

5 The Cultural Womb and the Garden: Local Publics That Depend on Institutions to Sponsor Them

Some local publics depend on institutional sponsors and use these institutional affiliations to create “inspired contexts” for literacy learning that operate in locations of stress and scarcity (Willinsky 153). As inspired contexts, these local publics employ democratic practices to nurture participants within their walls and to prepare them for literate social action outside them. But what makes an inspired context for literacy learning a decidedly *public* achievement—albeit, a local one? The answer lies within the rhetoric of transformation that such sites enact. To explore the rhetoric of transformation and its relation to public life, this chapter compares an African American congregation in south central Wisconsin to a women’s writing workshop in the Tenderloin District of San Francisco.

A CULTURAL WOMB: THE LOCAL PUBLIC IN BRANDT’S *LITERACY IN AMERICAN LIVES*

In *Literacy in American Lives*, the local public is a cultural womb that nurtures the whole person, even as it prepares members for social activism outside its borders.¹ This image describes Metro AME, eight of whose members participated in Brandt’s study of “how ordinary people learned to read and write” over the course of the 20th century (*American* 2). The image of the cultural womb describes the black church at large and also Metro AME as an individual congregation. The image evokes not the biological womb supporting the lone fetus but the political space safeguarding a colonized people. As such,

the cultural womb evokes the political significance of what bell hooks calls “homeplace” (41)—whether the slave hut or the meetinghouse—where “colonized people can project an alternative future partly on the basis of a place beyond domination” (I. Young, *Body* 160).²

Distinctive Features: Nurtures and Prepares

As an image of local public life, the cultural womb first reclaims nurturing as a potentially political act of meaning making. The image then pairs nurturing with preparation for social action outside its walls.

Nurtures. Nurturing is a key feature of the African American church at large, and of Metro AME, in particular.³ Organic and holistic, the cultural womb suggests a place that nourishes the many dimensions and phases of human development. Unlike a school that prioritizes the intellectual development of its students or a Boys and Girls Club that prioritizes social or physical aspects, the image of the cultural womb attends to the full range of human needs. In the context of the African American church, the act of nurturing members from cradle to grave—in art, music and politics, for instance, as well as theology—has had political, as well as spiritual, implications. In various forms of “cultural support and uplift” (Brandt, *American* 118), nourishment has played a “compensatory role [. . .] in providing against poverty and government neglect” (114).

Prepares. Along with nurturing its members, the cultural womb also prepares them for social activism, both by teaching members to read and write and also by tying literate practices to “values of self-determination and social activism [. . .]” (Brandt, *American* 110).⁴ In other words, preparation links literacy to democratic values of access and participation. Historically, church-based democratic practices have prepared members to protest mainstream systems of exclusion and oppression and to bear witness to the liberatory power of literacy—a tool that otherwise had been “turned as a weapon against their liberties” (106). At Metro AME, democratic values infused the incentives for literacy learning that the congregation offered its members. “Bible reading for members [. . .] served as both a channel for developing religious consciousness and for enacting and demonstrating that consciousness” (135).

The Cultural Womb in Context: Location and Cultural Agency

As an institution, the African American church must continue to exist in material spaces such as Metro AME in order to sustain its institutional identity and legacy as a catalyst for social change.

Location. As a local public, location matters to Metro AME because the material space of the church shapes the congregation's discursive practices which in turn support a distinctive institutional identity. In their interviews with Brandt, members of Metro AME made clear that their congregation functioned as "a geography of hope" (Hull and James 255). In fact, it made little sense to talk about their participation in the congregation without referring to the church building as a site with a sanctuary, classrooms, libraries, and kitchens. These physical spaces host distinctive practices and relationships that parishioners use to uphold the black church's legacy.

Cultural Agency. Claims that attribute agency to publics are controversial. In defining formal publics, Warner, for instance, argues that claims attributing agency to formal publics are fictitious, grounded in images of people reading texts to arrive at a joint decision (123). In contrast, the local public as a cultural womb banks an understanding of agency not in terms of decision making but in terms of an increase in a distinct social phenomenon (in this case, literacy rates) under conditions that would predict a shortage or reduction of the phenomenon. Cultural agency suggests ways that individual local publics may articulate with other institutions and practices in order to change social conditions.

One of the first to apply Stuart Hall's theory of articulation to literacy studies was John Trimbur. In a 1993 review of Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, Trimbur drew on the concept of articulation to assert that there is not "a fixed or necessary correspondence between literate practices and social formation" (48). He argued that rather than being predetermined, the effect or role of literacy in lived experience must always wait to be articulated as "particular ideologies, political subjects, cultural practices, and social movements and institutions" are uttered and combined within specific moments of history (42). Metro AME illustrates how a local public may participate in acts of articulation through its institutional affiliation which endorses specific literacies and incentives for members to use them.

Extending Trimbur's analysis of literacy and institutional articulation, Brandt grounds her claim of the African American church as cultural agent in the distinction between economies of excess and efficiency. Brandt notes that the rise in African American literacy rates between Reconstruction and the modern civil rights movement complicates the thesis developed in the first three chapters of *Literacy in American Lives*, where she explores conditions of excess (109). In interpreting results from her research, she found that a theory of excess could account for the fact "that in twentieth-century America, opportunities for literacy became increasingly reliant on economic sponsorship and increasingly vulnerable to the lack of it" (*American* 107). However, a theory of excess could not account for the increased literacy rates among African Americans between Reconstruction and the modern civil rights movement, for these rates increased "in the *absence* of broad-based economic and political subsidy and the presence of so much social hostility" (107, emphasis added).

To account for the rise of literacy rates within an economy of efficiency, Brandt sought "the presence of a system for human development long identified with African American society, sets of sponsorship networks that provided political and cultural support to members (*American* 107). The system she identified is the African American church, a self-help system within which Metro AME continues to participate through the "incentives" it offers its members for "critical reading and writing" (118).

In sum, Brandt grants agency less to people and more to the church as an institution. As readers well know, agency is a contentious issue in rhetorical studies (cf. Geisler; Hull and Katz). Traditionally, the term has been used to refer to people.⁵ Metro AME's institutional membership affords us a different perspective. Through its affiliation with a larger institution and its practices, the African American church is first among a small set of institutions whose practices have earned the distinct status as a cultural agent.⁶ The church has achieved the status of cultural agent because of the cumulative effect of individual congregations like Metro AME extending opportunities and incentives to their members for literacy and literacy learning.

To a reader accustomed to thinking about agency in terms of people, Brandt's description would seem to personify local publics. Note below Brandt's use of personification to explain how something as ap-

parently vague as a local public's institutional practices could carry out something as consequential as acts of cultural agency:

The framework of this chapter borrows from a body of sociological literature [. . .] who have identified a core set of *cultural agents* within African American society who have been most *responsible* for racial survival since the days of slavery. In the face of economic and political exclusion, these *agents circulated resources and nurtured skills*, including literacy, all within what several sociologists have identified as a core set of cultural values. (*American* 107, emphasis added)

In charting the postmodern turn from the personal to the institutional, Brandt illuminates how the African American church has circulated resources—an outcome achieved *in situ* as local political acts of nurturing that have challenged the anonymity that has come to characterize so much of contemporary inner-city public life.

Brandt's figurative language suggests the magnitude of influence that local publics—here, individual congregations—can exercise when measured in terms of the cumulative effect of their institutional practices—in this case, the practice of providing incentives for reading and writing. Referring to the composite effect of individual congregations in promoting African Americans' literacy learning, Brandt writes: “these concentrated *sites of sponsorship* were *the deep wells* that *fed* a steady rise in literacy and education rates among African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century” (*American* 107, emphasis added). In this description, local publics are wells that feed. This imagery directs the reader's attention away from parishioners (those whom we may expect the wells of a church to sustain) toward the large socio-political trend: “a steady rise in literacy and education rates among African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century” (107). Metro AME demonstrates how a local public's institutional affiliation, including the associated discursive practices, may articulate with other institutions and practices to constitute cultural agency.

Tenor of the Discourse: Resourceful

Resourcefulness distinguishes the discourse of Metro AME as a local public—its capacity to make something new from what has been around awhile (Brandt, *American* 8). For years, parishioners of Metro

AME had relied on familiar practices to participate in their congregations, for instance, to offer extemporaneous prayers, to respond to a pastor's biblical exegesis, or to develop Sunday school lessons. Then, in walked a new pastor, requiring them to produce a new literate practice called *the talk*, researched presentations on biblical texts to be composed for delivery at evening meetings and special church services. The genre of the talk was as unfamiliar to parishioners as it was characteristic of the new pastor's method of leadership. And the demand for it caused parishioners some initial stress. In my experience, someone would have surely balked, "That's not how we've always done it." Instead, however, accustomed to working in an economy of efficiency, the parishioners "held onto, stretched, circulated and recirculated, altered and realtered" what they had been doing in church all those years (Brandt, *American* 109).⁷ They transformed these tried and true literacies into the new practice that the pastor asked of them.

Interpretative Literacies

Interpretative literacies organized how members of Metro AME participated in the life of the church. In addition to their exegetical functions, these literacies also structured parishioners' engagement with one another in what Brandt has previously termed "pure acts of human involvement" (*Involvement* 6).

- *The talk*: Parishioners delivered these presentations on biblical texts at evening meetings and special church services designed to involve lay members more than the typical Sunday service. Although the name of the talk, as a genre, focuses on the oral aspect of its delivery, this practice also required practitioners to engage actively in reading and writing.
- *Textual interpretation*: Members participated in these pastor-initiated lessons by reading and listening in order to draw analogies between their own lives and the biblical text and to debate rival interpretations of the biblical text.
- *Extemporaneous petitions*: Prayers could be offered orally or in writing. Oral prayers were offered spontaneously at a designated point in the church service. Written prayers were recorded on notecards or other small pieces of paper and placed inside a "burden box"—a place to deposit worries, prayers, commu-

nions, and other private thoughts in written form” (Brandt, *American* 113).

- *Sunday school lessons*: Sunday school teachers read teaching materials to prepare for Sunday school class and often used writing to record their plans. In delivering these lessons, they also relied on literacy, including oral performances of bible stories.
- *Meeting literacies*: Members used reading and writing to participate on various committees, including the stewardship and finance committees.

Familiar or new, these interpretative literacies invited parishioners to engage actively with texts, with one another, and in the life of the church.

Rhetorical Invention: Inspiration, Instruction, and Transformation

Rhetorical invention at Metro AME involved spiritual inspiration, pastoral instruction, and transformation.

Inspiration. Sometimes, ideas for talks came to parishioners in moments of inspiration. Parishioner June Birch, for instance, “recalled having an idea for a talk come to her as she looked at herself one day in a mirror” (Brandt, *American* 117). She explained: “I just got in a quiet spot and things *just came to me*, and I started writing it on the paper” (117, emphasis added). Later, Birch reorganized and edited her prose, but only after first capturing the flash of inspiration: “[W]hen thoughts were coming to me, I’d just jot them down” (117).

Instruction. The pastor also provided instruction to parishioners as they prepared their talks. In the planning phase, he provided relevant textual resources. He also coached the delivery of their presentations. By providing “feedback and correction” in this manner, the pastor assumed his role as both “a preacher and a teacher’ among his practitioners” (Brandt, *American* 118).

Transformation. Rhetorical invention also includes the process parishioners used to transform church-based literacies for new, often secular, purposes. Two accounts from *Literacy in American Lives* are especially illuminating, those of Metro AME member Francis Hawkins and Jordan Grant, both of whom recounted having transformed church-

based literacies to meet their own rhetorical goals. At the time of her interviews with Brandt, Hawkins was using her limited salary as a classroom teacher's aide to build a home library featuring black history books, since the holdings at her children's school libraries were so limited. Hawkins's home library paralleled in important ways the church library at Metro AME, and it protested childhood memories of exclusion from her hometown public library. Brandt interprets this library as an act of rhetorical transformation. Through the library, Hawkins "*instantiates* in daily practice [. . .] *integrated values* of faith, advancement, liberation, and survival that were remarkably similar to the *earliest formulations* of the AME church doctrine" (Brandt, *American* 119, 120–21, emphasis added).

Similarly, as an affirmative action officer, Jordan Grant transformed his father's sermonic style to "writ[e] an action plan and training manuals in a field that never existed before" (Brandt, *American* 141). Describing Grant's capacity for transformation, Brandt writes: "For Grant, developing as a writer in the second half of the twentieth century entailed *amalgamating* and *transforming* these traditional resources [including his father's sermons] to respond to—and contribute to—a period of tremendous political and cultural change" (138, emphasis added).

Implications

1. *A local public enacts its institutional membership by providing opportunities and incentives for participants to use literacy in ways that support the interests of the sponsoring institution; however, participants may put literacies to whatever purposes they see fit.*

A local public provides incentives that take reading and writing in one direction.⁸ However, resourceful participants may direct those literacies toward purposes of their own. Consequently, a local public is a crossroads of (at least) two literacy systems. The first is the institutional system through which the institution enacts cultural agency—circulating the particular literacy practices it endorses. This system is the easier of the two to trace. The second system is what people do with their literate repertoires—performances that are often less predictable though also highly constrained.⁹

Yet just because resourceful writers can try to transform institutional literacies for their own purposes, institutional sponsors aren't exempt from the responsibility to support the needs and interests of

their participants. This is Grabill's claim in *Community Literacy Programs and the Politics of Change*, where he argues that sponsors of adult literacy programs should implement a participatory design so that the literacies a program sponsors coincide with participants' motivations for enrolling in the program in the first place (199).

2. The same inspired context for literacy learning may participate in different economies and for different effects for different writers.

I'm thinking here of Cara and Chaz, two teen writers at the CLC in the early 1990s. Cara had lots of support beneath her; the literacy project was a bonus between various after-school programs and before college. In contrast, Chaz was caught in gang crossfire. His mother finally moved to a suburb north of town to extricate him from gang territory. In material terms, the location of the literacy project was the same for both writers: 801 Union Place; however, the teens experienced the literacy project differently. This difference was most marked in the circumstances of Cara and Chaz, but could be said of other teens in the community-literacy project, as well. I don't know how to calculate that difference, but I do know that the stress that Chaz was under was an injustice perpetrated by an unequal distribution of resources. We all missed out because of it, especially Chaz. To the extent that the CLC could serve as an inspired context—or an urban sanctuary (McLaughlin, Irby, and Langman)—its hospitality was a political act that defied social injustice. But this nurturing was also inadequate to circumstances that framed Chaz's existence as an urban teenager. This comparison between Cara and Chaz suggests that economies of efficiency and excess may converge in people's lives—and do so differently within different life experiences—further complicating our explanatory accounts as literacy scholars and our understanding of how economic conditions play out in the lives of our students.

3. Local publics participate in a larger social movement by sponsoring, as part of their institutional membership, ways of reading and writing that on a local level circulate a whole host of resources, including the moral consciousness, texts, and practices that sustain the movement itself.

Warner argues that formal publics function in order to circulate texts (123). The previous five-point analysis suggests, however, that for local publics, circulating texts may be a small part of their larger function. When they operate within a larger institutional structure, local publics

may also sponsor ways of reading and writing that circulate other resources on the local level—resources including a moral consciousness and a set of practices for enacting that consciousness. Such was the cumulative effect of African American congregations like Metro AME that over the past century have sponsored literacy within the context of the church's values of "resistance, freedom, self-determination, and collective uplift" and in conjunction with the civil rights movement and the black press (Brandt, *American* 108). The literate heritage of the African American church prepared ordinary people to participate locally in the civil rights movement, whereby securing the movement's "manifestations and successes" in the American public at large.¹⁰

Furthermore, local publics may circulate not only texts, but also literate practices. These are social routines for literacy "propelled into new directions by new or intensifying pressures for its use" (Brandt, *American* 9). Brandt credits the black church with circulating the resources that made the civil rights possible: "Especially significant were the efforts to transform historically church-based resources, ranging from ethical power to oratorical power to organizational power, into projects of secular activism" (142). Everyday literate practices that supported the civil rights movement were "text-based routines for liberatory action" (138), routines structured according to "formats" and rhetorical "stances" that circulated within and across religious congregations and other groups supporting the movement (137). The literate practice of protest writing serves as the chief example of such text-based routines, structuring both "the release of anger and the exercise of rights and self-determination" (137). Brandt documents that the practice of protest circulated into other local forums beyond the church, including "countless local settings in the push to end discrimination in employment, housing, commerce and education" (133). Thus, the efficacy of local publics may be best measured in terms of their capacity not to inform specific decisions but to alter the discursive landscape itself by challenging the moral consciousness of ordinary people and by structuring a range of literate practices that people can use to enact that consciousness.¹¹ In sum, then, local publics can alter how people think about pressing social issues and broaden the range of literate practices that people use to enact their new understandings. Metro AME served this dual function for its parishioners—a two-part purpose that, as we see next, the TWW also served for its members.

A GARDEN: THE LOCAL PUBLIC IN HELLER'S
UNTIL WE ARE STRONG TOGETHER

In *Until We Are Strong Together*, the local public is a garden that—like the cultural womb—nurtures people within it and prepares people for social action outside its borders. The image of the garden organizes Heller's description of a women's writing workshop sponsored from 1987 to 1993 by the Tenderloin Reflection and Education Center (TREC), dedicated to serving residents and the homeless in the Tenderloin District, one of the most economically distressed neighborhoods of San Francisco.

Distinctive Features: Nurtures and Prepares

As a garden that nurtures and prepares, the workshop invited participants to “create something true” and “put it into the world” (Heller 5).

Nurtures. The image of a garden highlights the nurturing qualities of the writers' workshop. In the extended metaphor, the workshop is a garden; the writers' investments in the meaning of their own lives and in each other, its soil. The garden offered to grow something for which the women yearned: the “wish to be at home” (Heller 131). That offer was realized through a process that transformed a disorganized set of strangers into a productive group of writers: “The soil of our individual places was being transformed into something that contained us all” (132). This transformation was cultivated through the writers' acts of nurturing, “a tenderness rare even for them” (132). The metaphor equates opportunity, time, and attention with the elemental qualities of sunlight, soil, and water. What grew in this garden was meaning, the significance of one's own life and of the group's collective experience.

Like Brandt, Heller attributes the nurturing quality of the TWWW to its democratic values and practices. Summarizing her interview with the director of the workshop's sponsoring organization, Heller writes: “It is the fundamental principle of the Tenderloin Reflection and Education Center that a true *democracy* is contingent upon all *citizens* developing clear, precise, and powerful *voices*” (Heller 8, emphasis added). Within this conception of democracy, voice is the ability to speak of one's experiences with clarity and conviction, a process that requires rehearsing and refining one's insights with others—thus, the need for such workshops (i.e., local publics) as the TWWW.

Prepares. As a womb implies birth, a garden implies harvest. A fruit harvested from the writers' workshop was social action, the capacity to address larger publics. Heller dramatizes the process. Initially, the members told stories to forge relationships with one another. Over time and because of the "investment in bringing their sense of place to their neighbors," they engaged also in political issues that mattered to them: "fairness, equality, justice, authority, power" (Heller 162). By nurturing the writers' voices, the workshop came to constitute a public in its own right; the workshop also prepared the writers to speak about their experiences in more formal arenas.

The Garden in Context: Location, Agency, and Maturation

Heller attributes the viability of the workshop to three main forces: its *location* that created a distinctive discursive as well as physical space; the *agency* of the workshop (as a "centripetal force") to sponsor literacies that, in turn, fostered the agency of the women writers; and the *maturation* of the workshop.

Location. On the one hand, the workshop was portable. Over its lifespan, the workshop met in a storefront, a hotel lobby, and a church basement. Heller celebrates all three as "sites for visibility and self-creation" (18). But as a discursive space, the workshop was transportable only so long as its defining vision, relationships, and discursive practices stayed more or less intact. So when it became necessary to relocate the workshop, TREC's director invested the intellectual and manual labor to do so—everything from planning and fund raising to assembling and disassembling the aluminum folding chairs (8).

Yet its physical location was not immaterial to the workshop's success. Location served a heuristic value. "The [hotel's] *picture windows*, opening to a view of the busiest drinking and drug-sale corner in the Tenderloin, *served to connect* the writers' workshop to the neighborhood in which it met [. . .]" (Heller 9, emphasis added). Framing even personal prose within this larger context, the workshop's location prompted writers toward socially relevant insights. Toward this end, TREC sponsored cultural events, at which TWWW writers "would take to the podium [. . .] to read their work publicly" (29). TREC sponsored these events "to maintain an *ongoing link between* the writ-

ers taking part in the [. . .] *workshops* and the *broader Tenderloin neighborhood*” (Heller 29, emphasis added).

Agency. As we saw earlier, Brandt’s portrait of the black church as a cultural agent is compelling in large part because of the status and stability that institutional membership grants places like Metro AME. In contrast, the TWWW operated outside a strong institutional framework. True, the workshop was sponsored by a social service agency—TREC. True, too, the Freirian commitments of the agency’s director framed the goals of the workshop (Heller 8). Surely, then, Brandt and Grabill would agree that TREC served as the workshop’s official *sponsor*. But while its Freirian orientation positioned the workshop within a larger liberatory tradition and TREC provided immediate funding, in material terms neither the Freirian tradition nor TREC could come even close to providing the institutional stability that the black church as an institution offers individual congregations. On what grounds, then, does Heller attribute agency to the TWWW to justify its description as “the centripetal force’ [. . .] the force [. . .] that propelled the calm” (132)? To borrow Brandt’s language, the answer lies in the workshop’s capacity to sponsor literacies that circulated resources in an economy of efficiency.

Over its six years, the workshop itself achieved the role of sponsor resonant with Brandt’s description of black churches. As Brandt describes the African American church as a consolidating force, “promot[ing] integration over fragmentation, persistence over change, remembering over forgetting” (*American* 112), similarly, Heller describes the TWWW as a centripetal force, “calming and consolidating narratives of place and order amidst a fragmented backdrop of chaos and disorder” (122). Likewise, as the church distributed a wide range of resources including literacy to compensate for poverty and racism, the TWWW offered a wide range of resources to its participants. Some resources were distributed within the workshop’s sessions themselves—a direct consequence of its design and delivery. Heller calls these resources “levels of supports” and includes in a longer list the following especially relevant to the study of literacy:

- Boosting identity and self-esteem—as people, as writers, and as a public presence [. . .]
- Sharing information and resources [. . .]

- Building skills as writers through writing [and] critique, including forming definitions of oneself as a writer and engaging in complex examinations of language. (Heller 17)

Other resources became tangible as writers from the workshop adapted what they were learning in the workshop to address new rhetorical demands: for example, to hold a landlord accountable to fixing a broken elevator or to fight the sale of property that foreshadowed one's own eviction (Heller 58). Because of the workshop, the writers "found renewed certainty as effective agents in their lives" (19). The workshop provided "a launching place for the writers to take increased action to better their lives" (58).

Maturation. Heller also attributes the TWWW's vitality as a public forum to the maturation of the group itself. First, as the group matured, the women's writing took a decidedly public turn. Heller writes: "The *longer* I was with the Tenderloin Women Writers Workshop, the more I noticed participants in the group critiquing American life [. . .]. In *later months and years*, stories and poems [. . .] engendered conversations *denser and richer* with invigorating analyses of varied social problems" (17, 54, emphasis added). Spawned from their personal writing, the women's public writing took the forms of cultural critique, social commentary, and problem analysis. For Heller the distinction between personal and public writing is neither a false distinction nor a fixed dichotomy but a web of meaning explored more intensely over the course of the workshop's life cycle (101).

Second, maturation accounts for the workshop's capacity to respond to the diversity of its participants and the conflicts that came with it. The group's diversity brought a host of discourse styles, dialects, and personalities to the workshop that introduced a set of power relations that led to interpersonal conflict (66). Accounting for the decision of a participant named Francis to leave the group, Heller evokes organic imagery: "[T]he workshop wasn't *yet solid* or secure enough in its footing, in its formative identity, *to absorb* her struggle" (66, emphasis added). Over time, however, the workshop matured to become more adept at responding to conflict. As evidence, Heller points to the group's capacity to deal with conflict. "In fact, *later years* provided *growing evidence* of the group's capacity to resolve complicated conflicts" (67, emphasis added). According to Heller, this maturation

cultivated a more robust “sense of community that didn’t just ‘accept’ diversity, but whose very vitality was built upon it” (57).

Tenor of the Discourse: Literary Uplift

Literary uplift refers to the capacity of the workshop’s discourse to “reassure [. . . writers] that they had lived lives that were of value and that could be—through the precision of their own words—felt, understood, and remembered by others” (Heller 18). Literary uplift was achieved through the covenant between readers and writer: as readers, the women served “as witnesses” for the claims they, as writers, made “for the richness of their complicated experiences” (18). To suggest the spiritual power of this uplift, Heller compares the tenor of the workshop’s discourse to that of a life history course for elderly Jewish immigrants “who found renewed meaning in their lives by publicly ‘re-creating’ themselves” (19).

Belletristic Literacies

The TWWW was a creative writing workshop. As such, writers worked primarily with literary genres. Although mirror stories and workshop discourse also structured the give-and-take of the workshop sessions, foremost the workshop put standard literary genres to the task of constructing local public discourse.¹² Below are some examples:

- *Journal entries*: Frances’s “stream-of-consciousness piece described her search for a good night’s sleep amid the troubled characters, chronic noise, and disruptions that form the background of her life” (Heller 30).
- *Poems*: Margaret’s poem “described her method of backing up four flights of stairs while hauling her wheelchair up to her apartment in a building with a broken elevator” (53).
- *Novels*: Mary’s *Doyon* was “a portrait of her homeland, her vanishing tribe in northern Alaska, of memories she would not abandon” (22).
- *Short stories*: Mary’s “The Night of Indin Bilijohn” was a tribute to the anomy of Native Americans living in the Tenderloin. “They’re at sea, totally at sea” (22).
- *Plays and other cultural performances*: Salima’s play depicted “[t]he claustrophobic feel of [a one-room] apartment and the

conflict between [twin boys] and their unemployed stepfather” (20, 53).

- *Articles*: Essays included Laraine’s “Homeless Women, Don’t Give Up! Get Up!” which “examine[d] the many forces that prevent homeless women from attaining productive lives, the countless issues that make “‘having a nice day’ for some a rare achievement” (94).
- *Satire*: Nikki’s “Liberal Anonymous” urged readers to bridge “distances between races and classes” even as it “poke[d] fun” at her effort to do so (92).

Writers also explored experimental genres, including Leona’s “what-chamacallit,” a piece of free verse which prompted the group to “explore[. . .] definitions of poetry as well as those of other literary genres” (60) and “a script” in which Virginia “performed the order of her home, the signs by which she knew herself and by which she could imagine becoming known to others” (122). They also wrote many “self narrations,” including Maria’s autobiographical novel, *The Life and Times of Ruby Brooklyn* and Salima’s autobiographical play, *Ain’t I Right, Too*, “tell[ing] the story of her childhood and its impact on her later life” (Heller 111).

Two kinds of “public platforms” provided venues for getting the women’s writing “out there” (Heller 26): public readings where writers performed their texts orally, such as the TREC-sponsored “Celebrating Beauty in the Tenderloin” (20); and publication in the neighborhood newsletters, newspapers, and TREC’s anthology, *Goddesses We Ain’t*. Through these platforms, the women writers achieved “public voice and visibility” (19).

Rhetorical Invention: Precision at the Point of Utterance

The TWWW celebrated the “precision” of the writers’ insights. Thus, rhetorical invention was a matter of “shaping at the point of utterance” (Britton 61) as writers expressed “what they had experienced, what they knew, what they had ‘looked at unflinchingly’” (Heller 145).¹³ The writers and workshop facilitators paid attention to invention indirectly. As the writers read and responded to one another’s drafts, they swapped helpful hints along the way, often in the form of what they described as habits and obsessions. Heller also credits the facilitators’

guidelines and personal investments for cultivating the precision of the women's prose and poetry.

Habits. Journal writing and “scribbling thoughts down on paper, no matter how these thoughts came out” were habitual approaches to prewriting that the writers commended to one another, particularly as an antidote to writer's block (Heller 61). Sometimes, the exchange of habits yielded “revelations,” epiphanies that freed a writer to approach writing in a new way. Yet these conversations were also met with resistance, as writers sought to have their own personal styles and habits validated. For instance, Maria asserted, “You see, I never change anything” (59) to support her contention that approaches to writing were entirely personal, so a habit that one writer commended enthusiastically would likely not work for her (59).

Obsessions. Writers sometimes commended to the other writers the rituals they practiced with zealous passion, including revision and editing.

- *Revision fever:* The practice of revision was hotly contested among the writers. Mary commended it with almost religious fervor: “I rewrite incessantly. Part of my madness is to rewrite. I think it's awfully fun!” (Heller 59); others found revision offensive, as if the practice itself questioned their skill as writers (59).
- *Nitpicking:* Surface-level editing directed writers' attention to the “precise language” they used to “express their thinking” (149). In this regard, the practice engaged women in the art of invention, “pushing [. . .] them to know what they didn't *know* they knew” (149).

Facilitators' Leadership. The workshop's facilitators offered standard writing guidelines and invested personally in the women's insights and experiences to encourage the writers to express insights with bold clarity:

- *Standard guidelines:* Facilitators encouraged writers “to offer surprises, conflicts, and contradictions” and “to trust in themselves as strong and insightful narrators” (Heller 145).

- *Nonstandard investment*: The facilitators' personal investments in the workshop created "a covenant of care" that motivated the writers to tell with precision and depth "the truth of one's personal, social, and political experience" (14). This investment is perhaps best demonstrated in the portrait of facilitators listening "with an engagement and urgency many teachers reserve for talking" (147).

The facilitators cultivated the TWWW as an inspired context for literacy learning. Just as a parishioner at Metro AME referred to the pastor as both a "preacher and a teacher" (Brandt, *American* 118), so, too, the TWWW facilitators graced writing instruction with a spiritual presence, "less [. . . a] pedagogical technique [. . .] than [. . . a] pedagogical *feeling*" (Heller 149).

Implications

1. *Economic efficiency does not cause people to be able to transform their literate repertoires from one purpose to another; instead, inspired contexts cultivate this capacity in conditions of scarcity and stress to compensate for the toll that poverty and other forms of social neglect take on people's lives, including otherwise diminished opportunities for literacy learning.*

One's capacity to transform a literate repertoire for a new purpose depends on having a repertoire to turn to—a repertoire of one's own, yes, but likely also a network of literacy sponsors (Brandt, *American* 114). Yet as William Julius Wilson reminds us, work isn't the only thing to have disappeared from much of contemporary urban life. When work disappears, so, too, do other social institutions, such as churches and community organizations that sponsor literacy. Consider, for instance, the writers in Higgins and Brush's study, entitled "Writing the Wrongs of Welfare." These writers found the task of transforming their personal stories for public ends so intellectually and emotionally demanding that they likely would not have succeeded in writing their documents, had it not been for the support of capable and attentive writing mentors (70). In this regard, Hawkins and Grant in Brandt's study and TallMountain in Heller's were better positioned to use literacy to cope with new pressures in their lives than the women in Higgins and Brush's literacy project, for as Brandt and Heller document, Hawkins's, Grant's, and TallMountain's literate repertoires had been nourished along the way.

2. The garden depicts local public discourse as gritty and grounded, associating expertise with personal experience and yielding insights often missing from mainstream public discourse.

TWWW participants and facilitators found their work satisfying because in their attention to detail, clarity, and precision, the writers' texts offered pertinent truths about American life clearly lacking from larger national discussions. Yet it is often difficult for local knowledge to go public, as several recent studies of community literacy document. Susan Swan encountered this problem in a capstone course for public policy students. The community residents whom the students interviewed offered crucial insights about the conditions that could make or break a proposed urban renewal project. However, the students couldn't figure out how to incorporate this vital information into the professional genre they were assigned to write. Instead, they relied on the expert opinion of published professionals to evaluate the plan and came up with a recommendation that overlooked the residents' well grounded concerns. Similarly, in Higgins and Brush's study, the writers—all of whom were previous and current welfare recipients—had important insights to share with welfare policy makers about welfare reform. Eliciting the writers' local knowledge in text was the purpose of the community-literacy project. Higgins and Brush leave for a future study how such local knowledge might actually go public to circulate within larger public deliberations.

3. Storytelling has an important function in local public discourse, making the cultural values and social knowledge that shape personal experience compelling and accessible to readers and listeners.

Can personal narrative carry out the rhetorical work of public persuasion? Susan Jarratt cautions that expressive pedagogies are insufficient for teaching students "how to argue about public issues—making the turn from the personal back out to the public" (121). Yet narrative—central to many literary genres—may be more attuned to some of the demands of contemporary public rhetoric than its old stand-by, argument (I. Young, *Intersecting Voices* 73). Iris Young argues that prominent rational-critical model of deliberation is too restrictive. Instead, she promotes a communicative model of inclusive democracy. This model draws on "a plurality of perspectives, speaking styles, and ways

of expressing the particulars of social situation as well as the general applicability of principles” (*Intersecting* 73). Within the model, narrative plays a central role:

- First, narrative reveals [. . .] particular experiences [. . .] that cannot be shared by those situated differently but that they must understand in order to do justice to the others.
- Second, narrative reveals a source of values, culture and meaning.
- Finally, narrative not only exhibits experiences and values from the point of view of the subjects [who] have and hold them. It also reveals a total social knowledge from the point of view of that social position. (72–73)

Young’s model dismisses neither the vitality of the TWWW stories, nor the legitimacy of Jarratt’s critique. Young suggests that being able to narrate a compelling personal story may be a helpful, even necessary, first step to fostering “enlarged thought,” the moral imagination that makes possible “understanding across differences” (I. Young, *Intersecting* 52).

To make this challenge more concrete, recall the eight former and current welfare recipients in Higgins and Brush’s study. They drew from their personal experiences on welfare to craft public narratives that could inform public policy decisions. In order to present publicly persuasive narratives, their texts had to acknowledge stereotypes that reign in the dominant discourse about them (including the welfare queen and deadbeat dad) without forfeiting their own dignity and agency—or dismissing their own culpability in their life circumstances. To do so, for instance, Nikki chose to write her narrative in the third person, a stance that provided her some distance on an earlier era in her life when she accepted public assistance; Jule accounted for her three children’s three fathers by portraying herself as sexually naïve as a young woman, but not promiscuous or deceptive. As rhetors, these writers had to provide signposts that skeptical (even hostile) interlocutors would find familiar without themselves succumbing to degrading innuendo and insults. The writers were most successful when they made explicit the choices, values, and circumstances that had governed their decisions—hidden logics typically ignored or dismissed in larger public discussions regarding welfare reform.

Narrative's place in public discourse raises at least two additional issues for local publics: how local publics situate the practice of story telling and how comfortable literacy leaders feel offering explicit instruction within those local publics. As a creative writing workshop, the TWWW took an indirect approach to linking story telling to these additional rhetorical demands. In contrast, Higgins and Brush integrated rhetorical problem-solving strategies and other scaffolds into the design of their community-literacy project in order to maximize the project's effectiveness.

4. The capacity for a local public to sustain its discourse depends, in part, on the viability of its sponsoring institution.

The comparison between Brandt's and Heller's local publics stresses the vulnerability of local publics that operate with only tenuous or temporary institutional sponsorship. Metro AME was directly affiliated with a larger institution. Through this affiliation, Metro AME gathered strength and efficacy to nurture its members and to prepare them for social engagement. The TWWW also nurtured and prepared its participants. Yet it was positioned far more precariously as a special project of TREC. Consequently, the workshop disbanded when resources dried up (Heller 9).

The comparison also suggests that it's not always appropriate to assess a local public's merit in terms of its sustainability (though strategies for sustainability are one of the first concerns a funding officer will raise to a community group that seeks funding). First, the TWWW was never designed to last over time. Implicit in the organic model was a sense of the workshop's life expectancy. In fact, the TWWW survived twice as long as predicted—a daunting accomplishment given the social forces pressing down on many of its participants. Second, over the course of its existence, the TWWW certainly made important contributions in its own right—including the (documented and undocumented) ways its writers benefited from their participation in the workshop and the ways the writers' insights intensified public discussion and enacted communicative democracy within the Tenderloin District from 1987 to 1993. Through Heller's published research project, the TWWW also continues to make significant social contributions as a source of scholarship in community-literacy studies.