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What No Literacy Means: Literacy Events in the Absence of Literacy

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... This essay argues that by expanding our conception of a “literacy act” to include the denial of literacy, it is possible to gain a greater understanding into how the politics of literacy are enacted both historically and in the current moment.

I open this essay with images of two literacy events: 1) In Detroit, a junior high school student skips school to avoid a spelling test, his certain failure punishable by a strike on the hand with a stick; 2) In Lawrence, Kansas, an inmate sits alone in a jail cell with nothing but his clothes and a Bible. The Detroit student’s day revolves around avoidance of that most common of school literacy events: the spelling test. His refusal to participate structures his time. Regardless of what the boy does that day, I suggest that his truancy is also a literacy event, but because of the literacy that isn’t there. In solitary for disciplinary reasons, the prisoner in Kansas could have no book (aside from the Bible), no notebook, and no writing implement; this denial of literacy is part of his punishment. Literate materials are forbidden and so not present, an absence I suggest that also makes this a literacy event.

In a series of oral histories of adult literacy students I conducted for my dissertation, I heard several versions of a story with this rough outline: If I failed the spelling test, I would get beaten, so when there was a spelling test, I avoided school. These histories highlight the connection between school failure and punishment, a connection that motivated



students to stop attending school. School literacy invoked fear, pain, and humiliation, and confirmed for students their inability to succeed academically. (I discuss these histories further in Branch 2003.) I suggest that avoiding these school literacy events was itself a literacy event of profound consequence for many of these students, and central to personal histories of educational underachievement and alienation.

At the Douglas County Jail in Lawrence, Kansas, former jail policy, according to the current program director, denied access to books, paper, or writing utensils for prisoners confined in solitary except for one hour a day, this hour also the only opportunity for out-of-cell exercise. This policy clearly augmented the deprivation at the center of punishment in solitary: boredom, silence, and seclusion. Such regulation of literate materials is evident in the first United States penitentiaries, and in their unsuccessful attempts at reforming prisoners. In early Quaker penitentiaries, for example, extended solitude with only a Bible did not produce the intended contrite and rehabilitated criminals. The absence of literacy (and the presence of the Bible) in solitary confinement ties this event to the history of corrections in the United States and emphasizes the institutional value of regulating literacy as an aspect of punishment. Again, a literacy event exists because of the lack of literacy in it.

According to the term's definition and long usage, however, calling something a literacy event in the absence of literacy is a contradiction. Literacy events have typically required the presence of a literate text. In this paper, I explore literacy events that have no literacy in them, that *are* literacy events, more precisely, because of that absence. My particular interest is not to provide a definitional nuance to a central term of the field, but rather to explore these literacy events as manifestations of typically successful uses of literacy as a tool of control, domination, and/or oppression. In particular, I explore the official educational value of enforcing the absence of literacy or of certain types of literacy.



In some ways, New Literacy Studies as a field developed from an intense interest in the presence of literacy in cultural and social practices, in its ideological functions and purposes. I begin my exploration of absence by examining that presence, especially through the development of terms such as “literacy events” and “literacy practices.” As a concept, the *literacy event* provided a micro-level perspective that helped usher in a field given to questioning grand claims about the consequences of literacy and what Brian Street calls the “great divide” (7) between orality and literacy. Interactions around texts, around reading books or writing checks or singing songs, were moments that declared the agency of the non-powerful, the “less literate.” I examine the ways in which New Literacy Studies celebrated such agency as against the powers of literacy over orality that had previously shaped the study of literacy.

But what of those places where literacy, or particular sorts of literacy, become banned or forbidden? I examine two such examples in this paper. First, during the Antebellum South in the United States when anti-literacy laws proliferated and made it illegal for slaves to learn, or for anyone to teach them, how to read and write. By the terms of the model I introduce, when such laws were in effect, anytime a slave wasn’t learning to read or write should be understood as a literacy event. Second, in 1994 Congress made prisoners ineligible for Pell Grants, which led to an overwhelming reduction in the college programs in prisons throughout the United States. So, anytime a qualified inmate is not enrolled in college classes should be understood as a literacy event.

Here, a dynamic counter to the impulses of New Literacy Studies is at work. Restrictions on literacy enforce boundaries between powerful and weak, between oppressors and oppressed, between teachers and taught. Literacy, in these examples, is a threat that becomes, through denial, a tool of the powerful. Denying literacy is a punishment, but it punishes by refusing to allow what seems, from an official perspective,



at worst dangerous (in the case of literacy education for slaves) and at best counterproductive to the act of punishment itself (in the case of denying Pell Grants for prisoners).

This power of literacy—not to change positively the cultures or people who become literate or enact practices that challenge domination, but to control, label, punish, deprive, and limit access—serves a critical function for managing both educational and social systems. The enforced absence of literacy creates contexts in which a lack of literacy is both natural and reinforcing. Slaves restricted from learning to read and write are easily represented as less intelligent, less capable of learning to read and write, than their masters. So, after Reconstruction, literacy laws designed specifically as a racist tool of political domination can appear instead as a rational limiting of the vote only to citizens intellectually qualified to make informed political decisions. These laws, unlike the Antebellum anti-literacy laws, never directly referred to race, a fact which only made the disenfranchisement of African Americans seem more justifiable and natural.

Likewise, in a bizarre inversion of standard social values around education, the desire on the part of prisoners to continue their education merits not celebration and encouragement but contempt and suppression. Prisoners, by the very fact of their legal incarceration, forfeit any right to state-supported self-improvement. The availability and success of college programs in prisons before the denial of Pell Grant to prisoners become an affront within a politically powerful tough-on-crime rhetoric. Imprisonment could be represented as an unjust reward and prisoners as parasites feeding on more deserving and law-abiding citizens. State-sponsored education in prison appears as a ridiculous proposition, and prisoners, historically undereducated, are required to remain undereducated for political convenience.

Literate absences, then, deliberate and backed by the forces of law and money, aspire, in silence, to silence. They silence slaves, prisoners,



children, and teachers without calling attention to that which is being denied. The absence hides itself, like the student who hides from the spelling test, and it hides as well the agents and laws that created the absence. No—or restricted—literacy education becomes natural on plantations and in prisons, a matter of fact and commonsense.

It is this dynamic I explore in this paper, a dynamic which requires that we examine educational literacy practices that foreground punishment and control and that deny a literacy perceived as a threat or an unearned luxury, a literacy which in either case holds out the promise of an unacceptable and unwarrantable change in status. I do so not to silence in turn, not to suggest that these enforced absences determine on their own the fates of the people they intend to shape. Rather, I hope to remind us that the stories we tell about the powers of literacy itself, about the agencies of local users of literacy can have an absence at the their center, one that overshadows the political effectiveness of restricting literacy as a tool of social control.

The Presence of Literacy in New Literacy Studies

When it appeared in the early 1980s, first in Anderson et. al. and then in two articles by Heath, the concept of the literacy event helped in part to make visible what had previously gone unseen. The term appeared first in an explicitly educational context in research that hoped to broaden the understanding of children's experiences and values around literacy and language when they first arrive in school. The literacy event demonstrated the existence and the complexity of the literacy experiences of low-income children. At its center was the presence of a written text in some way or another.

Anderson et. al. defined a literacy event as “any occasion upon which an individual alone or in interaction attempts to comprehend or produce graphic signs” (59). In “Protean Shapes in Literacy Events: Ever-Shifting Oral and Literate Traditions,” Heath defined a literacy event as:



“Any action sequence, involving one or more persons, in which the production and/or comprehension of print plays a role...a literacy event has certain interactional rules and demands particular interpretive competencies on the part of participants. Some aspects of reading and/or writing are required by at least one party, and certain types of speech events are appropriate within certain literacy events.” (93)

In “What No Bedtime Story Means: Narrative Skills at Home and School,” literacy events are “occasions in which written language is integral to the nature of the participants’ interactions and their interpretive processes and strategies” and include, for mainstream preschoolers, “bedtime stories, reading cereal boxes, stop signs, and television ads, and interpreting instructions for commercial games and toys” (50). Heath’s first definition requires “[s]ome aspects of reading and/or writing”; the second makes “written language” an “integral” aspect of the event, and it is this presence I highlight here primarily, a presence at the heart of all three definitions. Something visible, observable, or identifiable as written material is central to the activity.

To Anderson et. al., the point of studying such events is to connect the preschool experiences of children to their future schooling. As they argue, schools and teachers need such information to better understand their students:

“There is little systematic evidence about the everyday literacy experiences of the children that schools need most to respond to. What evidence there is is collected in ways that force the children’s histories to fit the school’s expectations and therefore may ignore the important parts of the real histories. By investigating the literacy environment of the children in this study...we hope to be able to shed light on the children’s preschool experiences and thereby provide information which schools and teachers can use to help them respond more effectively to low-income and “minority” children.” (65)



The explicit value of their study, then, is educational: teachers will be better able to “respond” to their students with a closer understanding of the literacy skills and experiences they arrive with in their initial schooling.

Heath too emphasizes the educational value of the idea of the literacy event, exploring these events in three separate communities that become linked in part when their children arrive in school. The three communities are familiar to any readers of *Ways With Words*: Maintown (which “represents mainstream, middle-class school-oriented culture” [“No Bedtime” 49] as “a cluster of middle-class neighborhoods in a city of the Piedmont Carolinas” [ibid. 52]), Roadville (“a white working-class community of families steeped for four generations in the life of the textile mill” [ibid. 57]), and Trackton (“a working-class black community whose older generations have been brought up on the land” and now “have found work in the textile mill” [ibid. 57]). Like Anderson et. al., Heath’s work seeks to highlight presence where absences had been assumed. She argues that there is little understanding “about what goes on in story-reading and other literacy-related interactions between adults and preschoolers in communities around the world” and that

“We have even less information about the variety of ways children from *non-mainstream* homes learn about reading, writing, and using oral language to display knowledge in their preschool environment. The general view has been that whatever it is that mainstream school-oriented homes have, these other homes do not have it; thus these children are not from the literate tradition and are not likely to succeed within it.” (ibid. 50)

Heath explicitly sets her sights on debunking both the idea of a literate tradition separate from an oral tradition and the concept of some sort of cultural continuum with orality at one end and literacy on the other:



“The nature of oral and written language and the interplay between them is ever-shifting, and these changes both respond to and create shifts in the individual and societal meanings of literacy. The information to be gained from any prolonged look at the oral and written uses of language through literacy events may enable us to accept the protean shapes of oral and literate traditions and language, and move us away from current tendencies to classify communities as being at one or another point along a hypothetical continuum which has no societal reality.” (“Protean” 115-116)

The experiences of preschoolers, then, reveal that children are not blank slates nor at the oral end of some vague continuum when they arrive at school. What schools recognize as an absence is better understood as a rich panoply of differences.

Heath focuses especially on the “bedtime story,” a common literacy event in Maintown and Roadville. For Heath, the bedtime story is exemplary of the ways in which Maintown families prepare their children for the literacy practices of elementary schooling. “There is a tight linear order of instruction [in school] which recapitulates the bedtime story pattern of breaking down the story into small bits of information and teaching children to handle sets of related skills in isolated sequential hierarchies” (“No Bedtime” 54). By the time Maintown children reach school, “they have learned how to perform in those interactions which surround literate sources throughout school” (ibid. 56). There is still a literacy event called “the bedtime story” in Roadville, but “Roadville adults do not carry on or sustain in continually overlapping and interdependent fashion the linking of ways of taking meaning from books to ways of relating that knowledge to other aspects of the environment. They do not encourage decontextualization; in fact they proscribe it” (ibid. 71). As a result of differences in the structure and rules of literacy events like “the bedtime story,” children from Maintown and Roadville arrive at school differently socialized for the rituals and values of elementary schooling.



More about Trackton and “no bedtime story” later, but what I want to emphasize here is that a close analysis of literacy events—here with the integral presence of a children’s book—allows Heath to point out that children bring with them to school an orientation to written language that fundamentally shapes their experience in school. As a tool of analysis, then, the literacy event suggests abilities and resources in children who previously have been assumed to be outside some amorphous “literate tradition.” The literacy event, that is, reveals a presence where absence had been assumed, and that presence gives—or at least imagines the possibilities of—a voice and an agency to students previously understood as voiceless and without literate resources. By expanding our perspective on what counts as literacy, the concept of the literacy event acts to promote personal agency and educational equity; a goal carried over into a theoretical outgrowth of the literacy event: literacy practices.

Street brought the idea of “literacy practices” into wide usage, citing Heath in the lineage of its development. Referring to the *literacy event* as one of “the key terms in the new literacy studies” (12), Street built onto Heath’s definition:

“I employ ‘literacy practices’ as a broader concept, pitched at a higher level of abstraction and referring to both behaviour and conceptualisations related to the use of reading and/or writing. ‘Literacy practices’ incorporate not only ‘literacy events’, as empirical occasions to which literacy is integral, but also ‘folk models’ of those events and the ideological preconceptions that underpin them” (12-13).

Here, by association, presence remains necessary if not sufficient for understanding the roles literacy plays within and between cultures. Later definitions of literacy practices emphasize that the concept allowed for a way of analyzing that which is not directly observable. Barton and Hamilton, for example, offer literacy practices as “the basic



unit of a social theory of literacy.” “Literacy practices are the general cultural ways of utilising written language which people draw upon in their lives. In the simplest sense literacy practices are what people do with literacy. However practices are not observable units of behaviour since they also involve values, feelings, and social relationships”

(6). They likewise connect practices to events, arguing that “Texts are a crucial part of literacy events, and the study of literacy is partly a study of texts and how they are produced and used. These three components—practices, events, and texts—provide the first proposition of a social theory of literacy, that: *literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts*” (8 emphasis in original). Again, we start with written texts and the observations about how those texts play a role in social and cultural interactions. A discussion of literacy practices gets us beyond empirical descriptions, but their root, still, is in the written texts at their heart.

And that presence, moreover, often works for similar purposes to Heath and Anderson et. al. to suggest that communities and individuals use and value literacy in ways that are typically not recognized from a dominant perspective, and that these subjects have agency in their use of literacy. Perry Gilmore, for example, points out that the literacy skills children demonstrate on the playground of an inner city Philadelphia school—in performances or “steps” that have been strictly forbidden by school authorities, as well as in playing Dungeons and Dragons—are exactly the ones that their teachers claim they don’t have. “The teachers in the study...regularly said that their students couldn’t perform certain word analysis skills, comprehension skills and citizenship skills, though observations of the students’ participation in both steps and D&D demonstrated otherwise” (167). Don Kulick and Christopher Stroud argue that indigenous people in the village of Gapun on Papua New Guinea do not acquire a literacy that “constitutes a kind of potent, active force in itself” (31). Instead indigenous people



use the literacy they acquire for their own purposes, which are not necessarily the goals of teachers and other literacy sponsors:

“The matter has not so much been one of literacy ‘taking hold’ in Gapun, as it has been of Gapuners seizing hold of those dimensions of literacy for which they consider they have the most use. Throughout this process, the wishes and goals concerning literacy of the Church and the school have remained largely peripheral. The villagers of Gapun have their own ideas about reading and writing, generated from their own cultural concerns. It has been and continues to be these ideas, and not externally generated and culturally foreign ones which they apply to the written word in the village. The villagers have not been ‘transformed’ by literacy. If anything, they themselves have ‘transformed’ it.” (55-56)

Highlighting “vernacular literacies” is one of the main points of Barton and Hamilton’s *Local Literacies*, which closely analyzes the literacy events and practices within one particular neighborhood in Lancashire, England. One point in these pieces, and one of the dominant projects of the field of New Literacy Studies, has been to show the complexity and richness of literacy practices in communities where the opposite has typically been assumed.

Deborah Brandt and Katie Clinton describe this impulse to focus on local agency and activity as a shift in the subject position within literacy studies. “The autonomous model of literacy put the technology of literacy in the active subject position, and the human in the passive acted-upon position...ethnographic investigations...shifted the equation...Now it was humans in the active subject position, and the technology of literacy in the passive position” (“Afterword” 254-55). They have argued, beginning in “The Limits of the Local” in 2002, that we should again pay attention to what they call “‘the thingness’ of literacy” (ibid. 256), especially to the idea “that the technologies of literacy enter a dialogue on their own terms, sometimes in conflict with



those that take them up but always worthy of analysis for what they contribute in their own right” (ibid. 256). While they want to maintain attention to “how readers and writers mediate their social world through literate practice,” they also “want to consider the additional question of how literacy acts as a social agent, as an independent mediator” (“Limits” 349). To simplify, just as people do things with literacy, so does literacy do things with people.

Reconsidering “‘the thingness’ of literacy” allows ways of analyzing how it moves through systems, institutions, and people. As I have argued (2007), within settings of literacy education, literacy attaches itself to particular social, cultural, and political projects that are supposed to shape people and societies in particular ways—from rehabilitating prisoners, to creating better workers, to working towards a more democratic and just society. More often than not in educational settings, what literacy is, and what it is supposed to do, is determined less by students and their teachers than by what Brandt has termed “the sponsors of literacy,” or those agencies and institutions that support and promote it.

Shifting our focus beyond the local and taking into account more than the agency of particular users of literacy necessarily requires that we understand literacy acts upon—intentionally or not—those local users. It is this relationship I want to extend into my own analysis. Just as the presence of literacy within activities and events can be understood in ways that go beyond the local, so with the absence or strict regulation of literacy. As literacy events, however, the limits of the local are absolute because the presence of literacy has been denied: it isn’t available for analysis on a local level and thus requires a perspective that takes into account larger systems and institutions.

No Literacy Matters: Absence and the Regulation of Literacy

Again, to think in terms of literacy events without literacy challenges



not only an accepted definition but the rationale behind the coining of the term. In my formulation, not only can a literacy event occur without the presence of a piece of writing, the very absence of that writing makes it a literacy event. Moreover, the absences I am interested in here involve the exercise of explicit control and punishment: literacy practices which seek to deliberately limit the very kind of human agencies literacy studies has often celebrated.

This dynamic becomes even more apparent by looking not at individual images of a prisoner in solitary or a kid skipping school but by examining the deliberate absences created by official educational policies. Such policies often have at their centers anxieties about illegitimate, wrongheaded, threatening, and dangerous educational literacy practices. We can understand certain policies, then, as creating educational literacy events centered on absences rather than on the presence of literacy. For teachers of literacy practices at any level, these absences should matter because they continue to shape student and institutional understanding about the sorts of literacy practices valued and allowed within schools.

Heather Andrea Williams explores the impetus for one manifestation of official educational policy in her discussion of anti-literacy laws in the Antebellum South. Such laws, Williams notes, highlighted the explicit threat literacy presented to the master/slave relationship, which could only be defended by maintaining a strict boundary between the humanity of the master and the baser nature of the slave, by drawing

“a line between slave consciousness and human will. The presence of literate slaves threatened to give the lie to the whole system. Reading indicated to the world that the so-called property had a mind, and writing foretold the ability to construct an alternate narrative about bondage itself. Literacy among the slaves would expose slavery, and masters knew it.” (7)



These threats were no mere abstractions: the first anti-literacy law appeared in 1740, following the 1739 Stono Rebellion in which more than twenty whites were killed as slaves tried to escape South Carolina for Florida. Suspicious that writing had been central in the planning and execution of the rebellion, the colonial legislature of South Carolina passed the following law:

“Whereas the having of slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attended with great inconveniences, *Be it enacted*, That all and every person and persons whatsoever who shall hereafter teach or cause any slave or slaves to be taught to write, or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe in any manner of writing hereafter taught to write, every such person or persons shall for every such offence forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds current money.” (qtd. Williams 207)

By 1800, this law had proven “insufficient for the keeping [of slaves, free Negroes, mulattoes, and mestizoes] in due subordination” and it was thus expanded to curtail all manner of “mental instruction” for a broader range of subjugated underclass (qtd Williams 207). Such laws regularly appeared throughout the South until the Civil War, a rash of them in the early 1830s as the northern abolitionist movement became more heated. Georgia responded to the seizure of abolitionist tracts in 1830 by making it a crime punishable by whipping, fine, or imprisonment to “teach any other slave, negro or free person of colour, to read or write either printed or written characters” (qtd. Williams 204). Louisiana in 1830 took an even harder line. In addition to mandatory imprisonment of any person teaching, permitting, or causing to be taught any slave to read or write, the law singled out

“whosoever shall make use of language, in any public discourse, from the bar, the bench, the stage, the pulpit, or in any place whatsoever; or whosoever shall make use of language in private discourses or conversations, or shall make use of signs or actions



having a tendency to produce discontent among the free coloured population of this state, or to excite insubordination among the slaves therein.” (qtd. Williams 205)

Virginia, North Carolina, Missouri, Mississippi, and Alabama each passed laws specifically forbidding literacy education for slaves. Slaves and free blacks gaining and using literacy threatened to undermine the institution of slavery, both practically—by making rebellion and escape more achievable, and theoretically—by demonstrating that slaves and free blacks were as intellectually capable as their masters.

Williams emphasizes the multiple ways that slaves and others subverted such laws, covertly and at great risk of punishment, and recounts truly heroic narratives of literate accomplishment in the face of such denial. Certainly, these laws did not make it impossible for slaves and free blacks to learn to read and write, and her stories of slaves becoming literate typically involve escape and/or the development of arguments challenging the theoretical justifications of slavery. As with the narratives of local agency and literate presence historically privileged by New Literacy Studies, these accounts of educational literacy events under threat of severe punishment demand our attention; such narratives ought to inspire teachers and students to recognize the limits of official power to deny access to education. Under the terms of such anti-literacy education legislation, we should understand any situation in the antebellum South in which a slave is not learning to read and write as a literacy event, an event occurring at least in part because teaching literacy has been outlawed.

In 1994, as part of the Violent Crime Prevention and Law Enforcement Act, Congress attached an amendment that cut off Pell Grants to prisoners, effectively ending a thriving three-decades-long experiment of college programs in prison. The reason given during debate about the amendment, spurious all, was that offering Pell grants to prisoners rewarded criminal behavior, encouraged it even, at the same time



that it made college education more out-of-reach for the oft-invoked hard-working and law-abiding American citizen. Revoking Pell Grants for prisoners allowed a tough-on-crime Congress to proclaim again its commitment to using prisons as instruments of retribution and deprivation, this by arguing that advanced literacy education is a luxury that should be denied criminals. Within an academic year after prisoners lost Pell Grants, an estimated 40% fewer college programs were available in prisons, with 44% fewer students (Marks). Never easy under any conditions, the provision of college education for prisoners became all but impossible. (For further discussion of the denial of Pell Grants to prisoners, see Branch 2007).

Williams notes that following emancipation, white southerners continued to deny the intellectual capability of blacks and resorted to drastic, often violent, strategies to stop blacks from gaining education: “The shame of it is that this inclination to question black people’s intellect survives. Further, many white people, including some influential ones, still fear the economic and social disruptions that could result if most black children had access to the highest quality education available in this country” (202). Given the continued racial disparity in United States sentencing and imprisonment, denial of Pell Grants seems in keeping with this ongoing legacy of slavery and anti-literacy legislation. According to the most recent statistics, in June 2006, 41% of the more than two million men in custody were African American, with over 100,000 more African American men in prison than whites. African Americans are incarcerated at 6.5 times the rate of white men, and among the African American men ages 25-29, a staggering 11.7% were incarcerated as of June 30, 2006 (BJS 9). The denial of Pell Grants to prisoners thus affects African American men more than any other segment of the population. As with anything else regarding penal policy in the United States, it is impossible not to recognize a racial element behind such a decision. Certainly, penal conditions and demographics rank among the most critical and most ignored contemporary civil rights issues in the United States. The quiet



termination of advanced educational programs within prisons has only augmented the silences surrounding imprisonment in the United States. As with the anti-literacy laws, we should recognize any situation in which a qualified inmate is not attending college classes while in prison as a literacy event, one occurring at least in part because the ability to provide programs of higher education in prison has been legally curtailed.

Such literacy events centered on absence rather than presence, and the practices shaping them, make explicit what Deborah Brandt and Katie Clinton call “the limits of the local.” Analysis of educational literacy events already highlights these limits, simply because the local uses of literacy in any classroom matter only insofar as they are designed to change literacy practices in preparation of a projected future. What matters in settings of literacy education is never simply how students value, understand, and use literacy, but how and why they should learn to value and use literacy differently. But the “limits of the local” are even more absolute in the case of these educational literacy practices. Here, the local only presents negative evidence. In my examples from the prisons and the plantations, understanding literacy practices is literally impossible by attending to local settings because certain types of literacy education have been intentionally and legally eliminated from those settings. Particular local uses of literacy are not even allowable, much less analyzable. The withholding of literacy education is a clear assertion of power and control—that for the social good and as a matter of official policy, some forms of literacy education are properly denied to some people. And the practices emanate in large part at a distance geographically and temporally from the literacy event.

These literate absences, as I have noted, reaffirm themselves by making it more likely that slaves or prisoners will remain uneducated or undereducated. For both slaves and prisoners, this denial of education supports perspectives in which enslavement is justifiable because slaves are less capable than their masters and so necessarily dependent on



them for survival, and in which imprisonment can be understood as caused by the low educational levels of inmates which lead to criminal behavior. Denying literacy education—beginning or advance—to these populations allows arguments in which low literacy and education explain the condition of slaves and prisoners, silencing other potential causes such as racism, a desire for free labor, and the increasingly punitive criminal justice policies that have caused a more than six-fold increase in the prison population in a little over three decades. Social causes, causes that implicate the entire population and not just the slaves and prisoners, become silenced along with the slaves and prisoners.

Conclusion

In “What No Bedtime Story Means,” Heath never explicitly spells out “what no bedtime story means.” Remember that “no bedtime story” reflected the language environment of the working class African American preschoolers from Trackton. Heath’s title suggests what her paper does not directly assert, that “no bedtime story” too is a literacy event, the absence mattering because it does not prepare the children from Trackton for schoolin.hCchildren arrive at school and quickly receive labels that mark them as less capable and intelligent when their differences are more accurately cultural and not cognitive. Of course, to interpret “no bedtime story” as a literacy event risks a condescending readin— that what is most significant about the language practices in Trackton is what isn’t there— a reading moreover very much opposed to Heath’s emphasis in all her work with the three communities. Yet from the point of view of success in schooling, what isn’t there matters a great deal. “No bedtime story,” on a temporal level, becomes a literacy event in relation to future schooling in which “no bedtime story” will have specific and potentially permanent consequences. In relation to the school, “no bedtime story” means that children from Trackton arrive disadvantaged and unprepared culturally for the daily



experience of official education. Of course “no bedtime story” cannot be understood as a deliberate absence from an official perspective, because the bedtime story has not been legally proscribed. But it remains an educational literacy event with absence at its center in any case, and, as a symbolic representation of differences in cultural capital, it creates the conditions, if not the official explanations, for variations in academic achievement.

Of course a focus on culture can itself have other absences, as Catherine Prendergast notes when commenting that Heath, in *Ways With Words*, has “a lacuna around the topic of race” (59). This is not a surprising gap in the book, given that Heath sought to offer guidance for teachers in newly segregated schools; racism is a much more insidious obstacle for teachers and institutions than is ignorance of cultural practices. Still, it is an important absence in part because a neglect of the legacies of racism is inscribed as well into policies around literacy and literacy education throughout the history of the United States. This is of course not true in the anti-literacy laws of the Antebellum South (though it is in the banning of Pell Grants to prisoners). In the post-Reconstruction South, the literacy laws that worked to disenfranchise African Americans for three quarters of a century never mentioned race; instead, the alleged danger to democracy was illiteracy, and to ban illiterate adults from voting protected democracy from ignorance. Literacy, an Antebellum threat that required banning, became instead a marker of proper citizenship that eliminates the very real threat of African-American political power. There is a kind of simple and powerful elegance in these laws, because they used a supposedly objective marker—literacy—to make acceptable racist public policy. After nearly a century of effectiveness, such laws were finally too clumsy and transparent, and were struck down as unconstitutional in 1965. But the term “illiterate” has lost none of its power: how much easier to account for unemployment and imprisonment as marks of an educational failure than ongoing social and racial power imbalance.



At the heart of any deliberate literate absence are literacy practices that justify that restriction. Bans on bilingual education, for example, appear in the context of anxiety over immigration and the threat to English. the absence of sanctioned multilingual literacy events in schools under such a ban should be understood in that larger context. In its progressively more punitive penalties for schools failing to make annual yearly progress, the No Child Left Behind Act limits sanctioned reading instruction to methods it confirms as “scientifically based,” suggesting a prohibition on unscientific methods such as sustained silent reading and regular in-class writing. Again, this Act should be understood in the context of educational literacy practices that seek greater official control over curricula, teachers, and classroom practices. The absence of particular sorts of literacies in such circumstances must be understood as a powerful literacy event, more powerful because it is not visible, empirical, or observable.

Sometimes the literate absences at the heart of literacy events are absolute, as in the case of slaves not learning to read and write: there is no literate text present to shape that event. But even in the case of literacy events with literate texts at their center, like the “scientifically based reading instruction” promoted by NCLB, we must understand that what is eliminated, what is denied a presence, what is made consistently and deliberately absent, is as much if not more a part of these literacy events than what is present. Enforcing absence so effectively as to make that absence an invisible but operative aspect of social and educational policy is a literacy practice that shapes all of the educational contexts—preschool to college—in which teachers of educational literacy practices operate. The absence of literacy matters as much as its presence ever has.



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