

The Desire for Literacy: Writing in the Lives of Adult Learners, by Lauren Rosenberg. Urbana: NCTE, 2015. 185 pp.

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Foregrounding her commitment to theorizing with rather than about literacy learners, Lauren Rosenberg quickly sets the terms for reading her book, *The Desire for Literacy: Writing in the Lives of Adult Learners*: “What started out as a research study ended up as an engaged conversation,” she writes. “I am not apart *from* but a part *of* the stories” (21, emphasis in original). Rosenberg’s focus on this fundamental dynamic—the role of the researcher in representing participant accounts—taps into our discipline’s increased awareness of and attention to both the researcher’s role in shaping the discourse about how literacy operates in society and the role of “tellability” in constructing narratives of experience (Webb-Sunderhaus). Rosenberg’s study is notable for applying these lines of inquiry to a lesser-studied population—older literacy learners—and for her deliberate and considered effort to confront her own positionality in relation to her research participants. “This book,” she explains, “is my story of their stories” (21).

Interested in “what it means to gain literacy under unconventional circumstances” (15), Rosenberg utilizes narrative inquiry and, in particular, the notion of “restorying” to gather insight into the affectual motivations of four students—George, Violeta, Lee Ann, and Chief—attending the Read/Write/Now adult literacy program. Hence, the title of the book is also one of its central questions: *From where does the desire for literacy emanate?* For Violeta, we find out, the desire for literacy is an extension of a desire to advocate for herself and her son; for Chief, a desire to communicate with a wider community; for Lee Ann, a desire for independence as well as a desire to have her stories heard; and for George, the fulfillment of a lifelong desire to read and to avoid “embarrassment and shame” (75). These are oversimplifications, of course, ones that Rosenberg teases out and examines in depth, acknowledging the struggles and contradictions that characterize the kinds of literacy work these students pursue. As a result, Rosenberg’s study serves as a compelling example of the inaccuracy of lock-step linear notions of literacy learning. The four students we come to know through the stories they tell do not move neatly from stage to stage but rather move in and out of difficulties and successes—some explicitly literacy-related and many not—that pose challenges to their negotiation of a literate identity.

Rosenberg’s vivid portrayals of her participants’ lives and literacy practices are an important contribution to our increasing but still insufficient supply

of studies examining adult learners and extra-institutional literacy education. Structured broadly as a chronicle of the four participants' evolving relationships with reading and writing, Rosenberg includes a number of their written texts in full, and excerpts many more. Additionally, readers are provided with thick description of these students' past and current life circumstances and hear, in first person, their views of themselves as learners. Just as importantly, Rosenberg often pauses to reflect as she presents her students' lives and their experiences with literacy, analyzing how her own history as a writing teacher and researcher impacts her ability to both notice and tell certain stories about literacy, but not others. Chapter five, "What Writing Enables," demonstrates the efficacy of Rosenberg's ethnographic approach most completely. Here, she analyzes Chief's and Violeta's efforts to communicate with audiences beyond their classmates and instructor at the literacy center. Detailing Chief's publication and distribution of a newspaper created by the center's participants and Violeta's work on a DVD project aimed at educating people about HIV, Rosenberg illustrates how the two writers imagine audience and claim agency for themselves as writers and authorities on their chosen subject matter. Near the end of the chapter, Rosenberg interrogates her participation and influence in this imagining to examine critically her own role as audience member and distributor of the stories Chief and Violeta tell.

Another strength of Rosenberg's research approach is that she weaves together several scholarly traditions to ground her methodology, including community literacy studies, new literacy studies, and postcolonial theory. At its best, the book melds these disparate threads into a cohesive mesh through which Rosenberg can explore the multifaceted and often contradictory feelings these students express in their writing as they restory their experiences with literacy. For instance in chapter two, "Speaking from 'the Silent, Silenced Center': 'Just Because You Can't Read Doesn't Mean That You Don't Know,'" Rosenberg adopts Krista Ratcliffe's practice of rhetorical listening to "stand under" her participants' accounts of their literacy learning processes and "experience their discourses as they choose to present them" (26). Similarly in chapter three, "Contemplating Literacy: 'A Door Now Open,'" Rosenberg extends Jacqueline Jones Royster's and Gesa Kirsch's practice of strategic contemplation to implement it as a shared model of inquiry and introspection between researcher and participants, "lingering deliberately" with her students to promote "mutual contemplation" and invite "conversation with multiple voices" (57).

Although Rosenberg's ability to bring an array of scholarly perspectives to her analysis lends depth to much of the text, at times, the multiplicity of lenses she uses leaves some threads at loose ends or, in the case of Lee Ann, creates a somewhat knotted theoretical approach. In a particularly striking passage, for example, Rosenberg recounts sharing Lee Ann's story at her university: a com-

plex, even self-contradictory narrative that highlights, on one hand, Lee Ann's history as a working-class housekeeper and, on the other, her self-representation as a woman of means—one who can choose whether to retire or continue working. Rosenberg questions part of Lee Ann's claim to economic security, asking "how [Lee Ann] can purchase real estate when she is unable to do the paperwork," and then adding "I don't know how she did it, or if she really did it" (37). After Rosenberg's talk, an audience member asks if Lee Ann is "crazy," suggesting that her testimony might not be rational and therefore is invalid" (50). While Rosenberg's answer—that by listening to and believing Lee Ann, we can be made "more aware of our own assumptions and biases surrounding literacy" (50)—issues a powerful call for ensuring marginalized voices are heard, it leaves unaddressed questions about how Rosenberg's representation—her restorying—of Lee Ann might contribute to the perception that she is "crazy," thereby disallowing the unconventional literacy narrative Lee Ann tells despite Rosenberg's earnest attempts to create space for it.

Part of the difficulty in constructing Lee Ann's story may arise from Rosenberg's reliance on Spivak's concept of the subaltern as the lens through which she theorizes her participants' positionality as "nonliterate," the term Rosenberg uses to "name people who have not had the benefit of becoming literate" (167) in contemporary U.S. society. "In Lee Ann," Rosenberg asserts, "—in all four participants—we can hear the subaltern subject" (50). However, Rosenberg does not offer a particularly robust case for her participants as constituting a *de facto* "colonized" population as distinct from the oppression they face as nonliterate adults. Indeed, her distrust of Lee Ann might be read as stemming from Lee Ann's rejection of a subaltern position in favor of her self-identification as a property owner and landlord (36). While Rosenberg ultimately indicates a willingness to hear and believe Lee Ann's claims, her moments of doubt regarding Lee Ann's veracity—and the absence of reflective theorizing about the implications of that doubt—leave unresolved the conflict between Lee Ann's description of herself and her agency and Rosenberg's chosen lens for analyzing Lee Ann's experience. In light of this disconnect, it would have been useful to understand why Rosenberg sees the participants as subaltern, particularly in light of Spivak's own cautions regarding over-application of the term (de Kock).

The problem of representing someone else's experiences in the world is an inherently thorny one, and Rosenberg should be applauded for confronting this difficulty head-on; after all, our questions about the restorying of Lee Ann are made possible by Rosenberg's detailed descriptions and examination of her own thoughts and biases. Importantly too, Rosenberg's commitment to "exploring discourse 'with' and 'for' others, rather than representing people by folding their views into existing discourses" (21) ably takes up Spivak's subsequent challenge for researchers to "learn outside of the traditional instruments

of learning ... with the persistently asked question, "What is it to learn, what does it mean to learn" (Danius, Jonsson, and Spivak 25). In these critical and consequential ways, *The Desire for Literacy* both achieves Rosenberg's call to "pay careful attention to the words of people outside of the formal institutions that ignore their experiences and constrain their voices" (21) and, as one of only a handful of longitudinal studies of adult literacy learners, begins to fill a significant gap in our understanding of our field's (re)storying of the process of literacy learning beyond the academy.

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