Book Review—*Literacy Work in the Reign of Human Capital* by Evan Watkins

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Decades after Harvey Graff's research complicated the correlation between literacy acquisition and social and economic mobility, literacy myths are alive and well in twenty-first century cultural discourse. Graff himself, in his 2010 article "*The Literacy Myth* at 30," remarks on this persistence, saying, "I am . . . struck by the resilience . . . of 'literacy myths' around us . . . . Literacy myths continue to sprout like weeds" (636). In *Literacy Work in the Reign of Human Capital*, Evan Watkins provides an updated version of the literacy myth for the digital age, one that encompasses widely accepted perceptions of the relationship among education, digital literacy, and economic success. The myth, he says, is that educational reforms centered around digital literacy training will help to narrow the growing economic divide between classes in the United States. In other words, if students are trained to use technology well (and not just for entertainment purposes), they will have a leg up in the current economy. Watkins counters this perception, saying,

> I'm hardly opposed to the mythic hope for educational reform and the idea that educational institutions might allow more students than ever to experience an entire spectrum of multiple literacies far more than ever before. But none of that is likely to happen without changing the occupational structure of the economy and completely reconfiguring the reign of market forces assumed to determine economic value. (29)

For Watkins, educational reform with a focus on new literacies will not solve economic disparity—instead, the structure of the economy itself would have to change.

Watkins's work aligns with other literacy studies scholarship concerned with the role and value of literacy skills in our modern economy. He positions himself in conversation with Graff and Deborah Brandt, citing extensively from Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives* to make the case for literacy skill as a resource which is highly valued, labor-intensive, and rationed by economic forces. Unfortunately, the timing of publication meant that Watkins missed the opportunity to respond to Brandt's 2015 book, *The Rise of Writing*, which traces writing's cultural and economic history in America, underscoring its long-standing association with work and the transactional sphere. According to Brandt, the rise of mass writing parallels the emergence of what has been called the knowledge (or information) economy, wherein "texts serve as a chief means of production and a chief output" (3). While Brandt's research focuses on the workaday writing practices of workers in a knowledge economy, Watkins is interested in theorizing the everyday (and not necessarily work-related) literacy practices of consumers in an economy that highly values *human capital,* defined as any "resource that is embodied in the person of its possessor. Hence in corporate terms, the education, skills, intelligence, and even character of employees can appear as capital assets" (4). For Watkins, the concept of human capital is meant to capture the embodied labor involved in so many everyday literacy skills, from the myriad literacies required in the contemporary workplace to the most mundane practices, such as using an ATM to withdraw money from the bank. Watkins uses the ATM example early in his introduction to argue that the economic value of these everyday literacy skills flows toward the institution—that the consumer's embodied labor benefits the banks (who can, for example, hire fewer employees because ATM literacy is so ubiquitous and customers can perform tasks themselves). This unidirectional flow of benefits "extends a class division of winners on the inside and losers everywhere else" (9).

To support this claim of increasing economic stratification alongside the emergence of new literacies, Watkins structures the four chapters of his book as extensive literature reviews, synthesizing scholarship from a vast range of disciplines to situate literacy alongside issues of economy, labor, technology, and human capital. He draws on the work of literacy scholars, of course, but also economists and information technologists, film theorists and sociologists. In chapter one, he traces the concept of *human capital* from Adam Smith's eighteenth-century text *The Wealth of Nations* through contemporary economic theory, critiquing the modern tendency to downplay labor and ignore the potential for antidemocratic stratification that accompanies this downplaying. After tracing theories of human capital from other scholars, in chapter two Watkins proposes his own concept of *just-in-time human capital* as a way of theorizing human capital in our current economic moment. He explains,

> The radical departure that distinguishes what I call just-in-time human capital...is the elimination of any perceived necessity for depending on large and available reserves. Like the just-in-time corporate organization that takes its name from the minimization of inventory—no more than what is necessary on any given occasion—just-in-time human capital minimizes reserves as much as possible . . . Workers can become redundant in much the same way as excess material inventory (15-16, 17).

This *just-in-time* approach may increase economic efficiency and productivity but, as Watkins notes, those benefits do not necessarily flow back to the individuals whose embodied labor was called upon in the moment of need (65). In chapter three, Watkins traces variations of the argument that we do not, in fact, exist in an information economy but rather in an *attention economy*. Information is ubiquitous and readily available in the digital age, and its value is entirely dependent on the attention that is paid to it (attention being an arguably more finite resource). Watkins ultimately argues for attention-as-human-capital; in other words, consumers constantly perform the (unpaid and unrewarded) labor of attentiveness, and the capital benefits of this attention work flow outward rather than inward. Chapter four ties together the threads from previous chapters to support Watkins's central argument: that "inequalities [are] a symptom of the class division produced by the concentration of human capital" (23) and that current structures of labor, education, and attention-as-human-capital have created "a world in which being rich in literacies does not necessarily translate at all into human capital wealth or position" (25). Watkins supports this argument by laying out and then dismantling his version of the new literacy myth. Ultimately, he writes, "The key question is not how to initiate necessary [educational] reforms against the dead weight of past practices and institutional inertia. The question is how to radically alter the direction of those reforms already transforming education into the profoundly antidemocratic narrative of human capital triumph" (160). In other words, the structures and ideologies of our human capital-driven attention economy need to be reformed rather than merely our educational approaches to teaching digital literacies.

While it is not entirely clear, after reading Watkins's book, exactly *how* economic and ideological structures would need to and could shift to help resolve the vast (and growing) class disparity in the current US economy—and while his concluding outlook on the "antidemocractic narrative of human capital triumph" (160) feels quite bleak—Watkins's extensive and interdisciplinary synthesis of scholarship related to literacy and human capital provides a useful starting point for researchers interested in pursuing these questions further.

WORKS CITED

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