

Project 1: Literacy Narrative

Background: In her essay “Sponsors of Literacy,” Deborah Brandt finds our development as readers and writers (and what we think about these activities) is tied “literacy sponsors.” These sponsors are “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate suppress, or withhold literacy--and gain advantage by it in some way” (166). Brandt’s theory of literacy sponsorship is useful as it allows us to see how individuals (e.g., parents, teachers, employers) as well as broader economic forces (e.g., the development of new technologies or changes in labor markets) shape our histories as readers and writers. You will further examine literacy sponsorship by writing your own literacy narrative--a reflective, personal essay about particular events, texts, and persons that have impacted your literacy practices.

Assignment: Drawing upon Brandt’s article, write a literacy narrative, addressed to the class, that reconstructs one moment in your literacy history **when a particular sponsor influenced your development as a reader and/or writer in an important way**. Besides providing a vivid, detailed account of this episode, your narrative should analyze what impact this sponsor had on your literacy development and what the sponsor’s motivations were.

Or, if you prefer, you may focus on a time when you sponsored another individual’s literacy in a significant way. If you write about yourself as a literacy sponsor, discuss what impact you had on this other individual’s literacy development and what your motivations were.

Include with the final version of the article a “Dear Reader” letter, addressed to the class, that answers the following questions:

- What is the purpose of your essay?
- What are the strengths of your literacy narrative? What are its problems?
- What were the challenges you encountered writing the literacy narrative and how did you address them?
- If you had two more days to revise the literacy narrative, what additional changes would you make and why?

Support your response to these questions with specific details from your literacy narrative and experience.

Tips for Writing

- Your literacy narrative will be peer reviewed by your classmates, so do not share information you do not want public.
- The persuasiveness of a narrative rests on the details it provides. Try to do more than summarize your experience in your narrative; in addition, capture the concrete details (the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, dialogue, and feelings) that make up this experience.
- Avoid reducing the significance of your literacy narrative to a simple commonplace, such as “this experience taught me how important reading is” or “without literacy, I would not be the person I am today.” Remember that, according to Brandt, the story of how we acquire literacy is complex. Sponsors aren’t necessarily benevolent; they both “support” and “withhold” literacy, and they do so for particular reasons--some of which have nothing to do with helping someone read and write. Your narrative should attempt to capture the complex situation of literacy sponsorship in some way.

Length & Format: 5 pages, double-spaced, sources cited in MLA

Due Dates: **Rough Draft, 9/7;** Conferences, 9/12, 9/14; **Final Draft, 9/14 online (by midnight)**

Assignment Specifications: Below are the criteria I will use to assess each student's essay.

An effective essay

- Focuses **on a particular moment** or event in a student's literacy history described in vivid detail
- Analyzes the narrative it tells, explaining the significance or meaning of the event
- Demonstrates an accurate **understanding of Brandt's theory of literacy sponsorship**
- Documents sources using MLA in-text citations and a Works Cited
- Avoids excessive basic writing errors and stylistic problems that prevent readers from comprehending the narrative
- Includes a Dear Reader letter that answers the three questions listed above, using evidence from the author's writing and/or experience

* Note: every time I say American, I mean US; I understand there is an ocean between the two however for ease of transition, I used American

Literacy Narrative

I didn't realize I was sick of reading the stories of dead white men until I stopped

Even after reading J. D. Salinger, John Steinbeck, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ms. Assef has redundantly assigned an “American Author Project”. Excellent.

Distributing a dense packet of writers to choose from, Ms. Assef excitedly announced to the class that it was printed in color, only for us to realize most of the pictures were taken in black and white anyways. My classmates cooed with adoration for her subtle humor while I sat unresponsively. Ms. Assef was undoubtedly my favorite high school teacher but with a quarter left of sophomore year, the already low amusement I had was nonexistent at this point.

Flipping briefly through the pages, I remained apathetic towards all the white collar and facial hair variations. All the choices looked the same, their titles and qualifications all uninteresting. Ms. Assef, the gem she was, meandered her way to me to ask whether I had chosen an author.

I shrugged, “They all kinda blur into one dead white man.”

She laughed so genuinely that I managed a slim smile. Being the only two people of color in the class, I’d like to believe we shared a special bond.

As if knowing exactly what I needed, Ms. Assef turned to the very end of the packet where the more contemporary authors lay in color and circled a peculiar name.

“Ed-widge Dant-i-cat?” I sounded out.

“Read *Farming of the Bones*, no dead white men there.”

While she went to advise the rest of my classmates, I looked for more information about Edwidge Danticat on my phone. She had grown up in Haiti and immigrated to Brooklyn when she was twelve, definitely not widely considered as an *American* author. But that was what intrigued me.

My mom always brought home books from the library for me, in hopes that my shelved love of reading would reemerge; she was only too happy to fetch the book from the library on the way home from work that night.

“You know I suggested this to you a few weeks ago,” my mom said smugly while handing me the yellowed hardback over dinner.

“As if,” I muttered before examining the cover. Still possessing a child’s sensibility, I inspected the cover before I deemed it worthy of reading. A two-dimensional water fountain was the backdrop for three mediocre looking sugar canes. Not the most riveting cover but the queer title and author names pulled me in. If my elementary literacy knowledge had taught me anything it was that a name meant everything. After finishing my meal, I thanked my mom and went to my cave of a room to read.

Diving into the book, everything was uncomfortable.

I had likely never read the work of a person of color and it was depressing that I was surprised more than anything else. It was difficult for me to believe that any PoC could produce such a poetic piece of writing, nevermind a brilliant description of a genocide. If all the sophisticated, artistic, and remarkable writers I was exposed to were European or American, it was simply not possible for me to know there was such thing as sophisticated, artistic, and remarkable writers who are Immigrants, Minorities or PoCs. Edwidge Danticat made sure to inform me that there was such a thing.

In Deborah Brandt’s *Sponsors of Literacy*, she defines a sponsor as “any agent who enables, supports, teaches, as well as regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy” (166). Danticat is unquestionably my most influential sponsor, the access portal to widely unknown texts and the knowledge that comes with those texts.

Danticat's *Farming of the Bones* bluntly introduced me to the Dominican Republic in 1937, known as the Parsley Massacre. Essentially, the Haitian protagonist, among thousands in her ethnic group, was laboring in the D. R. while an ethnic cleansing of Haitians took place. The fates of unidentified individuals were dependent on how they pronounced parsley, with a *Kreyòl* or *Spanish* accent, hence the name. Despite the elephant theme of historic genocide, the book is not a conventional, chronological account of history. Danticat often drifted from past to present, from figurative to reality, as if they were single entities. The shifting between different states was intended to explain how various intricacies had permitted history to transpire the way it did. Being so accustomed to chronological, two-dimensional history texts, I could not imagine anything like this. I remember pausing countless times between pages to dissect the words and their meanings. By the time I had finished the book, there were a few phenomena clear to me, however, it took much longer to comprehend the individuals and institutions of power behind my literacy that had kept me from reading authors like Edwidge Danticat.

As a child, I poured over the American Girl historical fiction series and various other historical non/fiction books but they were unparalleled to *The Farming of the Bones*. Some were based outside of the US or featured protagonists of color, yet they never strayed past Euro. or Amer. narratives. Minority and PoC history books are very distinctive from Amer. and Euro. history books. The latter tends to *idolize* wars, presidents, and governments, overemphasize the wickedness of the opposing side, and downplay their own faults. For example, reading many accounts of the Revolutionary War they all sustained the same belief: the colonists were "cheated" by the British with (relatively minor) taxes and fighting the British was honorable, not radical, effectively demonizing the British and worshiping the Patriots. The romanticism of the Revolutionary War demonstrates how, according to Brandt, "literacy takes shape from the

interests of its sponsors” (168). The US painted itself in a heroic light so “good” characteristics were exaggerated and the historic narrative altered. In contrast, Minority history gravitates towards more honest accounts about the humanity of both sides, presenting the *grit* of war, governmental tyranny, domestic conflict, and colonialism. Danticat’s illustration of the Parsley Massacre allowed me to gain sympathy for both the Haitian laborers and the Dominican Republicans they worked for and kept a brutally honest explanation about the circumstances they were in. Amer. and Eur. perspectives of history hold a more nationalistic truth, while Minority and PoC viewpoints are more intersectional.

Throughout the book, I was amazed by Danticat’s ability to seamlessly lace in complex themes like the Kreyòl tongue and power dynamics, and at the same time retain “simple” dialogue and diction. Even though her language is “easy”, it holds an overwhelming range of symbolism, analogies, emotional undertones, etc. The texts I read in high school had over-picked themes and uncomplicated plots, that felt over-dramatized and unrealistic. *Great Gatsby* at its core is a soap opera: the idealistic, stalker feel of the green light was easily avoidable if Daisy had simply waited for Gatsby. Danticat’s words are tangible concepts you can still see: belittling someone based on their tongue or ethnicity, lingering colonialism labeled “influence”, or unaddressed historic trauma. As my restlessness to recognize Danticat’s intentions increased, my confusion as to why I had never read anything so “explicit” before rose as well.

After draining *The Farming of the Bone*’s rich contents, I eagerly read the stories of other PoC writers such as *The Confucian Analects* by Kôngzî, *Aluta* by Adwoa Badoe, *The Empress that Launched Modern China* by Jung Chang, and anything Gabriel García Márquez. These authentic accounts of the past exposed me to suppressed and neglected history considered irrelevant by K-12 educational institutions. Though none of the authors named live/d anywhere

near the US, our government has been overwhelmingly detrimental to China, Ghana, Colombia, and other Latinx nations. Understanding the damage done by our country is critical to US literature and history but it remains ignored. Obstruction from authors like Danticat, who reveals these crucial yet forgotten perspectives, is a heavily enforced feature in English curriculum and society. All prominent institutions and figures of literacy are the descendants of the dead white men who exploit their power to maintain the sole dominance of their history, culture, morals, and ideas of humanity. Brandt actually specifies that “the abilities to read and write [have been turned into] widely exploitable resources” (168). Even though reading and writing are easily exploitable, only European and American institutions have the privilege and willing audience to wield and continue this power. This endless reinforcement of power cultivated an overglorification of Euro. or Amer. literature and views, and authorizes the belief that countries outside the US and Europe are incapable of creating equivalently sophisticated and valuable literature.

Before Danticat, my “sponsors” of literacy were singular, or quite simply, white. My English teachers, authors, and advocates of literacy were predominately white. Coming to this conclusion was very alarming for me, a Chinese girl with mostly first and second generation immigrant friends. I suppose being adopted, or more “importantly,” having white parents might have limited me from PoC texts, ideas, and history but white parents or not, my first and second gen friends hadn’t been exposed either.

Asking first gen friends about what and who they read before immigration, they admit that foreign (Amer. / Euro.) books were translated into their language. Upon arrival to the states, their report is the same as my second gen friends and everyone else: American and European texts *only*, more precisely, *English only*. Confidently, I can predict that if I were to ask them

what their favorite authors were, they would name a white author. The sole text ever specified to me that had not originated from Europe or the US is the *Qur'an*, taboo to most Europeans and Americans. What is more concerning than immigrants not knowing books or authors from their country of origin, is that most could not describe their history as well as they could describe the history of the US. It seems that the people I interact with have little access or awareness of any sort of texts that aren't Euro. or Amer. This ties back to the overwhelming impact sponsors have on the availability of literacy and therefore economic success. Brandt illustrates this through Raymond and Dora, though living in the same community, they had contrasting sponsorships and consequently, contrasting futures. Raymond, a white man, had a privileged childhood, his family was wealthy enough to buy him a personal computer when he turned *twelve* and encouraged him to develop his programming skills. With their financial and educational support, he became "a successful freelance writer of software." On the other hand, Dora, a Mexican woman, had an extreme lack of support. She had to learn how to read and write in Spanish by her own means because her parents were always working and her cousins and siblings didn't know how to read or write either; the first time she touched a computer was at age *thirteen*. She now works at a cleaning company which brings us to the verdict that no sponsorship means no opportunities. (170 - 172). It definitely appears that the US and Europe have a bare spot where PoC and Minority sponsors should be, and without them, PoC and Minority students are at a complete disadvantage.

Despite the appearance that there is a lack of non-Euro. or Amer. writers, there are plenty of exceptional Minority and PoC authors who are simply not seen as writers worthy of the same universal recognition and reputation as Salinger or Fitzgerald. Euro. and Amer. books are taught and celebrated internationally, little can be said vice versa. The United States specifically has

trouble recognizing that authors like Edwidge Danticat are *American Authors*. When an American Author is not white, they are classified as *Native American Author* or *Korean American Author*, distinguishing them from white authors who are never named *White* or *German Author*. The failure of the public and academia to acknowledge PoC or Minority writers does not simply lay at the fault of White Americans or Europeans. Brandt admits that sponsors (in this case Amer. or Eur.) “are usually richer [and] more knowledgeable” yet she also includes, “nevertheless, [they] enter in a reciprocal relationship with those they underwrite” (167). Minorities and PoC could choose their own texts, history, and authors (if they know they exist) but they don’t. The bleak reality is that only white individuals are viewed as traditional American writers, therefore making Euro. and Amer. narratives the golden standard or, arguably, the only standard.

I assume for the American Author Project, my classmates chose one of the three dead white men we had already read or worse, they tried choosing Shakespeare not knowing he was British. However, when I told Ms. Assef I wanted something more unconventional, she suggested Edwidge Danticat. Her book, *The Farming of the Bones*, is no *Great Gatsby* or *Catcher in the Rye*, and it does not compare to most novels based in the United States. Yet reading Danticat’s narrative and the aftermath it induced, was far more enlightening for my literacy progression and awareness of the sponsors and institutions manipulating historical and traditional text-based literacy than reading any “American Classic” ever was.

Works Cited

1. Brandt, Deborah. *Sponsors of Literacy*. National Council of Teachers of English, May 1998, Sponsors of Literacy <http://www.jstor.org/stable/358929>. Accessed September 21, 2018.