

Book Review *Literacy and Mobility: Complexity, Uncertainty, and Agency at the Nexus of High School and College*, by Brice Nordquist

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In light of the lasting, negative effects the autonomous model of literacy has had on educational policy throughout the United States, New Literacy Studies scholars have called for increased attention to issues of power and agency in studies of literacy practices. Brice Nordquist's *Literacy and Mobility: Complexity, Uncertainty, and Agency at the Nexus of High School and College* answers that call. As the result of a Kentucky Board of Education audit of "Hughes" public high school, the principal and a third of the teachers were replaced and the school was labeled "failing" (Nordquist 66). In the larger study that informed this book, Nordquist followed eleven students in three different tracks of English—regular (i.e., the developmental course), AP, and dual-enrollment—from their senior year at Hughes through two years of college or work. The book's focal participants are Katherine, a second-generation Mexican American honors student who is partially deaf and enrolled in the Dual-Enrollment course; Nadif, a first-generation Somali refugee in the AP class; and, James, an African American student placed in the regular class despite his good grades and writing skills. Through a three-year, multi-sited, mobile ethnographic study of these students' trajectories around and through high school, Nordquist reveals the complexes of literacies and mobilities through which students engage "education as a process of placemaking in the present" (129). While Nordquist is not the first to critique standardized testing, Common Core Standards, and restrictive definitions of so-called Standard English, he employs a novel theoretical framework that offers a more nuanced view of the effects of "the rhetoric of readiness" (46) in educational discourse and the agency constituted by students.

Nordquist interweaves methodologies and methods from place-based composition, mobility, and new literacy studies with feminist orientations to investigate "how students begin to see themselves as agents, as makers of places, literacies, and identities that constitute the educational systems in which they participate" (4). The theoretical orientations of the study focus not only on literacy practices in different spaces, but also on the physical and bureaucratic movements of educational materials, achievement standards, and students' bodies. The clarity with which Nordquist describes his methodology and orientations produces a valuable model for how other scholars may produce "an account of power-in-literacy which captures the intricate ways in which power, knowledge, and forms of subjectivity are interconnected with 'uses of literacy' in modern national, colonial, and postcolonial settings" (Collins and Blot 66).

In the book's introduction, Nordquist briefly traces his own complex trajectories across "six public schools in six different districts in four states" (2). This narrative highlights an experience of being labeled, assessed, and "placed" by education systems that is common to many students

in the United States. By reflecting upon his own educational and personal histories and “the roles literacy plays in maintaining and demarcating inequalities among social classes,” Nordquist engages Gesa Kirsch and Joy Ritchie’s feminist interventions and Powell and Takayoshi’s attention to power asymmetries (4).

The book’s first two core chapters, “Literacy in Place and Motion,” and “Methodology for Mobile Literacy,” further describe the methodological and theoretical frameworks of the project. To begin, Nordquist offers a salient critique of the prevalence of the deficit model throughout US education discourse and policy. Promotional materials for the Common Core Standards (CCS) depict a staircase representing the fixed points of each grade “level” and suggest that students’ movements are necessarily linear, forward, upward, and ever future-oriented (10). Nordquist warns that literacy studies has not paid sufficient “attention to the seemingly mundane movements and stoppages of bodies along the systems that enable or disable their movements—movements of bodies across cities and counties, institutions and campuses, techno- and mediascapes, through hallways, on highways, and so on” (23). And he notes that even social practice models of literacy tend to reify certain aspects of the deficit model, such as the idea that movement occurs “between absolute places left behind and places of arrival” (40), such as grade levels or high schools and colleges. The answer to these issues, he suggests, is to deploy methodologies from mobility and place-based composition studies in order to attune ourselves to these complex movements and stoppages.

The third chapter focuses on the ways that schools establish, regulate, and maintain “Systems of (Im)mobility” that students must navigate to be successful. To analyze these complex systems, Nordquist presents “a range of data types—mobile observations and interviews, time-space maps, images and student texts—to represent three students’ intersecting and diverging mobility narratives” (65) to demonstrate ways that the school system differently enabled or disabled each students’ progress.

“Mobile Collaborations,” the fourth chapter, provides a compelling analysis of one of the study’s most engaging subjects: the mandatory busing of students from impoverished suburbs to the high school’s location in an affluent, predominantly white neighborhood. More than just a means of transportation between the school and the students’ neighborhoods, the bus is the site of a complex interplay of students’ identities, literacies, and trajectories. Students exchange feedback on writing and other assignments and cultivate relationships that accommodate, resist, and alter the school’s (im)mobility systems. Nordquist also investigates how mobile technologies intersect and shape students’ composing and review processes.

Literacy and Mobility showcases several strengths: a rich theoretical foundation, revealing critiques of the American education system’s future-orientation and “rhetoric of readiness,” and a sobering account of the ways institutions of power continue to compartmentalize, marginalize, and suppress the mobilities of students on the bases of race, class, gender, and ability. The conclusion also provides some pedagogical tools and resources to bring mobility to the forefront of classroom praxis. The book will be useful to teachers in high schools and colleges, as well as to compositionists and literacy studies scholars broadly interested in models of literacy that inform socially just pedagogy. Although the scope of the book was understandably constrained, a shortcoming is that it does not

describe the movements of the study's other eight participants. Nordquist argues that Nadif's success is due in part to the bevy of linguistic and literacy skills he accesses to navigate through the school system. However, several other participants, who are described in an appendix as monolinguals, also matriculate into colleges and universities without clear analogs to Nadif's skills. Including an analysis of one of these other participants may have offered a richer comparative perspective and further highlighted the power differentials between the (im)mobility systems schools create versus the placemaking and navigational skills of students. However, this minor limitation does not reduce the value of Nordquist's contributions. This book pushes against the myth that academic literacy guarantees a forward, upward form of mobility, and urges teachers and scholars alike to do the same while attuning ourselves to the ways that students are not merely passive inhabitants of fixed spaces but active, agentive placemakers and wayfinders. In a direct rebuttal of the deficit model of education, Nordquist advises that we recognize students' diverse linguistic, modal, and literacy practices as resources rather than as deficits that must be overcome.

WORKS CITED

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