

Defying the Odds: Class and the Pursuit of Higher Literacy, by Donna Dunbar-Odom. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007. 139 pp.

Reviewed by Marcy Tucker, Texas A&M University–Kingsville

The grand narrative of the American Dream assumes equal opportunity for anyone with enough ambition, perseverance, and willingness to work. The grand narrative of literacy assumes that its acquisition smoothly facilitates upward mobility and financial gain. Composition scholars have largely questioned these assumptions, yet our inquiry was limited in its focus on our *students* and not so much on *us*, as if to say that as scholars, we arrive here having taken the same roads from the same points of departure. Our attention did in time to turn to issues of race and gender, but class seemed relevant only in regard to students, primarily those termed “first-generation” and of whom we generally characterized as underprepared. Discussions of class as it pertained to the academics themselves were rare, until relatively recently when a growing body of scholarship produced by and devoted to working-class academics emerged, work that has gone far to dispel the myths of class mobility that are so endemic to our culture and so pervasive in the promotion of higher education.

Donna Dunbar-Odom makes an important contribution to this scholarship with *Defying the Odds: Class and the Pursuit of Higher Literacy*, a project inspired in part by her own experience as an academic of working-class origin—a “seemingly anomalous” experience in that her pursuit of higher literacy was, given her background, not predicable (16). As a teacher of writing for more than twenty years, Dunbar-Odom’s project was further prompted by questions of why and how some individuals from working-class origins pursue higher literacy despite, as her title suggests, doing so against the odds. Hers are questions of desire: What inspires some to a life-long yearning toward literacy, and what turns others off of reading and writing, and how does class factor in these critically different relationships to literacy?

Dunbar-Odom seeks to examine stories of literacy as “part of a larger cultural narrative of literacy education” (17). She begins by framing her work in terms of how literacy works as and within a system of power and how power simultaneously motivates higher literacy and complicates it. Stories—or narratives—serve various functions for both writer/speaker and reader/listener: confession, reassurance of individuality, and self-representation, among others. Dunbar-Odom examines the role of literacy as a “life-changing” function by drawing on familiar examples of Frederick Douglas, Mike Rose, and Richard Rodriguez (chapter two), not for the sake of telling (or, for many readers, re-telling) their stories, but toward devel-

oping ways of teaching that enable students to gain similar authority and self-knowledge through the writing of their own stories. In these examples, as well as in numerous other working-class narratives, lies an element of “escape,” the use of reading as a “passport” to other more exciting, and in some cases, safer, places. Another recurring theme is that of the presence of the interested and supportive mentor-teacher, who, as in Rose’s case, may even pull strings to help the working-class student gain entrance and loans for college. Here Dunbar-Odom makes an important point for readers and one that is critical to her book: not all working-class narratives ring the same. She—nor I—nor other working-class academics—all share identical experiences, and to overlook the fact that we are not homogenous impedes the process of understanding, and thereby better serving, our working-class students (and, by extension, our working-class academic peers).

Similarly, Dunbar-Odom’s discussion of Richard Rodriquez’s *Hunger of Memory* makes another important point: not all who traverse class lines, even in “ascension” from working-or poverty-class to middle class, experience the journey as a positive one; class mobility can bring isolation and conflict, as evidenced in Rodriquez’s narrative of his personal loss and subsequent disillusionment with academia. Using *Hunger of Memory* as an assigned reading in her classroom, Dunbar-Odom recounts how students are resistant to Rodriquez’s frank description of how higher education alienated him from his family; she emphasizes, however, the importance of having students deliberate their resistance to the possibility that the change that education brings may not be the kind of change they anticipate.

In chapter 3, Dunbar-Odom looks past representations of literacy that portray its acquisition as a pleasurable experience to representations that are more troublesome, and she presents her concerns that middle-class teachers may value more those middle-class students who are like them—in her words, the “pedagogy of the ‘mini-me’” (56). As Lynn Z. Bloom suggested in “Freshman Composition as Middle-Class Enterprise,” Dunbar-Odom calls for teachers of composition to develop a more honest self-awareness, but whereas Bloom calls for middle-class teachers to examine their perspectives toward “lower-class” students, Dunbar-Odom asks for “those of us from nonmainstream backgrounds” to see what assumptions we bring with us past our own apprenticeships (57). Difficult as it might have been, we made a choice to pursue higher education, and neither our experiences nor our goals can neatly be assumed to be the same of our students.

Chapter 4, “Metaphors We Write By,” reminds readers of the power of metaphor to define, relate, and reveal the ideological framework of our beliefs, and Dunbar-Odom devotes this chapter to examples of how she employs the metaphor in the curriculum of her first-year writing students and her first-year teaching and graduate assistants. Asking her graduate students to examine or even discover where their desire to teach came from as well as

to identify a metaphor for teaching puts into practice Dunbar-Odom's theoretical notion that discovering the key to desire for higher literacy demands self-reflection among those with any degree of success, especially among graduate students (and/or writing majors) who not uncommonly see themselves as "naturally" talented. Her work with first-year students sheds light on the tremendous result that state-mandated testing had on their inability to discuss literacy without equating it to tests and the anger, frustration, and obstacles that accompany them, evidence that further supports what Dunbar-Odom demonstrates throughout the book, which is that what we do matters as much—if not more—than what our students do, and that attention to what motivates a *desire* to write may produce better outcomes.

In the following chapter, Dunbar-Odom turns her attention to a great many published working-class literacy narratives, making this section particularly significant for readers who may be unfamiliar with this body of scholarship. As she does throughout the book, Dunbar-Odom balances discussions of personal experience and classroom practice with current composition scholarship. Although much of the work she references is likely to be familiar to composition scholars, her particular use of these works is done with a fresh perspective and with careful attention toward re-seeing them through the lens of class studies. Chapter five, "Literacies, Lived, Written, and Owned," goes far toward revealing to those outside the poverty- and working-classes the difficulties experienced by so many working-class academics who entered the middle-class academy to find—probably unexpectedly—that they are neither working-class nor middle-class, but are indeed *Strangers in Paradise, Caught in the Middle, in Limbo*, or any of the other descriptors that name the published scholarship of the working-class.

If chapter 5 serves to make the strange familiar, then chapter 6, "Reading with Pleasure: What Oprah Can Teach Us about Literacy Sponsorship," must certainly broach a subject with widespread familiarity. Dunbar-Odom examines the phenomenon that is Oprah Winfrey's Book Club. Drawing on Deborah Brandt's concept of the "literacy sponsor," Dunbar-Odom draws on Oprah's Book Club as an example of a way to foster literacy through a "culture of reading" that is positive, without criticism of its participants, and, of course, no grades. It is what Dunbar-Odom calls "a sense of invitation and community" (129) that she urges us to work to foster in our classrooms.

Because of a steadily increasing enrollment of working-class students in higher education, Dunbar-Odom's work is important to educators in terms of understanding the important and complex cultural distinctions that form the gap between the working-class majority and the middle-class academy. For those of us in the writing classroom, this book, as with other scholarship produced by and about the working-class, is timely and necessary. Dunbar-Odom does not attempt to provide easy and simple answers (for there are none), but she does provide readers with complicated examples, provocative

questions, and helpful input based on her personal and teaching experiences as well as introductions to published works that address issues of class that place discussions of class in the theoretical framework deserving of such an important topic.

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Works Cited

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During my first week at the University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA), I was handed a text I had never seen before: *Teaching Writing with Latino/a Students*. As I began skimming the articles, I couldn't help but wonder what my colleagues knew that I didn't. As a teacher-researcher interested in the effects of place on students and academics identities, I was not naïve enough to believe that I could simply transfer the courses I used at a mostly Anglo, private university in North Texas to a majority Hispanic student population in the Rio Grande Valley. But as a native Texan, I did assume the students and I would be able to share in Texas pride, and I was open and ready to have them teach me about my new place. Now that I have been in the classrooms of a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) for one semester, teaching both undergraduate and early college students, and I am still torn between viewing my students as either [1] a contextual and unique student population, one influenced by the Valley's undeniable border identity, or as [2] typical eighteen- to twenty-year-old college students, millennials struggling to make sense of and find relevance in college life and college demands.