An irresistible behind-the-scenes look at one of America’s most powerful learning environments, created by individuals drawn together by their deep desire to make America a true democracy. This is a powerful, in-depth, and deeply moving story about the power of starting small but believing big.
—Shirley Brice Heath, Stanford University

Literacy for African Americans has always been about more than reading, writing, speaking, and listening. It has been about liberation and self-determination. In this volume, Lathan captures the very soul of African American literacy during the crucial years of the modern Civil Rights Movement.
—Gloria Ladson-Billings, Kellner Family Chair of Urban Education, University of Wisconsin–Madison

Through a blend of African American cultural theory and literacy and rhetorical studies highlighting the intellectual and pedagogical traditions of African American people, Rhea Estelle Lathan argues that African Americans have literacy traditions that represent specific, culturally influenced ways of being in the world. She introduces gospel literacy, a theoretical framework analogous to gospel music within which to consider how the literacy activities of the Civil Rights Movement illuminate a continual interchange between secular and religious ideologies. Lathan demonstrates how gospel literacy is deeply grounded in an African American tradition of refusing to accept the assumptions underlying European American thought and institutions, including the oppression of African American people and the denial of full citizenship rights.

Lathan’s critical historical analysis draws on oral histories, personal interviews, and archival data, allowing her to theorize about African American literacy practices, meanings, and values while demonstrating the symbiotic relationship between literacy and the Civil Rights Movement. Central to her research are local participants who contributed to the success of citizenship education, and she illuminates in particular how African American women used critical intellectualism and individual creative literacy strategies to aid in the struggle for basic human rights.

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Freedom Writing
African American Civil Rights Literacy Activism, 1955–1967

Rhea Estelle Lathan

RHETORIC / COMPOSITION / CIVIL RIGHTS ERA LITERACY
CONTENTS

Acknowledgments vii
Introduction: The Gospel According to Literacy xi

1. Like a Bridge over Troubled Water: An African American Sacred–Secular Continuum 1
2. “Gonna Lay Down My Burdens”: Jim Crow to Composition Studies—A Diagrammatic Perspective 26
4. “I’ve Got a Testimony”: Bearing Witness to a Historical Case of African American Curriculum and Instructional Methods 73
5. “And Still I Rise”: Finding Redemption through Unceasing Variations of Literacy Acquisition and Use 105

Notes 113
Bibliography 123
Index 135
Author 143
INTRODUCTION: THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LITERACY

Paul and Silas, bound in jail
Had no money for to go their bail
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold
Hold on (hold on), hold on (hold on)
Paul and Silas began to shout
The jail door opened and they walked out
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on

Freedom's name is mighty sweet,
soon one day we're gonna meet.

Got my hand on the Gospel plow,
I wouldn't take nothing for my Journey now.
The only chain that a man can stand,
is that chain of hand and hand.
The only thing we did wrong,
stayed in the wilderness a day too long.

Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on
Alice Wine

There was also a new bidding—and we could feel it from the vantage point of our Citizenship Program—across class and educational lines, across generations, across localities and dialects and family backgrounds. We could hear this unity in the singing voices and speaking voices of the people; it seemed we could even hear it in the earth itself, like a soft rumbling, a rhythmic beating of drums from all over the South. It was knowing, with undeniable and unshakable conviction, that our time had come.

Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden*

**THE SOUTH CAROLINA CITIZENSHIP SCHOOL** fairytale goes something like this: Once Upon a Time, in the South Carolina swamps, Septima Clark, a matronly schoolteacher, gathered a few tired, illiterate farmers and taught them to read and write. This bunch of tattered Jim Crow shuckin’ Lowcountry residents, suddenly, with
little forethought, decided they wanted social equality. With Clark’s help, they learned how to read the South Carolina Constitution. Armed with their newly acquired “literacy,” the farmers fearlessly marched into the Charleston City Hall and, magically, without incident, registered as voters. Literacy saved the day. Literacy was the golden key that unlocked the gates to civic freedom. White South Carolinians surrendered their Jim Crow practices, integrated lunch counters, and graciously opened schools to black children.\(^1\) The fairytale ends as Septima Clark runs the notorious Jim Crow laws out of South Carolina. And the South Carolina Sea Islands residents lived happily ever after. The End.

This is a nice, neat fantasy. Other romantic adaptations have Clark traveling all over the South with a bag of literacy, which she spreads like pixie dust over “Jim Crow,” leading to his ultimate demise. These romantic adaptations reinforce an African American rags-to-riches fantasy that ultimately perpetuates misrepresentations of African American literacy activism. They also legitimize social inequalities that stem from uncritical and incomplete histories. When we tell the stories of our leaders in the struggle for our rights, rarely do we look beyond “Super Septima,” “Tired Rosa Parks,” or “Mighty Man-on-the-Mountain Martin Luther King Jr.” We don’t have to look far to locate nostalgic movies or documentary films about the brave Freedom Riders, courageous Montgomery bus boycotters, or heroic Selma marchers. However, if we consider civil rights icon Andrew Young’s declaration from the vantage point of the Citizenship Program, we hear an instrument that amplifies local, community-based voices. A more complete narrative restores participant voices to the historical record. This occurs when we listen carefully to the people dedicated to both teaching and learning.\(^2\)

An oversimplified narrative of the Civil Rights Movement in general, or an uncritical analysis of the Citizenship Schools specifically, casts a shadow on primary sources of African American literacy practices. *Freedom Writing* illuminates principal resources and lays bare the Citizenship Schools myth, which is often a placatory narrative that obscures hard truths about the role of writing—learning and teaching—during the Civil Rights era. Literacy activism is
especially viable within the context of a social movement designed to take up the ongoing fight against intellectual oppression.

The Citizenship Schools are a chapter in the continuing struggle against the overwhelming justification for relegating black people to subhuman positions: the belief that they were, by and large, illiterate. Not until the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision did we begin to see the demise of prevailing US education policies that had enforced laws preserving educational access exclusively for whites (Prendergast, *Literacy* 16). The decision emboldened black communities en masse to demand their inalienable constitutional rights. The *Brown* decision was the gateway to civic inclusion, but Citizenship Schools were the path up to the door.

Beginning with fourteen students on Johns Island, South Carolina, the schools grew to include more than 60,000 participants throughout the South and later became the largest program of Martin Luther King Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The schools set a precedent in mass literacy activity for African Americans that extended far beyond the goal of African American voter registration. They were an empowering force against the dehumanizing strain of segregationist ideologies, guiding many participants into activism. Then, as now, national studies claimed that African Americans lacked the literacy skills required to keep pace with their white American counterparts. If we look to the Citizenship Schools for an innovative perspective on literacy, we both recover and revise a vocabulary for discussing the literacy history of marginalized groups—in this case, the learners and teachers who participated in the Civil Rights crusade.

**KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE PRIZE: A REVISIONIST PERSPECTIVE**

A revisionist narrative of the Citizenship Schools could begin something like this: In 1954, Alice Wine, a domestic and factory worker, memorized the necessary sections of the South Carolina Constitution in order to pass a voter registration literacy test. Cognizant of the consequences that came with resisting Jim Crow protocol, Wine walked into the voter registration office on Society Street in
Charleston and, invoking a calculated mnemonic strategy, recited the appropriate passage. Wine proudly described her intellectual manipulation, explaining: “Everybody had to read and get a paper, read and get a paper. . . . And then the man put me for read, and I read those things just like I been know ’em. And I didn’t know them things, I swear!” (qtd. in Carawan and Carawan, *Ain’t You Got*). Wine’s unrestricted courage, motivation, determination, and ultimately successful registration empowered a Johns Island businessman and community activist, Esau Jenkins, to initiate funding efforts for an adult literacy program.

Jenkins operated a bus service transporting workers between the Sea Islands and Charleston. As a passenger on his bus, Wine bargained with Jenkins that if he taught her to read during those long rides to Charleston, she would take the voter registration literacy test. Both found the process more challenging than anticipated, so memorization became the immediate solution. Jenkins had very little faith in the memorization tactic and didn’t think Wine would pass the test. Wine, however, remained determined. She passed the literacy test and received her voter registration certificate. Jenkins explained that Wine’s resolve to learn was his ultimate motivation as he set out to solicit funding for a Sea Islands adult literacy program. In 1956, Alice Wine became one of the first participants in the Citizenship Education Program on Johns Island, South Carolina.

But just as the African American fight for civic inclusion did not begin on a bus in Alabama, Alice Wine’s activism did not begin on a bus in South Carolina. In 1945, Wine participated in the strike of the Negro Food and Tobacco Workers Union of Charleston. During this strike, she revised a Negro spiritual into a protest anthem. Most people recognize “Hands on the Plow” as a Civil Rights anthem, but few people know it was Alice Wine who revised the lyrics. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Freedom Riders sang this song while they were literally “bound in jail.” They sang as they endured brutal beatings and undue prosecution and imprisonment in Mississippi’s notorious Parchman Farm (Mississippi State Penitentiary). Freedom Rider and Congressman John
Lewis explains that the lyrics “Hold on Hold on . . . encouraged us to go on in spite of it all” (Guttentag and Sturman). The lyrics were shouted and moaned in the midst of almost every Civil Rights protest from the 1950s on.

Singing was one of the creative rhetorical strategies adopted by Civil Rights activists to protest segregation. The various strategies drew heavily on the black church, which provided sanctuary for protest rallies and a venue to plan resistance tactics. Despite the centrality of songs in black social justice protest, however, we have yet to account for their rhetorical appeal or literate power, particularly as a way of knowing. In 1942, Zora Neale Hurston introduced the idea of complicating perceptions about African American spiritual expressions, framing them as a theoretical concept: “The real spirituals are not really just songs. They are unceasing variations around a theme” (869). Hurston warns us not to reduce African American compositions of expression to rote performance because these activities are taken up with deliberate attention to a history. Engaging Hurston’s gaze, we can see how Alice Wine and other African American freedom crusaders combined song with their liberatory activities and how musical ideologies were an intricate source of black activism. Keith Gilyard expands this theory, arguing that African American rhetorical strategies, along with sacred activities, are crucial components in African American discourse (“Introduction”). From this perspective, we can consider how Alice Wine and other African American activists combined sacred language with secular liberatory activities. An example of this relationship is the way that Citizenship School participants replicated religious services while learning, following the format of basic church services: devotion, sermon, and benediction. The devotional service includes a scripture reading and a series of call-and-response songs followed by a prayer and members testifying or witnessing about an overwhelming or extremely difficult situation. The sermon begins with another reading from the sacred text—often the Bible—and a statement of the sermon’s theme. The preacher teaches the “Word.” Finally, the benediction sends the congregation off to practice what they learned during the session. This pattern is clear from the first
Citizenship School teacher Bernice Robinson’s description of a typical day:

A typical class would begin with devotions. Someone would be assigned to carry on devotions for each class night. This relaxed and warmed up the group. Then homework was checked. Then we would have about thirty minutes of reading. I wrote down each word they had difficulty in pronouncing and used these words during our spelling period, which followed. The definitions of these words were also taught so the students would understand what they were reading. Then we would have a session in arithmetic, using the prices from grocery lists, catalogue orders, etc. Then we would go thru the process of applying for a registration certificate. After which I made assignments for homework. Some nights, to maintain interest and break up the monotony of lessons, I would show a film. Highlander [Folk School] provided us with many films. Guy Carawan, who headed up the music department at Highlander, would come down and would teach singing at the classes and here again we used the words of the songs for reading. The goal of the classes was to create an awareness of the political structure in the local community, across the state, as well as nation [that] controlled funds for education, housing, employment etc. Blacks could not only be knowledgeable as to whom they should contact to eliminate what problems, but they could become candidates for these offices as well.5

Relying on weaving together both sacred and secular practices, Robinson opened up a space for a literacy activism that encouraged active literacy. Describing how and why she included worship tools in literacy activism, she explains, “That’s where blacks used to release all of their problems[,] was through their music. They would go into those Praise Houses and shout and talk about their problems through the music. Sort of get it all out of their systems.”6
GOOD NEWS: SACRED MUSIC AS LITERACY ACTIVISM

Black musical expressions resonated within Citizenship School activities and fostered an orientation toward a material and cultural consciousness. Gospel songs contained a mixture of Christian music based on American folk music, marked by strong rhythms and elaborate refrains while incorporating elements of spirituals, blues, and jazz. Gospel ideologies highlight black music’s refusal to simplify reality or devalue emotion. Songs of faith rallied the hopes of people suffering devastating social conditions. By their very nature, gospel expressions included patterns of telling stories that echoed participants’ ways of talking about literacy activism, a multirhythmic way of being that exposed cultural, spiritual, and material ways of knowing, thinking, and existing. Gospel consciousness is especially visible within the literacy activities of the Civil Rights Movement, during which participants interchanged literacy activism, spiritual knowledge, and ideas about social change and were able to do so because the processes took place in private, protected worship spaces—as did the Citizenship Schools, which met in churches, social clubs, and private prayer meetings. As Robinson illustrates, even within gatherings dedicated to learning there was an exchange between spiritual and sociopolitical ideologies. Consequently, the literacy activities of the freedom movement and gospel consciousness evolved along with the surrounding culture, as people developed innovative styles and tested inventive language in response to new expressions of traditional problems. I call this “gospel literacy.”

Gospel literacy, like gospel music, contains four ruling concepts: acknowledging the burden, call-and-response, bearing witness, and finding redemption. Acknowledging the burden engages an African American intellectual tradition of embracing knowledge as power, which begins by recognizing the consequences of oppressive ideologies and epistemologies while consciously choosing a redemptive response to that oppression. Specifically, in the gospel tradition, people are empowered through a formidable understanding of local history. Although the Sea Islands were politically calm before the 1950s, they are part of a region that has a tradition, since the
colonial period, of strong engagement in the struggle for African American liberation. Acknowledging the burden as a theoretical concept lends itself to an analysis that pays particular attention to the legacies and traditions of African American literacy action. In addition, it’s an ideology that illuminates how the Sea Islands’ Citizenship Schools project was not an isolated phenomenon but the result of an African American tradition of critical intellectual activity—an empowering response; an acknowledgement of burdens. Sea Islands Citizenship School participants invoked and deepened a tradition of intellectual control.

The second driving principle of gospel literacy is call-and-response. I depart from the common understanding of call-and-response as a spontaneous exchange that operates in almost every space in black culture. Within the ideology of gospel literacy, participants use call-and-response as an avenue to practice well-thought-out responses that change the direction of dominant social forces in and out of the community. A response that merely affirms or changes the direction of a call suggests a nonabrasive action; in gospel literacy, the response doesn’t refuse to go along with the call but becomes a means of doing intellectual work to execute a strategic plan, taking authority over literacy activism.

Bearing witness, the third element of gospel literacy, treats “witnessing” as a critical intellectual practice. Witnessing—interchangeable with testifying—is a sophisticated literacy activity that consists of symbolic illustrations and recitations of an experience (individual or shared). As a literacy template, it’s used to recover an epistemology that complicates the way we understand the relationship between social activism and literacy acquisition and use.

The final defining concept of gospel literacy is finding redemption. This is a theoretical model that demonstrates how the deep cultural resources that develop in African American spiritual life come into secular contexts as intellectual and spiritual literacy strategies, which enhance literacy activism. Specifically, finding redemption shifts from the standard religious doctrine of eternal salvation toward a socially literate activist principle of attaining justice in this life.
Acknowledgments / xix

Up to this point, perspectives on African American gospel ideology engage primarily in observations limited to black sacred performances. As a religious concept, gospel music is a synthesis of West African and African American music, dance, poetry, oratory, and drama. Within African American culture, gospel expressions most often call to mind joy, hope, and expectation, including narratives that provide a sense of security. However, I treat gospel from a literacy perspective that complicates conventional understandings, a perspective that situates both community-based literacy activism and gospel as ways of being, knowing, and living. This gospel literacy perspective is based on accounts by the participants of Citizenship Schools as well as my explorations into their literacy practices, exposing a gospel consciousness that weaves together spiritual and secular concepts within literacy practices, meanings, and values. These literacy practices intersect with elements of a gospel ideology, including a narrative model derived from African epistemologies.

The gospel literacy framework is not simply an attempt to impose an alternate template onto a traditional format or to claim yet another neologism for literacy. *Freedom Writing*’s uniqueness and significance lies primarily in the way I reconceptualize the meaning of *gospel*. Understanding composition studies’ rhetorical roots affords me the opportunity to draw on the word *gospel*’s Greek origins, where *evangelion* meant “good story” or “good news” (specifically, “good + spel” = good news). The current definition emerged as Old English translators went about the task of converting the Bible from Latin to English. They changed the Latin term *bona annutiatio* or *bonus numtius* into *gospel*, meaning “God’s story.” However, I use the term *gospel* as defined in its original incarnation of “good story” or “good news.” Following a nonconformist definition provides a means of exploring Citizenship School participants’ “gospel” through a narrative lens, which includes patterns of telling stories that echo the recovering thoughts about literacy. The Citizenship School participants thus used a narrative inquiry.

*Freedom Writing*, then, considers the literacy narratives of community-based Citizenship School participants: Bernice Robinson, Esau Jenkins, Anderson Mack, Ethel Grimball, Aileen Brewer, and
finally, Guy Carawan. Robinson, a beautician and the school’s first teacher, developed the original Citizenship School curriculum, teaching philosophy and classroom structure. Robinson went on to directly and indirectly train all subsequent Citizenship School teachers—if she didn’t train the teachers, she trained someone who trained them. Esau Jenkins, the most prominent black community leader on Johns Island, initiated the idea for the schools and, with Robinson’s help, did most of the initial organizing on the island. Anderson Mack, one of the youngest participants, became an active community organizer, responsible for getting a community and day care center established on Johns Island. Ethel Grimball, a social worker, and Aileen Brewer, a former teacher, first took on the task of teaching Alice Wine to read and write. Both Grimball and Brewer went on to set up and teach schools on Wadmalaw and Edisto Islands. Finally, I explore the experiences of Guy Carawan, folk artist and musical director of the Highlander Folk School, who introduced “Eyes on the Prize” to the wider movement after Alice Wine taught him her rendition of the song.

“NOBODY KNOWS THE TROUBLE I’VE SEEN”:
SITUATING LITERACY
Before I move any deeper into situating gospel literacy within the story of the Citizenship Schools, I need to illuminate the landscape for defining literacy in general and African American literacy in particular. Literacy here does not mean solely decoding or encoding sounds and letters, nor is it a synonym for education. As I interviewed participants and gathered text for this book, I recovered a wealth of primary narratives, including perspectives on how Citizenship School participants defined literacy for themselves. My literacy analysis, then, is not of the Citizenship Schools but rather of the actual participants and what they say about what literacy does within the context of African American social protest. Through my recovery, participants share how literacy acquisition became more than rote alphanumeric skills acquired for civic participation; it was a marriage between critical thinking, one’s sense of self-worth, and the ability to effectively utilize socioeconomic, intellectual, and hu-
man resources. My interest in this relationship became even more intense when I learned that Alice Wine’s literacy activism ranged beyond voter registration. For her it meant being able to read novels and write letters to her family in New York. Wine’s experience speaks to a central shift in literacy studies, which in recent years has moved from the concept of literacy as a set of stand-alone skills to the idea of literacy as a social practice. New Literacy scholars like Brian Street explain that this shift requires acknowledging that although literacy activities are specific to individual behavior, they are shaped through social relationships and “embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. It is about knowledge [and wisdom]: The ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, being” (418). Thus, the socially constructed nature of literacy is evident even when an individual fills out a voter registration form. But foremost, cultural and social traditions intensify the ways in which relations within discursive communities determine both how reading and writing happen and who is able to participate.

Both participating in and researching a literacy event as extreme as the Civil Rights Movement require more than simply being able to read and write; these activities rely on adhering to the West African philosophy of mate masie (wisdom, knowledge, and prudence). This philosophy weaves together both wisdom and knowledge while having the good sense to consider other perspectives. Without crucial knowledge of how social customs and power dynamics within African American culture vary from one situation to the next, it is difficult to negotiate rhetorical situations and to participate in a way that is meaningful and even comprehensible to the collective (both inside and outside composition studies).

It is with an eye toward critical literacies that I treat literacy not only as the process of learning to read and write—decoding and making meaning—but also as the way these skills are linked to social contexts: in this case, the lived experience of less visible and often marginalized community-based activists. Literacy here works within the complexities of a social constructivist paradigm—it represents social status as well as identity ideology. This means that the
unit of analysis is the individual and the community. I recognize participants as socialized members of an interpretive community. As I see it, the key to this perspective is the existence of a consensus among interlocutors. Literate activities are located within the norms of an interpretative community. Therefore, the direction of my analysis is reciprocal—from the group to the individual and the individual to the group (i.e., the learner to the teacher, the teacher to the learner, and each to a goal beyond the general description of civic inclusion).

I primarily map my literacy perspective around the ideas about literacy of Jacqueline Jones Royster and Deborah Brandt. Royster identifies literacy as a sociocognitive acquisition. She says that literacy “is the ability to gain access to information and to use this information variously to articulate lives and experiences and also to identify, think through, refine and solve problems, sometimes complex problems, over time” (Traces 45). Brandt illuminates how individual acts of writing are connected to larger cultural, historical, social, and political systems (Literacy). I find that theorizing literacy within a turbulent era of civil unrest underscores the idea of literacy’s symbiotic relationship with specific contexts. It advocates for an ideological model, viewing literacy as consequential.9 Similarly, Royster’s and Brandt’s definitions initiate a paradigm shift in composition studies through a methodology of recovering, while accounting for, the intersections of a material and cultural framework of literacy activity. These theories’ components of literacy as a social process, including multiples stages of participation, intertextual relations, and cultural knowledge, are ways to understand not only the social process of literacy but also its multirhythmic nature as it functions in African American literacy activism.10 I follow this body of work through my analysis of a specific grassroots literacy campaign, demonstrating how learning to teach writing and learning to write operate in this context.

In my attempt to recover these literacy narratives, I faced two obstacles familiar to most literacy historians, primarily due to literacy’s individual and social implications. First, for both historical and contemporary literacy research, the primary problem is
to define literacy. The second problem is how to clearly mark the significance of the symbiotic relationship between literacy and an event. Carl Kaestle describes the problem of defining literacy by explaining that “the term literacy appears straightforward, but because it can refer to a wide range of reading and writing activities, historians’ definitions vary” (qtd. in Royster, Traces 3). He goes on to say that “even if restricted only to reading, the term literacy may imply a wide range of abilities.” For example, the work of literacy historians such as James Anderson, Harvey Graff, Shirley Brice Heath, and Brian Street includes accounts of how literacy access—freedom and opportunity to obtain literacy and favorable circumstances to use and expand basic skills—is restricted by race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion, language, and geography. These perspectives encourage me to dismantle philosophies of universal access for all groups and individuals through a rigid examination of the barriers to access experienced by members of marginalized communities. Sociolinguist James Paul Gee argues that definitions of literacy too often appeal to notions of naturalness, innocence, and individual responsibility. He maintains that this narrow perspective “obscures the multiple ways in which reading, writing and language interrelate with the workings of power and desire in social life” (27). Revisionist perspectives, however, bring attention to the ways in which access is experienced differently within racial, class, gendered, historical, social, religious, and geographical contexts.

I align myself with social historians who identify the complicated layers of literacy acquisition and, more recently, attempt to examine the ideological and functional relationships between literacy and broader political ideals. Social historians include but are not limited to Janet Duitsman Cornelius, Adam Banks, Keith Gilyard (“African,” “Introduction”), Deborah Brandt (Literacy, “Sponsors”), Catherine Prendergast, and John Duffy—scholars who, to varying degrees, place the study of literacy within larger social contexts, illuminating the material and cultural conditions that facilitate an increase in mass literacy acquisition and use. Ultimately, some social historians remind us that the problems of defining literacy, historically or contemporarily, cannot be resolved by treating lit-
eracy as a stagnant, linear process. Literacies like those discussed in this book include fluctuations, strands, transactions, and divisions. The challenge becomes more complicated when combining ethnographic and historical literacy explorations.

My dilemma of how to situate myself within these perspectives intensified when I waded through the sea of archives while also interviewing participants. I searched for academic language or theories to help explain what I saw happening. Soon I discovered that the majority of existing research falls short of including language and ideologies composed from an African American perspective. Other studies of the Citizenship Schools consisted of either biographies or social historical studies, primarily within the disciplines of education and history. Listening and reading closely with respect and honor, I became increasingly frustrated in my attempt to find a methodological and theoretical perspective that includes conversations with participants, one that pays attention to literacy acquisition and use yet also speaks to an African American worldview. The problem was compounded by the fact that the vocabulary describing everyday grassroots critical intellectual activities was produced by and accessible to the educated elite, thus continuing the marginalization of the very community that actually put in the work. Consequently, I cannot abandon my position as a composition scholar. This is a difficult space to occupy. Fortunately, I can draw courage from the mandate to secure a place for black women’s intellectual strategies set forth by black feminist scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins and Barbara Smith, who lead me to Royster, whose work on the rhetorical and literate history of African American women eases the strain of researching African American intellectual activities. Highlighting my task as an obligation, she challenges the scholarly community to “enrich our definition of tradition, literacy and intellectualism and . . . use this enriched vision to look again at the historical evidence of the ways in which black women have used their literacy” (“Perspectives” 103). Both Royster and Collins explain why my responsibility is to build an inclusive intellectual perspective, and each is worth quoting at length. Collins notes the following:
One key role for Black women intellectuals is to ask the right questions and investigate all dimensions of a Black woman’s standpoint with and for African-American women. Black women intellectuals thus stand in a special relationship to the community of African-American women for which we are a part, and this special relationship frames the contours of Black feminist thought. . . . While Black feminist thought may originate with Black feminist intellectuals it cannot flourish isolated from the experiences and ideas of other groups. The dilemma is that Black women intellectuals must place our own experiences and consciousness at the center of any serious efforts to develop Black feminist thought yet not have that thought become separatist and exclusionary. (6)

The ideology that permeates Royster’s and Collins’s work requires us to find ways to transcend standard “composition” frameworks developed outside African American ways of knowing. Like Carmen Kynard, I accept that my orientation is “high academe” as well as “inner-personal and outer-historical” (13). These intersections are the development of enhanced intellectualism. Ultimately, I ignite my courage as a new scholar required to create innovative theoretical models that look to the culture—my culture—for identification. Royster explains this as a bold task of generating proactive models:

In forging ahead in uncharted territory, I have also had to confront directly, in the rendering of text, my own status as a researcher who identifies unapologetically with the subjects of my inquiries. In terms of my own invented ethos, within contexts that would position me otherwise because of the “marginality” of what I do, I have had to create proactive spaces rather than reactive spaces from which to speak and interpret. The task of creating new space, rather than occupying existing space, has encouraged in me the shaping of a scholarly ethos that holds both sound scholarly practices and ethical behavior in balance and harmony and that consistently projects this balancing in research and in writing. (Traces 252)
This call for varied methodologies originating in an African-derived cultural epistemology, where self is understood as a process of continual interaction, rests securely in a call-and-response ideology within a community, which in turn is constantly negotiating within a resistant context. As a theoretical concept, this practice is also understood as decentering. However, when this ideology is applied to African American culture, the deconstructive interrogation of self is usually predicated on the unexamined assumption that the self is constructed in Euro-American terms, which means the ideology itself needs deconstructing. Ultimately, Royster’s declaration gives me permission to embrace my position as both a composition researcher and an African American woman. As a researcher, I am not invisible. This book unapologetically includes my perspective as the granddaughter of a Milwaukee-based Freedom School trustee and my cultural connection to an African American community. In addition, my experiences growing up in a black church taught me that I’m obligated to remain grounded in the African American sense of self, drawing strength and energy from a community capable of validating my experience.

True to her location within composition studies, Royster offers a model for the responsibility of literacy historians to push explorations into a larger context, encouraging change for individuals and the world. The task of defining literacy is to construct a theoretical framework for African American people that recognizes the autonomous and subjective value of literacy as a means of “generating action” (Traces 42). In my own work, I follow the outline in which she defines the multiple tasks involved in shaping this type of theoretical framework, which are:

1) to analyze and interpret the ways in which written language and action systematically converge; 2) to document the rhetorical habits and choices of individual writers, an effort that requires attention to ethos and context, as well as to message and medium; 3) to examine patterns emerging over time, not simply to suggest, for example, that African American women seem to have an affinity for essay writing but to theorize about what such rhetorical preferences indi-
cate about connections between this group, a worldview, and their deliberate uses of written language to meet sociopolitical purposes. (43)

Royster equips historical revisionists with a means of defining the literacies of an individual, a culture, and a community. In the end, I’m a critically conscientious historian, embracing my own cultural identity while wading through the waters of Sea Islands literacy stories. Through both my ethnographic and historical research, I recover an emerging theme grounded in African American gospel concepts, which weave spiritual and secular principles into the motives, means, and methods of literacy learning and literacy activism.

CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

First and foremost, *Freedom Writing* recovers gospel literacy as a way of knowing; it is a cultural practice within an African American literacy event. In this introduction, I explain how to take on the burdens of academic conventions to develop a text that revises the intersections between an African American gospel consciousness and literacy. Chapter 1, “Like a Bridge over Troubled Water: An African American Sacred–Secular Continuum,” introduces and defines gospel literacy concepts within mainstream literacy scholarship (including various disciplines) while discussing how, within these perspectives, African American women have an intellectual tradition, albeit marginalized, of consciously choosing a response to their burdens that embraces the authority to expand their own knowledge. I accomplish this through an extensive analysis of social, historical, and theoretical perspectives within composition, African American, historical, education, and women’s studies. I take on studies that examine various ideologies in literacy as well as the rich diversity of African American culture. Chapter 2, “‘Gonna Lay Down My Burdens’: Jim Crow to Composition Studies—A Diagrammatic Perspective,” draws on the gospel concept of “acknowledging the burden” to map the Citizenship School story. This chapter employs an African American tradition of embracing knowledge as power within existing perspectives. Chapter 3, “‘I Got Some Pride’: Call-and-Response as an Intellectual Principle of
Literacy Acquisition and Use,” looks at how Sea Islands Citizenship School activities invoked “call-and-response, a culturally informed approach to literacy action that permeates notions of literacy and language. I describe how some of the fundamental dimensions of this communication pattern played out in the Civil Rights literacy crusade. Most important, I discuss how participants forged resistance against a narrow literacy learning centered on civic inclusion by drawing on gospel literacy. This chapter also demonstrates how Citizenship School participants’ communal performances and emerging meanings were central to literacy acquisition and use.

Chapter 4, “I’ve Got a Testimony: Bearing Witness to a Historical Case of African American Curriculum and Instructional Methods,” treats the gospel literacy concept of “witnessing” as an intellectual process in order to analyze the Citizenship Schools’ curriculum and instructional methods. I explain how such an analysis complicates the way we understand the relationship between social activism and literacy acquisition and use. Drawing on personal interviews and actual classroom discussions, as well as lesson plans and teacher training sessions, I provide an extended analysis of the classroom-in-action, illustrating how everything is working together—witnessing, spirituality, music, curriculum, teachers, and learners.

Finally, Chapter 5, “And Still I Rise: Finding Redemption through Unceasing Variations of Literacy Acquisition and Use,” situates the gospel literacy concept of “finding redemption,” which embodies principles of recovery through the intersections of literacy acquisition and emancipatory power and authority, as a theoretical model for explaining the implications of gospel literacy, as well as a means to restore to a place of honor the idea that African American cultural traditions contain more than basic exercises in thought and expression.

Before I begin the following discussion, however, I need to be clear that I am taking aspects of a unified experience out of context, making it difficult to discuss one characteristic without seeing evidence of another.
RHETORIC / COMPOSITION / CIVIL RIGHTS ERA LITERACY

An irresistible behind-the-scenes look at one of America’s most powerful learning environments, created by individuals drawn together by their deep desire to make America a true democracy. This is a powerful, in-depth, and deeply moving story about the power of starting small but believing big.
—Shirley Brice Heath, Stanford University

Literacy for African Americans has always been about more than reading, writing, speaking, and listening. It has been about liberation and self-determination. In this volume, Lathan captures the very soul of African American literacy during the crucial years of the modern Civil Rights Movement.
—Gloria Ladson-Billings, Kellner Family Chair of Urban Education, University of Wisconsin–Madison

Through a blend of African American cultural theory and literacy and rhetorical studies highlighting the intellectual and pedagogical traditions of African American people, Rhea Estelle Lathan argues that African Americans have literacy traditions that represent specific, culturally influenced ways of being in the world. She introduces gospel literacy, a theoretical framework analogous to gospel music within which to consider how the literacy activities of the Civil Rights Movement illuminate a continual interchange between secular and religious ideologies. Lathan demonstrates how gospel literacy is deeply grounded in an African American tradition of refusing to accept the assumptions underlying European American thought and institutions, including the oppression of African American people and the denial of full citizenship rights.

Lathan’s critical historical analysis draws on oral histories, personal interviews, and archival data, allowing her to theorize about African American literacy practices, meanings, and values while demonstrating the symbiotic relationship between literacy and the Civil Rights Movement. Central to her research are local participants who contributed to the success of citizenship education, and she illuminates in particular how African American women used critical intellectualism and individual creative literacy strategies to aid in the struggle for basic human rights.

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Rhea Estelle Lathan

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