Why does critical literacy often feel uncomfortable with aesthetic texts like poetry? In this provocative book, Ray Misson and Wendy Morgan, proponents of critical literacy in their home country of Australia, develop an understanding of the aesthetic in current poststructuralist terms and the role that the aesthetic might play in a critical literacy classroom. Throughout the book, their belief remains strong that “poststructuralism provides the best framework we have for understanding texts and their relationship to human society and identity.” To demonstrate how the conjunction of critical literacy and the aesthetic can transform English classrooms, the authors draw examples from various genres, media, and countries, including poetry by Donne, Shakespeare, Robert Lowell, and Les Murray; *To Kill a Mockingbird*; an episode of *Friends*; and even one chapter using only the example of *Huckleberry Finn*.

The authors reconfigure critical literacy so that it can give proper consideration to the aesthetic, which involves paying attention to such things as individual identity, human emotion, creativity, and the value and productivity of texts. Acknowledging these things within critical literacy is vital. As Misson and Morgan emphasize, “it is one of the greatest pleasures and responsibilities of being an English teacher that we work, critically and creatively, with the aesthetic and its rich sense of human possibility.”
CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ...................................................... vii
INTRODUCTION .............................................................. ix

1 The Cultural and the Critical, 
   the Aesthetic and the Political .......................... 1
2 Defining the Aesthetic ............................................. 25
3 The Social Nature of the Aesthetic ......................... 46
4 Engaging the Aesthetic Subject ............................... 68
5 The Dynamics of Alignment and Resistance ................. 89
6 What’s the Use of the Aesthetic? .............................. 110
7 The Aesthetic and the Body ..................................... 130
8 Productivity and Pleasure ...................................... 153
9 Teaching for the Aesthetic and the Critical ................ 175
10 Reconfiguring Critical Literacy and the Aesthetic ........ 212

NOTES ................................................................. 227
REFERENCES ........................................................... 233
INDEX ................................................................. 245
AUTHORS ............................................................... 259
INTRODUCTION

This book sets out to investigate a very simple problem. Both of the authors are known in their home country, Australia, as proponents of critical literacy. The range of what might be meant by this term is looked at in the first chapter. Suffice to say for the moment that the salient feature of critical literacy as far as we are concerned is that it conceives literacy education as ultimately concerned with giving students an understanding of textuality (i.e., of the way texts work). In particular, it is based on a poststructuralist understanding that all language is socially contextualised, and so texts are inherently ideological, and that texts are fundamental to the construction of our identity.

We have both been active in promoting the critical literacy agenda through publications, plenary addresses, professional development workshops, policy work with government curriculum bodies, and in our teaching of student teachers in teacher education programs. And yet both of us, perhaps in differing ways and to differing extents, had concerns that there were major areas of the English curriculum that critical literacy, as currently constituted, was not able to deal with adequately. By 1997, Ray was confessing in print that he was uneasy about some aspects of critical literacy, particularly that its theoretical framework had “the effect of making the whole concept of personal difference suspect, pretty much unavailable for serious consideration” (Misson, 1997, p. 18).¹ Wendy’s concern was focussed starkly when a well-known critical literacy guru said to her that he could not see any place for poetry in the critical literacy curriculum. Understandably, this gave Wendy, a committed, published poet, considerable food for thought. When she discussed her reaction with Ray, it coalesced with his concerns, and this book is the (rather delayed) result. It is an attempt to answer the question of why critical literacy feels uncomfortable with aesthetic texts like
poetry, and whether it needs to be. This is used as leverage onto questions of what are the limitations of critical literacy in terms of its conceptualisation of significant matters such as individual identity, human emotion, and creativity, and whether it can be reconfigured to answer those concerns while retaining its acknowledged and vital strengths.

There are two major strategies employed in this project. The first is to try to understand the aesthetic in the poststructuralist terms that are current in critical literacy (discourse, genre, subject position, resistant reading) or that might be compatible with its poststructuralist framework (desire, performativity) in order to investigate the value it has, and ultimately to make a case not only that it is far too important to be neglected, but that it can be reconciled with the critical literacy agenda. The second is to consider how a poststructuralist understanding of the aesthetic might be worked with in a critical literacy classroom. These strategies are often employed simultaneously, but implicitly. In fact, there are many implicit assumptions and decisions on which this book is built, so it is worth making some of them explicit here at the beginning.

Assumptions

Poststructuralism

It will be noted that the poststructuralist framework is never questioned, or even explicitly argued for, but implicitly the whole book is making the case that poststructuralism provides the best framework we have for understanding texts and their relationship to human society and identity. If the discussion of textuality and individual texts in poststructuralist terms does not demonstrate satisfactorily how poststructuralism can be illuminating and how it can be the basis of an engaging and significant English curriculum, then the argument is lost.

One of the problems we have confronted with this, as with many other matters, is what kind of knowledge we can assume in our readers. Should we assume that our readers are familiar with the fundamental concepts of poststructuralism (even if they do not necessarily subscribe to them), or should we back up and
explain what we are talking about? On the whole we have taken a conservative line on this, going back to first base on many of the concepts. This is not because we think that they will be unfamiliar to our readership (although the strategy allows that this might be the case), but because most of the concepts with which we are dealing are broad, multiply defined, and often contested, so it is useful for us to indicate where we stand on them by giving an introductory explanation, however brief. It also, of course, allows us to define the concepts strategically for the purposes of our argument.

Incidentally, we have used the term *poststructuralism*, although what is understood by this term in the United Kingdom and Australia is more often subsumed under *postmodernism* in North America. Apart from wanting to follow what is our familiar domestic usage, the reason for doing this is that it does enable at times a distinction between the formation of theoretical understandings that is known (to us) as *poststructuralism* and a thesis about our inhabiting a particular historical period, the features of which are gathered under the term *postmodernism*.

**Critical Literacy**

Just as we have not argued for a poststructuralist framework, we also have not explicitly argued for the importance of English/literacy teaching adopting a critical literacy framework. We have assumed that if the poststructuralist understandings of textuality are valuable, then critical literacy as an attempt to base English teaching on those understandings must be worthwhile, whatever its limitations might be.

The standard procedures of the critical literacy classroom are, on the whole, also assumed, although we have been careful to give enough detail to ensure that those who are unfamiliar with the pedagogical model will understand what is going on. We are very aware that critical literacy is more current and institutionalised in Australia than it is in either North America or the United Kingdom, and we are also aware that readers will be interested in the pedagogical practicalities. However, it needs to be asserted upfront that this is not a general critical literacy handbook, however practical its implications might be (see below).
Literature Teaching

Similarly, we have assumed that a critical literacy model is not the current norm in literature teaching, but that literature teaching generally proceeds on a more conventional model of narrative, thematic, stylistic, or issues-based analysis, alongside a regime of tasks that may ask for creative responses but in the end values most the analytical essay or the book report.

We have assumed that the explosion of “theory” that happened in the 1980s and 1990s has had some effect on literature classrooms, so that, for example, a feminist or postcolonialist reading would not be found extraordinary, but that, on the whole, most literature classrooms are operating on broadly liberal humanist principles, aiming at a general, “non-tendentious” reading of the text.

Decisions

As well as working on particular assumptions, inevitably there were a host of other decisions made on how to develop our argument and where to place our emphasis. Some of the major ones that have been particularly significant in shaping the book and that it might be useful to make explicit to our readers are discussed below.

The Aesthetic versus Literature

It may well be asked why we have framed the book as an investigation into the aesthetic and critical literacy, rather than simply talking about literature. There are two reasons: the first is because we felt it important to achieve the level of generality given by taking the argument back to the aesthetic. This is not a book about literature teaching, but about the importance of acknowledging in the English classroom the range of aesthetic experiences that texts give, whether such experiences occur in literary texts or elsewhere. Indeed, it is a small but important part of our argument that critical literacy
cannot achieve its aims without acknowledging the aesthetic element in the nonliterary texts that it is ostensibly comfortable dealing with.

The second reason for focusing on the aesthetic and critical literacy has to do with the eternal problem of defining literature. Again the practice in the various English-speaking countries seems to be rather different, but certainly the tendency worldwide at the postsecondary level and increasingly in secondary schools is to conceptualise English in terms of cultural studies and so expand what is meant by literature to include movies, TV programs, hypertexts, popular publishing (comics, magazines, newspapers)—indeed any kind of text that is read for leisure purposes. We would support this explosion of the category, but rather than become embroiled in the often pointless discussions of what might or might not be considered literature, it seemed best to go back to the underlying notion of the aesthetic, especially since we did want to argue that the aesthetic was potentially an element that needed to be acknowledged in all texts. It will be noted, however, that our definition of literature is the broad one, and when we use the term we intend it to cover movies, TV shows, comics, and all those other kinds of leisure texts.

This also means that we have a broad view of reading and writing. When we use the word reading, we intend it to cover viewing, game-playing, or any other kind of decoding and responding that relates to making sense of or taking pleasure in the range of texts that we are covering by the term literature. Our use of the term writing can be taken to cover the production of all such texts and so could include such things as creating a hypertext, performing an improvisation, or producing a video.

Choice of Texts to Discuss

Anyone writing on teaching texts knows the problem of choosing which texts to use as examples and how much reader knowledge of them to assume. Our solution has been pragmatic. We have largely talked about classic texts, poems that can be quoted in full, or, in a couple of cases, popular texts that most people are likely to know. This has meant that the range of texts discussed
might seem very limited and conservative and not particularly appropriate across the levels of education. In any country there are texts that are particularly favoured for work in the classroom, texts that speak particularly to that country's concerns. Teachers and curriculum bodies in each country will be concerned to ensure that the texts chosen acknowledge appropriately the presence and importance of indigenous people and groups from other than mainstream cultures. There will be a concern to acknowledge the special value of contemporary literature written specifically for young people in that country. We would certainly hope that most teachers would go well beyond the range of texts that we have covered in making choices for their classrooms. However, in writing for an international audience, one cannot easily discuss the favoured local texts without providing a great deal of background, and so we made the decision to work with texts that are likely to be familiar to most English teachers in English-speaking countries. Even so, we have tried to give enough context for any quotation that a reader who did not know the text would still be able to get a sense of what was going on and have some chance of confirming whether or not the point being made was valid.

Some chapters have been built around a broad range of examples drawn from various genres, media, and countries (e.g., Chapters 4 and 9), whereas others have deliberately been limited to a few texts (e.g., Chapter 3, which is built around a novel, a poem, and an episode of a TV sitcom) or even just one (Chapter 6, which uses only *Huckleberry Finn*). It is perhaps worth saying that while we were concerned to vary the strategy in the various chapters, the decision to work on a large range or just a limited number was almost arbitrary: the decision could have gone any way. It is not that it is easier to talk about the way texts put us into subject positions on a range of texts (Chapter 4) and the value of the aesthetic on just one (Chapter 6): it was almost a test of what we were saying to see if it could work either generally or particularly in any case.
Textual Interpretations

It is one of the basic tenets of poststructuralist thinking about literature, as it was of reader-response theories, that there is no absolute single “true” meaning of a text. Any reading is the result of complex negotiations between a reader and the text, as we will see in Chapter 5, and not only will different readers make quite different sense of a text, but one’s own reading is inevitably shifting, tentative, and subject to change over time as well as from moment to moment. However, as Stanley Fish has pointed out, while we may be aware that our current reading of any text is provisional, at any moment we are of necessity actually inhabiting a reading (or a reading is inhabiting us), and that reading is what we believe about the text at that particular point (1980, pp. 364–365). Our sense of the “obvious” (at that moment) meaning of the text playing against our knowledge of its provisionality provides a dilemma for anyone writing a book such as this. Does one make constant acknowledgment that other readings of the text are possible, and humbly and persistently insist at every point that the reading and judgment one is proposing are just one’s own and that no claim is being made for absolute authority, or does one simply talk about the text from the position one is currently inhabiting and make the points about it that one currently believes to be “true”? We have decided on the whole, to take the latter path, and so we would hope the reader will keep in mind that when a statement is made about the meaning or value of a text, it is surrounded by the unspoken acknowledgment that the reading or judgment is provisional and only one of the nearly infinite number possible, but that, on the other hand, it is how the text is being experienced at the time. In fact, one of the things that we hope this book achieves is reassuring people that there need be no sense of an embarrassing failure in poststructuralist purity when they make statements about a text’s meaning and its value. Texts matter to us because they mean things and we like them. Such statements are a basic element of our interactions
around texts in everyday life, when we see a movie or read a novel, and they are part of classroom activity around texts, always with the proviso that it is the teacher’s job to keep the possibilities of meaning and judgment open and not impose her or his meaning or evaluation on the class.

**Pedagogical Implications**

As noted above, it is a major strategy of this book to look at the implications that a consideration of the aesthetic might have for classroom practice. One of the most difficult decisions was how explicit to make this. In the end, we have developed only one chapter (admittedly by far the longest) that is specifically examining what a pedagogy embracing the critical and the aesthetic might look like (Chapter 9). However, we would claim that the whole book is, in the end, implicitly geared to what might go on in the classroom. There are many incidental comments about classroom practice, but more importantly, much of the book is committed to articulating the kind of understandings that we think could be valuably developed in the classroom, albeit not always in explicitly theoretical terms. The strategies by which this might be done are not made explicit, but we assume that the readers of this book will be good, innovative teachers (or prospective teachers) who will know how to go about implementing lessons that draw on what is given here. If a teacher finds interesting the analysis of the discourses in *To Kill a Mockingbird* in Chapter 3, then she or he will know how best to set up their students to investigate that aspect of the novel. If someone else finds interesting the discussion of the physical importance of rhythm in Chapter 7, they will know the strategies by which to develop these understandings in their students on the texts that they have assigned in their classrooms (or had wished upon them).

We do acknowledge readily that teachers are not free agents. They work within particular curriculum and assessment regimes that strongly influence (if not determine) what they are able to implement in their teaching. We hope, however, that all teachers will find in this book ways of thinking about aesthetic texts that open up possibilities for their practice, whatever the adaptations
Introduction

that might be necessary to fit in with the institutional constraints under which they are working.

Reading versus Writing

One of the things that we have been very aware of is that this is largely a book about reading, and we do not say a great deal about writing. We do talk about it here and there, but rather in an apologetic, supplementary fashion, guiltily conscious that we are not giving it more time. The reason for the comparative neglect of writing is simple: critical literacy is preeminently a pedagogy of reading, and since critical literacy was our starting point, reading is what we have tended to concentrate on. Critical literacy is not alone in tending to divorce the writing curriculum from the reading curriculum: classical literature teaching has not generally been intimately meshed with creative writing, perhaps because it was felt that students could not possibly compete with the greats. Creative writing has generally been seen as a sideshow, irrelevant to the development of the kind of understandings that the literature classroom taught. If we had wanted to develop a proper account of creative writing within the critical literacy context, it would have almost doubled the size of the book, and the editors were rightly anxious about the size already. We acknowledge that the hints here about the creative writing curriculum are inadequate, but we hope that they will at least be a beginning to set readers thinking.

The Book’s Structure

Although the various chapters can, of course, be read separately, and we hope that they can stand interestingly on their own, this is a book with a very strong overall argument mirrored in its structural development.

Chapter 1 gives a historical survey, locating the development of socially critical versions of literacy in relation to English and literary studies, thus establishing why we think it important to consider the place of aesthetic texts within critical literacy.
Chapters 2 to 5 as a group develop a view of the aesthetic and the reading of aesthetic texts within the kind of poststructuralist framework that is underpinning critical literacy. Chapter 2 establishes the basic view of the aesthetic on which the book is built. Chapter 3, largely through a discussion of the concepts of discourse and genre, examines the ways in which the aesthetic is inevitably implicated in particular social contexts and values. Chapter 4 turns to the individual and looks at how individual subjectivity is socially constructed through texts, and at the ways in which aesthetic texts engage readers through playing on their desires, thus bringing them into particular subject positions. However, we are not simply subject to texts, reading them as they demand to be read—there are complex negotiations that go on as we accept, reject, or qualify what the text is saying. Such negotiations are investigated in Chapter 5.

Chapter 6 picks up the suggestions implicit so far in the book on what might be the value of the aesthetic and makes a case for its significance by reconsidering in poststructuralist terms some of the answers traditionally given. This leads on in Chapters 7 and 8 to a consideration of two aspects of the aesthetic that would seem to be beyond the realm of critical literacy as currently constituted. Chapter 7 looks at recent theoretical work on the body and argues for the importance of acknowledging the embodied aspects of the aesthetic. Chapter 8 considers the aesthetic as a productive phenomenon, generative of different kinds of pleasure.

In Chapter 9, the pedagogical implications of the book’s arguments are considered in terms of what might practically be done in the classroom, while Chapter 10 rounds off the argument by articulating how critical literacy might be transformed by taking account of the aesthetic.

Our Positioning

We speak a great deal about positioning in this book. It is a good indication of how the positions any of us takes become thoroughly naturalised that in some ways only in retrospect has it become clear how we have positioned ourselves and what possible positions our readers might take.
Introduction

Those readers coming from a traditional literature teaching background who pick up this book to see what critical literacy has to say to literature teaching will find a quick introduction to a certain amount of basic theory that they may well find very useful in reconceptualizing and extending what they are doing in their classrooms. If they have previously looked into critical literacy and rejected it because it seemed to miss so much when it came to literature, we hope that they will find the version of critical literacy presented here much more interesting, persuasive, useful, and even liberating.

Those readers coming from a critical literacy background are, in fact, as likely to be as challenged by the book as are the traditional literature teachers, although they will understand much more readily the discourse we are using and the position we are coming from. For these readers, the challenge will be to remain open-minded as we argue about the limitations of their current position and about what critical literacy is not doing well, and as they come to terms with thinking about literature as a highly significant area of textuality worth their very serious attention. We hope these readers too will find the version of critical literacy presented here interesting, persuasive, useful, and even liberating.

Of course, these are the two extreme positions: most of our readers will come somewhere along the continuum ranging between them, pragmatically using in their teaching whatever seems to work best. It is our hope that these readers will find it helpful that we are trying to accommodate a breadth of literacy practice here in a properly theorised way, and that they too will find the model convincing.

In some ways, we could have simply written a book for literature teachers, arguing that critical literacy had something to offer them, but, of course, that would not have been responding to the major impetus behind the book, which is to reconfigure critical literacy so that it can cope with the aesthetic and all the attendant aspects of human experience. Such an alternative book would have left critical literacy practice unquestioned and unchanged. Our positioning is in some ways a little odd: we spend a great deal of time showing up what is wrong with critical literacy and criticising its practices, whereas we are ultimately aiming to promote its interests. There are, no doubt, those who
will read the book as being against critical literacy and will perhaps see us as recanting our earlier commitments. We think this would be totally mistaken. We are both still thoroughly committed to the critical literacy agenda. If we criticise it, we do so as insiders, concerned to ensure that its understandings are seen as basic to the whole English/literacy curriculum. We have found that bringing the aesthetic into its realm and conceptualising what this might mean for critical literacy practice in general is a significant thing to do. We can only hope that all our readers, whatever their initial positioning, do so too.
Why does critical literacy often feel uncomfortable with aesthetic texts like poetry? In this provocative book, Ray Misson and Wendy Morgan, proponents of critical literacy in their home country of Australia, develop an understanding of the aesthetic in current poststructuralist terms and the role that the aesthetic might play in a critical literacy classroom. Throughout the book, their belief remains strong that “poststructuralism provides the best framework we have for understanding texts and their relationship to human society and identity.” To demonstrate how the conjunction of critical literacy and the aesthetic can transform English classrooms, the authors draw examples from various genres, media, and countries, including poetry by Donne, Shakespeare, Robert Lowell, and Les Murray; *To Kill a Mockingbird*; an episode of *Friends*; and even one chapter using only the example of *Huckleberry Finn*.

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