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Freedom Writing: African American Civil Rights Literacy Activism, 1955–1967

Rhea Estelle Lathan

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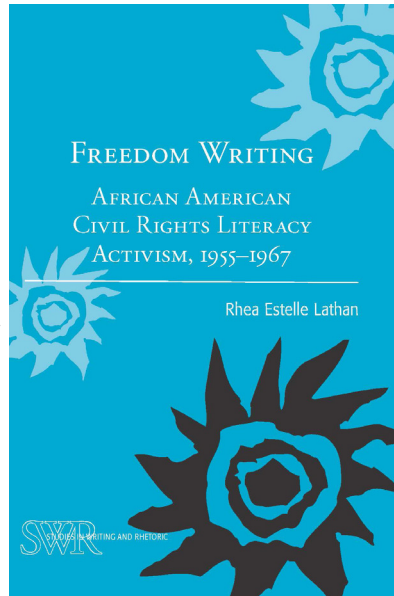
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F*reedom Writing: African American Civil Rights Literacy Activism* by Rhea Estelle Lathan rests on the intersections of the African American rhetorical tradition and community literacy. This project introduces the term “gospel literacy” to illustrate the complex and innovative literacy practices of the Sea Island Citizenship School teachers and participants from the Civil Rights era. Activism is also in the forefront of the discussion, as the histories and narratives of the Citizenship School suggest a literacy practice that moves beyond reading and writing skills and into discussions of critical consciousness and civic freedom. Lathan is explicit in naming literacy within a social constructivist paradigm, and aligns her work with that of social

historians who attempt to examine the ideological and functional relationships between literacy and broader political ideals (xxiii). *Freedom Writing* is a moment of recovery as Lathan urges readers to follow her on an exploration of the Citizenship School for an innovative perspective on literacy, of which will come a revised vocabulary for discussing the literacy histories of marginalized groups (xiii).

Chapter one begins the act of recovery by first tracing the histories of her main term “gospel literacy.” Lathan starts with a brief history of gospel, tracing the term back to Thomas Dorsey in 1932 who coined it as a music genre. Gospel music extended beyond Negro spirituals because of its inclusion of secular rhythms with spiritual lyrics, while Negro spirituals were primarily in a European musical style pushed onto African American people. They also differed in that spirituals “rested on a fantasy of hoping for a better life in the hereafter, but gospel held tight to the promise of a better life right now” (1).

Lathan then moves into a working definition of gospel literacy, starting first by naming and explaining four fundamental components of gospel consciousness: call-



and response, acknowledging the burden, bearing witness, and finding redemption. “Call-and-response” might be thought of as an expression of both ritualized communal unity and a spontaneous expression of individual freedom (9). It is a way of knowing, and it makes literacy participatory and not something to be observed from afar (10). “Acknowledging the burden” relies on the conviction that history and power are synonymous. Understanding this component as foundational to gospel literacy is essential as it represents a moving past suffering and despair through demonstrating how history changes when people take authority over their literacy practices (18). The meaning of “bearing witness” draws from Geneva Smitherman’s definition of testifying, as Lathan quotes Smitherman’s description as “a ritualized form of black communication in which the speaker gives verbal witness to the efficacy, truth and power of some experience in which all blacks have shared” (18). Lathan hails bearing witness as foundational to gospel literacy, since her goal is to seek a definition of literacy that exists at the intersections of the individual and the community. Bearing witness accomplishes this by communicating life-giving or life-changing experiences and relating them to larger social systems.

The fourth component, finding redemption, illustrates the importance of recovery in Lathan’s project. Drawing on Zora Neale Hurston, Lathan claims that the concepts of understanding and interpreting histories provide moments to consider theoretical intellectualisms that intersect with African American cultural norms (23). Finding redemption is then pivotal to the project, as it demonstrates, “a means of explaining how deep cultural resources that develop in the church and spiritual life transfer to a secular context as intellectual and spiritual strategies that enhance literacy activism,” all of which, in this instance, might be done through a recovery of the Citizenship School narrative (24). The strength in chapter one lies in Lathan’s framing of gospel literacy, but it isn’t until the subsequent chapters that readers witness the complexity of the frame when told through the Citizenship School narrative.

Chapter two begins the exploration of gospel literacy as seen in the Citizenship School narrative through the gospel component of acknowledging the burden. The burden in this instance had to do with the issues presented to African Americans in the Reconstruction era as they fought state mandates that utilized literacy as a tool to exclude blacks from voting, which would then exclude them from shaping the political atmosphere of the communities they inhabited. Lathan maps the history of the Citizenship School that arose in the Sea Islands of South Carolina, claiming that participation in these schools were “fueled by the failed attempts of the local and federal governments to sponsor adult literacy initiatives for African Americans” (38). The success of the Sea Island Citizenship School might be attributed to an ability to acknowledge and understand the areas where past practices failed. Lathan also attributes it to the adoption of a philosophy that believes in the dignity, knowledge, intellectual competence, and capacity for growth possessed by adult learners despite their level of reading, writing, or other academic experience (39).

Call-and-response takes center stage in chapter three, as Lathan utilizes it to illustrate and theorize communal performances that were on the intersections of literacy acquisition and civic freedom. She begins with the call, marking it as

the moment when Citizenship School teachers and learners Esau Jenkins, Bernice Robinson, and Septima Clark attended a workshop that sought to create solidarity between African American social justice crusades and global social justice movements. The end of the workshop involved a series of questions (the call) that asked participants, “What are we going to do when we get back home? How are we going to transmit our experiences this week back in our community?” (44). Esau Jenkins responded with a call of his own that emphasized high levels of illiteracy in his community, all of which had a negative impact on voter registration. It is out of Jenkins’s call that the instantiation of the Citizenship Schools would occur.

As Jenkins, Robinson, and Clark began their literacy work with the participants in the Sea Island Citizenship School, the need grew for something deeper than just literacy gains for the sake of voter registration. Lathan notes this as she quotes Bernice Robinson, who stated,

...we accepted the black school, we accepted the whites and the colored fountain as a way of life. I knew that there was a lot illiteracy around me, but I accepted that as a fact, that there was nothing you could do about it.... When Esau started talking about it, then, you know, it started to really coming through and something to think about. People can’t read, you know. So he turned a whole workshop around; [laughs] everybody became interested in this, you know? (51)

Robinson’s words resonated with various experiences of the participants in the Citizenship School, with some connecting more with the sovereign freedom they gained through literacy acquisition (66). Lathan acknowledges the necessity for such a variety in her theorizing, stating, “call-and-response is a process that acknowledges diverse voices and diverse experiences, including the meaning(s) of civic freedom, within participants’ teaching and learning activities” (66).

In chapter four, Lathan looks at the curriculum as well as the interactions within the Citizenship School classes, using the component of “bearing witness” as a lens. Lathan’s argument that gospel literacy rests at the intersection of both literacy acquisition and social activism continues in this chapter. She notes that the Citizenship School curriculum required learners to not only become aware of the problems in their world and the worlds of others, but also to begin asking questions and proposing solutions (78). Lathan brings in Paulo Freire’s framing of critical consciousness in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to aid in making sense of the class and curriculum experiences of the Citizenship School. One explicit connection occurs in the teachers’ desire to not be seen as expert in the eyes of students, illustrated when Lathan quotes an unidentified teacher, stating, “I tell people, I’m not Jesus Christ. I didn’t die on the cross for you. I cannot carry you over to Canaan. You have to walk over there for yourself” (89). Such a statement brings up Freire’s conception of co-intentionality as a key factor in a liberating education, as it suggests that students must claim agency *with* their teachers and be recognized as Subjects that can both critically know their realities and take ownership of their knowledges (Freire 69).

Lathan ends chapter four by analyzing a class interaction that demonstrates how a class focused on completing a voter registration application transitioned into a means of testifying and sharing ways of knowing (96). The interaction between the students and instructor show various instances of students questioning language that traditionally disenfranchised African American people, one example being *pardoned* as a term that carried significant social and political implications (103). Lathan notes that participants in those moments don't accept quick definitions of terms. Instead, they wish to discuss what it means on various levels, from them, to the registrar, to the State of South Carolina (103–4). The final chapter focuses on the example of Bernice Robinson as a model for the fifth component, finding redemption. In further defining this fifth component, Lathan states that finding redemption is the overarching theme of gospel literacy as it is a theoretical interpretive concept that disrupts the myth that names grassroots literacy acquisition and use as basic, simple, or mechanical (106). The history of Bernice Robinson and her work with the Citizenship School are a paradigm of gospel literacy, as her narrative illustrates a moment where an intense spiritual and cultural way of being worked as literacy activism in a political context (107).

Lathan claims that Bernice Robinson engaged in a “finding redemption” ideology by insisting on having a place in the history of the Citizenship Schools (107). While Robinson's role in literacy acquisition among African Americans in the civil rights era has been historically diminished, her participation in interviews in the late 1970s (as well as her story recounted by Lathan) illustrate the ability for memory to be critical part to redemption. Lathan claims that memory itself can be considered composition, as we continually revise our memories, rewriting them into stories that bring understanding (109).

The place of redemption and recovery in Lathan's conception of gospel literacy not only provides an overarching theme, but also provides readers with a call that is best communicated with Lathan's own words:

My efforts of recovery through this book are aimed toward one goal: if I can link the grassroots literacy activities of African American Civil Rights Movement to contemporary literacy issues, then many troubled students in community literacy programs, especially black women who are otherwise at risk for harmful activities, might identify with these ordinary grassroots heroines and focus their energies in a creative direction. (112)

Lathan's attempt to recover the narratives of historically marginalized grassroots literacy activists speaks to the necessity for a continued recovery of similar histories as well as the continued connection of such histories to contemporary issues. Such connections create possibilities for others to continue the work of literacy activism that will be necessary in impacting our respective communities during this time of political division and uncertainty. Possibly best suited for those readers with an interest in adult education as well as those involved with grassroots community programs, the histories of literacy activists like Bernice Robinson reminds scholars, teachers, and

students alike that community literacy work can recognize and recover the literacy histories of marginalized groups. These histories also ask that we remember the spiritual components of literacy in addition to the alphanumeric.

Works Cited

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Trans. Myra Berman Ramos. New York: Continuum, 1990. Print.