RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Radical Digital Media Literacy in a Post-Truth Anti-Trump Era

by Alexandra Juhasz

RACE AND RACISM POETRY WORKSHOP, PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHOR

I have engaged, over the duration of the Trump administration, in a series of linked pedagogical experiments: one woman's pedagogic resistance, albeit aligned with many others through making poetry together by way of digital media literacy. These have been acts of engaged, enraged intellectual citizenship in three parts: 1. an online digital media primer about fakenews, [#100hardtruths-#fakenews](1), produced over the first 100 days of the administration; 2. nine Fake News Poetry Workshops held over the spring semester of 2018 making use of that online primer (these are each co-facilitated by poets in different locations and communities), and 3. an action plan to further mobilize the primer, poems, and workshops to a scale larger than my own personal pedagogy, this still in process.

These experiments are first and foremost acts of civic engagement qua pedagogy, art-making, and community-building. They are organized to create and make use of responsive formats, processes, and places to better express our keen knowledge, concern, and curiosity about a host of inter-related phenomena and in response to the current crisis of fake news: self, community, and the world; the fake and real and true; our own power and that of (social) media. The workshops allow small groups of people to learn and listen together. We think about and then communicate our own internet truths in a shared context where we take on the permissions allowed by poetic license: vernaculars and modes of being outside of internet-speak and our internet-home. This is the pedagogy: engaging small groups of participants in local, embodied art making about their individual and community truths about social media and fake news. The process of making poetry, together, in situ, concerning what we know and want to share with others is the key product (over the poetry itself): fake news poetry workshops as radical digital media literacy centers working together to model better conversation, interaction, understanding and communication in our post-truth anti-Trump era.

Don't Look, By Kiy Gentle[2]

Shhhhh
can you hear that
I think you've made them angry
Shhhhh
Don't look, they're watching us
Wanting us to keep believing

I heard a survivor type once that skepticism is just a side affect of reality

But then again
I haven't heard from her lately

Let's just keep going

Stopping is a place of growth
And when they feel they are getting small
They teach us new ways to survive

My quest for useful formats, compelling processes, other kids of words and healing engagements—in the time of Trump and Trump's time of social media-powered deception—is part of my own ongoing education as educator and media activist. Here, I share some of my own

processes as I continue to try to figure out *what to do about the crisis of fake news*, given what I know (and do not!) as longtime scholar, activist, and educator focusing on activist, and also fake, media. I have made and taught about radical media for nearly thirty years; at one time, I thought about (and made use of) fake documentary as a potential tool for challenging identity, truth, and power.[3]Arming communities with "media literacy" (whether they be college students, AIDS activists, QPOCs, or youth poets from LA) has always been part of my process: sharing strategies to read, make, distribute, and challenge both our own media and the images and ideas circulated in large volume by corporate media. The powerful linking of social media and fake news—particularly in how it justifies and enables real world violence—has thrown these tried-and-true methods, analyses, and beliefs into crisis.

Thus, this piece tracks my movements in a still-forming response to rethinking and remaking digital media literacy. It begins with my "resolution toward radical digital media literacy in a post-truth era," a short piece of writing that travelled in December 2017 from my blog, to a video, to a scholarly meeting, to a podcast, to finish here.[4]The resolution's movement across registers, platforms, and audiences evidences one strategy of this radical pedagogy: testing and trading formats, vernaculars, and communities so as to be responsive and inventive during this moment of increasing representational crisis.[5] How do we reach and teach different learners differently making the most of the many media formats available to us while staying critical of them? Here, I offer a brief description of some of the nine Fake News Poetry Workshops that I held in the Spring of 2018 attempting to teach and write newly. The third and next part of the project, about to begin in Summer 2018, will be to conceive and enact a considered use of these poems and the primer given my primary commitment to better understanding and undoing fake news.

do not be distracted from the truth
that you make with your own body

Solidity is a useful illusion
It gets us through the day

solidity (gets us) resists us
tectonic assurance is fragile ground

the truth is the emptiness in the middle of the atom
the truth is the impressionability of matter, of us,
the truth is the space we fight to shape

-M. Astley[6]

Resolution toward radical digital media literacy in a post-truth era[7]

Given that scholars and makers of documentary, visual anthropology, journalism, and autobiography have been investigating the construction, forms, and circulation of reality-based truth claims in their fields of practice since the invention of these disciplines.

Given that these forms vary across time, culture, media, convention, and discipline.

Given that teachers have attempted, for as long as such claims have been made, to educate about the traditions, forms, and conditions that produce, authorize, circulate, and challenge mediated truth claims because such a "media literacy" is closely connected to citizenship, power, and knowledge.

Given that the mobilization of powerful, loose, and adapting theories and practices of mediated truth claims, under the nomenclature "fake news," took by surprise even the most committed practitioners, scholars, and educators signaled above.

Let it hereby be resolved that our previous practices of "digital media literacy," while useful and relevant for the previous epoch, are no longer equipped for our emergent reality.

Radical digital media literacy is required in a post-truth anti-Trump era.

Given that I was just one within a vast community of scholars, media makers, teachers, and students, over time and across disciplines, who drew on "anti-essentialist theories to show the relationship between power, knowledge, and the construction of truth," particularly in my earlier work on the productive possibilities of fake documentaries (in the 1990s[8]), and the insidious, definitive "increasingly unproductive" dangers of the destabilization of the fake/real binary as definitive of the forms and platforms of internet culture,[9] most definitively of videos on YouTube[10] (in the 2000s). When our current president and the broader culture became fixated on the problem of "fake news," especially during the first 100 days of the new administration when this felt the most rabid and destabilizing, I felt compelled and qualified to act in this time of confusion, despair, and self-criticism.

I pledged: "For 100 days, aligning and twinned with the new President's opening timeline, to blog every day about fake news and in so doing produce an online primer of digital media literacy."[11]

Given that my painful if productive effort of informed, desperate citizenship eventually took the form of a digital tower of 100 blog posts, #100hardtruths-#fakenews, each cell holding either my efforts or those of a great many others across a range of fields who were also contemporaneously attempting to understand, combat, respond to, and teach about the crisis of fake news as it was unfolding.

Given that this high and vast monolith itself holds an immensity of deep efforts, inter-disciplinary knowledge, diverse resources and thoughtful tools but that, in this form, these many useful things remain hard to navigate and needing of literacy efforts in their own right so as to make them the most useful for the many people interested in this crisis.

Let it hereby be resolved that I will transform my own preliminary efforts at "an online primer of digital media literacy" to become something even more useful, responsive, thoughtful and focused on educating about, and working against, the enduring and complex crisis at hand by experimenting (with others) with new formats and practices for **radical digital media literacy.**

I will work with poets in their local communities to adapt, transform, extend, translate and all-in-all make more usable my original "online digital media primer." I will experiment with others in place-based, local, embodied poetry workshops that begin with my #100hardtruths-#fakenews primer as itself a set of resources toward new forms of **radical digital media literacy.** In so doing, we will engage together in place-based, people-made, word-bound expressions of individual and community truths about social media, fake news, and post-truth outside of the indexical, evidentiary traditions that currently bind us and the technologies that are built upon, reinforce, and monetize such expression.

In an ABSOLUT world/ Notes on the real thing by Angus Walker

**Sifting transcendence on the shop-
floor, max out on red
       carpet talk in the latest spirit
engagement, lacquer lips rainbow and
       say "equality". No really say
it.**

       **Eyes-closed dance: a platform for silent
withdrawal, redeeming chaebol
       payouts down in pledge-
making, cover(t), nothing**

       **to hide – Moon smears refresh –
official sponsors of Seoul sunrise
       bloated   dangle need over
waiting. Distorted marches shape
       bottle and crop
       barriers, fermented.[12]**

Fake News Poetry Workshops as radical digital media literacy

Here are five alternatives #hardtruths that I hold as self-evident:

1. fake news r us: we are implicated by, produce, and circulate this crisis whenever we study, teach, or try to fix it.

2. virality is virility: a potent mix of internet-fueled falsity, masculine grandiosity, and resulting real-world bellicosity undergirds fake news and our efforts to understand it.[13]

3. art answers to fake questions: departures from evidence-based, indexically-linked practices into realms of truth-telling verifiable by different logics might get us out of the he-said/he-said rabbit-hole where we currently find ourselves.

4. our internet truths trump media lies: we must name, share, and honor our own lived experiences within social media as another form of honesty in desperate times. Let's first do this offline, together where we live, work, struggle or learn.

5. heed the poet's call: poetry, a time-honored word-based form of truth-telling outside the logics of indexical mediation might be one well-honed literacy practice well-suited to this crisis.

Using these five hardtruths as both motivation and preliminary action plan, I embarked on a series of nine poetry workshops in the Spring of 2018. I worked with digital artists, community college students, queer media studies scholars and artists, poets, teachers, professors, and a youth poetry troupe[14]; we wrote poetry about our local internet truths felt and lived in New London CT, Queens NYC, Toronto Ontario, and Brighton England. In England I engaged with a classroom of undergrads studying writing. Their teacher, Sam Solomon, led the session. Later that week I found myself writing with an already extant feminist collective, Devil's Dyke, that made use of their own practices of facilitation and power-sharing to organize the session.

In May, I participated in three workshops: one, facilitated by the women of color poets, Margaret Rhee and Chet'la Sebree, about race and racism online. This workshop was peopled by interested local poets. A week later, I participated in a workshop focusing on somatic expression led by the artist, scholar, and publisher, Lynne DeSilva-Johnson, and then quickly raced cross-country to another where we built a collective exquisite corpse poem with media scholars led by the video artist Orr Menirom. I could go on about the different approaches, tactics, interests and outcomes of each workshop—as diverse as are the poets and the communities in which we engaged—but this work has already been done in another context: each poet has written a blog post published on the
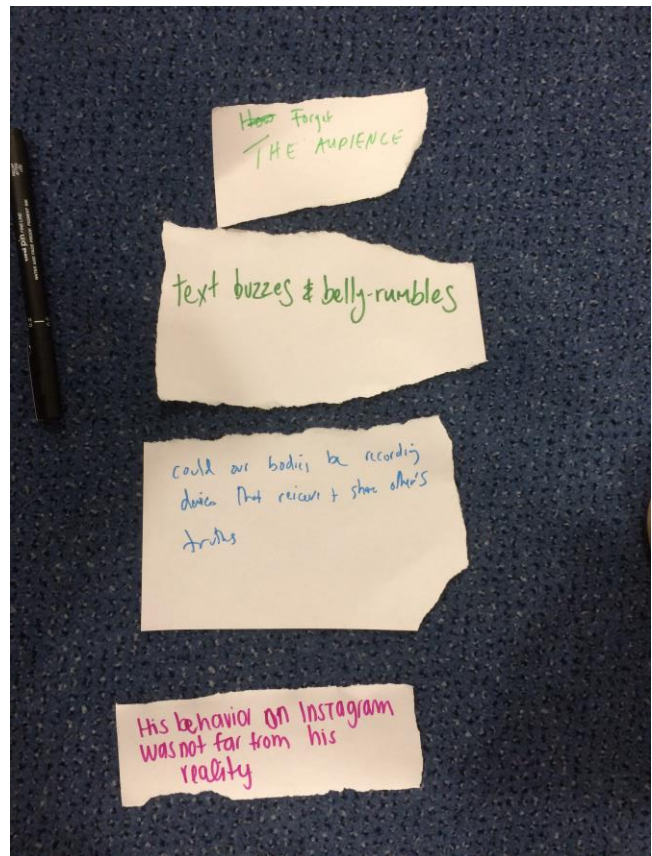

FIGURE 1: FROM DEVIL'S DYKE COLLECTIVE

Operating System, "an [online] equitable space for art access" of which Lynne is the creative director and founder. You can read those details, and many more poems, there.[15]

Resist how we are framed[16]

thoughts
are from the mind
We believe no one should have to face a
mental health problem
alone
Feel lonely as I seek truth

truth[17]

Despite their many local and personnel differences, what the workshops share is a set of opening exercises, often led by me, where participants reveal "truths" about themselves and the world, tying to understand where these might be found, learned, and shared with others, how they might be verified, and which technologies might play a part: from the digital to the family; from photos on a wall in a house to those on an Instagram feed; from the body to its notarized governmental records. In these opening conversations, we always seem to learn just how leery we actually are online, how guarded, how distrustful, and not just of fake news, or of Trump, but of ourselves. We learn how good it feels to admit and disclose *these* facts, with others, about ourselves, online: how we are always there and ever facing and guarding against deception. We then take some time for people to engage with the primer, finding one "hardtruth" that resonates with ideas already

now live in their minds from the previous conversation. This respects each participant's personal knowledge while taking into account that there is still much more to be learned about these issues, and some of it can be found in the primer. We ask them to find something in the primer that speaks to them: a hardtruth or some writing or art. From this, and the conversation, a poem might be inspired. Then, my collaborating poets take over and share other, linked resources—readings, poems, writing prompts or exercises— and then, poems might be written. Some of these are shared with the project. Others stay private.

Call the man of the year a liar, Mika Judge

Gladly!
I would be first in line.
From the first moment of his presidency, he inflated a scraggly cloud to mammoth proportions.
It was the largest audience to witness an inauguration, period.
He is beloved, he is the prophet of all things true, period.
Some people are haters--sad!--but those who know best know him, period.

There are a lot of small things about him, but his lies are enormous. like his crowds. like his supporters. like his heart. like the coal mine he's reopening right under our feet--America, how does black lung feel?
How does it feel being cheated by a cheesy smile balanced on an emergency red tie?
How did a small loan of a million dollars become the ruining of billions of lives?
How does it feel to be led by the lovechild of racist comments on Facebook and *unimaginable* power?

America, get your heads out of your echo chambers.
There is more to politics than what you want to believe. There is more to know than what they show you.
Do not mistake easily obtainable for true. Do not mistake your agreement for divine approval.

Where there is doubt, there is still hope.
Period.[18]

While we do seek and make poems, as I've been sharing throughout, even better yet we find ourselves in community-based conversations about the truth of our own internet experiences communicated and shared with artistic license: a poetry solution for resistance, knowledge production, and better literacy given the truth of fake news in the Age of Trumpism.

Conclusions: From online primer to in-person poetry to what?

Over the first 100 days of the Trump administration, I built an online media primer. It held an enormous number of resources made by myself and others during this time. I quickly came to believe, however, that the primer, as it

is—an online, well-designed receptacle holding a great deal of information—*can* be used for teaching and learning, but its online form leaves it (and us) complicit in the larger problem: mining and getting lost in digital minutiae
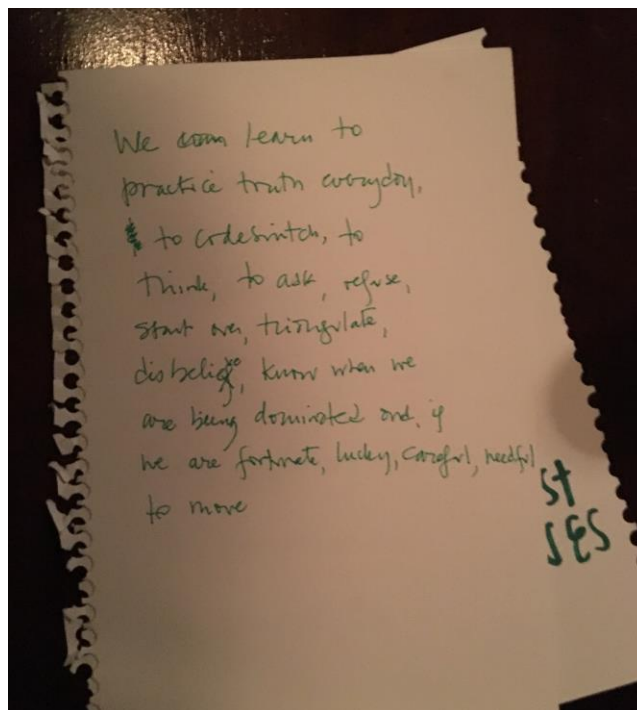

FIGURE 2: FROM TORONTO WORKSHOP

(written by others), using digital formats for exchange (which tend to get nasty or stupid), engaging in digital ways of being (which move us toward isolation or self-hatred or doubt), all the while seeking out short-term (word- or image-bound) fixes to problems that can't be thought or answered in this way.

***Activity alert at 5:27 p.m.: gather 13 social network comments.* By Kyle Booten**

1. I used to spend half my life chasing networks. Now with YouTube, I've swapped that time for time to create.
2. Started from 0, now I'm at 19k. Next I'll be at 100k.
3. ...even a whit the beauty she leaves behind like her eternal, up to now, shadow.
4. Dude I have no idea how I got here but I'm glad I did
5. Only Beethoven and Bach come close.
6. Context: a knightship is a glider (a structure that translates itself across the Life grid periodically)
[ran out of time]

Accumulating, and even sharing information, can be a step towards pedagogy, but only as a resource. Rather than chasing networks, we need time and place to create them, together.

The poems, and processes, collected from the workshops and shared here are in this vein: compliments to, extensions of, contributions about, exclamations concerning, thoughtful deliberations focused upon the deluge of digital information, and experience, about fake news (including the primer). While I work with poets to

teach from the primer, and encourage more writing from its ideas, the participants in the workshops also understand that they too are part of the larger pedagogic (and political) project: talking and listening to each other about our truths; making poetic sense of our thoughts and feeling; flexible claim-making that accounts for listening and learning.
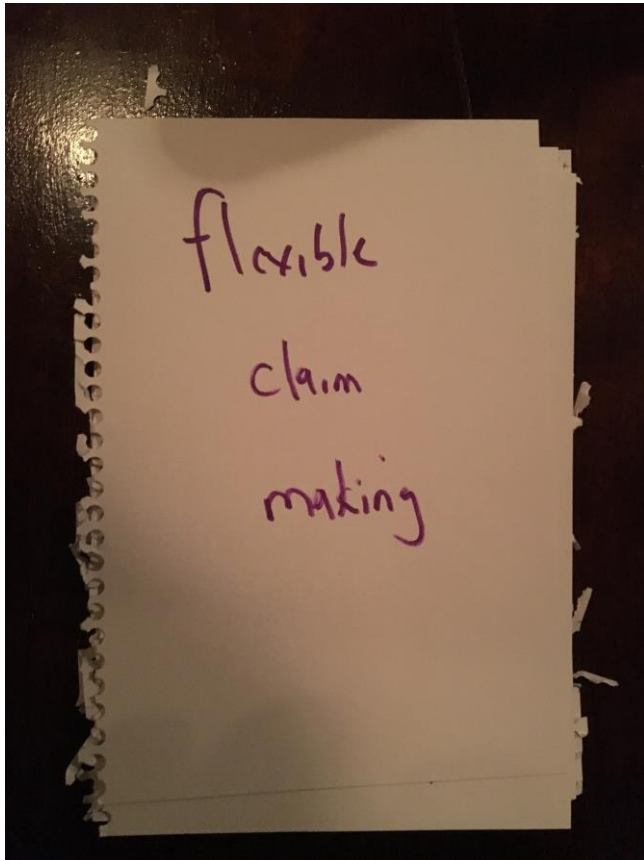

FIGURE 3: ONE OF MY OWN POETIC REFLECTIONS, TORONTO WORKSHOP

Notes

[1] http://scalar.usc.edu/nehvectors/100hardtruths-fakenews/index

[2] From Get Lit Workshop, LA, CA, March 2018.

[3] Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner, eds., *F is for Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth's Undoing* (Minnesota, 2001).

[4] "Resolution toward radical digital media literacy in a post-truth era" was first presented on my blog, MEDIA PRAXIS, on November 20, 2017: https://aljean.wordpress.com/2017/11/20/resolution-toward-radical-digital-media-literacy-in-a-post-truth-era-draft. It appeared as a video with the same name on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vLcIN0RfQWc. The video was presented in my absence at the panel "Ex-Post-Facto? The Anthropology of Media and Journalism in a Post-Truth Era," at the American Anthropological Aassociation meetings on December 1, 2017. This was recorded and transformed into the podcast "The Anthropology of Media in a Post Truth Era," by K. Sacco for AnthroPod: https://culanth.org/fieldsights/1276-the-anthropology-of-media-in-a-post-truth-era.

[5] The project is also available as a paper "companion" that can be accessed as a PDF or on paper: http://www.blurb.com/b/8446148-100hardtruths-fakenews. I first produced this version for the art show, Manifesto: A Moderate Proposal, at the Pitzer Art Galleries, January 2018. It allows for the #100hardtruths to be something a person can hold to read.

[6] From workshop at the University of Sussex, March 2018.

[7] https://aljean.wordpress.com/2017/11/20/resolution-toward-radical-digital-media-literacy-in-a-post-truth-era-draft.

[8] See the film I produced and starred in, *The Watermelon Woman* (Cheryl Dunye, 1996) and the book I co-edited with Jesse Lerner about it and other fake documentaries, *F is for Phony*.

[9] "The Increasingly UnProductive Fake," *No More Potlucks* 4 (July-August 2009): http://nomorepotlucks.org.

[10] *Learning from YouTube* (MIT Press, 2011): https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/learning-youtube.

[11] "My Pledge," February 18, 2017: http://scalar.usc.edu/nehvectors/100hardtruths-fakenews/about.

[12] From University of Sussex workshop, March 2018.

[13] Alexandra Juhasz, "Trump's Alpha Male Posturing was Made for our Social Media," *DAME*, September 2017: https://shar.es/1VXnu5.
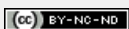
[14] My nine collaborators were: 1. Kyle Booten at the Ammerman Symposium on Art and Technology, New London, CT (February 2018); 2. Kelly Grace Thomas, with the Get Lit Players, in LA, CA (March 2018); 3. TL Cowan, with queer feminist scholars and artists in Toronto, Ontario (March 2018); 4. Sam Soloman with undergraduates at the University of Sussex, England (March 2018); 5. Linda Paoli and Claudia Treacher with the Dyke's Ditch Poetry Collective in Brighton, England (March 2018); 6. Lisa Cohen with three professors and their distinct classes (poetry, intro to writing, a poetry club) at LaGuardia Community College, Queens, NY; 7. Margaret Rhee and Chet'la Sebree with local poets, Brooklyn NY (May 2018); 8. Lynne DeSilva-Johnson, with local poets in Los Angeles, CA (May 2018); 9. Orr Menirom, with participants at the Digital EngAGEment Conference, CUNY, Manhattan, NY (May 2018)

[15] 10 Tries, 100 Poems, the Operating System: https://medium.com/the-operating-system/10-tries-100-poems-alexandra-juhasz-field-notes-fake-news-poetry-workshops-as-radical-ee2408808403.

[16] http://scalar.usc.edu/nehvectors/100hardtruths-fakenews/86-resist-how-we-are-framed

[17] Exquisite Corpse Poem from NYC, May 2018.

[18] From Get Lit, LA, March 2018.