

Literacy, Economy, and Power: Writing and Research After *Literacy in American Lives*, edited by John Duffy, Julie Nelson Christoph, Eli Goldblatt, Nelson Graff, Rebecca S. Nowacek, and Bryan Trabold. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2014. 244 pp.

Review by Kristina Fennelly, Kutztown University

Featuring a range of works by eighteen noted scholars, *Literacy, Economy, and Power* continues the diverse inquiries within and surrounding literacy studies. This edited collection functions as both a reflection on Deborah Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives* (2001) and as a response to one of her research questions, namely: "How has literacy learning changed over the last century and how have rising expectations for literacy been experienced as part of felt life?" (4). *Literacy, Economy, and Power* not only seeks to pay homage to the salient contributions provided by Brandt's eighty interviews on the subject of literacy, but it also provides a democratic approach to understanding how literacy functions as privilege, how economic standing and sponsorship shape access, and how power informs reading and writing practices. This collection offers tools for expanding pedagogical practices and interrogating theoretical frameworks in chapters that successfully complement and challenge Brandt's work. Overall, the volume is a conscientious invitation to scholars to reexamine definitions in, approaches to, and uses of literacy studies.

The editors outline three specific purposes of the collection: (1) to examine the influence of Brandt's work on literacy by asking contributors to detail how their own scholarship has been shaped in historical, conceptual, methodological, and pedagogical ways; (2) to convene the most current and relevant research taking place in literacy studies; and (3) to mark the span of more than a decade since Brandt's work was published. The volume's three sections consider the historical impact of literacy studies; the present use, value, and estimation of literacy; and the future of literacy research, theory, and practice. Ultimately, each section offers an inquiry-driven text that seeks to respond to and model the generative nature of questions initiated by Brandt's work.

The first section of the collection, "Looking Back at Literacy: What It Did to Us; What We Did with It," features chapters by Ellen Cushman, Rhea Estelle Lathan, Carol Mattingly, and Morris Young, and embodies the historical perspective at the core of Brandt's book. The section provides a nuanced consideration of sponsorship and the cultural and economic forces surrounding it. Of particular interest is the way in which Cushman's chapter draws on five years of research to offer a portrait of regional histories of literacy, namely that of the Cherokee Nation. Her work challenges Brandt's definition of sponsorship by asserting that rather than only exhibiting power over those acquiring literacy,

sponsors are also “often beholden to the very people who sponsored them in the first place” (15). To illustrate this distinction, Cushman meticulously details the complicated history of Elias Boudinot, the first editor of the *Cherokee Phoenix*, showing how he sought to mediate the demands of the newspaper’s white and Cherokee audiences. Although he preserved the use of Sequoyan in the tribe and provided literacy access to the Cherokee by publishing their language in the newspaper, history has often represented him as a traitor due to his alignment with white sponsors. Although several scholars read Boudinot as embracing a hegemonic view of literacy that sought to undermine his own people, Cushman offers a fresh and objective perspective on Boudinot’s legacy and the complications of literacy sponsorship.

The second section of the collection, “Looking at Literacy Now: A Tool For Change?” offers chapters by Julie Nelson Christof, Kim Donehower, Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu, Beverly J. Moss and Robyn Lyons-Robinson, and Paul Prior, among others. Like Cushman’s chapter in the opening section, Eli Goldblatt and David A. Jolliffe’s contribution to section two, “The Unintended Consequences of Sponsorship,” also pushes at the borders of Brandt’s definitions, although their focus is on the economic rather than the cultural implications of literacy sponsorship. Goldblatt and Jolliffe take issue with what they see as Brandt’s too-narrow conception of the power dynamics at play between sponsors and the communities they serve. While they do not negate the advantages sponsors gain through their activities, they nonetheless emphasize that literacy sponsors and literacy networks also take risks, and through those risks “can be harmed, altered, or even transformed by the population and pedagogy they contract to teach” (128). Drawing on Jolliffe’s fieldwork from the Arkansas Delta Oral History Project—an educational initiative sponsored by the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville—and Goldblatt’s association with Tree House Books—a Philadelphia neighborhood literacy center supported by Temple University—the chapter contends that institutional sponsors and sponsored populations can mutually benefit. Also of note in section two is Michael W. Smith’s chapter, “Seeking Sponsors, Accumulating Literacies,” which is based on personal and professional conversations with Brandt. Smith makes a case for a closer connection between English education and composition studies as a way to interrogate, extend, and challenge definitions of literacy. One way to achieve this improved partnership is by “accumulating literacies,” which Smith—by way of Brandt—defines as “creating new and hybrid forms of literacy” (162). Smith argues for the import of “transfer,” wherein pedagogical practices equip “students for the literacy learning in which they will engage both in and out of our classrooms” (163).

Readers can find examples of accumulating literacies and best practices in section three, “Looking Forward at Literacy: The Global and Multimodal

Future,” which marks the shortest section of the collection and contains contributions from Cynthia L. Selfe and Gail E. Hawisher, Harvey J. Graff, and Anne Ruggles Gere. Each contribution examines Brandt’s question, “Can mass writing claim a moral authority powerful enough to transform the social institutions that were organized to serve readers over writers?” (229). In “Beyond *Literate Lives*: Collaboration, Literacy Narratives, Transnational Connections, and Digital Media,” Selfe and Hawisher argue that literacy narratives composed through a range of mediums help writers form and articulate identity. By observing ways in which individuals are “composing themselves into the fabric of an increasingly technological world,” Selfe and Hawisher renew Brandt’s purpose to locate meaning in our personal relationships and through evolving approaches to literacy (194). As Selfe and Hawisher’s and Ruggles Gere’s contributions both emphasize, writing now appears to trump reading given the growth of social media and the exchange of digital rhetoric. This shift, they contend, will have profound implications on not just scholarship in literacy studies, but on the nature of literacy itself. Indeed, this final section compels all readers to learn more about the rise of writing in the literate world, and revisiting Brandt’s work through the lenses provided in *Literacy, Economy, and Power* offers a concrete approach to doing so. Because the contributors’ research reflects Brandt’s influence on their own work, these essays speak to each other in meaningful ways. Though the dominant thread in the volume focuses on the complexities of sponsorship—and thus places less emphasis on other fascinating issues in literacy studies—it is successful in its interrogation of how economic, political, and cultural forces come to bear on access to literacy. Overall, *Literacy, Economy, and Power* provides a rich variety of essays that readily invite readers to affirm the value, relevance, and ongoing evolution of literacy sponsorship and literacy studies today.

Kutztown, Pennsylvania

Works Cited

Brandt, Deborah. *Literacy in American Lives*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. Print.