

6 The Link and Gate: Local Publics That Intersect with Public Institutions

Local tends in the direction of the private and personal, *public* toward the social and official. This chapter focuses on the discursive space where the two intersect. Here, each phrase modifies the other, the term *local* qualifying *public* to refer to the informal the accessible, and *public* qualifying *local* to suggest the communal and shared. To depict this intersection, Barton and Hamilton evoke the image of a link and stress movement between the private-public binary; Cushman evokes a gate and stresses its outright collapse.

A LINK: THE LOCAL PUBLIC SPHERE IN BARTON AND HAMILTON'S *LOCAL LITERACIES*

In *Local Literacies*, the local public is a link connecting private lives to public institutions for the purpose of social action. *Local Literacies* is an ethnography of a neighborhood called Springside in Lancaster, England, where in the 1990s, working-class residents forged links to protect the land rights of local gardeners, to advocate for children with dyslexia, and to protest the emission of noxious gases. According to Barton and Hamilton, links can be forged by community groups—as illustrated when a group of gardeners protested the city council's plan to sell public allotments to bolster the city's diminished budget. Individuals can forge links, too, as the community resident named Shirley did while “fighting injustices, [. . .] making changes, [. . . and] getting things done” (Barton and Hamilton 100–01).

Distinctive Features: Linking Networks Across Domains

The link as local public depends on three concepts: *domains*, the contexts structuring specific literate practices; *links*, connections forged

in literate practice; and *networks*, the social relationships that make forging the links possible and purposeful.

Domains. Domains are the contexts—such as the home, the workplace, and school—that structure and regulate specific kinds of activity. Through their institutional affiliations, domains organize how people spend their time and for what purposes. Some domains are more private and others more public, depending on the degree to which one or more “socially powerful institution” has jurisdiction over a given domain (Barton and Hamilton 10). The home is the most private domain and, thus, the most tolerant of literate activity that is creative, variant, and inventive. Public domains are affiliated with more formal institutions that adjudicate not only procedures and documentation practices but also penalties for violating these rules. Contrast, for instance, the consequences of omitting an item from a grocery list versus from a tax form.

Links. Links connect domains for the purpose of social action. The link “mediates [. . .] between the private sphere of family and household and the public sphere of impersonal formal organizations” (Barton and Hamilton 16). A link can be a noun: “[L]inks were motivated by personal concerns” (x). *To link* is a verb. Adept at linking private lives to public institutions, Shirley:

- liaised between members of the community and local media
- liaised between residents and the office
- crossed boundaries
- mobilized personal networks for public ends
- linked people with resources
- crossed between domains.

Unlike a bridge that exists whether or not a car is on it, links between private lives and public institutions are more tenuous, more like a neurological synapse that must continue to be fired in order to exist. Constituted in literacy, links permit people first to connect their private lives to public institutions and then to preserve the connection in attempt to take some kind of social action.

Network. Networks are the social relations that link people and their activities within and across domains.¹ The image of a network high-

lights the social relationships people forge and the power relations they negotiate, as they use literacy to carry out a shared goal. Like the domains they occupy, networks can be characterized along the private-public continuum. What was remarkable about Shirley was her ability to mobilize people in and across public as well as private networks “to get things done in the community” (Barton and Hamilton 16). Shirley had networks of friends and associates in her immediate neighborhood of Springside with whom she shared interests and history. Some whom she knew informally—from sharing knitting patterns and exchanging books—joined her efforts to organize a dyslexia association to advocate for children who had difficulty learning in school. People in that network introduced her to still others, including those who later joined Shirley’s efforts to protest a neighborhood revitalization plan that residents found discriminatory. The concept of a network connotes not simply pairs or small groups of people working in relation to one another but an ever-growing set of interrelated connections. Networks offer the possibility of dynamic, yet-to-be-constructed points of contact where ordinary people can connect their private lives to public institutions.

The Link in Context: Location, Bottom-Up Initiative, and Agency

Links, domains, and networks raise important questions: *Where are local publics actually located? Who (or what) has the capacity to forge them?* Answers to these questions depend on location, bottom-up initiative, and agency—contextual factors that make a link a viable local public.

Location. In part, *local* refers to Springside’s physical location. As suggested in the study’s subtitle, *Reading and Writing in One Community*, the term *local* in *Local Literacies* refers to the study of practices associated with a specific time and place. The authors commit two chapters to tracing the economic, political, and social history of Lancaster, England, along with its geography and demographics, in order to situate the neighborhood of Springside within this history. They do so because the various details of the locale (ranging from its history as a milltown, to the location of the public library, to the function of a roundabout in the roadway as a site for homemade banners and flyers) affect how people use literacy in their day-to-day lives.

The literal and local also evoke the theoretical and global. In both the introduction and conclusion to *Local Literacies*, Barton and Hamilton connect their study of local literacies to global trends and theoretical issues. Consider, for instance, the literal-theoretical connection they draw regarding the Allotment Association's effort to stop the city council from selling its garden plots. The situation had both literal implications for the lettuce-consumption of the gardeners and theoretical implications for public-spheres studies. Most immediately at stake was the literal loss of fresh garden produce, including the cost of this loss to household budgets. In theoretical terms, this translated into the "loss of *communally owned open space*" (218, emphasis added). The incident raised questions about both the legality of city council's plans and the residents' claims to the land itself. Resolution would depend on the residents' access to the literate resources required to exercise their right to public land when the land right itself was contested. At issue was whether the gardeners would have the wherewithal to create a discursive space capable of linking their Allotment Association to the city council (a formal public institution) in attempt to restrict the council's intent.

Bottom-Up Initiative. To constitute a viable local public, a link needs to emerge from the private/personal and connect to the public/institutional. Links forged in the opposite direction were doomed to fail. In Springside, community residents were suspicious of initiatives that formal institutions (such as an established political party or a government agency) instigated. The Housing Project Association (HPA) serves as a case in point. At the time of Barton and Hamilton's study, the British government had established community organizations called HPAs to increase local support for a comprehensive urban renewal plan. Merging public and private interests—what Barton and Hamilton refer to as the "very hybridity" of the organization—"was very much part of national government policy at the time" (222); therefore, the project manager "was committed to the community involvement aspect of his work" (222). However, because Springside's HPA imported its agenda and decision-making practices from the government office, many residents were suspicious of it, for "local participation was grafted onto an organization which had been set up without the consultation or informed consent of the residents and which *ultimately they did not control*" (228, emphasis added). Most local residents were unwilling

to invest their resources—especially their literate resources—in this organization.

Agency. Local Literacies credits groups and individuals with the capacity to forge local publics. Community groups serve as liaisons between individuals and public institutions, as in the case of the Dyslexia Association serving as a “go-between for parents and schools, usually where parents have identified a problem with their child’s literacy that they are finding hard to get the school to recognize or deal with” (104).

Likewise, individuals can mediate between private networks and public institutions. Shirley, for instance, took an “active stance in bridging the public and private spheres in her neighborhood [. . . by] act[ing] as a catalyst in community activities and [. . .] represent[ing] the interests of others” (Barton and Hamilton 109). Issues of her newsletter created “text worlds” that situated residents in positions of influence over representatives of more public domains (109). For instance, Shirley wrote editorials to “try to bring local people together to influence the Council to do things in the neighborhood: whether it is introducing traffic calming measures, getting children’s play space, defending allotment land, or getting more resources for building work” (109).

But even when credited with taking strategic action, Shirley was not acting alone. She wrote in order to forge connections with others in her neighborhood networks, urging them to join the effort to pool relevant resources (such as access to a fax machine or word processor) and expertise (such as knowledge of legal proceedings) to take relevant action to protect or to enhance the quality of their community life (such as increased access to home improvement grants).

Tenor of the Discourse: Hybrid—a Mix of the Formal and the Everyday

The discourse that links public and private domains is hybrid in quality, a mix of the formal and the everyday. Links mix the more public and official, on the one hand, and the more private and personal, on the other. The quintessential hybrid genre is the newsletter: “[N]ewsletters [. . .] are a kind of *public writing* that has no fixed, official format and is, therefore influenced a great deal by [. . .] *personal style and purposes* [. . .]” (Barton and Hamilton 107, emphasis added). As editor of such a newsletter, Shirley commingled the dominant and the vernacular,

making “public points,” for instance, by “using personal examples” (107). The result was a hybrid, one that drew from informal and formal discourses in hopes of humoring, goading, and persuading readers to join the group’s efforts to “get things done” (109). When groups, rather than individuals, forge links, the discourse is still hybrid, but often even more varied because more people are contributing to the mix. Take, for example, the Allotment Association. The group’s efforts to stop the city council were a mix of literacies that individuals had learned (observed or overheard) on the job, in school, or through prior experience with community organizations (219).

Mobilizing Literacies

Mobilizing literacies coordinate the texts, resources, and strategies that people bring to a shared problem. They emerge from the people’s response to the situation, rather than from a pre-existent blueprint imposed from above, like the process the Labour Party attempted to impose to get a foothold in Springside. Situational constraints assign mobilizing literacies their purpose and meaning. For instance, literacies such as the taking and reading of meeting minutes may help a group prepare for subsequent social action—but this isn’t the effect of all minutes. Mobilizing literacies, such as letter writing, can serve any number of functions depending on the purpose of the group. Contrast, for instance, letters that invite lapsed members to renew their membership with a letter-writing campaign to governmental representatives in protest of the emission of noxious gasses. The text-resource-strategy matrix for the Allotment Association is described in table 4:

Table 4. The text-resource-strategy matrix for the Allotment Association. Reprinted with permission. David Barton and Mary Hamilton. *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community*. London: Routledge, 1998.

Strategies, resources and texts: elements of literate practices

The strategies used to solve the problem

This is what people did:

gather and distribute information in the local community

mobilize local people

petition among allotment holders

hold general meetings to agree on what to do

*form an action committee to implement decisions and to
negotiate on behalf of the community
hold letter-writing campaign to influential people
start press campaign in local radio and newspapers
influence local officials by oral persuasion*

The resources used

These included material objects, skills, knowledge, time and ideas, money, meetings and space:

*legal literacy knowledge of trainee solicitor
use of word processor, photocopier
local library
accounting skills
money raised by fund-raising
local contacts in the Council
skills in dealing with the media
skills of persuasion and argumentation
organizing skills—offering structure and being able to work
with others
design skills—combining words and graphics on signs, posters etc.*

The textual resources involved in these practices

The following texts were used:

*letters of various kinds, including official
maps (for understanding the compromise plan)
historical records of the Allotment Association (to see how land
was used and tenure changed over time) and more general
history of allotments
legal documents
newspaper articles
petition
newsletter to the local community
posters
press release*

Mobilizing literacies are the eclectic mix of literacies that ordinary people use opportunistically for the purpose of social action. They are not individual property (even though individuals contribute dif-

ferent literacies to a group effort) but rather a community resource for enhancing the quality of local life.

Rhetorical Invention: Adapting and Retooling

In *Local Literacy*, rhetorical invention is largely a process of adapting and retooling, both for group members trying to solve a shared problem and for an individual writing independently.

Group Invention. In the tidiest of rhetorical situations, groups selected among options or recombined available literate strategies. However, when the exigency created new or unclear demands, residents' uncertainty about what was required and how to accomplish it made rhetorical invention a far more daunting task than choosing among a preconfigured set of options. Under these circumstances, groups improvised and adjusted their approach based on what went wrong or proved ineffective. For instance, when Springside's gardeners realized they needed to act as a formal Allotment Association to protect their land rights, they constructed a problem-solving process under pressure and over the course of several meetings. This process involved "search[ing] out and draw[ing] upon" different funds of community knowledge, including the history of similar disputes, the group's legal rights, and the decision-making process through which their claim would be reviewed (Barton and Hamilton 220). The precise process is not documented; Barton and Hamilton refer to it more generally as trial and error, a process of "constant reinvention" (226). The daunting challenge for the group was how to manage all this diverse input.

Individual Invention. Shirley offers a closer view of an individual's invention processes. Even when choosing among available alternatives, she often adjusted familiar rhetorical tools to make them suit the situation at hand. As editor of the residence association newsletter, for instance, Shirley drew on her past experience and expertise but adjusted her literate repertoire to suit her more public role. Sometimes, the adaptation could be quite straightforward. Many situations required Shirley to shift her channel of communication from oral to written—something she reported doing easily. The rhetorical moves Shirley made in her newsletter editorials, for example, "dr[e]w heavily on the discursive conventions of addressing a meeting orally" (Barton and Hamilton 109). As evidence, consider that Shirley often used humor

in her newsletter to introduce serious issues—a strategy she knew to work well at community meetings. Other situations required Shirley to make deliberate changes to her discursive strategies. To account for her composing process, Shirley observed that she drew from personal experience, but she was also aware of altering what she had done in the past or what she was accustomed to doing in her private life in light of more public demands.

Implications

1. *Not only do individuals have difficulty connecting private lives to public institutions; groups also struggle.*

Although Shirley was able to sustain her commitment to literate social action, she couldn't always transfer her enthusiasm and commitment to others. Likewise, groups in Springside struggled to forge links to public institutions. Figuring out how to proceed required a lot of time and energy. Describing the Allotment Association's process of figuring out how to fight city council, Barton and Hamilton write: "[C]hoices have to be carefully weighed up. [. . .] People were uncertain about what to do and considerable time was spent in meetings discussing the value of different strategies" (225). The group's decision-making process was also riddled with tension, and the less committed members left the group because of it. Furthermore, there was no guarantee that a group's decision-making process would be up to the task at hand. Describing the limits of a group's networks, Barton and Hamilton write: "Networks [. . .] may not provide expertise in the ways that are needed at a particular time" (254).

2. *Forging the link in the first place is hard work, but even more difficult is sustaining the required literate activity so that the connection has some chance of advocating the desired social change.*

This implication extends the first. Granted, connecting private lives to a public institution is hard work in its own right, yet sustaining those connections is even more difficult. For instance, Janice, another participant in Barton and Hamilton's study, organized a protest to oppose an increase in the area poll tax. However, she couldn't sustain the momentum that an initial march instigated because she didn't know how to work with public institutions responsible for the tax or how to network with other relevant local organizations. "Janice [. . .] had

strong informal networks but very little experience of dealing with official agencies or formal organizations; she did not know what to do after her initial action, even though organizations existed with which she could have linked, notably the anti-poll-tax union” (Barton and Hamilton 228).

3. *The organic quality of community groups that makes them inventive, spontaneous, and responsive (and, thus, so interesting to literacy scholars) also makes the links they try to forge to public institutions especially vulnerable to established institutional power.*

Community groups that are “vernacular and local” are likely to be sites of creative and inventive literate activity (Barton and Hamilton 226). This inventiveness often correlates with a lack of financial resources, as well as a lack of expertise regarding the dominant practices of public institutions. Moreover, it is unlikely that everyday people receive any formal education or explicit training in the literacies or roles required to forge links to public institutions. Importantly, this includes lack of training in “working together in groups to solve disputes” (228). Thus, the disequilibrium between private lives and public institutions makes any link that a group or individual is able to forge vulnerable to a public instruction’s bureaucratic and technical literacies and other dominant practices. In Springside, this disequilibrium set in relief other sources of vulnerability for local publics, namely the agendas, values, and practices of dominant domains that encroach upon local life.

This tension raises another question: *how are we, as rhetoricians, to understand the value of efforts like Shirley’s to use literacy to improve daily life?* As Catherine Squires argues in “Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres,” it may be a mistake to conflate a public’s capacity to circulate texts with the rhetorical efficacy of those texts. However, community-literacy scholars tend to be deeply committed to the possibility of community literacy to “support civil action” (Grabill, “Written City” 138) while intensely aware of literacy’s “radical insufficiencies” (Mathieu 75).

4. *Links between private lives and public institutions aren’t necessarily sites of democratic practice.*

Unlike the organic imagery in the previous chapter, the link suggests that the relationship between literacy and democracy is an uneasy one. Data from Springside led Barton and Hamilton to conclude: “Literacy

has a role in democratic practice, yet literate practices are not necessarily democratic in their own right. Neither can they, on their own, promote democracy” (228). In each documented instance of a local organization behaving democratically, they observe that “it was not literacy in itself which was democratic; it was the practices” (229).

Another factor complicating the literacy-democracy equation is the constructive, hybrid nature of links. At the moment when a local community group is poised to connect to public institutions, its practices are often under construction. Thus, just as the possibility for democratic practice exists, so too exists the possibility for restriction and exclusion. This tension is evident in Barton and Hamilton’s description of the Allotment Association’s annual meetings where, on the one hand, “[t]he record-keeping and the minutes *ensure a democratic accountability*, both to the people at the meeting and to the larger membership of the organization” (229, emphasis added). On the other, however, when it came to viewing the organization’s financial records, the bank statement was “proffered” in such a way that residents couldn’t ask to see it “*without appearing to be rude*” (229, emphasis added). Literacy itself can complicate democratic processes. “Literacy in its administrative, bureaucratic forms without accountability can be limiting, alienating, and stifling” (Barton and Hamilton 228).

Barton and Hamilton commend processes of democratic literacy “where people have competence in and retain control over [. . .] decision-making processes” (230). Here their ethnography takes a prescriptive turn. They caution that to make good on its democratic commitments, a group’s leadership must take responsibility for making resources available, including access to information (228). By implication, such a group needs to acknowledge that members will bring a wide range of vernacular literacies to bear not only on their own participation, but also on their expectations of others in the group. This dynamic is likely to increase the potential for conflict and the need for negotiation and wise leadership.

Thus far, this chapter has depicted the local public as a link where working-class residents like Shirley make contact with public institutions to improve the quality of their lives and life of their community. But what if Barton and Hamilton had been researching the local literacies of the “poor” and “marginalized” (Barton and Hamilton 64)? Would they have needed a different image to do justice to their observations of local publics? Cushman, author of *The Struggle and the*

Tools: Oral and Literate Strategies in an Inner City Community, maintains they would. Such circumstances call for an image attuned to power differentials between community residents and representatives of public institutions. Like Barton and Hamilton's image of a link connecting domains across networks, Cushman's image of a gate depicts encounters as the borderland between private and public spheres (Cushman, *Struggle* 124). But the gatekeeping encounter highlights political contingencies at play within this borderland and the intensely political linguistic skill required to navigate such space.

A GATE ALONG A FENCELINE: THE LOCAL PUBLIC IN CUSHMAN'S *THE STRUGGLE AND THE TOOLS*

In *The Struggle and the Tools*, the local public is a gate along a fence line that can creak open to allow entry or remain shut to restrict access. Cushman uses this image to describe the local public life of the two families she studied from 1993 to 1996 in an industrial city in the northeastern United States, a city she calls Quayville.

Distinctive Features: Access, Space, and Conflict

In the gatekeeping encounter, the local public is the point of contact between the African American inner-city residents in Cushman's study and representatives of various public institutions. The phrase *public institution* here refers to the wide range of social service agencies that distribute resources in inner cities, including regional branches of the Department of Social Services, the Housing Authority, and Housing and Urban Development. The phrase also includes the criminal justice system. Representatives of philanthropic and religious organizations such as Urban Ministries are also included in Cushman's group of *institutional workers* who operate public institutions, as are landlords themselves, the final decision makers in community members' search for housing.

Access. The significance of a closed gate is obvious: access denied. In this case, the gate and the gatekeeper are barriers between the community resident and the resources she seeks. But a closed gate also suggests—however obliquely—the possibility of an opening, permission to access the resources on the other side.

Space. A gatekeeping encounter is a rhetorical space. At its best, it invites the community resident to use her community-based literacy skills to negotiate with respect and mutuality fair access to opportunities and equitable distribution of resources. Of all the literacy events that Cushman studied, this version of a local public space was clearly instantiated just once when a young woman named Raejone met with Mr. Villups, a college admissions counselor, to discuss the prospects of enrolling in the state university he represented. Because of the mutuality of their exchange, Cushman credits the exchange with “open[ing] up more opportunities” (Cushman, *Struggle* 187).

A gate also implies the space beneath it, “the rock bottom” which one “hits” under dire circumstances (Cushman, *Struggle* 88). The image of a gatekeeping encounter indicates how high the stakes are for community residents. For a mother of young children, hitting rock bottom means not only “falling through the cracks” yourself, but taking others with you. Women in Cushman’s study struggled to negotiate gatekeeping encounters to provide for their dependents. They achieved status in their community by developing the linguistic savvy required to do so.

Conflict. The gate marks contact between two cultures’ conflicting value systems. On one side of the gate is the culture of community residents, African Americans living in Quayville’s inner city, people who privilege privacy, self-help, and collaboration among kith and kin. On the side of the gate is the institutional culture of gatekeepers. For all the good intentions grounding many social programs, the ideology governing the social service industry is often patronizing, assuming that “poor people, especially poor Black people [are] passive, disorganized, and apathetic” (Cushman, *Struggle* 47). Unlike Shirley whose social-action projects added something extra to her life, the urban poor in Cushman’s study constantly negotiated gatekeepers because public institutions intervened in the most basic aspects of their daily lives, from where they lived and what they ate to the living conditions of their children, their marital status, and their eligibility for job-training and higher education. The flipside of this relationship is that—like the bereavement counselors in John McKnight’s *Community and Its Counterparts*—gatekeepers have a parasitic relationship to the residents they serve. Like McKnight, Quayville residents indicted caseworkers for keeping themselves employed by ensuring that the problems that

sent community residents in search of their services were never entirely resolved.

The Gate in Context: Location and Linguistic Agency

To be a viable local public, the gatekeeping encounter requires a location; it also depends upon community residents' linguistic agency.

Location. Location pushes certain local publics into the fore (over the possibility of others) because of the historical forces that shape the contours of daily life. In Quayville, daily life is marked by the struggle for employment and housing, “twentieth-century material struggles” that stem from Quayville’s position within a larger national history, involving “the Second Great Migration, the displacement of Blacks through Urban Removal, the movement of jobs to the suburbs” (*Struggle* 44–45). In response to the destructive consequences of these events, in the 1960s and 1970s the federal government and philanthropic organizations created social programs to alleviate the suffering of the poor. Though funding for these programs has ebbed and flowed under various governmental administrations, these agencies have continued to control important resources in Quayville—thus, the prevalence of institutional representatives in the lives of the residents whom Cushman studied. As the vortex where political, historical, and economic conditions meet, location determines the local publics that matter most in people’s lives and the literacies people use to work within these spaces.

Location is also a central site for “daily politics” (Cushman, *Struggle* 239). “[A]ll political endeavors take place in the daily,” Cushman writes (5). As an object of analysis, the gatekeeping encounter permits Cushman to “locate every interaction and literacy event [. . .] in the broadest types of social structures” (5). Because of its position within social structures, a gatekeeping encounter captures a “foundational form of politics” (239). Each gatekeeping encounter has political significance in its own right, independent of its capacity to bring about any large-scale outcome or “massive changes in consciousness” (239). That’s because a gatekeeping encounter encompasses the “particulars of daily politics, the commonplace victories and defeats, the subtle and overt challenges” associated with its location (239).

Location also connects gatekeeping encounters to the situated knowledge of community residents—both their perspectives and their

local cultural values. Every gatekeeping encounter has the potential to respect or to violate the local knowledge and cultural values of a community resident. In his admissions interview with Raejone, Mr. Villups cues his respect for Raejone's perspective on what it means and takes to earn a college degree. In contrast, during a sting operation to shut down a drug ring in Raejone's neighborhood, representatives from both the police station and the regional office of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People failed to recognize the validity of local perspectives. The community police program failed on two counts. First, institutional representatives failed to show respect for local perspectives, revealing instead their own "paternalistic attitudes" (106). Second, the program was insufficient to the task of curtailing drug activity—precisely because it failed to reflect the "complexity of the situation," knowledge that local perspectives could have provided. Used to describe the gatekeeping encounter, *local* in the phrase *local public* connotes people's ideological struggle to have their perspectives and expertise respected within the material struggle for resources (3).

Linguistic Agency. More than any other factor, what makes gatekeeping encounters viable local publics is the linguistic agency that community residents exercise within them. In Quayville, residents exercised agency through the linguistic strategies they chose to use in gatekeeping encounters and then by assessing the efficacy of those choices. Consider Salliemae's decision to supplement her housing applications with a list of references that had been typed on a computer and printed. Linguistic agency emphasizes that Salliemae's decision was a choice among alternatives—say, not to bother with a list, to write it out long hand, to mention the names on the list to the landlord orally, to select some names for the list by omitting other candidates, or to describe those on the list with certain attributes but not others. Linguistic agency highlights that such choices are tied to their social functions. In this case, Salliemae wanted to use the list of references to challenge the conclusion that a landlord would draw from reading her housing application alone: that since she collected welfare, she didn't work. By including the names of co-workers at the Department of Dependent Services on her list of references, Salliemae cultivated a rhetorical space for landlords to "ask her about her unique situation," which included working as a child-care provider and her goals to finish her General

Equivalency Degree (*Struggle* 161). In Cushman's working theory of local public life, agency is a linguistic phenomenon. To have agency is to be a "savvy negotiator [. . .] of highly nuanced, everyday interactions with wider society's institutional representatives" (2).

Tenor of the Discourse: Dueling Dualities

To hear what's really going on in Quayville's gatekeeping encounters, we'd need a special audio-recorder that could simultaneously record two frequencies: one broadcasting the signal for the *public transcript*; the other, the *hidden transcript*. Listening to both frequencies, we'd hear "dueling dualities"—the wrestling, the wrangling, the tension between the gatekeepers' public "structuring ideology," on the one hand, and the "counterhegemonic ideology" that residents keep private, on the other (Cushman, *Struggle* 139).

Hidden transcripts challenge the superiority of the public transcript. "[I]n the hidden transcripts," Cushman writes, "we see that individuals critique, question, seek paths around, and attempt to subvert the racist and classist ways these institutions work" (*Struggle* 96). Using hidden transcripts to call public transcripts up short, residents were able "to both mollify and rebuke, play into and off of, adopt and adapt, placate and challenge, conform and undermine, accommodate and resist" (227–28). [D]ueling dualities is the noise of "daily politics" (239).² In moments of such wrangling, neither the gatekeeper nor the resident has the upper hand. It's not that Social Structure wins out or that Personal Agency triumphs. Instead, the dueling dualities unleash the noisy collapse of political binaries: "micro/macro, agency/structure; power to/power over; confrontation/ denunciation; resistance/oppression" (*Struggle* 3).

Institutional Literacies

Institutional literacies both create the discursive space of the gatekeeping encounter and provide people the means to navigate through it. First are the literacies one uses *to acquire* institutional tools. Next are the literacies one *transfers* from one's toolkit to the situation at hand. Third are the literacies used *to evaluate* what went awry during a gatekeeping encounter in order to retool for the next encounter (Cushman, *Struggle* 231). Categories include both oral and text-based literacies (123). They are interdependent, each category "informed by the other two" (231).

Together, these literacies form a “cyclic process” that lets residents continually hone their linguistic repertoires of institutional discourse (4).

Table 5. Activities used to acquire, transfer, and evaluate institutional literacies. Reprinted by permission from *The Struggle and the Tools: Oral and Literate Strategies in an Inner City Community* by Ellen Cushman, the State University of New York Press @ 1998, State University of New York.

Acquiring	Transferring	Evaluating
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • questioned the literate artifact before them • modeled ways to transfer knowledge • collectively problem-solved • constructed the mundane as problematic • critically reflected on past experiences and future plans • found people who could teach them more skills • collected literate resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • bent semantics to index two different value systems • flattered authority of gatekeeper • selected pronoun of solidarity • named and acted upon linguistic shortcoming • compared writing against successful model • crafted linguistic representations of themselves • code-switched when thought appropriate for situation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • assessed the utility of language strategies • considered other linguistic tactics • questioned ethics of using one strategy vs. another • determined why interaction went awry • intervened on someone’s behalf if necessary • altered linguistic strategies that worked poorly • considered language and politics of situation

Many factors complicate the interactions between institutional workers and community members: power relations are asymmetrical (Cushman, *Struggle* 68), social service institutions are internetworked (187), and people’s subject positions are multidimensional (23). But these factors intensify rather than undercut the importance of residents’ reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills.

Rhetorical Invention: Evaluating Acquired Literacies Transferred to New Contexts

As institutional literacy defines it, rhetorical invention permits a person to revamp linguistic tools available for transfer in hopes of handling the challenges of a gatekeeping encounter more strategically next time. Rhetorical invention promotes a meta-awareness residents use

to consider “(1) when and how to resist a gatekeeper who is being unduly harsh; (2) which language styles they should have used given who was present and their authority; and (3) when and how to intervene in those gatekeeping situations that go poorly” (Cushman, *Struggle* 205). Rhetorical invention is a political act and the crux of residents’ linguistic agency.

Residents participated in rhetorical invention differently, depending on their age and gender. Because they were inexperienced in negotiations with institutional workers, children were expected to listen to adults talk about altercations with landlords or social workers, but not to interrupt or to interject with their own perspectives. Adults’ renditions of their interactions with gatekeepers became “case studies of collective and collected knowledge” about “linguistic and political struggles within wider society’s institutions” (Cushman, *Struggle* 189). Kitchens, front steps, and community centers became “local classrooms [. . .] where adults taught through example and youths learned through watching and listening” (106). Such gatekeeping instruction was usually indirect, with children picking up what they needed to know by listening to adults analyze “all sorts of letters, bills, and receipts” that warned of unwelcome institutional interference.

Both boy and girl teens were likely to resist the stance adults promoted in institutional literacy lessons; however, resistance toward institutional discourse and the hypocrisies it represents was a luxury that few teens could afford for long. The transition from adolescence to adulthood was usually a rather sudden one, brought about by “moving out of the parents’ home, pregnancy, employment, or graduating from high school” (125). Adulthood positioned teens in a new relationship to “the social networks the individuals could draw upon for resources and support” (125). To cope with the pressures of their new responsibilities, young adults drew upon previous language lessons: “When teens suddenly shift into the roles of young adults, they quickly learn to *play a deeper game with their language, language they’ve acquired and learned in the community*” (125, emphasis added). By the time men and women reached adulthood, they assumed diametrically opposed positions in relation to language learning. Men refused to hone the linguistic savvy required, for instance, to appear before a caseworker to apply for welfare, opting rather to preserve their personal integrity, often by working the underground economy. Women, however, were responsible to provide for their children and other dependents. They

valued institutional literacy as a means for doing so. Learning to speak White English was a means toward an end. For adult women, learning institutional literacy also meant learning to quiet one's own resistant impulses in order to take care of those who depended on them.

Implications

1. *Local publics invoke democracy when they open up a space for community residents to advocate for their own interests on their own terms.*

The relationship between local publics and democracy is a contested one. The cultural womb and the garden depict an easy relationship between literacy and democracy that nurtures participants and prepares them for social action. The link, on the other hand, makes democratic practice more tenuous because of the very nature of literate activity that can evoke democratic values one minute and uncut them the next. Cushman provides a deeper analysis. She argues public institutions were indeed founded on "democratic values" (*Struggle* 226), "established out of a concern for the well-being of citizens who were hungry, unemployed, homeless or living in dilapidated housing, or who lacked access to higher education" (223). Because of these democratic tenets, Cushman argues that public servants should "strike a balance between the role of judge and advocate in ways that promote social and political equality" (184). However, gatekeeping encounters are fraught with difficulties that compromise democratic values. Along with the policies that the gatekeepers oversee and the bureaucratic forms and procedures used to maintain them, the reigning ideology invokes "insidious attitudes" toward welfare recipients and public-housing residents (48). Yet as weary as the residents became of the "mire of requirements, codes, and insidious attitudes," they tenaciously maintained belief in "the *promise always present* in public institutions" (19, emphasis added). The obligation Cushman places on the gatekeeper is to meet the community resident half way.

2. *A respectful local public wouldn't attempt to eradicate hidden transcripts, but rather to create a productive tension among participants' values, knowledge, and priorities.*

The gatekeeping encounter offers a strikingly different approach to conflict than the TWWW garden that absorbed interpersonal conflict as it celebrated the group's diversity. A respectful encounter wouldn't

attempt to eradicate hidden transcripts but rather would recognize the legitimate differences between the participants' social locations. Referring to Raejone's encounter with the college admissions counselor, Mr. Villups, Cushman writes: "My data show that both community residents and gatekeepers can actually communicate effectively, *mutually indexing* the *shared task* of providing and accessing resources" (9, emphasis added). Using West's notion of prophetic pragmatism, we could conclude that ordinary people like those in Cushman's study act "prophetically" when they test the limits of what's possible within situations that otherwise threaten to degrade and to demean them (*American* 235). It follows, then, that ordinary gatekeepers conduct themselves prophetically when they identify and represent the agency and expertise of others.

3. *It may be wise for a rhetorician, as an instrument of social change, to seek not a sea-change in public policy but a better understanding of how ordinary people use "language and literacy to challenge and alter the circumstances of daily life" and to "facilitate actions" with those in need* (Cushman, "Rhetorician" 12, 14).

Why didn't the residents in Cushman's study resist gatekeepers more overtly? Wouldn't such resistance demonstrate agency more vigorously? Cushman disagrees. Community residents negotiated gatekeepers' linguistic cues subtly, rather than overtly, because they had too much to lose, both in a given encounter and in future encounters. An overt challenge would likely have made the gatekeeper click the latch shut, and as Barton and Hamilton remind us, social services participate in a larger network of public institutions. Once the word gets out to other caseworkers that a resident has behaved inappropriately, a resident could be "blackballed" from passing through the gates of other social service agencies (Cushman, *Struggle* 142). The complexity of this network means that linguistic agency can't be adequately measured in terms of its outcomes. For one thing, linguistic agency is a balancing act, a matter of selecting linguistic tools that keep one's cultural values intact (if out of view) while meeting the gatekeeper's expectations for proper behavior, for what a teen named Rachel called "'pol-White'" discourse (192). Yet even for the savviest negotiators in Cushman's study, gatekeeping encounters "rarely went as planned" (89). Accounts of Salliema's and other gatekeeping encounters remind us that "multiple economic and social forces push hard on poor people" (187). But,

linguistic agency isn't only about the resources on the other side of the gate. Even more, it acknowledges—without romanticizing—“the process of struggle” and “the sophistication of the tools” that community residents employ within the gatekeeping encounter itself (x).