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## Toward a Literacy of Promise: Joining the African American Struggle

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trial. These examples illustrate how people from the outside often have comparative social power.

In acknowledgement of this power differential, Coogan engages in a set of ethical best practices throughout the project.<sup>2</sup> For example, he purposely did not read background information offered to him about the participants' crimes. This distancing allows the writers to reveal this information when they are ready. Secondly, all participants gave final approval for the way their writing appears in the book, and they were given the option of using a pseudonym. In a consent form, Coogan also made it clear that the writers could stop participating at any time. Notably, workshop participation did not obligate them to publish in the book. These measures provide opportunities for agency and indicate a profound respect for participants. Finally, Coogan and the writers made publication decisions together. In opposition to a top-down model in which the program facilitator decides how and when the stories enter the public sphere, publication with an academic press was a collective decision. As more people venture into the uncharted territory of carceral writing, it is clear that we need to think carefully about power and ethical practices. This work offers a crucial step in the right direction.

The writing workshop has been succeeded by Open Minds, a program Coogan founded in 2010, that enables incarcerated people to take courses with college students and faculty from Virginia Commonwealth University. In addition, Coogan invites former participants of the project to speak in his prison literature classes. These approaches, along with *Writing Our Way Out*, are critical for countering monolithic conceptions of people who are incarcerated. The stereotypes circulating in the public sphere are counterproductive to the shift in public opinion needed for meaningful intervention in the broken U.S. criminal justice system. As a counterpublic text, this book provides a valuable blueprint for scholars, educators, and activists to become part of the intervention, and ultimately, the solution.

## Endnotes

1. While referring to Coogan by his last name and the workshop participants by their first names might suggest a hierarchical relationship, I have chosen to use the participants' first names, as is done throughout the book.
2. For a more detailed discussion of ethical best practices with incarcerated writers, see Hinshaw and Jacobi (2015).

## Works Cited

Hinshaw, Wendy Wolters and Tobi Jacobi. "What Words Might Do: The Challenge of Representing Women in Prison and Their Writing." *Feminist Formations* 27.1 (2015): 67–90. *Project Muse: Premium Collection*. Web. 17 Nov. 2015.

## *Toward a Literacy of Promise: Joining the African American Struggle* Edited by Linda A. Spears-Bunton and Rebecca Powell

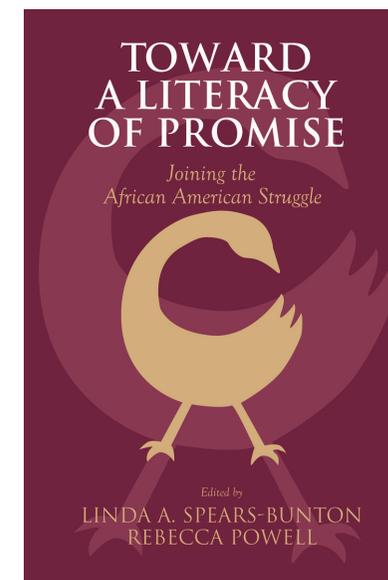
New York: Routledge, 2009. 208 pp.

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Linda Spears-Bunton and Rebecca Powell's anthology of essays is an invitation to literacy activists to stand up for the education of historically marginalized communities and a guide of culturally relevant pedagogy for the teachers fatigued by the monotony of the canon. The teacher-scholars featured in *Toward a Literacy of Promise* not only ask us to consider joining in this culturally responsive pedagogy, a literacy of promise, but offer us a comprehensive look at the challenges marginalized groups have faced in classrooms while bestowing feasible solutions to the archaic demands of historically conservative pedagogy. Readers of *Community Literacy Journal* will thoroughly enjoy this text for it is seminal for any teacher engaging with millennial students. The essayists mark this generation as new readers of everything, of texts, images, their lives and society, critically defining literacy as an engagement and the "ability to function in the world" (152). The literacy of promise is a hope toward a more whole and liberal, truly liberating, education and classroom.

This text is organized well, containing a foreword by Lisa Delpit, an introduction by Rebecca Powell, and then three sections that work as a pathway to progressive education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Each of the ten chapters end in discussion questions to reflect on and further the chapter's details and activities that bring theory and practice to the fore.

Powell's introduction, chapter one, defines the literacy of promise as "a literacy that potentially empowers students and teachers and that gives them a voice. A literacy of promise requires students to negotiate meaning and to be actively engaged in discerning relationships of power and repression in society" (xiii). Literacy here is magnified conceptually beyond simply reading the written word; instead, literacy—as a concept—invites learners of all kinds to read their lives and experiences as



ones influenced by power relations. The readers are asked to be critical of these relationships and use the literacy of promise to rethink or reroute their practices.

The first section is entitled “Problems and Promises”—herein the writers delineate societal and historical situations where literacy plays an integral role and how a literacy of promise is able to counteract these problems. The second chapter, entitled “Along the Road to Social Justice: a Literacy of Promise,” is written by the two editors, leading the way to understanding the critical nature of literacy. Spears-Bunton and Powell find literacy to be a catalyst toward gaining cultural capital—a major contributor to the power and privileges to write, change, enforce, and amend rules and laws that govern societies. Throughout the text, the writers focus on how schools and classrooms are appropriate spaces to dismantle these powers that have been historically reserved to certain classes and bestow voice to all. The literacy of promise “intentionally presents a challenge to the status quo” (23), which is illustrated in questioning the texts we teach and the presumptions we make about students of color.

There is a history of what schools have deemed acceptable in terms of speech, writing, and study. Spears-Bunton and Powell inform us that conservative and ill-functioning pedagogy, which they name schooled literacies—an older canon of methods and books by writers who are not culturally relevant to underrepresented groups (these writers are normally upper-class, white, cisgendered men)—enforce hierarchies of power. These hierarchies distance power away from oppressed groups, deeming them unreliable to engage or manage their space and voice in the classroom and society. Teachers must assess the validity of multicultural (and countercultural) texts if they are willing to join in the literacy of promise and African American struggle, for it is through those texts that the literacy of promise can “give rise to social consciousness” and transcend “the boundaries of class, race, gender, ignorance, hopelessness and learned helplessness” (37).

Spears-Bunton and Powell ask educators and activists to question their assumptions about a multicultural canon, non-mainstream literacies, and the spectrum of language acquisition skills. Literacy is learned and performed in and outside of the classroom and understanding how to teach students to apply those literacies in and outside of the classroom will benefit them to a greater degree than teaching material that is not relevant to their experiences. Spears-Bunton and Powell conclude the chapter by stating their mission, which is lifetime occupation of working with *all* people “along the road toward social justice” (37). The “all” is demonstrated well in the following chapters, where the writers, from a number of disciplines and backgrounds, execute different case studies and strategies that work toward the literacy of promise.

Chapter 3 asserts reformation is needed in multicultural literacy classrooms. Written by Letita Hochstrasser Fickel, “Unbanking’ Education” discusses what unbanking practices look like within literacy classrooms. She critiques the conventional classroom for its omniscient professor who lords over the feeble-minded student. This kind of class reiterates and solidifies a hierarchal power

structure and makes for passive regurgitators of information as well as rendering a multiplicity of cultural experiences and learning styles irrelevant. Fickel reframes the classroom as a space where all are learners and teachers simultaneously. Students, under the mandate of the literacy of promise, are asked to be active and forward-thinking critics of the world around them. This ideology is based on Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *The Politics of Education* where he recommends students study the world critically rather than simply living *in* it uncritically.

Fickel’s chapter relies heavily on the work of Freire, almost too much so. While Freire’s work is definitely seminal to anyone who works in the convergence zone of academia and social justice, this chapter is too dependent on Freire’s work. The exploration of Freire’s work, via several theoretical frameworks, ultimately allowed for greater analysis wherein Fickel could lay bare her own thoughts on liberating education for African American classrooms where everyday texts, magazines, commercials, music videos, etc., can be used to examine one’s life and society toward the aim of critical literacy.

Chapter 4 completes and compliments the first section well. Spears-Bunton writes with Sherman G. Helenese and Kimberly L. Bunton in chapter 4, titled “Resistance, Reading, Writing, and Redemption: Defining Moment in Literacy and the Law,” to both complete and compliment the first section of the book. This chapter is a timely call for educators to understand the high stakes of reading, writing, and literacy for historically underprivileged communities. This is a chapter in which teachers of English, history, political science, and sociology will be most interested. The scholars featured in this chapter argue that there is a “symbiotic relationship between literacy and the law” (57). Literacy in the U.S. functions as a humanizing force and a vehicle for political participation and citizenry. The authors suggest that the struggle for literacy is related to the quest for “human dignity, efficacy, and authenticity” (59). Throughout the chapter, the writers explore laws and policies that have adversely impacted the political participation of people of color in America from Reconstruction through the Civil Rights Movement. This historical mapping is accomplished in not only naming and asserting the power of legal exclusion over oppressed groups, but also in stating the reality of discrimination and what social activists have accomplished to counter the hegemonic force of unjust laws. Spears-Bunton, Helenese, and Bunton complete this chapter with a literacy test that can be used to demonstrate these realities and for discussion of the critical nature of literacy and democratic participation.

In the section titled “Realizing a Literacy of Promise through Literary Texts” and the two chapters therein, the authors do not make the case for their argument using texts that are often employed in writing classrooms. While this may seem like a problem at first glance, the point of the literacy of promise is to incorporate and analyze unconventional texts from multiple perspectives, so the writers of this section are in good keeping with the thematic concerns Spears-Bunton and Powell make manifest. Introducing and juxtaposing these new(er) voices against the continuum of schooled literacy is a constructive and smart move.

Julia Johnson-Connor and Arlette Ingram Willis wrote chapter 5, “Educational, Controversial, Provocative, and Personal”: Three African American Adolescent Males Reflect on Critical Framing *A Lesson Before Dying*.” Within the chapter, Johnson-Connor and Willis interview three of their students, using their responses to Ernest Gaines’ novel and stories about school experiences as the focus for the chapter. This makes for an honest narrative where the students can express their relationship to writing, literature, and social justice. Johnson-Connor and Willis preface the students’ stories with how they conceptualized a “Minority Authors” elective course that focuses on African American texts and then share some of the assumptions faculty colleagues have on the subject of teaching beyond the canon. They interview three male students, Vincent, Ahmad, and Clarence, before and after reading *A Lesson Before Dying*, and charted the differences between the students’ answers to questions about the text. They were specifically questioned about their definition or vision of a “perfect world” and before reading Gaines’ text, the answers were not engaged or thoughtful at all about their world(s) or life. There was a marked difference in their answers after reading, one that seemed to contend with how race and discrimination affected their lives.

Chapter 6 is a call for white female teachers to consider using multiple perspectives and multicultural texts. Spears-Bunton’s “The Obscured White Voice in the Multicultural Debate: Race, Space, and Gender” investigates Paula’s classroom. The teacher asks compelling rhetorical questions at the outset of the chapter: “What happens to a Black kid who never gets to read a book written by a Black author? How do the White kids feel about the emphasis on Black literature?” (106). Paula’s questions about difference and curriculum is a double-edged sword. Her school had a subtle mandate to avoid racial topics, but Paula found this kind of monocultural teaching unacceptable in that it enforces cultural blindspots and ignorance about the world in which we live.

Spears-Bunton’s initial questions, in chapter 6, lead the reader to believe that the chapter will focus on Black students’ experiences with Black texts (perhaps for the first time) in the classroom. However, Spears-Bunton refocuses the question toward white students’ first time experiences with Black texts. She does this in order to demonstrate how multicultural texts can have a culturally relevant and positive impact on all students. White students complete interviews in order to demonstrate and expand their understanding about how distance and difference work in white students’ engagement in texts from other cultural groups. Bridging these gaps are a large part of the literacy of promise, as the writer reminds us in the conclusion of the chapter, “Moving toward a literacy of promise is not without risk. . . . [S]ilence does not resolve cultural ambiguity, contradiction or conflict;” in fact, silence may lead to further conflict (119–20). The third section of chapter 6, “Realizing a Literacy of Promise through Oral and Popular Texts,” Spears-Bunton exhibits how the millennial student and teacher can engage in critical literacies and create supportive educational environments for students from historically oppressed and marginalized groups.

The often-fought battle of Black English’s place in the classroom is fought by Ira Kincade Blake in chapter 7, “Ebonics and the Struggle for Cultural Voice in U.S. Schools.” While this chapter can be used to assess high school students’ silence and voice, she posits that a study of elementary schools is necessary to chart cultural voice in the classroom. All children, she claims, come to school equipped with their home languages, what she calls “the cultural backpack” (139). Once they enter school, these home languages are placed into categories of acceptability; school then becomes a cultural battleground that creates borders for what is worth voicing and in whose dialect. The results of this are often Standard English registers are embraced as Black English speech is shut down. Blake argues that language is raced and classed and that schools create and police students differently. Blake extends this analysis by asking the reader to recall George W. Bush’s presidency and his linguistic performances. The chapter examines how Bush’s race and class allow for protection of his status and title despite his “bad” English. Blake ultimately asks us all to make classrooms and schools that are supportive of the differences in linguistic performance and standards of communication across cultures.

Jessica S. Bryant’s chapter “The Potential of Oral Literacy for Empowerment” pairs well with Blake’s immediately prior chapter. This thoughtful chapter-by-chapter organization gives a holistic picture of how orality should be a focus within our classrooms. Bryant uses Blake’s conclusion to discuss how to make supportive classroom spaces, asking us to disrupt the history of teachers-as-gatekeepers-of-knowledge convention that is often seen in classrooms across the country, in different disciplines, from elementary to secondary and higher education. This chapter invites us to make a student-centered classroom where students feel free to discuss and engage in the topics at hand. This kind of classroom makes for better thinkers and readers who critically discern their lives and opinions, instead of merely rehearsing what has been told to them.

Chapter nine is compelling in that the writer’s execution of the literacy of promise is not only one that is performed in the classroom, but also on stage. Karen B. McLean Donaldson writes “Voices of Our Youth: Antiracist Social Justice Theater Arts Makes a Difference in the Classroom” to describe the ways she has used her dramatic arts expertise to invoke the literacy of promise for students who have dealt with racial tension in their schools. Donaldson has worked all over the U.S. and focuses on two specific occasions in inner-city schools where she could instantly tell her students were impacted by the systemic racism. In each of her productions, she asks her students to write and perform spoken word poems and skits that embody how to interpret their relationship to social justice. Donaldson has students enact a literacy of promise on stage that she hopes will extend to their daily lives (172).

The tenth and final chapter by Rebecca Powell enlarges the literacy of promise to “The Promise of Critical Media Literacy.” Powell invites teachers to consider moving beyond the written word in this chapter. Powell cites popular culture as a space that millennial students will engage in their daily lives and will need to reflect critically upon. She says hip-hop, fashion, film, and advertisements are clear

representatives of one's socio-political context and world (189). The writer examines the movies *Black Barbie* and *Baby Boy* in order to discern their worth as multicultural texts to be examined in the classroom. She concludes with a call to arms to English teachers, but I find that this call is for "all" teachers to make important choices about including non-traditional texts in order to have enable transformative classroom experiences.

*Toward a Literacy of Promise* offers provocative suggestions for teachers interested in literacy studies and clearly aspires to reach a wide cross-disciplinary audience. Spears-Bunton and Powell's edited collection challenges readers to think about relationships between language, identity, power, community, subjectivity, pedagogy, literature, and critical literacy. Their work calls scholars and teachers to acknowledge and respect the differences that create human diversity and variability in experiencing, understanding, composing, and critiquing the world. Overall, practitioners and theorists of critical literacy will benefit from the essays in this well-written and well-researched anthology.