

# Literacies in the Body

Stephanie Jones

The author invites literacy teachers and researchers to consider that, for better or worse, literacies and bodies are inextricably linked.

have you ever had that feeling,  
when a song  
washed over your body  
and transported you  
back to a different time  
and a different place?

**Y**ou may feel the breeze in your hair the same way you did on that fabulous day, or the sunlight on your skin, or maybe the punch in your gut or the quivering of your chin as grief and mourning wash over you—again and uncontrollably. Some people can name specific songs that affect them; others are startled when they become physically and emotionally saturated with embodied memories spontaneously provoked by music.

My first memory hearing Israel Kamakawiwo'ole's version of *Over the Rainbow/What a Wonderful World* was during a graduate class I was teaching in my early years as a professor. Students were leading a portion of the class and used the music to prompt a writing session and discussion.

It was my brother's birthday and he was suffering from adult onset seizures. I lived 600 miles away from him and was healthy and thriving.



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He was experiencing depression and loss.  
I was living my professional dream.

Years have passed, but when I hear the song unexpectedly a rock expands in my throat and I'm transported back into that classroom and reexperience the bodied response that came with that moment. Suffering alongside my brother so far away, trying my damndest to hide it, to blend in with my graduate students hunched over their notebooks and computers writing. The burning pain is felt so deep in my body because of that song—because of the way it came to me, because of what I did with it—the meaning I made of it, the actions I took around it, the state of mind I was in when I heard it and the place of the encounter. It's nearly impossible to hear the song and not have the same visceral response to it.

So, you ask, what does a song and, more important, physical and emotional embodiment have to do with literacies in the classroom? In what follows I extend an invitation to literacy educators and scholars to tend to the body in multiple and varied ways—certainly beyond what I offer here. I see at least two productive paths: (1) tending to the ways we engage and cultivate literacies for making sense of bodies and (2) tending to the literacies embedded in, performed through, and experienced *as* bodies. These distinct conceptual paths are inextricably linked, thus requiring interconnected analysis, for sure. But in separating them—if only tentatively and for certain purposes—we might also glean insights for transformative thought and action.

## An Invitation to the Body

The body is one of those elusive objects of study that comes to mean in infinite ways so as to deflect our gaze before long. It is so complex and varied and unpredictable—and yet sometimes simple and repetitive and predictable—that many of us are reluctant to settle in long enough to glimpse the brilliance that could prompt lines of flight (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) toward expansive and powerful literacies in our unjust world. What I offer here is an invitation for those of us wondering how and why, after decades of scholarship on inequity and power in education and society, we find ourselves mired in practices that perpetuate much that is unfair, unjust, unethical, and inhumane.

I invite us to tend to literacies we use to make sense of bodies—our own bodies, bodies of colleagues, bodies of students, bodies filling public and private spaces, and bodies we see and hear in media—to critique the discourses through which bodies are constituted and notice where we bump up against the limitations of our language to speak about bodies (e.g., Hughes-Decatur, 2011). In these critiques we might wonder how and why teachers talk about their bodies and body image with colleagues and their students, and how these literacies influence the way bodies and pedagogies are performed and experienced inside and outside the classroom.

For example, what roles do discourses of the exercise industrial complex (e.g., Newman, Albright, King-White, 2011), sexism, misogyny, sexuality, and heteronormativity play in women's and men's literacies for knowing their own bodies (e.g., Blackburn, 2002)? How do those literacies in the body, then, get “taught” and acquired through other bodies in literacy classrooms? We might also wonder how we come to make sense of a brown-skinned teenage boy in a hoodie, a young adolescent Latina in skinny jeans and blue eye shadow, a white tattooed biker parent of a student, a white teacher-education student from the suburbs.

How is it that we encounter bodies and believe we already know something about them? What literacies provide us with such confidence and simultaneously such limited and partial perceptions of bodies in moment-to-moment interactions (e.g., Jones & Vagle, in press)? And what if we can take hold of those literacies that thrust us into a space of already-knowing

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and cultivate different literacies of tuning into our sense-making, restraining it, denying it, recognizing its partiality and contradictions? In other words, I invite us to make sense of and reimagine the literacies that enable us to make sense of bodies: *literacies in the body*.

By *literacies in the body* I also mean the way particular literacies are *in* the body, how they manifest, and how they are acquired (e.g., Enriquez, 2011; Hagood, 2005; Johnson, 2011; Jones, 2010). Some examples include the more obviously performance-oriented literacies many of us can conjure on demand: dance, music, circus arts, digital composition, or theater (e.g., Vasudevan, 2010).

Less frequently considered but equally sophisticated literacies in the body would include a car mechanic, hairstylist, plumber, sanitation worker, or even a mother advocating for her child in school (e.g., Reay, 1998; Rose, 2005). And what about the performative nature of pedagogy (e.g., Britzman, 2003; Ellsworth, 1989) in literacy education? What are the required and manifest *literacies in the bodies* of both teachers and students that make pedagogical moments intelligible?

The example I provide next is not as exciting as rethinking the bodied literacies of an activist mother or a plumber beside the bodied literacies of a dancer. Nonetheless, it offers a critical glimpse into the phenomenon of a literacy having long ago been acquired by a body and now lying dormant.

This example also asserts a disruption to some assumptions about “embodied literacies” as set apart from “traditional” print-based literacies. I will tell a brief story of a literacy acquired through a particular discursive practice known as round robin reading—decidedly declared a counterproductive pedagogy for reading instruction by scholars, and yet a literacy embedded in the bodies of teachers and students across the United States and easily produced spontaneously if a context requires it.

## Round Robin Reading in the Body: A Brief Illustration of the Mundane

I don't do it to inflict long-term pain or harm, and even in my performance I make sure to avoid calling on my teacher education students who have expressed anxiety about public performances of any kind. But for more than a decade now, I have opted to engage my young adult undergraduate teacher-education students in a round robin reading activity near the end of the semester as a pedagogical practice to *teach*

*against* using it as a pedagogical practice with their future students.

For years I noticed how future teachers would instantly “get” why round robin reading is not “teaching reading” the way many assume it to be. It is quite simple, really: After weeks of immersing teacher education students in a pedagogical space with feminist commitments of dignified teaching/learning interactions, building mutual respect and trust, and emphasizing critical literacies, provide students with a text of relative difficulty (I like using Vygotsky and Luria, given my students’ previous coursework in child/human development focused mostly on Piaget) and tell them they have to answer some questions after their reading.

Once they start reading, I ask individuals—without notice—to read paragraphs aloud so everyone can follow along. The result is a remarkable testament to the power of discursive practice, embodied literacies, and the relative ease with which one might be positioned as vulnerable and incapable.

In the round robin activity, I spontaneously perform the bodied moves of many of my own reading teachers of the past: smooth walk, calm voice, careful surveillance of the text being read, an overall unwavering presence of power and authority. I control who speaks and who reads. All anxiously await the possibility of their turn.

The discursive practice of round robin reading produces a subject position of teacher authority, and my body, tone, and language successfully populate the subject position. It is as if the round robin reading cannot occur without my body moving a certain way, without my head being held high, without my eyes staying wide and disinterested. I feel it in the moment—the taller neck, the slow and steady pacing about the room, the intent gaze on the text in my hands and the brief look at the next student to read.

The students’ round robin literacies also spring immediately to life, awakened from a dormant state—as if we were not in a university course being critical of all such authoritative and shame-making educational practices, as if they did not recognize me as their professor who invited dialogue, taught with compassion, and purposefully made space for contradictory and alternative perspectives to be brought forward and analyzed.

Some students read with practiced tone, pace, and expression and others with too much pausing and telling quick and quiet (apologetic) jokes about not knowing how to say a word in their passage. Some fold into the tops of their tables, backs curving

excessively and avoiding all eye contact with me, and others shift nervously while faces flush. It is always extremely uncomfortable for me.

“All right. What just happened here?” I ask, stopping the experience a good 30 minutes after we started.

One student comes to the lesson more quickly than others, “You just taught us a reading lesson!”

Slowly, others catch on, and the collective sigh of relief is evidence of the central role the body was playing—and continues to play—in this lesson about literacy. Where they had been absolutely still, trying not to attract attention during round robin reading, arms now stretched up, legs uncrossed, backs arched against chairs, and shoulders relaxed.

“Oh my God. I was so stressed out,” someone says, and everyone laughs.

“I was so afraid you were gonna call my name to read out loud. I hate to read out loud,” said another student.

“I was angry! Oh my God! I was seriously concerned,” said another.

Students report sweating, feeling hot, noticing their heart rate speed up, shaking legs, and fearing humiliation and being perceived as incompetent.

The students were engaged in reading multiple layers of signification in the round robin discursive practice (me and my movements, their past experiences of the discourse, the social context, perceived hierarchies, their bodies’ responses, etc.). And although they were wildly successful in producing the literacy performance required, including reading the discursive practice and the material effects it was having on them and others, few reported being able to understand the printed text on which the activity was supposed to be focused. I—and the discursive practice—successfully produced failure in the task at hand (if the goal, indeed, is to make sense of the printed text).

Like Walkerdine’s (1988) reading of her body, gesture, and focus as recorded on a video of her conducting an experiment with young children around mathematical understandings, I turn my gaze onto myself to see the ways in which the round robin discourse produced material effects as I acted as facilitator. I was not entirely unaware of changes in my body produced by the discursive practice, for it was apparent to me in the moments of the round robin reading that I was walking, talking, gesturing, and performing in ways that were otherwise not typical of my behavior in this class.

It does, however, surprise me how seamlessly I took up the subject position, how easily I formed the words in my mouth, how calmly I patrolled the classroom, and how, even though I felt much discomfort about making the students so anxious and self-conscious, I even reveled in my ability to so quickly and radically alter the power relations of a room filled with 31 people.

Bourdieu (2000) writes about bodily constraint, arguing that

an order takes effect only through the person who executes it; which does not mean that it necessarily presupposes a conscious and deliberate choice on the part of the executant, implying for example the possibility of disobedience. Most of the time, it can rely on what Pascal calls “the automaton” within us, in other words dispositions prepared to recognize it practically. (pp. 168–169)

In my performance of the round robin reading discursive practice, I simply took up—or “executed”—a literacy practice that was already in existence in the world, already possible for me to engage in, already laid out so clearly with its regimes of truth (e.g., Foucault, 1990) propelling the automaton in me. A practice known so well to me that I could transform myself on demand, and thus transform what would be possible for my students to do and be.

I did not forcefully position myself as the one with power in the situation; instead it seems to work as if by “magic,” as Bourdieu would say, without any physical restraint. But the magic of the production of power relations in the round robin reading discursive practice is much like the magic of the overwhelmed body upon hearing a particular song or the magic of powerful and docile performances in society, according to Bourdieu (2000),

The magic works only on the basis of previously constituted dispositions, which it “triggers” like springs...in the immense preparatory work that is needed to bring about a durable transformation of bodies and to produce the permanent dispositions that symbolic action reawakens and reactivates. (p. 169)

Round robin reading is just one illustration of a seemingly mundane discursive practice, or “symbolic action,” that calls the automaton to life. Round robin reading is embedded in the body.

## A Call

How is it that what Bourdieu calls “previously constituted dispositions”—what I call literacies in the body—seep into our skin, muscles, bones, and psyches? What other literacies have we acquired through educational methods that lay dormant but then reawaken and reactivate through symbolic action? Where do we see these literacies manifest in schools and society, and what do we make of body-wounding pedagogies—pedagogies so traumatic for some that they produce increased heart rates, flushed faces, sick stomachs, sweating palms, and twitching legs after years of lying dormant?

If literacies are in bodies, and educators and researchers contribute to that acquisition, what affect do we wish to be awakened in former students when the dormant literacy springs to life unexpectedly? Is it possible to predict such embodied phenomena?

Tending to literacies in the body can open up lines of flight for exploring these, and other, fascinating questions that have crucial implications for the ways we do literacy education. I invite us to pursue that elusive object of study, the body, and settle in with our gaze and not be intimidated by the infinitely complex. I invite us to be deeply curious and imaginative about the body’s unpredictability *and* its predictability, and help us recognize the “automaton” within us that engages literacies because they already exist. There is nothing inherently good about literacies, and inquiring into the literacies we have in the body might expand how and what we know about the work literacies do.

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