
Reviewed by Margaret M. Strain, University of Dayton

One of the first research projects I undertook as a doctoral student was a literature review on the writing processes of children. At the time, I was just beginning to discover the complexities of composing, musing at what had brought me to this point in my own literacy journey as I now entered the field of rhetoric and Composition. The researchers whose work I examined—Donald Graves, Suzanne Jacobs, Thomas Newkirk, and Lucy McCormick Calkins—all identified a consistent characteristic among the young composers they studied: the role of imagemaking (i.e., drawing and painting) as instrumental to children’s prewriting and revision decisions. I wondered then at what point the image-making practices stopped, at what point the fluid connection between image and word was severed so that we began to privilege the word as the primary arbiter of literate meaning. In Embodied Literacies, Kristie Fleckenstein recovers and reanimates this very connection. She coins the term “imageword” to highlight the inextricable connection or double vision between image, “the incarnation of meaning in various modes and modalities,” and word, the “linguistic manifestation of meaning” (3). Fleckenstein sees the relationship between the two not as a binary but a melding, positing that this union lies at the heart of learning, the act of reading-writing, and teaching itself. She argues for nothing less than a transformation of the way we understand literacy and literacy praxis.

The book’s title reflects the author’s call for a poetics that embraces the “embodiment of literacy through imagery” (4-5). To situate her discussion, Fleckenstein opens with a rationale for such a poetics before turning to the concept of imageword itself. For her, the term imageword possesses an is logic, an unbounded metaphor (e.g., sunset) that we know in relation to but cannot separate from the patterns around it (e.g., the sky, the clouds, the horizon beyond which the sun sets); the metaphor and the patterns mutually reconstitute each other. As if logic comprises the linguistic component which shapes and restricts the reality we know. It allows us to conceptualize an object (e.g., a tree) while distancing ourselves from it; thus we can create an image of an object without having to become the object. Together, is logic and as if logic allow us to entertain and hold two seeming incongruities as simultaneously true. Both qualities also operate in what the author terms an “ecological system of meaning” (33). An understanding of these dynamics grounds chapter 2, which addresses four “permeable parameters” within which an imageword’s ecology is configured and literacy is made possible. These porous planes include bodies, culture, places, and time (7). Fleckenstein offers a range of examples from the lives of her children, her students, and her teaching to illustrate each.
Teaching and awareness of ethical practice are what Fleckenstein cares most about, and these topics are her major concerns for the remainder of the book. Chapter 3 takes up the issues of literacy instruction specifically. Here Fleckenstein, enacting the very theory she sets forth, weaves the various ecological settings she has introduced into three embodied literacies that inform a poetics of teaching. According to the author, we participate in an embodied literacy by drawing upon two or more of the ecological planes. Somatic literacy is derived from the juncture of body and place; polyscopic literacy from the merger of body, place, and cultures; lateral literacy from the fusion of space and time (78-79). Writing instructors who recognize these literacies can then self-reflectively teach to and from these perspectives, designing assignments and courses that help students gain necessary skills or more easily traverse one embodied literacy into another. Fleckenstein uses the terms “immersion,” “emergence,” and “transformation” to describe students’ exposure to and eventual facility with embodied literacies, reaffirming the cyclical and recursive rather than linear and progressive nature of their operations (92). She provides a sampling of “slippery” texts that lend themselves to this pedagogy in chapter 4 and an embodied-literacies curricula in chapter 5.

Throughout, Fleckenstein employs the work of Michel Foucault, Lev Vygotsky, Michèle Le Doeuff, Gregory Bateson, and Donna Haraway to show how their theories about cultural history, cognition, language acquisition, interpretation, and communication shape and legitimate the ways we make meaning of the world—and the way teachers approach literacy instruction. But in a culture increasingly saturated by image, Fleckenstein argues for more than unseating a linguistically based literacy in favor of a visually infused one. Rather she posits the notion of imageword in all its dynamic complexity as a return to conceptual wholeness—a wholeness that always already permeates our textual, psychological, social, intellectual lives—and introduces a pedagogy that will sustain it. And herein she reminds us, like the children who shift almost intuitively from drawing to written word and back again, of the need for literacies that embrace a “double vision.”

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WORKS CITED


Reviewed by Ronald L. Pitcock, Texas Christian University

Former U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige’s 2004 remarks celebrating the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education* sounded more political than celebratory. Issued six days before the 17 May anniversary, Paige’s opening lines saluted the Supreme Court’s historic opinion ending racial segregation in public schools. Having attended school in rural, segregated Mississippi, Paige understood the social importance of *Brown*, leading him to note that *Brown* “gave every student in America a seat in the classroom.” Paige’s comments then move quickly away from the epideictic rhetoric characteristic of most *Brown* celebrations. For Paige, the work of *Brown* is incomplete. Whereas many tributes honored the elimination of “separate but equal,” Paige proclaims that separate but unequal schools persist, where “[s]ome students are taught well while the rest—mostly poor and mostly minority—flounder or flunk out.” Though *Brown* put students in seats, the Bush Administration’s *No Child Left Behind* “guarantees each of those students an education” through increased accountability and “academic proficiency.”

Catherine Prendergast’s *Literacy and Racial Justice* addresses in compelling ways the powers shaping instances like Paige’s press release—beliefs informed by a fifty-year historical record of literacy initiatives that failed to achieve racial justice. Indeed, *Brown*’s success in securing equal educational opportunities for all races is limited. School districts continue to use race as a factor in establishing integrated learning environments, individual schools enroll high numbers of minority students in special education programs designed for the mentally or physically challenged, and poor districts with large minority populations have received substantially less funding than schools with predominantly White populations. In states such as Maryland, Illinois, Ohio, and Florida, court-mandated desegregation plans continue to be challenged. As Prendergast emphasizes throughout, access to literacy through education is essential to White identity: “the ideology of literacy...”