauma and perpetuate perceived deficits about the working class. These compositions are world-making and have very real consequences for working-class families because rather than composing young folks from working-class communities as creative, capable, intellectual beings, they compose them as lacking in some way, in need of intervention, (i.e., “at risk” of summer slide). To complicate the issue, rarely are these same “do good” monsters let loose on families from middle-class and affluent homes. The urge to “do good” tends to stop at a certain income level, and thus no one is checking to see if the middle class and affluent are engaged with academics every day during the summer, and no one is exploiting their trauma.

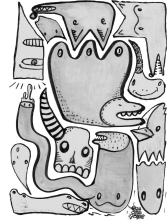
Furthermore, to assume that one should engage in academics in all aspects of one’s life is a product of a hyper-capitalist society that sets up the conditions to teach its young that their bodies are only meant for working—rather than laughing and playing and making and thinking and dancing and being and all the other things a body might become in a lifetime. It is strange, indeed, that educators would expect young people to stick hard and fast to academic endeavors over the summer when their own public digital timelines offer stories of beach trips, BBQs, bike rides, and yes, perhaps the occasional book. Veritably, there is much to be learned through the act of play (Dyson, 2003; Thiel, 2015a; Wohlwend, 2011)—perhaps even ways to create a more equitable and just world?

I know there will be camps of scholars who will read this and say,

“But we want them to get out and make something of themselves. We want them to have a shot at college.”

To those people I reply,

“Read the introduction to James Rebank’s (2015) book, *The Shepherd’s Life*. Rebank rails against the misguided notion that “staying local and doing physical work doesn’t count for much” (p. 6). Besides, what does it mean to make-something-of-oneself anyway?”



Furthermore, if we are asking people to *make-something-of-themselves*, who determines where that threshold lies? And in the making of a predetermined threshold, what might that threshold miss or make impossible along the way? As Moss (2014) explains, in a world of free markets and commercial enterprise, narratives about *making-something-of-oneself* produce humans as capital who are economic subjects and whose role is to increase returns on investments. If we are to see movement-living-doing-being as a constant making of worlds, then aren't we always, already in the throes of *making-something-of*? Aren't we always co-constructively worlding? A posthuman ethic would offer a resounding, "Yes!"

Tied to these notions of the subject as human capital, summer slide's prescriptive rhetoric supposes that it is the fault of young people and families (and sometimes teachers) when a child produces their reading practices differently from one academic year to the next rather than a material-discursive apparatus that is part of a much larger social and political construct that makes some things possible for some and some things impossible for others. Summer slide fabricates an individual responsibility rather than a collective one. But the truth is, it really didn't matter how many books I read over the summer. It didn't matter how many grammar workbooks I filled out or how many essays I wrote because when it came down to it, I was seen as "one-of-the-girls-who-wouldn't-go-to-college" by my school. No amount of compensating for a hypothetical summer slide could account for that, change it, or soften it.

How do I know this? Because despite the fact that I had the highest grade average in my English class, and despite the fact that time and time again I was the only person to make it into the fake colleges with the fake college essays we were forced to write in class, not once did someone in my school come to me and encourage me to apply to colleges (Thiel, 2013).

Not once.

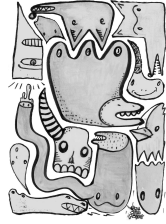
It was never my engagement with texts or my reading abilities that were the problem. Rather it was the ways in which I, a girl from a working-class family, was being produced by the institution of school and left vulnerable to the hordes of monsters lurking in the midst.

If you want to think about the ways this literacy monster potentially produces literacy tools and practices, go to page 120.

If you want to take time to map out the production of this or another literacy monster, go to page 124.

Summer Slide Crashes Into the Tools of Literacies and Literacy Practices

I've always loved the assemblage of reading. To this day, when I am down and out, I'll go to a library or bookstore so I can be surrounded by the smell and energy printed texts and readers expound. I attribute this love of reading to several things:

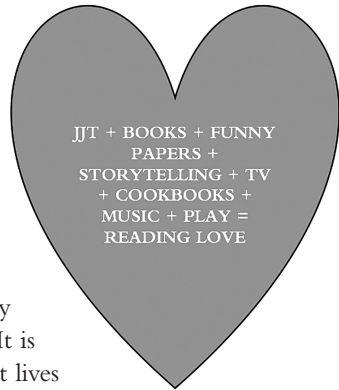


1 I can't remember a time when I couldn't read. All my life I have found solace within the pages of books. The first book I remember reading repeatedly was *In a People House* by Dr. Seuss. I loved everything about this book. But what isn't to love? Using rhyme and humor, the colorful pages chronicle the adventures of a bird and a mouse who sneak into a people house. There is also something very satisfying about the mess these two make. It is glorious to think animals might have secret lives we don't know about or understand and that sometimes creating a big mess makes for a great story.

2 As far back as I can remember my grandfather sat me in his lap and would read the funny papers with me. After reading, he would painstakingly go through each frame, explaining to me what was happening, why it was funny, and how it connected to everyday worlding. It is no wonder that the smell of newsprint triggers comfort for me as well.

3 My grandfather was also a storyteller. When he wasn't reading the funny papers to me, he was telling and retelling grand stories as I sat wide-eyed in his lap. The stories he shared were often ones of a boy named Red and his adventures during childhood, including the disappearance of a pet goat, an encounter with an angry squirrel, and a loyal dog named Pete. These stories, I quickly learned, were his personal narratives of being a young redhead full of curiosity and splendor. These stories became my childhood as much as they were his, and I still yearn for the chance to hear him tell them just once more.

4 I LOVED watching stories unfold on television (and still do). Seeing the action, the passion, the surreal come to life, was (is) thrilling. I was particularly mesmerized by my grandmother's TV "stories" (daytime soaps). The absurd lavishness of it all and the over-the-top emotional reactions brought the strange world of Port Charles to life through twisting and turning plots that seemed to go all over the place and yet made sense all at once.



- 5 Cookbooks. The simple joy of cookbooks. From reading ingredients, to looking at professional food photos, to making pretend grocery lists for what meals I imagined might sit on the table if I were the one charged with the task of dinner. (CONFESSION: I still look at cookbooks and dream of what stories food and I might tell together.)
- 6 My life has always been entangled with music lyrics. My mom often tells the story of how I, perched on a pew in a baby carrier, sang before I spoke as I oohed and aahed loudly on pitch to hymns at church along with the choirs and organs and pianos. Eventually I was old enough to follow along with the hymnals even though I knew the lyrics by heart by that time.
- 7 Improvised and pretend play crafted so much of my childhood. Hours spent as Wonder Woman in the front yard, stories that unfolded from my Weeble Wobble and Sesame Street playsets, planting miniature stick-and-weed gardens for fireflies and frogs and fairies in the backyard filled many days. Each was a living book to be read, reread, and rewritten.

The things that books, funny papers, lap-side stories, television, cookbooks, music, and improvised play and I could do together created enormous affects within me. Had reading been relegated to books alone, I am unsure I would be the reader I am today. Certainly, the thing-power (Bennett, 2010) of a book is a mystery, producing powerful embodied literacies (Jones, 2013; Thiel, 2015b) that continue to drive me (and many others, I suspect) perpetually toward their pages. But books alone do not contain reading. Reading is a becoming, a material-discursive assemblage unfolding over time and space. I became a reader not through reading levels or guided reading practices, but through sustained co-constitutive engagements with the assemblage of reading. These were not texts forced upon me—which would have produced a different embodied literacy—most likely one of rejection and dislike. I never charted how many books I read because there was no need. The power created through the reading assemblages produced me as a reader. This is not the way reading is materialized in schools today (Bridges-Rhoads & Van Cleave, 2017). Rather books are measured and leveled and stickered and sorted and sanctioned. So much so that to not read books daily in the summer is seen as tragedy—hence the obsession with the monster that is summer slide.

Summer slide materializes reading as about the number of words, pages, books, and so forth rather than about the thinking, the creating, the becoming that emerges through a reading assemblage of material bodies entangled with each other. It produces books as something to be mastered. Again, this literacy monster's obsession with words like "quantity" and "growth" is firmly rooted in hypercapitalism (Massey, 2013). First it produces books as economic commodities. When books are leveled and measured and stickered and sanctioned they have the capacity to create more capital for companies that produce educational materials and for publishing houses. It also produces the child as an economic subject that needs to consume more books and thus needs to master reading—as

if there is a point where the reading assemblage no longer exists because we have conquered it. But if there is a stopping point, where is it? How do we reach it? And who gets to say where that exact point is? What kinds of reading count as mastery? In this sense, books and the traditional literacy practice of reading become a tool for pathologizing children and discrediting other legitimate practices (such as TV watching, lap-side stories, funny papers, pretend play, music, cookbooks, etc.).

Furthermore, summer slide locates reading achievement as the cure-all for society's woes, firmly rooted in the individual's ability and inability to become reader-enough within a school context.

It becomes all too obvious that well-functioning societies, defined in terms of a variety of well-being and economic indicators, cannot be explained or produced by any one factor, such as early childhood education. Rather they are the product of complex, interrelated economic, social and political influences.

(Moss, 2014, p. 32)

In the case of summer slide, the "one factor" is reading education, particularly summer reading, and by all accounts cannot be the thing that cures all of the world's ills and inequities. At some point, institutions have to come to grips with the political, social, and economic violence producing the conditions for inequity at a much grander and much more complex scale. As Latour (2012) writes, "Every-day in our newspapers we read about more entanglements of all those things that were once imagined separable—science, morality, religion, law, technology, finance, and politics. But these things are tangled up together everywhere" (n.p.). And they always have been.

If we are to use posthuman theories to think through ethical-onto-epistemological entanglements such as these, we must scrutinize "certain kinds of bodies to think new relations that offer liberty and a contemplation of the practices of power which have been exerted upon bodies" (MacCormack, 2012, p. 1) such as the bodies of books, pedagogies, policies, and children. If we are truly to engage a posthuman ethics, our attention cannot focus on crafting future-reading bodies but on how these bodies are being produced in the present by the literacy monsters that have been abandoned, forgotten, and normalized as "best literacy practice" without attending to the unintended consequences that have sprouted up along the way.

Is the monster *summer slide*, or is summer slide the *unintended consequence* of neoliberalism? How does neoliberalism fashion the ways education seeks out places of deficiency and economic hardship for some and privilege and economic gain for others? Perhaps it is both summer slide and neoliberalism. Creating certainly has unintentional consequences, and rather than abandon our work, perhaps it is our responsibility to own those consequences, walk beside them, work

to change them if need be. We can never truly be unbound from the elements we help assemble because we, too, are part of that assemblage. Deborah Bird Rose (2004) writes,

Exactly here, where to be alive is to be implicated in the lives and deaths of others; exactly here we are called into an ethics of proximity and responsibility.

(pp. 3–4)

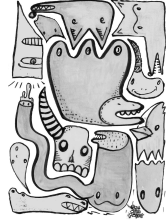
Maybe it isn't enough to love our monsters or take care of them. Perhaps our ethical responsibilities are more than creating and loving and caring. For much violence can be (and has been) done in the name of love. Perhaps it is our ethical responsibility to acknowledge that our creations and the unfolding consequences that ensue do not live and die with us alone, but are implicitly connected to the living and waiting and dying of others. Exactly here. Exactly now.

If you want to think about the ways this literacy monster potentially produces young people, go back to page 118.

If you want to take time to map out the production of this or another literacy monster, go to page 124.

If you want to read about literacy monsters and the writing workshop go to page 175.

**Mapping, Thinking, Making, Being,
Processing Space**



References

- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bridges-Rhoads, S., & Van Cleave, J. (2017). Writing posthumanism, qualitative enquiry and early literacy. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 17(3), 297–314.
- Colorado Department of Education (n.d.). *Summer slide and the importance of reading over the summer*. Retrieved from <https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdelib/summerslide>
- Dyson, A. H. (2003). *The brothers and sisters learn to write: Popular literacies in childhood and school cultures*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Dr. Seuss, (1972). *In a people house*. New York, NY: Penguin Random House.
- Jones, S. (2013). Literacies in the body. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 56(7), 525–529.
- Latour, B. (2012). Love your monsters: Why we must care for our technologies as we do our children. *The Breakthrough Institute*. Retrieved May 26, 2017, from <https://thebreakthrough.org/index.php/journal/past-issues/issue-2/love-your-monsters>
- MacCormack, P. (2012). *Posthuman ethics: Embodiement and cultural theory*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Massey, D. (2013, June 13). Neoliberalism has hijacked our vocabulary. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jun/11/neoliberalism-hijacked-vocabulary
- Moss, P. (2014). *Transformative change and real Utopias in early childhood education: A story of democracy, experimentation and potentiality*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Rose, D. B. (2004). *Reports from a wild country: Ethics of decolonisation*. Kensington, NSW: University of New South Wales Press.
- Thiel, J. (2013). The places where we live and learn: Mementos from a working class life. In P. Gorski & J. Landsman (Ed.), *The poverty and education reader: A call for equity in many voices*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Press.
- Thiel, J. (2015a). “Bumblebee’s in trouble!” Embodied literacies during imaginative superhero play. *Language Arts*, 93(1), 38–49.
- Thiel, J. (2015b). Shrinking in, spilling out, and living through: Affective energy as multimodal literacies. In L. Johnson, G. Enriquez, S. Kontovourki, & C. Mallozzi (Eds.), *Literacies and the body: Theories and research on teaching, learning, and embodiment*. New York: Routledge.
- White, W. (1906). Reviews before and after vacation. *American Education*, 185–188.
- Wohlwend, K. E. (2011). *Playing their way into literacies: Reading, writing, and belonging in the early childhood classroom*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.