

Review

Daniell, Beth and Peter Mortensen, eds. *Women and Literacy: Local and Global Inquiries for a New Century*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007. 335 pages.

Dara Rossman Regaignon

Although the “literacy myth” (as Harvey Graff has called it) would have us identify individual literacy with social mobility and economic advancement, the new literacy studies of the last 25 years has paid careful attention to the ideological nature of literacy and literacy practices. *Women and Literacy: Local and Global Inquiries for a New Century*, edited by Beth Daniell and Peter Mortensen, makes a valuable contribution to this project, offering a series of what the editors call “glimpses” (33) of literate practices that are usually occluded from view, marginalized because they are the practices of women—often poor, often of color, often rural. These glimpses work together to complicate our definitions of literacy in a way that I find at once salutary and sobering. If, as J. Elspeth Stuckey argues in *The Violence of Literacy*, “questions of literacy are questions of oppressions . . . matters of enforcement, maintenance, acquiescence, internalization, revolution” (64), it is particularly important for writing program administrators to think carefully about the literacies our programs teach and the promises we make students about how those literacies will change their lives.

In her 1999 CCC article, “Narratives of Literacy: Connecting Composition to Culture,” Daniell (following Lyotard) argues for the importance of “little narratives” of literacy to challenge the grand narratives that had structured earlier conversations. Such little narratives emphasize the socially embedded nature of literacy, and hence the impossibility of monolithic or transcendent definitions. The little narratives collected here provide a kind of thick description of global literacy practices, a description that can only proceed through the accretion of details, of local stories and studies, that do justice to the various ways “individual acts of [reading and] writing are connected to larger cultural, historical, social, and political systems” (Brandt 392). Every one of these essays admirably addresses its local (tem-

poral as well as geographic) context. This is in part a result of what we can call, following Brian Street's work, the volume's ideological emphasis: while there is due attention to the technical skills involved in any form of literacy, these essays "understand . . . them as they are encapsulated within cultural wholes and within structures of power" (Street 161).

The methodological as well as the temporal and geographic range of these essays is only part of what makes the collection as a whole so interesting: we range from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twenty-first, from the Carolinas to Tunisia, through literary and rhetorical analysis to case studies to demography to cultural ecology. These authors' shared commitment to understanding how gender shapes literacy practices and how literacy practices shape our expectations and performances of gender helps them complicate the literacy myth; in addition to identifying the ways in which learning culturally important literacies can help women challenge governmental authority (see Powell) or negotiate the shift to a market economy (see Crawford), some of these essays remind us that even when literacy doesn't bring instrumental gains, it can increase individuals' emotional and psychological confidence in themselves and their abilities to negotiate institutional structures (see, for example, Hogg and Gong).

I find myself grateful to Daniell and Mortensen's introduction for the way it highlights issues and critical categories that cut across the "local/global" divide that their basic organization suggests. (The first section—"Women's Literacies Situated Locally: Past, Present, and Future"—presents essays largely about the United States, while the second section—"Women's Literacies in a Globally Interdependent World"—reaches outward.) In addition to identifying the theme that I've already highlighted—engaging with and complicating the literacy myth—many of the essays are indebted to Deborah Brandt's notion of literacy sponsorship, a "conceptual approach that begins to connect literacy as an individual development to literacy as an economic development" and that gives us a way to think about "who or what underwrites occasions of literacy learning and use" (Brandt 166).

Several essays draw our attention to how our understandings of particular historical phenomena are deepened when we pay closer attention to marginalized voices. Lathan argues that African-American activist Ethel Azalea Johnson's writings "confront conventional patriarchal histories of the civil rights movement" (68); Roskelly and Ronald show that Louisa May Alcott "deepen[ed] and extend[ed] the Metaphysical Club's most famous and far-reaching idea, pragmatism" (126); and DeShazer teaches us to read South African women's poetry as literacy narratives that contribute crucially to the "post-apartheid imagination" (244). Other essays extend this project by drawing our attention to voices that are marginalized not only by gender

and/or race but also by being coded as “private” (and therefore doubly feminized). Smith’s study of Oprah’s Book Club, for example, examines how the reading experience it offers is at once public and private, economic and emotional, communal and personal. In feminist poetry and poetry workshops between 1968 and 1975, Flannery sees an analogous blurring of this boundary, hinged on an imagined reader who is always engaged, ready to “hammer through the limits and possibilities of language in order to resist a culturally-mandated passivity” (154). And Donehower’s interviews with several Appalachian women suggest that literacy conferred a highly context-specific authority, in that their educations allowed them to “renegotiate their status” within their rural community (96). These are all optimistic pictures—indeed, Stuckey might well be skeptical of such rosy depictions of the authorizing, liberating potential of literacy. By contrast, Strickland argues that Dorothy West’s “The Typewriter” depicts the extent to which race and gender trump the characters’ possession of specific literate skills; she draws our attention to the kinds of emotional pain and oppression that result from a direct confrontation with the fictive nature of the literacy myth.

This leads me to a set of essays—Watson and Young’s study of Western College’s early global outlook; Walter’s nuanced discussion of the complexity of “literacy” in contemporary Tunisia; and Hawisher, Selfe, Coffield, and El-Wakil’s thick description of the “complex web of social forces, historical events, economic patterns, material conditions, and cultural expectations” that shape women’s digital literacy (214)—that provoke us to ask questions about the role of educational institutions in flexibly fostering not just some kind of monolithic literacy, but the various and shifting literacies students need. In fact, if we are to take Stuckey’s challenge seriously, we would do well to adopt Anne Wysocki and Johndan Johnson-Eilola’s description of literacy “as a cloud of sometimes contradictory nexus points among different positions . . . not . . . a skill but a process of situating and resituating representations in social spaces” (367).

Women and Literacy’s concluding chapters challenge us to take such complex and nuanced understandings into more activist fields. In “The Outlook for Women’s Global Literacy,” Catherine Hobbs asks literacy scholars and theorists to engage in conversations with development workers and activists, noting that “according to UNESCO’s *World Education Report 2000*, nearly two-thirds of the world’s illiterate adults were women” (277). Min-Zhan Lu, in “Afterword: Reading Literacy Research Against the Grain of Fast Capitalism,” then argues persuasively for the importance of building a definition of “literacy” that is “enlivened and enlightened by the efforts of [English] users/learners around the world” (297) in order to move toward “proactive efforts: practices that mobilize articulations (in words and deeds,

that of our own and by the people we talk to, study, teach, and represent) aiming to make the standardized englishes of Developed Countries serve purposes and conditions of life critical to the learner/user but de-legitimized by the standardized englishes of Developed Countries” (311).

By drawing our attention to multiple literacies (and englishes), embedded in their local conditions, the essays in this volume challenge us to ask the questions we need to move away from Stuckey’s bleak picture and toward the “proactive efforts” Lu imagines. How, for example, might we create institutional structures that support and foster the kinds of academic and social literacies we believe will help our students without simply indoctrinating them with particular values? How do we teach the kinds of flexibility students need for a world in which reading, writing, and other ways of processing information are in constant flux? How can we help students use their literacies to gain agency (and even authority) while also helping them realistically assess how those various literacies will help them towards their academic, economic, social, spiritual, and other goals?

I don’t have answers to these questions; in fact, this volume has made me productively wary of definitive answers, fearful that they might catapult us back into a world in which we become enamored of grand narratives and precise definitions of literacy. By providing us glimpses of not only different literacies, literate practices, and literate processes, but also the “cloud of sometimes contradictory nexus points,” *Women and Literacy: Local and Global Inquiries for a New Century* makes it increasingly difficult to imagine, for example, that there is a single academic literacy that students must learn. Instead, it seems that as readers and writers, program administrators and teachers, we must ourselves learn to listen, and that we must make such attentive listening one of the central features of what we teach our students.

WORKS CITED

- Brandt, Deborah. “Sponsors of Literacy.” *College Composition and Communication* 49 (1998): 165–85.
- Daniell, Beth. “Narratives of Literacy: Connecting Composition to Culture.” *College Composition and Communication* 50 (1999): 393–410.
- Street, Brian V. *Social Literacies: Critical Approaches to Literacy in Development, Ethnography, and Education*. New York: Longman, 1995.
- Stuckey, J. Elspeth. *The Violence of Literacy*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1991.
- Wysocki, Anne and Johndan Johnson-Eilola. “Blinded by the Letter: Why Are We Using Literacy as a Metaphor for Everything Else?” *Passions, Pedagogies, and 21st Century Technologies*. Ed. Gail E. Hawisher and Cynthia L. Selfe. Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 1999. 349–68.