Review:
Literacy Hope and the Violence of Literacy: A Bind That Ties Us

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In a solicitation letter for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s Citizenship Education Program in 1961, Septima Clark described its urgent necessity to the owner of the Shuford Mills in Hickory, South Carolina (Letter to Shuford): “There is a great potential for leadership in the South but there are some facts we have to be cognizant of. Facts which look as barriers and really deter the United States in its efforts to keep the peace and maintain the balance of power.” These facts included an “illiterate” population of 10,000,000 in the United States, 27.4 percent of whom lived in South Carolina. Also, “court records show” that “juvenile delinquency and criminal cases stem largely from these poorly prepared human beings.” The Citizenship Education

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Program,” she told the mill owner, “would train these illiterate adults to help themselves become gainfully employed and economically secure.” She requested a $5,000 donation “for the teaching of illiterates throughout the South . . . to change this picture for world power and peace.”

Coming from Clark, this is a remarkable description of the program she had directed since it opened in a small storefront on Johns Island, South Carolina, in 1957, then as a Highlander Folk School project. Clark framed her plea in a familiar tone of crisis, connecting illiteracy to criminality and suggesting that such an overwhelming number of “illiterates” put the power of the United States and the security of the world at risk. Contrast this to her summation of the program in a letter inviting the Civil Rights activist S. S. Seay to speak (1962): “We must educate to defend as they educate to destroy.” The Citizenship Education Program and its earlier iteration, the Citizenship Schools, never intended to address criminality or promise future employment or help secure the international standing of the United States. Specifically, the program existed to assist African Americans throughout the South to register to vote, the end goal to create, in the words of Myles Horton, “intelligent first-class citizens” (145) whose civic and political involvement would foster democratic social change in the South. Clark, however, must have concluded that linking literacy education to a fight against institutionalized racism might not motivate the mill owner, so she turned to other more familiar tropes of literacy.

Those trained in new literacy studies will see in Clark’s fundraising plea Harvey Graff’s “literacy myth” at work, but a basic understanding of the history of the Citizenship Schools and of Clark’s biography make clear that Clark did not see “illiterates” as the cause of social dysfunction, nor teaching them to read as the solution to those dysfunctions. The solicitation letter identifies “illiterates” as the crisis, their massive numbers a threat in so many ways to the sorts of stability and security she marketed to the mill owner. But for the Citizenship Schools, the crisis was not illiteracy, not the collected deficits of a population, but the bureaucratic architecture of racism that oppressed American citizens and prevented them from participating politically in a way that could effect social change. Put a different way, in her case to the mill owner, “illiterates” create a crisis for the workings of “the real world,” while for the Citizenship Schools and the Citizenship Education Program, the crisis was “the real world.”

I introduce this letter not to catch Septima Clark in a moment of hypocrisy or contradiction. Clark, as a recent biography by Katherine Charron makes clear, spent most of her career working as a teacher in segregated public schools that were intentionally and systematically oppressing African Americans, systems designed to preserve a “real world” of Jim Crow race relations and deep economic disparity. Gaining resources in a racist institutional structure—in any institutional
structure for that matter—is often a matter of knowing how to request them in terms recognizable and important to institutional priorities, and Clark’s letter was an example of this sort of rhetorical flexibility. Still, there’s something jarring about this rhetorical shift, something unsettling about the quick availability—and proven effectiveness—of arguments that rely on literacy myths.

I was reminded of this tension when I read the last paragraph of Todd Ruecker’s Transiciones: Pathways of Latinas and Latinos Writing in High School and College, an ethnographic case study of seven students whom Ruecker follows from their senior years in high school through their transitions into college. Ruecker closes his book with a call for writing teachers and researchers to work beyond our own classrooms:

[I]t is vital to advocate for change in broader contexts, producing and disseminating data that convinces policy makers, voters, and others that an English-only education model, underpaid and overworked teachers, and poorly designed standardized tests are contributing to broader social inequalities that will continue to threaten the United States’ dominance in a globalized, knowledge-based economy. The latter part of this argument may not be popular among those in rhetoric and composition, but it is one that must be harnessed in order to play a larger role beyond the writing classroom. (183)

Ruecker has me up to “broader social inequalities,” but I confess to being one of those in the field for whom the latter part of that argument is not popular. Perhaps social inequality does threaten international dominance (though the goals of global domination and social equality seem at odds, historically), but even if so, must I harness an argument to a project I don’t really support—“United States’ dominance”—if I want to play a role beyond the writing classroom?

I don’t mean this as a rhetorical question, since it’s relevant in many ways to all the books under review here. Clark’s letter and Ruecker’s exhortation highlight a bind for literacy practitioners—teachers and scholars—a bind that ties us, and I’m announcing at the front of this review essay that I’ll still be caught in that bind at its conclusion. Such moments remind us that arguments about literacy (and its boogeyman antonym, illiteracy) allow for, perhaps even insist upon, a certain degree of rhetorical flexibility. The idea of literacy slips into familiar commonplaces, hard to resist—or heard whether we mean them or not—in arguments with administrators, the public, our students, ourselves. Literacy’s trailing clouds include the sorts of promises that literacy scholars have learned to distrust, even as we’ve probably heard ourselves make them. Indeed, Michael Harker goes so far as to argue, in The Lure of Literacy, that “the literacy myth is here to stay, and it is quite possible that we need it—or at least the field of composition and rhetoric must act like it does.” This is so, he clarifies, in order “to retain our position in higher education” (129–30).
Like Harker, scholars of literacy over the past several decades have worked to pry apart what Harvey Graff called “the literacy myth,” but as Amy Wan notes in *Producing Good Citizens*,

[Fa]ith in literacy, a kind of literacy hope, still remains the backbone of much literacy instruction, not because those who believe in it are naïve, but because there are material, legal, and political effects of literacy that merit attention . . . Literacy instructors often play a role in imbuing hope and value in literacy, even if only by reinforcing literacy’s importance by teaching it. (7)

These hopes and promises have consequences too, ones that no one else to my knowledge has attempted to enumerate as starkly and angrily as J. Elspeth Stuckey in *The Violence of Literacy*, published twenty-five years ago as I write this. For Stuckey, the promises of literacy education are more often convenient and highly persuasive lies that mask more compelling social functions: “Literacy oppresses, and it is less important whether or not the oppression is systematic or intentional, though often it is both, than that it works against freedom. Thus, the questions of literacy are questions of oppression; they are matters of enforcement, maintenance, acquiescence, internalization, revolution” (64). Our hopes and promises, that is, have the potential—in her argument the near certainty—of harming, oppressing.

Wan is correct, I think, in suggesting that our positions as literacy teachers are central to our production of literacy hope. Scholars of literacy—especially those from rhetoric and composition like me and the authors of these books—are usually teachers of literacy too, likely before they were scholars of literacy, and it remains a difficult task to enter a literacy classroom foregrounding “literacy despair” rather than “literacy hope.” “Literacy oppresses” is as likely to motivate college writing students as it is to garner institutional resources for a first-year writing program. Instead, the syllabi of writing classes typically make literacy promises about critical thinking, citizenship, preparedness, success, betterment, about the good that literacy properly taught and learned will confer upon its students. But when does literacy hope become literacy myth become the violence of literacy? Some version of this question is a bind that ties literacy scholars and practitioners.

As I read them, each of the four recent books under review here engage this question in one way or another. Paul Feigenbaum, in *Collaborative Imagination: Earning Activism through Literacy Education*, directly takes on the possibility of faith in literacy education to advance progressive and democratic social change. Adapted from Bob Moses, “earning activism” (Feigenbaum 4) requires gaining legitimacy among various audiences that have something at stake in the activist goals, a collaborative praxis involving flexibility, dialogue, action, evaluation.
Arguing that contradictions inherent to critical pedagogy—particularly concerning the notion of false consciousness—have “caused many teachers who otherwise support progressive politics to abandon progressive education,” one of Feigenbaum’s goals is “to exhort progressives’ return to the project of earning activism through their teaching and scholarship” (3–4). That is, Feigenbaum seeks to revive the hope that literacy education can serve the ends of progressive social change, that it can do something besides serving what he calls adaptive rhetorics, which “undermine progressive efforts to fight injustice by invoking literacy as a politically and ideologically neutral tool, thus curbing people’s capacities to imagine alternative uses of literacy as well as their own sense of power to effect social change” (7). I see his adaptive rhetorics as an enactment of the violence of literacy, designed to legitimate inequity and normalize social hierarchies. He finds hope—never easily won or wholly realized—in what he calls “activist rhetorics.”

Michael Harker, in *The Lure of Literacy: A Critical Reception of the Compulsory Composition Debate*, explores literacy hope in connection to recurring calls to abolish or reform the required first-year college writing course throughout its history. These polemics, he argues, are often inspired by and reveal “vague and contradictory attitudes about literacy as well as the exaggerated expectations about the consequences of possessing literacy” (17). He sees in such recurring calls “an unproductive and cyclical debate that returns us time and time again to the same starting point: criticizing instructors for not achieving the impossible and pursuing the ostensible problem(s) of illiteracy with mismatched solutions” (5). The notion of the literacy myth is central to Harker’s work: the first-year writing course, he suggests, is likely to be a failure as long as it is judged by the standards of that myth, which fosters “exaggerated expectations about the consequences of possessing a particular type of literacy, as well as the unreasonable expectations of composition to consistently deliver these qualities and characteristics in students” (110). Linking the varied narratives of FYC’s repeated, to Harker’s mind almost inevitable, failure is an anger about the proper good that literacy education has failed to achieve.

Ruecker is directly concerned with the potential and limits of literacy education in his case studies, focusing them on “the role [composition researchers and teachers] play in supporting and hindering students’ transitions into college,” a role he writes “may be smaller than we like to think” (4). He follows the students, whom he met as a volunteer in a predominantly Latinx high school in El Paso, through writing classes from their senior year in high school through their second year in college. Case studies of these students make up four central chapters, titled according to his description of their experiences: “Struggling Transitions,” “Difficult but Successful Transitions,” “Smooth Transitions,” and
“An Unpredictable Transition.” The case studies make clear that students face such complexities across their experiences, from financial difficulties to pregnancy to navigating family life on two sides of a national border, that Ruecker notes, “It is tempting to believe that anything [writing teachers and researchers] do is futile” (155) in addressing the systemic inequities. Ruecker does not succumb to the temptation and offers a theoretical and practical follow-up of the case studies with grounded ideas about how institutions and the field might work to address the issues his case study raises, based in part on his determination to turn away from narratives that blame failure on individual students to the ways that “local, state, and national institutions regularly failed the students in this study” (148).

Wan’s historical exploration of the connections of citizenship to literacy education in the 1910s and 1920s reveal the discursive usefulness of citizenship (like literacy) as “an easy trope because of its immediate associations with positive civic activities.” That power as “an unspecific rhetorical flourish” (19) covers myriad, often contradictory definitions. In federal immigrant education programs, for example, citizenship meant being a good worker “who was punctual, followed the company rules and did not agitate against the factory owner” (68). In labor education during the same period, however, citizenship could be connected to an ability “to question the status of workers in the industrial economy and then figure out ways to fight against employers using the means available to workers as citizens” (92). Invoking citizenship as a goal, she makes clear, provides curricula with a veneer of “literacy hope” that can just as easily reproduce the social hierarchies that the concept might otherwise push against.

For Stuckey, “literacy hope” is part of the action of the violence of literacy, because it supports a notion that the robust teaching of English can help address systemic social inequities. Instead, Stuckey argues (in a passage that Wan also quotes), “literacy is a weapon, the knife that severs society and slices the opportunities and rights of its poorest people” (118). Literacy wounds in part by suggesting that the deep economic and social disparities within the United States are somehow linguistically based: “We must understand the extraordinary power of the educational process and of literacy standards not merely to exclude citizens from participating in the country’s economic and political life but to brand them and their children with indelible prejudice, the prejudice of language” (122). Twenty-five years after its publication, I would argue that the conditions generating Stuckey’s fury—the vast gulf between rich and poor, the systems of standardized tests, the use of literacy as a tool that suggests meaningful divisions among American citizens—are stronger than ever. In Stuckey’s analysis, “literacy hope” powerfully distracts us from addressing violent social disparities simply by repeating the promise that literacy is capable of solving them all by itself. Some promise about the vast capacity of literacy typically exists at the
heart of literacy initiatives, of course, whether they be policies or curricula, and these four books engage directly the promises and goals of literacy education, albeit in different ways.

Harker places the goals of literacy education at the heart of his analysis, arguing that much of the historical dissatisfaction with the first-year writing requirement stems from the course’s failure to meet the murky but grand expectations attached to literacy. The regular calls for either the abolition or reform of the FYC—the Great Debate over the course—are sustained, he argues, “not by arguments over composition’s effectiveness (nor quibbles over which pedagogical approach is the best) but by competing attitudes about the nature of literacy” (31), especially about what that literacy should do. For example, a 1911 essay by Thomas Lounsbury, taken up by Harker in Chapter 1, decries the compulsory composition course for failing to develop a strong style and clear thinking in its students, something he sees it as incapable of doing. E.A. Thurber, in 1915, sees the course as overburdened by a charge to “wean [students] from illiteracy by giving them the registered milk of articulation” (qtd. in Harker 39). Harker explores calls for the abolition and reform of the required composition class throughout the twentieth century, up to Sharon Crowley’s Composition in the University. Indeed, as Harker notes, the debate continues today, “and with it, the questions, continuities, and myths of literacy that have perpetuated the argument since the inception of the compulsory composition course over a century ago” (109). We are likely to cycle through such debates, Harker argues, as long as “myths of literacy are not dealt with directly, that is, if they are not identified, complicated, and situated historically and comparatively” (112). The proper goals of literacy education shift according to commentators and historical contexts, but they are typically laden with literacy’s ideological burdens.

Harker’s book stands out for its close attention to ideologies of literacy as they have informed and continue to inform the first-year writing course. He acknowledges throughout that many of the pieces he explores never really define or identify what they mean by “literacy,” and, perhaps as a result, Harker’s argument can be difficult to follow sometimes, both within individual chapters and across chapters. What’s clear is that Harker sees the recurring debate about the first-year course as ultimately unhelpful and often based in ideas about literacy that stem from literacy myths or strong accounts of what literacy should do. By those standards, the first-year course is constantly open to criticism because literacy can never accomplish all the good it is supposed to accomplish. Revisions of the course that do not directly engage this tension, he argues, will simply recreate it in a different form, and complaints about the course will continue. He concludes with a pedagogical way out of the cycle in a proposal for a First-Year Literacy Studies course. That course, he argues, engages the “[i]mplicit
and unacknowledged attitudes about and expectations for literacy [that] are the engine of the Great Debate” (117). Harker doesn’t decry the literacy myth that burdens the first-year writing course; in fact, he says, “it is quite possible that we need it—or at least the field of Composition and Rhetoric must act like it does” (129–30), because it plays a central role “in how we articulate our relevance to those who have a stake in compulsory composition.” There, of course, is another restatement of the bind that ties scholars and teachers of literacy; to legitimatize our field, we rely on the same literacy myth that we’ve often spent a career challenging. Harker’s course proposal is compelling—a broad, complex, and textually rich engagement of ideologies of literacy—and I recommend it especially to teachers who work from a writing studies perspective. As I am about the promises of most curricular reform, however, I remain skeptical about his claim that a compulsory first-year literacy studies program “will remake the field of composition along more progressive and equitable lines and demonstrate once and for all . . . that we are, in fact, literate ourselves” (130). As a response to a course that he argues has historically over-promised, he seems to burden it with new and just as complicated promises.

Like Harker, Wan explores tensions around the goals attached to literacy education, especially as they relate to citizenship. In her comprehensive and engaging opening chapter, Wan engages theories of citizenship, especially in relation to literacy education that invokes citizen production as a goal, exploring two central questions: “First, why is citizenship a faithful goal of literacy instruction? In turn, why is literacy so often used to cultivate citizenship” (17)? Citizenship, she notes, appears within syllabi or studies of writing pedagogy as a way to connect them “to external motive and a broader significance” (20) and solidify their relevance. Further, representations of writing pedagogy often link it to the sort of participatory action associated with citizenship, in particular through interaction with the public sphere: “Calls for increased public discourse and public engagement are seen as a way to cultivate a richer sense of citizenship” (21). Such approaches are premised upon beliefs that Wan calls “not sufficient,” “that one only needs to act as a citizen through participation in a community or society in order to become a citizen, or the resulting wholesale acceptance of citizenship as a meaningful product of effective writing instruction” (23). Linking citizenship to literacy requires a belief that one is not born into citizenship, but rather achieves it, making a legal definition secondary to citizenship “as cultural identity, standing and status, civic virtue, everyday habits, and participatory action” (23).

A pedagogy that fails to account for “differing opportunities for cultural and legal forms of citizenship and with the varied definitions of and access points
to citizenship” (29), however, risks ignoring inequality as related to citizenship. Misrecognizing “the equality of citizenship” as a given “perpetuates the belief that literacy of all kinds will secure both participation in society and the achievement of personal and economic success” (31). Once you’ve engaged in the right sort of literacy education, that is, you’ve got the tools to be a full citizen. Here, for Wan, is one of the perils of attaching literacy education to the production of citizens. When literacy education embraces the project of developing citizens, it works not only in service of healthier citizenship, but “can also reinforce the legal, economic, and cultural exclusions that already exist”:

When the focus is only on an individual’s literacy, the burden of realizing citizenship remains on the individual rather than locating that burden within a larger system of inequality. Allowing this inequality to persist when individuals fail to be seen as literate, the citizenry that imagines itself as legitimate for legal or cultural reasons then has a category of noncitizens against whom they define themselves, with some dominating others. (35)

Wan identifies herself as one of those instructors “who view the citizenship-making project as an integral part of their work” (28), but that mission, she recognizes, must be something more than a “rhetorical flourish” or a nod to the values of civic engagement. More troubling to Wan are that the promises attached to such a mission distract us from their own failure to be realized beyond the classroom, or worse, affirm that failure as individual rather than systemic.

Wan’s historical analysis focuses on materials connected to literacy pedagogy in three primary settings during the 1910s and 1920s: federal immigration programs, labor education programs, and college English classes. These spaces foreground significant tensions around the meaning of citizenship in relation to literacy education and highlight the ways that anxieties about citizenship shape curricular discussions. So, the potential for immigrants to become labor activists shaped federal programs that sought to undercut a union identity. In a 1922 textbook, for example, a worker who did not report a broken saw blade blames himself for the injury the blade caused: “I did not report the broken [blade to] guard. The rules say I should. The company is not to blame. I was careless” (qtd. in Wan 64). Such passages, Wan notes, taught workers to “shift culpability to themselves rather than learn to agitate for safe workplaces or other labor rights being touted by unions” (64).

At the same time, anxiety over appearing to promote an approach to citizenship that appeared too radical led unions, by the end of the 1920s, to step back from their earlier, more movement-based goals: “Discussion in support of workers’ education began positioning educational programs as a means to battle radicalism and socialism internally, in contrast to fighting new industrialism, mass
manufacturing, and unscrupulous employers—the initial goals of worker education” (106). Writing teachers in the university attached to citizenship production, she argues, “saw the goals of the [composition] course shifting from teaching the content of literature and other cultural texts to teaching the communicative, intellectual, and ethical skills needed to be a self-governed citizen” (125). Underlying these approaches, Wan argues, as well as contemporary examples she engages in her final chapter, are tensions between what she calls “two ‘brands’ of citizenship, between a citizenship measured by self-improvement and success of the individual versus a citizenship measured by the degree of participation and civic responsibility, with literacy playing a key role in both” (153). How literacy education controls, creates, shapes, limits, and promotes ideas of citizenship in anxious times is necessarily contentious and fraught, never straightforward, and Wan’s deep historical exploration of one era of anxiety provides useful frameworks for understanding citizenship production in our own anxious times.

Ruecker’s project—“to explore what writing teachers across institutions do to support the success of increasingly diverse students, especially Latino/a LM [linguistic minority] students” (3)—ends in what reads to me like frustration, albeit a familiar frustration based in a frank assessment of the limits of literacy education to address social inequities. Following his detailed and well-organized case studies, Ruecker concludes with two chapters: one providing a theoretical overview and the other providing practical ideas about how teachers and institutions might support transitions. In his theoretical exploration, reflecting on habitus and hysteresis, Ruecker notes that the more immediately successful transitions occurred in two cases where students “had already been developing a habitus suitable for college in high school” (143), supported in both cases by “robust networks of capital” connected to family, community, and teachers. Students whose transitions were rockier but successful arrived without that habitus but had sponsors in their first year in college who supported their transitions.

Bianca, for example, participated in the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP), designed for students who are migratory or seasonal workers. CAMP brought Bianca to campus for the summer with a community of peers and mentors, where she made friends, learned the university, and practiced work habits that prepared her for the work of the university (71). The two students whose transitions were the most fraught arrived in college without having developed a habitus and “faced a pronounced hysteresis” (144), a lag time in which they could not adapt to the new environment; likewise, they did not find sponsors and connections in college that fostered success in the transition. Ruecker, though, is careful to note that an analysis emphasizing habitus or its lack leans toward a deficit model that blames individual students for failure; instead, he usefully seeks to identify the ways “local, state, and national institutions regularly failed
the students in this study” (148). Instructors typically did not take time to know and understand their students, colleges did not take measures to incorporate linguistic minority students, state and national standards were “designed around a native English speaking white norm in a century where minorities are expected to become the majority” (150).

Ruecker’s frustration is most evident in his final chapter, “The Role of Composition Researchers, Teachers, and Administrators,” in part because it’s where he most fully examines the limits of that role. His insights here are helpful and focused, in particular for teachers and administrators, but they are also predictably fraught. Individual teachers and institutions can attend more to who their students are, and teachers can increase their practices of conferencing. He calls for smaller class sizes and a reduced teaching load, for more multilingual approaches to teaching writing, for a greater variety of course offerings to reflect a busier student body. These are all, of course, resource intensive and in many cases repeat calls for institutional change that are long-standing in composition and rhetoric, perhaps what leads him to his final recommendations for larger changes in the discipline. These include prioritizing knowledge “gained from broader qualitative and quantitative studies” rather than from “localized stories” (170) and, as I note at the beginning of this essay, a rhetorical shift that will allow the field to gain more credence in official arguments about literacy education. Interestingly, Ruecker’s study, notable for his excellent attention to “localized stories,” doesn’t fit into the sorts of research he calls for at the conclusion of his book, though I would argue that it should. Ruecker directs his frustration at more than the limited efficacy writing classes can have in supporting the sorts of transitions he highlights; instead, he focuses it toward a discipline with less public authority than he believes it should have.

More than any other of the books in this review, Feigenbaum explores the challenges of progressive literacy programs designed to create social change, and he relies throughout his book on a contrast between adaptive rhetorics and activist rhetorics. Whereas rhetorics of adaptation, by defining literacy as “a politically and ideologically neutral tool,” are likely to leave larger social goals of education unquestioned, “counterhegemonic rhetorics of activism make overt the economic, political, and social interests that are obscured by adaptive rhetorics, a process that enables people to communally direct their civic imaginations against the status quo” (7). Adaptive rhetorics resist a reimagining of the present in part by describing it as “the culmination of earlier activism” (55) that has achieved its goals, putting preservation at the center of educational work. Rhetorics of activism, however, force a reconception not only of the means of literacy education, but more importantly of the stories adaptive rhetorics tell about the past and the goals they hold out for the future, making a project of progressive education...
in part “an ideological competition over story-telling” (54). Activist rhetorics work against the status quo in part by representing “the present as the (always) incomplete heritage of past activism that must be constantly reimagined, and they envision a future in which citizenship has been . . . unrigged” (56). Activist rhetorics necessitate the collaborative imagination of Feigenbaum’s title because they require gaining legitimacy across a variety of audiences.

Perhaps most engaging about Feigenbaum’s analysis is his frankness about the difficulty of implementing and sustaining a progressive educational project coupled with his resistance to narratives of failure. In detailing examples of historical and contemporary activist literacy education, he refuses to celebrate any of them as successful “because the processes of struggle they exemplify are ongoing.” They are, rather, “narratives of hardship, obstacle, confusion, and contingency as spearheaded by thousands of ordinary people who made lots of mistakes along the way” (71). When the histories of activist movements are told as “narratives of triumph, their rhetorical influence decays into something more adaptive than activist, as when they feed conservative arguments that systemic inequalities no longer exist or that any remnant inequalities are the fault of the people victimized by them” (71). Those narratives include Feigenbaum’s own personal engagement with an Earth literacy in collaboration with communities in Miami and Nicaragua, the subject of his final chapter, in which he details the difficult and ongoing struggles to develop, implement, and sustain the work over time. Readers who have been involved in any sort of similar project will likely react with relief and empathy to the challenges that Feigenbaum describes here; it’s hard work that progresses in fits and starts and requires regular attention, repair and negotiation.

What Feigenbaum refuses throughout his book are narratives of cynicism and hopelessness, at the same time that he never dodges the very real difficulties faced by the programs he explores. In a chapter that explores university collaborations with communities on literacy projects, he acknowledges all the familiar perils of such engagements, but he refuses to succumb to descriptions of any institutions that make them immutable to change and reform: “. . . just as there are no ‘pure’ communities untainted by institutional imperatives, there are no absolutely institutionalized structures utterly immune to reform” (129). Progressive educators working in higher education, he argues, must resist descriptions of their own institutions that mitigate against the possibility of changing them for the better, a project like all of the ones he describes that will never be complete. For Feigenbaum, the ongoing work toward progressive literacy education requires a steady focus on activist goals, which inherently involves both a critique of adaptive rhetorics and an ongoing collaborative imagining.
“What to do? What to do?” (97). Stuckey quotes these lines from a June Jordan NCTE keynote to open her chapter titled “The Violence of Literacy.” She doesn’t quite answer this question in the book—instead, she expands it into a sort of coda:

What to do with our profession, what to do with our mechanisms of oppression, what to do with our hysteria or complacency or resignation, what to do with the great disparities among our resources and knowledge and access to help, what to do with a world whose literacy pampers us but targets those we teach, what to do with a violent history, a miserly present, and a myopic future? What to do—we English teachers—to deal with all of that? (Stuckey 124)

Readers will likely have been seeking some sort of answer to this question for the whole book and are just as likely to be somewhat frustrated by her concluding answer: “We either recognize that we already ‘deal with all of that’ and continue to do it, or we recognize the unfairness of our dealings and stop. We promote greater literacy, or we promote greater humanity. The first choice is easy. The second choice is not. The second choice is infinitely more human, however” (124).

I believe Stuckey is right; in fact, in some ways, I don’t think she is strong enough about the ways literacy enacts violence. The literacy narratives of students in a community literacy center where I taught in Seattle, for example, often associated violence directly with literacy events—a failure on a spelling test could lead to a beating (Branch). Likewise, the literacy test as a suffrage requirement in the post-Reconstruction South became an appealing tool because it was a way to replace the rampant violence necessary to quell African American political participation (see, for example, McCrady), and it worked throughout the South to reduce (though of course never eliminate) the use of physical violence as a means of political repression.

At the heart of Stuckey’s book is perhaps the sort of frustration shared by Ruecker, that our literacy pedagogies are wholly inadequate to the tasks we continue to enlist them in, even while, as Harker suggests, our profession as literacy instructors almost requires that we attach our work to some version of a literacy myth. In some ways, beginning in her first chapter, Wan articulates the thesis of *The Violence of Literacy* more succinctly than Stuckey does throughout her entire book. By highlighting the concept of citizenship and its abiding connections to literacy education, Wan specifies how literacy education becomes implicated in reproducing, sustaining, and justifying inequality and oppression. In the end, what I find so compelling about Feigenbaum’s book is that he wholly engages the contradictions at the heart of literacy education, that he understands the ways his own teaching is implicated in the sort of violence at the heart of Stuckey’s
analysis, that the necessary impossibility of achieving the goals he attaches to progressive literacy education does not mean that it will fail. None of these books, like this review essay, can sidestep these binds of literacy education, and in fact in their own ways, each of them embraces those binds as central to their analyses. If these binds tie us, we can at least hope that they tie us together, that they allow us to work with others within and outside our disciplines to understand and continually reimagine the potential of literacy education in anxious times.

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