

Critical, Patriotic, and Proud

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Becoming critical is currently a hot political issue. Shannon argues that when associated with literacy, critical thinking becomes a moral and patriotic act to hold “democratic” governments to their originating promises.

I’LL ADMIT that I did not spend my COVID year reading only classic literature. When Jeff Bridges announced that he was diagnosed with lymphoma, I began to binge on his films—we are the same age and share rugged good looks. In *Starman* (Carpenter, 1984), Bridges plays an alien stranded on Earth while answering NASA’s attempt to contact life on other planets. Karen Allen agrees (under some duress) to drive Bridges to meet another spaceship that will return him to his kind, avoiding the NASA officials eager to “study” the alien (ET phone home). During that drive, Bridges learns to be an Earthling from the social things he reads along the way. After the first day of driving, he assures Allen that he can take over the wheel while she sleeps. During the first few miles, Allen keeps one eye open in order to verify that Bridges can in fact drive. When Bridges accelerates before a yellow traffic light at an intersection, Allen shrieks, “That’s a stoplight. Don’t you understand what it means?” Relying on what he observed, Bridges replies, “Red means stop. Green means go. And yellow means go very fast.” Why do I consider that scene amusing, and what do I think it has to do with critical literacies?

It’s funny because Allen’s righteous indignation is foiled by Bridges’s ironic reply—she taught him that

humans interpret rather than simply comply with the intended meanings of social things they encounter, including traffic lights. Clearly, that light is a text: complete with code and sequence, literal meaning, generic form, and social intentions for its production and deployment. Through its placement, state officials perform public pedagogy. Traffic lights’ standard form are meant to teach drivers (and their observers) uniform expectations, positioning all as subjects of the state and suggesting that they live in a society of laws. Its lawful regulation of traffic teaches drivers that the state protects them equally. Certainly, those who learn that intended lesson are “safe” drivers. Allen’s sleepy inquiry implies that she received that intended lesson about the light and law. But Bridges’s reply demonstrates that despite patrol cars, rude hand signals, and wrecks, she (and those who watch the film) interprets intended meaning and lessons according to her/their contexts.

Explorations of that text’s context among groups reveal a seamier side of the public pedagogy behind traffic lights and laws. Despite the producers’ intentions, standardization actually hides important realities of the negotiations among drivers and the state concerning what traffic lights mean in our daily lives. People of color,

teens, and the poor are more likely to be stopped by the police; they are more likely to be ticketed and more likely to receive punishment, including more and more severe punishment, than white, older, and wealthier drivers (The Stanford Open Policing Project, 2021). Kathleen and I (her husband, although she often denies it) moved recently from the Happy Valley of State College, Pennsylvania, to the Twin Cities in Minnesota in order to be closer to family. Our new context has added more explicit examples of the systemic nature of those “hidden” realities of traffic lights and many other social things.

I hope you see the reason for this introduction. Children and youth are observant and work to make sense of what they observe. Unless all children learn to read all social things (including literature and media) as texts both competently and critically, they will be less able to recognize and negotiate the public pedagogies intended to position them in society according to others’ definitions of what is real, right, and common sense (what they should know, who they should be, and what they should value). That seems dangerous in a democracy. Learning to be critically literate, then, is an act of patriotism.

Critical and Patriotic Simultaneously?

For some, the “critical” adjective adds a negative connotation to educational practices. These concerns run a gamut, from Jordan Davidson in *The Federalist* (2021), to Ross Douthat in the *New York Times* (2021), to David French in *Time* (2021). Why not enjoy the fruits of American social things, they argue, as we develop children’s sophisticated understandings of what they do in, for, and to our lives? To be critical is to dwell on our problems, they continue, even to the point where we begin to imagine intentions and meanings that did not and do not exist. Recall TV commentator and best-selling coauthor about American history Bill O’Reilly’s attempt to clarify the critically “mistaken” Michelle Obama’s observation that she lived in a white house built by slaves. O’Reilly claimed the slaves “were well fed and had decent lodgings provided by the government” (as cited in Victor, 2016). “Patriotic,” they assure, comes from a Greek root meaning “love of one’s fathers.”

To be critical can mean finding fault, I agree, even harshly. But to be critical can also involve careful judgment or judicious evaluation; the best of literary or art criticism demonstrates these latter connotations of critical. And a “critical” moment can refer to a turning point or a specifically important juncture. Critical literacies, then, need not be harsh or negative; rather, they can be tools for careful judgments at this specifically important historical juncture (Klein, 2021). Granted, “patriotism” and “patriarch” share the same cognate; however, that does not restrict patriotic practices to expressions of “love for the *patria* by seeking to

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husband the country’s resources and preserve its natural beauty and its historical heritage, or make it rich, powerful, culturally preeminent, or influential on the world scene” (Primoratz, 2020, Ethical Patriotism section). Patriotism can be an active ethical commitment to the “fathers”’ first principles, the ones declared in order to justify a country’s existence and purpose (Baron & Rogers, 2020).

Here, patriots seek to ensure that their country lives up to those principles within and across its borders. A country’s past moral record becomes relevant for its explanatory powers for the country’s present (and its future). Apt expressions of first principles are to be commended, of course, even celebrated, while deviations from those principles are to be acknowledged with plans for actions in order to prevent them from continuing or being repeated in the future. After all,

nations reel and stagger on their way; they make hideous mistakes; they commit frightful wrongs; they do great and beautiful things. And shall we not best guide humanity by telling the truth about all this, so far as the truth is ascertainable? (Du Bois, 1935, p. 701)

Patriots take credit when their country upholds its first principles. And although primary responsibilities for past deviations lie with those who made those decisions and acted upon them, patriots must recognize and share some responsibility as well, particularly if they benefit from those deviant practices, policies, or laws. In examining the past or present, patriots prioritize their country’s and their own commitment to the fulfillment of those

principles. In this way, patriotism is a moral duty, and critical literacies are tools for monitoring, evaluating, and responding to the texts/social things that reveal and obfuscate our collective and personal applications of first principles across peoples, times, and places.

I'm a white, heterosexual (married 41 years), monolingual (read American) male of some means and modest abilities with ties to the Troubles, labor, and feminism through two generations of family (Shannon, 2017b). My patriotism and my commitment to critical literacies are based on a belief that the egalitarian *promises* of the "founding fathers" (including Thomas Paine), and John Dewey's (1916) *recognition* that "democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife" (p. 89), compose a real utopian *project*. In and out of schools from preschool to doctoral levels, I have and continue to endeavor to bridge multiple varieties of critical literacy through my understanding of Nancy Fraser's (2008) radical democratic conception of social justice; my term for these acts is "reading wide awake" (Shannon, 2011). But I get ahead of myself.

The Promises

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness, —That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed —That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. (as printed by John Dunlap, July 4, 1776, Philadelphia)

According to law professor Danielle Allen in *Our Declaration* (2014), this second sentence from the Declaration of Independence promises these truths:

1. All people are equal in being endowed by their creator with the rights of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness, among others;
2. Humans build governments to secure these rights and political legitimacy rests on the consent of the governed;
3. When governments fail to protect these rights, people have a right to revolt. (p. 153)

Allen substituted "people" for "Men" based on her reasoned interpretation of the later use of the term "MEN"

in an omitted passage. That passage described slavery as a "cruel war against human nature" that violated nature's "most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of distant people" (p. 154). It blamed British kings for the initiation of the American slave markets and charged George III as "determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold" (p. 154). Allen reasoned that this second use of "men" to represent all who were bought and sold at a slave market (men, women, and children) denotes that the term "men" throughout the entire Declaration stands for "people," regardless of color, sex, age, or status. In *This America* (2019), historian Jill Lepore included two of those promises as the basis for the American identity: the affirmation that "all people are equal and endowed from birth with inalienable rights and entitled to equal treatment, guaranteed by a nation of laws" (p. 20).

Certainly, those promises were compromised within the Declaration itself. The passage concerning slavery was edited from the Declaration before publication in order to obtain the signatures of all the delegates to the Continental Congress. Moreover, in the Declaration's list of 18 examples of the king's tyranny, Native Americans were referred to as "the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions." In describing Native American responses to July 4 celebrations on National Public Radio, Guggenheim Fellow David Treuer concluded that the Declaration's promises were "wonderful sentiments that were not put into practice in any kind of meaningful way until long after 1776.... We [Native Americans] are both deeply skeptical, and we are also, you know, deeply patriotic.... We remain committed to forcing this country to live up to its own stated ideals" (Martin, 2021, paras. 3, 11). Treuer's contemporary definition of "patriots," based on a critical reading of and moral commitment to the Declaration, echoes those of other patriots in their response to America's second founding (Foner, 2019).

A government founded upon justice, and recognizing the equal rights of all men; claiming no higher authority for its existence, or sanction for its laws, than nature, reason and the regularly ascertained will of the people; steadily refusing to put its sword and purse in the service of any religious creed or family, is a standing offense to most of the governments of the world, and to some narrow and bigoted people among ourselves. (Frederick Douglass, 1867, para. 14)

Our fathers did not say that governments derive their just power from the consent of the male sex, they did not say from the consent of the men, black or

white...they made the broad statement that governments derive their just power from the consent of the governed. There is where we base our claim, and by consent, the people all mean the same thing—simply suffrage; it is the right to vote...so that it follows by our theory of government that every person capable of rational choice is rightfully entitled to vote. (Lucy Stone, 1869, p. 8, as cited in Tenkotte, 2019)

The Recognition

At the turn of the 19th century and through the first half of the 20th, John Dewey addressed the tension between the declared first principles of liberty and equality—the individual and society—by describing their dialectic relationship within a “true” democracy: “A democracy is more than a form of a government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (Dewey, 1916, p. 93). “What is valuable about freedom is not the negative absence of interference, but the positive power to be an individualized self” (Dewey, 1927, p. 458). For the individual, democracy means having a share in directing the activities of the group, while for the group, it demands liberation of the potentialities of each individual member in harmony with their common interests. Democracy rests on this dynamic balance; liberty requires equality, and equality is responsible for the conditions for self-realization of each and all.

Democracy, to Dewey, is not a thing or a template to be applied; rather, it is a method for identifying and solving the common problems of securing the rights of life and pursuit of happiness for all, across time and contexts. It requires robust inquiry from all, with open access to all available evidence and arguments, followed by deliberation among all about alternative solutions in order to decide upon which course of action is most likely to render the desired outcome. The chosen alternative is then put into practice, monitored, and modified toward that “common good.” That is, democracy is experimental—never made, but always in the making—allowing profound questioning of fixed ideas, which might seem to have been already settled. And because democracy is associated with ways of living, Dewey (1937) argued it would be naive to think that “government is located in Washington and Albany. There is government in the family, in business, in the church, in every social group, which regulate individuals’ thoughts and acts” (p. 464). Because those institutions shape individuals and groups within communities, Dewey (1937) reasoned, then they should be democratic as well.

Every authoritarian scheme...assumes that its value may be assessed by some prior principle, if not of family and birth or race and color or possession of

material wealth, then by the position and rank the person occupies in the existing social scheme. The democratic faith in equality is the faith that each individual shall have the chance and opportunity to contribute whatever he is capable of contributing, and that the value of his contribution be decided by its place and function in the organized total of similar contributions:—not on the basis of prior status of any kind whatever. (p. 467)

Dewey argued that prevailing moral and political thinking had not kept pace with the economic, social, and cultural demands of his contemporary modern world. Past ways of doing democracy were no longer helpful to communities attempting to negotiate the practical problems they experienced during rapid industrialization, immigration, and urbanization. In fact, Dewey claimed that past solutions acted as biases that prevented more imaginative institutional and community thinking. Dewey asserted:

In the name of democracy and individual freedom, the few as a result of superior possessions and powers had in fact made it impossible for the masses of men to realize their personal capacities and to count in the social order. (Dewey & Tufts, 1908, p. 443)

Existing laws, policies, and institutions, he charged, had been “harnessed to the dollar,” designed to maximize profits at the expense of people’s abilities to participate actively and equally in civic and social life. If true democracy were to continue to “secure” the promises of the Declaration, he argued, democracy had to be reborn through a renewal of “the democratic faith” that had been degraded systemically through “harnessed” class-based ideology, and rhetorically, through media propaganda, “every one must have his fitness judged by the whole, including the anticipated change; not merely by reference to the conditions of to-day, because these may be gone to-morrow” (Dewey, 1898, p. 328).

For Dewey, education is the catalyst for this renewal. He sought answers to two questions: (a) How can we organize schooling to reflect upon the experiences of changing social conditions, and (b) how can we ensure that these reorganizations align with our declared promises? Schools from beginning to end would be designed around all students’ development of the necessary dispositions and “habits-of-mind” to fulfill the democratic faith: goal clarification, problem-posing, intelligent action (gathering all available relevant information from diverse sources, those with daily experience as well as expert opinion), deliberation, decision on which alternative(s) to try, experimentation, open discussion of the relative success of outcomes, and majoritarian decisions on how to proceed. To ensure that first principles were featured throughout, schools

would feature curriculum and pedagogy organized around participatory parity among all students, emphasizing the who and why of learning (rather than dwelling on the how and what), demonstrating to all students that they are smart enough and have the right to ask questions in order to participate in all decisions that do and will affect their lives in classrooms and beyond.

It remains but to organize all these factors, to appreciate them in their fullness of meaning, and to put the ideas and ideals involved into complete, uncompromising possession of our school system. To do this means to make each one of our schools an embryonic community [life], active with types of occupations that reflect the life of the larger society, and permeated throughout with the spirit of art, history, and science. When the school introduces and trains each child of society into membership within such a little community, saturating him with the spirit of service, and providing him with the instruments of effective self-direction, we shall have the deepest and best guarantee of a larger society which is worthy, lovely, and harmonious. (Dewey, 1907, p. 44)

The Project

Dewey's recognition demonstrates the role of critical literacies within the democratic project. The need for democracy to be reborn was based on his critical reading of social/cultural, political, and economic social things/texts of his times. If Americans were to maintain their patriotic commitment to their country's first principles, he cautioned, then they must engage in the project to remake democracy. His belief that education should and could be the midwife, and his (and others') consequent actions, displayed critical production of social things/texts intended to transform schools, communities, and society(ies) (Shannon, 2017a).

Earlier in this essay, I labeled Dewey's project "real utopian" (Wright, 2010); *utopian* because we are thinking about alternatives that embody our deepest aspiration for a just society (that we realize will always be in the making), and *real* because we intend to continue to experiment with and deliberate within our associated ways of living as we struggle toward that society. Dewey, Wright, and the others I cited in the "Promises" section defined being critical as recognizing that societal structures and cultural assumptions are more likely to create and influence unjust barriers to the realization of those aspirations than individual and psychological factors. Nancy Fraser (2008) explained:

According to [the] radical-democratic interpretation of the principle of equal moral worth, justice requires social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in social life. Overcoming injustice means

dismantling institutionalized obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction. (p. 16)

In the quotes I offered, Dewey evinced an economic dimension to the critical work of evaluating whether or not specific social arrangements further or hinder participatory parity among groups in the remaking of democracy to secure people's rights. He argued that the project could not be left to aristocrats or their experts, because they would continue the maldistribution of resources in order to assure that their rights would be prioritized over those of other poorer groups. The authors I cited in the "Promises" section presented a social/cultural dimension, reasoning that the project to rebirth democracy can't be left to white men and their apologists, because they have and continue to misrecognize the moral equality (humanity) of other races, genders, sexes, and abilities, denying "others" participatory parity with themselves. Rather, all asserted that the project must be universally inclusive—all groups within the nation.

Fraser (2008) added a third (political) dimension in order to account for globalization and its consequences for nations, states, and communities. Along with questions concerning how resource distributions and status recognitions enhance or limit groups' rights to participate, Fraser asked those engaged in critical readings of current social arrangements to consider multiple questions: (a) What levels of authority direct the decisions that affect their daily lives—community? state? national? transnational? (b) How do we frame the jurisdictional scope of current social problems? (c) To and toward whom should we direct our appeals and projects? For example, how should the Native American tribes of northern Minnesota (and other groups) frame their project to preserve and protect their water rights from the Enbridge Line 3 crude oil pipeline connecting Edmonton, Alberta, to Superior, Wisconsin (Cornish, 2021)? With whom might they form coalitions to protect their right to life? Helene Landmore (2020) called for "dynamic" inclusiveness to transcend national borders to address unjust barriers when they cross jurisdictions.

If you are familiar with the 2021 Caldecott winner *We Are Water Protectors* (Lindstrom, 2020), my reference to the Line 3 protest might make the promise, recognition, and project come alive in your efforts to connect children's literature and critical literacy. Ojibwe Carole Lindstrom provides a lyrical tale of a young girl "rallying my people" "to fight for those who cannot fight for themselves" against the "black snake that will destroy the land." Michaela Goade illustrated this tale, including traditional Ojibwe symbols, characterizing the black snake as an oil pipeline and picturing a coalition of international tribes who will work to protect the Earth. Although not derived from the

Declaration, the Indigenous promise of life justifies the struggles of Native peoples, who declare as a group, “We are still here,” as they demonstrate that they will not go away easily. The right to life and that real utopia project are developed through education, elders with their “children,” which Goade has depicted as a border-crossing movement. The book wears its pedagogical intent on its jacket literally. That is certainly a blessing, but perhaps, also a curse.

The blessing is the splendor of this story and these illustrations, their ecological topic, and their invitation to participate; the appendices contextualize the story in real events, provide a brief glossary, and conclude with a pledge to become an Earth steward and water protector. Briefly, I see two possible problems arising. The snake metaphor, while cleverly illustrated, hides the ideology behind the disenchantment of nature: “The Earth. We are all related.” What powers and which groups separate humans from nature, prioritizing oil over water? In reading around this book (Bird, 2020), I found that the author and illustrator recognize that the promise of life has been “harnessed to the dollar,” if not Judeo-Christian beliefs and Cartesian logic. Proceed with caution. Second, the book implies that the text initiates critical literacy; the topic must be clearly problematic, rather than people with critical stances and dispositions employing literacy to read powers hidden in all social objects (including traffic lights). As the National Council of Teachers of English (2019) asserted, critical literacy is an all-day, take-anywhere practice.

Criteria for Evaluation

Wright (2010) offered three criteria for judging real utopia projects: Is the project desirable, viable, and achievable? As I argued above, patriots should desire the project’s goal, because it would move a country toward its declared first principles within and across its borders. Consequently, schools for inquiry and critical literacies become desirable as the rebirthing project’s engine and tools. Is the project viable? Could social arrangements promoting participatory parity among the governed work successfully to secure self-evident rights? That’s the original American question, and across two and half centuries, patriots have answered, “We believe so,” as they paraphrase David Treuer: “We remain committed to forcing this country to live up to its own stated ideals” (Martin, 2021, para. 11). Are schools based on inquiry, participatory parity, and critical literacies possible? Across the 20th and 21st centuries, we have positive small- and large-scale evidence that they are viable (Shannon, 2017a).

Unused knowledge soon vanishes. Education lies in thinking and doing. From my experience in the progressive group, I believe I have learned to think

critically and act more intelligently for myself. I believe that after studying in such a group, one could not accept a statement without thinking and questioning it. I believe that I have learned to read more intelligently and to enjoy reading more than if I had not been trained as progressives have been. I believe that I have learned to work with others as part of a group and for the good of the group, and not for my own benefit and honor. (Giles et al., 1942, p. 68)

Achievability asks what it would take to implement the project. This is a tough call due to the project’s scope and diversity of contexts, approaches, and points of entry. Wright (2010) structured his criteria for evaluating whether or not a project is achievable according to strategies (neutralize harm and transcend structures) and targets (macro political and micro social). He described four possibilities for real change. Agents could tame (neutralize) or smash (transcend) the political, and they could escape (neutralize) or erode (transcend) the social.

STRATEGIES		
	Neutralize harms	Transcend structures
Macro (political)	tame	smash
TARGETS		
Micro (social)	escape	erode

Wright (2010) emphasized taming the policies and practices that serve as political barriers to participatory parity rather than smashing them. Although Allen (2014) included revolution as a declared promise, often smashers do not accurately assess power differentials within institutions and society, underestimating the levels and types of official resistance to their demands for “revolutionary” change. Although tamers would experience resistance as well, Wright (2010) maintained that change is more likely to materialize through their persistent coalition-building, extensive deliberation, and insistent negotiation. Escape from the harms of social barriers is nearly impossible to achieve, and it would be morally reprehensible to try, because it would abdicate one’s responsibility to others by leaving them in harm’s way. If barriers cannot safely be smashed at the political level, then they must be eroded through social practices, demonstrating how new social arrangements can and do achieve steps toward justice.

We Are Patriots, Tamers, Eroders

Our sponsorships of “rich engagements” with social things “situate” children and youth to employ “personal and cultural resources” in order to deliberate on how power influences their “constructs of their world[s],” inviting them to “disrupt,” “negotiate,” and “transform” barriers within their social arrangements that deny and preclude the promises of equality and inalienable rights within our democracy (Napoli et al., n.d., Calls for Manuscripts section). We define these acts as critical literacies. We intend our sponsorships to distribute those resources with parity among all individuals and groups in all settings, recognizing cultural and social differences and individual variety within their development across time and place.

As sponsors, we enact these critical literacies upon the social things within our immediate and extended social arrangements, seeking to neutralize those that do harm, negotiating institutional policies and cultural assumptions that prevent children, youth, and our participatory parity in decision-making concerning social interactions in and out of our institutions. Perhaps foremost among these harms are the consequences of the powers behind the discourses of efficiency (business and scientism) coded as evidence-based practice (Shannon, 2018).

Beyond our reactions to barriers, our experimental actions within our sponsorships are intended to produce practice-based evidence as warrants to justify our acts within our particular contexts. Our critical stances, our questioning deliberative dispositions, and our respect for situated knowledges are designed to identify both indicators of children’s and youth’s development of critical literacies and engagements in the rebirthing project *and* pedagogical practices that produce those developments for each and all. Our practice-based evidence extends well beyond the question of “what works” to address the questions of “works for whom,” “in what contexts,” “in what ways,” and “toward what ends?”

To paraphrase Dean Fay, a sax-playing character in *The Commitments* (Parker, 1991), another binge-worthy film, “We’re critical, and we’re proud!” ■

Patrick Shannon has read with and to children, youth, and adults across a variety of settings. He is more interested in the why of reading than the how and what to read, believing that the latter two questions are matters of context and opportunity. His essential questions are: What is reading for, and what can writing do? He is a Distinguished Emeritus Professor of Education at Penn State University. Email: pwshannon211@gmail.com

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