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A forerunner of the New Literacy Studies, Shirley Brice Heath’s 1983 Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms profiled the language use of three hundred black (Trackton) and white (Roadville) working-class families in the Piedmont Carolinas from 1969 to 1978. Three decades later, still in contact with roughly 85% of the original three hundred families, Words at Work and Play follows the descendants of the Piedmonts, now scattered across the United States, from the early 1980s to 2007. In light of changes in work and family activities during these years, her present book considers the social, linguistic, and cognitive effects of dual-earning parents, middle-class aspirations, and after school activities and community organizations. A large portion of the narrative is concerned with the YMCA, 4H Club, youth theatres, and other local and national organizations designed with kids and teens in mind. Having found that “families [no longer] generate the human resources to provide the quantity and quality of talk and experience necessary to socialize children for adaptive competence” and that “[f]ormal schooling did not keep up with the rapid increase in scientific discovery or the accelerating interest of young people in technology, arts, and design” (65), Words at Work and Play conveys the importance of such “extracurriculars” in children’s lives.

Chapter 1 offers a succinct summary of Ways with Words that registers the cultural and economic changes in family and work life that characterize the forty years comprising Heath’s research. The original families from Trackton and Roadville did not have checking or savings accounts, likely did not have high school diplomas or higher education, did not own homes or automobiles, lived segregated by train tracks, and drew incomes from mill work, farming, or a combination of both. In contrast, the second and third generations of these communities had checking and savings accounts for adults and children, card credits, loans, mortgages, and jobs requiring special training or college.

The first of several of what Heath calls “relay race[s] of then-and-now stories” (1), chapter 2 introduces Jerome. When we meet Jerome (born in Trackton), he has made his way to Chicago. For a small financial incentive, Jerome and his friends from the local theatre company recorded many of their own conversations, kept track of them using “Script Time Data Sheets,” transcribed and annotated them, tracked language structures on a “Linguistic Research Chart,” and met with Heath to discuss and interpret the data collected (29). Moving deeper into the book, we understand Heath is not the ethnographer observing from a distance. Her research is dependent
upon the co-researching capabilities of families, particularly teenagers like Jerome and his friends, who contemplated what it meant for them when the present tense columns continued to outweigh the past tense columns on their research charts: “Our kids gonna grow up just like us—stuck in NOW” (32-3). Heath uses the appendices to explicate the broad changes in social history- and ethnography-based research disciplines that explain the contrast between the distanced narrative that characterized Ways with Words and her current work, within which she plays a critical role. Testament to such changes, her first appendix offers her own backstory.

Chapter 3 transports us to the suburbs of Boston where we reconnect with Martin, a child of Roadville, who is now married with two children, Rebecca and Mark. Rebecca and Mark’s nanny, and the thirty hours or more a week each child dedicates to after school activities introduces Heath’s concept of “intimate strangers,” a phrase she uses to characterize coaches, choir directors, and other non-family adults children’s extracurricular activities bring them into contact with. We also reconnect with Jay, a child of Trackton, and his son, Bernardo, and follow them from Texas to Colorado. Important is what Jerome, Mark, Rebecca, and Bernardo share in common: Mark and Rebecca picked up some German from their nanny, Bernardo and Jerome are both bilingual in Spanish, and all four gained experience making decisions, understanding consequences, budgeting, solving problems, and setting goals by participating in community organizations that gave them identities, and perhaps more importantly responsibilities, beyond student and son or daughter.

For those of us working in college classrooms, when we meet Lisa Dobbs in chapter 4, we are reminded of how unfamiliar and alienating such spaces are for some of our students. “The college classroom was the scariest place I’d ever been,” recalls the woman who grew up in Roadville and relocated to Texas with her two sons after divorcing her alcoholic and abusive husband (68). We also meet Lisa’s sister, Sally, now living in Minnesota with her husband and two daughters. When we join the families and Heath on their summer vacation, we sit in as the two women review their own transcripts and activity logs, we listen and identify with them as they discuss the difficulties of managing Sunday dinners, time on the weekends for families to spend together, and the propensities of parents and children to escape to personal technologies during down time.

We continue on with the stories of Zinnia Mae (Jerome’s birth mother) and her other three children in the fifth chapter, also meeting Sissy, her husband Red, and their two children. Sissy’s brother Tony was one of the first members of the Trackton community to go away to college. However, where Tony came from, it was unfriendly to lead conversation away from the community’s knowledge-base, thus, talking about faraway places, people, and things was not only unfamiliar but unknown. Heath explains that such inexperience was particularly felt when these students were asked to
contribute “critical perspectives,” “comparative analysis,” and “persuasive arguments” in their writing (99).

In chapters 6 and 7, we meet more of the descendants of the Piedmonts, continuing to observe changes in family life and learning how the third generation of the Piedmonts’ activities outside of school and home prepared and shaped them to be the people they would become (something I was eager to read about and happily satisfied when I did in the “Epilogue”). The large-scale results of Heath’s study feature prominently here. Heath found that changes in children’s play and playthings inhibited them once they entered schools, causing “trouble in academic subjects that required the understanding of concepts of change” and “difficulty with texts heavy with concepts they could not readily reduce to labels or short phrases” (126). By the end of chapter 7, we are confronted fully with the impacts of cell phones, videogames, Wikipedia, and YouTube, causing Heath to give explicit attention to multimedia writing on pages 142 and 143. Leaning on the wisdom of a twelve-year-old—“if I can’t see it, I can’t get it” (143)—she advocated for “representational models” that combine both visuals and words to support learning, particularly writing.

The closing chapter unites the narratives of the people whose lives we have followed throughout the book as well as the many other narratives that make Heath’s work so important. One finding is that children are not acquiring the scheduling skills we might think their growing participation in extracurricular activities would imbue them with and are often unable to site the details of the upcoming week let alone the upcoming months. As scheduling dominates the lives of parents and children, time for “extended” and “deliberative” talk is decreasing (162). Heath argues that without such kinds of talk happening in the home or elsewhere, children will grow into adults without a sense of the consequences of their actions, an understanding of sequences of events, and inexperienced with “conditionals or hypotheticals” that support “self-monitoring and planning” (163).

The weight of Words at Work and Play’s importance hits us when Heath explains: “My audio recordings in family life enable me to compare how the same family across two, sometimes three, generations spent Saturday mornings with their two-year-old or twelve-year old” (19). We wonder how she has possibly managed a slim 200-something-page book, and we forgive the sometimes confusing backwards and forwards of its narrative—from the 1970s to the 1990s to 2007, from personal narratives to statistics representative of the wide-scale social and economic changes that paralleled her research. Heath’s book is an important read for a range of teachers, like parents, who are the earliest educational guides in children’s lives, and more traditional teachers as well that will have to adjust their expectations of students as patterns of language in the home limit young children’s capabilities of envisioning, planning, and then executing the ideas in their heads. One of the most striking characteristics of Heath’s research is its dependence upon teens to perform as co-researchers and co-interpreters, encouraging teach-
ers and researchers alike to instill more trust and greater responsibility in their seemingly inexperienced students and participants. For composition researchers and teachers, *Words at Work and Play* reminds us that learning to write is a multilayered process, one we cannot fully understand when we conduct our research solely in schools and focus exclusively on texts, and one we can never teach if we don’t consider our students as people who have lives and identities outside of our classrooms.

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