

Literacy/Literacies Studies and the Still-Dominant White Center

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Many of us in composition-rhetoric studies know, cite, and use Catherine Prendergast's text, *Literacy and Racial Justice: The Politics of Learning after Brown v. Board of Education* to substantiate our claims that literacy has often, if not always, been framed as a white property. Nonetheless, I am still perplexed that there has been no real, vociferous debate around one of the book's most critical contributions, namely chapter three, on Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words*. In fact, after that chapter, it seems like the very terms we use to talk about literacy when we imagine ourselves to be talking about multiple locations, academic literacy/discourse communities, schooling, and marginalized communities should be called into question.

Ways with Words is a central canon in literacy studies, a product of a Post-Civil Rights/Post-*Brown* agenda at the same time that it *reproduces* that agenda. This is why Kathryn Flannery's text, "Babies and Bath Water," offers us an important reminder that the ideological discourses we are often deploying are fundamentally connected to *Ways* even though we do not always recognize this text as doing that kind of heavy lifting in composition-rhetoric studies. It seems as if our elitist tendency to distance ourselves from literacy studies, an elitism that Brenda Glascott has meticulously shown in "Constricting Keywords: Rhetoric and Literacy in Our History Writing," has left us with some blindspots. To riff off of Morris Young in his "Sponsoring Literacy Studies," we, too, can consider *Ways* a literacy sponsor to the kinds of work we have done in framing literacy in the post-*Brown* era. To take this back to Prendergast's argument, the very thing that we imagine ourselves to be pursuing in composition studies, namely the framing of contexts, histories, and ideologies in relation to literacy, has been inhibited as much as it has been promoted when *Ways with Words* acts as a framing device. To quote Harvey Graff's contribution here: "the roster of literacy studies' commissions and omissions is lengthy."

In its documentation of the literacy practices of a working class black community and a working class white community in 1960s/1970s South Carolina, alongside both communities' conflicts with the middle-class townspeople (whose discourse norms match and are sustained by schooling), Heath offered an analytical schema that suggested that non-dominant groups' social clashes with school was a cultural clash. As should be fairly obvious, the focus in our research on speech communities, discourse communities, cultural models of literacies, etc. can, thus, be traced back to or, at least, connected with *Ways*. However, Prendergast reminds us that *Ways* emerges out of and because of the Post-*Brown* mandate to desegregate, a *racial* clash that Heath always distanced herself from. While Heath's focus on the local offered important models for new research, race was as local as it was national, but is still given no real frame of analysis. If we go back to *Ways*, or (re)read Prendergast's chapter, we will remember the white working class male who said he only went to college when the town's mill (where he worked)

began hiring blacks because “when the niggers (pause), uh, the blacks, you know, started comin’ in, I knew that wasn’t for me. I wasn’t ever gonna work for no nigger” (Heath 39; Prendergrast 62). Class was never the overarching determinant of people’s identities over race in this study and this was more than just a difference in culture, especially since the black working class community found themselves poorer years after *Ways’s* publication, while the white working class community experienced much greater social mobility. My point here and my point in really thinking about Prendergast’s critical chapter has been this: when we have talked about understanding the social contexts of literacy, language, and discourse, we have done so mostly from the spaces of methodological considerations (either borrowing from history or from anthropology/ethnography); we have not done so from the perspectives of interrogating deep political and ideological shifts that have left structured inequalities and violence firmly in place, especially in reference to, but not solely based on, race. That one of our canons on the cultural-social meanings of literacy so totally eclipsed discussions of race at the first (and perhaps, now, only) time in history where schools were seriously challenged to desegregate, a book within whose clutches we are still held within, speaks to a crisis in how we have and will continue to approach literacy studies. There are contexts we see and there are the contexts we ignore but whose logics we sustain.

Kate Vieira reminds us in “On the Social Consequences of Literacy” that literacy is deeply “entangled” with upward *and* downward mobility and, therefore, with simultaneous barriers erected at streets, cities, borders, and trans-nations. I like the way Vieira challenges us to see these barriers as something other than metaphoric descriptions for rhetorical peppering that might uniquely flavor one’s research; instead, as she asserts, literacy is *doing* some things, not merely staging metaphors. Schooling, as its own form of doing, has never been exempt from unleashing exactly these same kinds of deep “entanglements.”

Bruce Horner offers me the most poignant words of caution about the ongoing political trajectory of our work that leaves a dominant center unquestioned and un(der)theorized. It seems that we have replicated what we saw with the culture wars/canon wars in the 80s and 90s: on one side, we had a Far Right obsessed with reclaiming the glory days when schooling and our social world was balanced, stable (read, white and male) and successful. On the other side, we had a kind of focus on multiculturalism, co-opted from its originary Third-Worldism framed by, for instance, the Bay Area Black Arts Movement (Smethurst). As Sylvia Wynter so forcefully argued in her 1990 letter to the California School Board in its adoption of a new “multicultural” social science textbook (that 100+ page letter was published as *Do Not Call Us Negroes: How Multicultural Textbooks Perpetuate Racism*), multiculturalism merely sprinkled on happily-ever-after stories of multiple-hued groups without any real interrogation of a centralized white power structure, structured inequalities, or racialization. Horner forthrightly suggests that our focus on multiple literacies/multiple discourse communities/academic literacies/et al. has moved us toward the same problematic space where multicultural studies now reside. This was, however, a foreseeable direction. We never wanted to deal with “ways with words” in ways that would bespeak and unspeak power and the structural violence it unleashes. We may now have no other choice since the direction in which we are headed might not get us anywhere, except right back to center.

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