CHAPTER 11.

PHENOMENAL WOMEN GETTIN' IT RIGHT IN THE EXTRACURRICULUM

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> The extracurriculum I examine is constructed by desire, by the aspirations and imaginations of its participants. It posits writing as an action undertaken by motivated individuals.
>
> – Anne Ruggles Gere, "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of Composition"

My scholarly identity is built around examining literacies in the extracurriculum, particularly in African American community spaces. Anne Ruggles Gere lays out for composition studies the value and necessity of scholarly inquiry on composition instruction outside the classroom in such spaces. Gere suggests that "in concentrating upon establishing our position within the academy, we have neglected to recount the history of composition in other contexts; we have neglected composition's extracurriculum" (79). She suggests that these community sites of writing instruction create a space where community participants see that "writing can make a difference in individual and community life" (78). While "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms" lays the groundwork for examining composition instruction in community spaces, I argue that one of its greatest values is providing a pathway for examining and documenting literacy practices more broadly—reading, speaking, and writing—in community spaces that have been characterized by narratives of literacy deficiencies.

In this essay, I address how Phenomenal Women Incorporated (PWInc), a contemporary Black women's club, demonstrates club-based practices of literacy instruction. I am reminded not only of Gere's work on 19th-century clubwomen's roles in literacy in the extracurriculum but also of Gere's call to "consider the various sites in which the extracurriculum has been enacted, the local circumstances that supported its development, the material artifacts employed by its practitioners, and the cultural work it accomplished" (90). I focus on the informal literacy instruction that operates in this extracurricular site as well as the role

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of desire and motivation that inspires PWInc members to engage in unfamiliar literacy practices that become part of their literacy identities.

THE SITE

PWInc, a nonprofit organization located in Columbus, Ohio, has been in existence since 1997. During my fieldwork, its membership has hovered between 15-20 adult Black women who range in age from their mid-20s to early 80s. Their socioeconomic classes range from working to middle class. The club came into existence because one member, Mawarine,[1] wanted to be in a club with other Black women who serve their community and with whom she could socialize. Mawarine also saw the forming of the club as continuing a legacy of civic engagement and activism passed down by the women in her family. She recalls how, as a child, she and her sister (club member Charlene) were influenced by her grandmother, great aunt, and mother (an original club member) who had been active in church groups and Black women's clubs. It was from these women and her childhood experiences that Mawarine's "vision" for the club evolved.

Much extant scholarship on African American clubwomen reveals the role of African American women's clubs in the activist, intellectual, and civic movements of African Americans. Gere discusses in "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms" the formation of and writing activities of African American self-help groups established in the 19th century in the form of literary clubs. As Gere and others report, these clubs were more than literary clubs in their communities. Gere states, "[F]aced with the double challenge posed by their race and gender, African American clubwomen embraced writing's capacity to effect social and economic change, to enact their [National Association of Colored Women (NACW)] motto, 'lifting as we climb'" (84). In discussing the Black women's club movement, Jacqueline Jones Royster states, "the club movement actually permitted women with different matrices of identity, different perceptions of needs, and different priorities for sociopolitical mandates (cultural, social, political, economic, religious) to form a shared space—a community" (217). The shared spaces that Black women created for themselves in these clubs became important sites for literacy learning and literacy activities. I suggest that, in this first half of the 21st century, they continue to be important extracurricular sites for examining literacy.

While Gere points to how the Tenderloin Women's Writing Workshop and the Lansing, Iowa Writers Workshop have taken up their task of bringing together individuals of varying classes, genders, and races who meet to read

1 All PWInc members are referred to by their first names because that is their custom and preference.

and respond to one another's writing, PWInc adds another layer. That is, these clubwomen do not meet to read and respond to each other's writing. They are not a writing group or a literary club. It is in doing the work of the club—their meetings, their record-keeping, and their planning of club activities, including community outreach and club social outings, among other events—that club members provide feedback and literacy instruction. For many members, doing this work requires that they rely on other club members as literacy resources, as informal literacy instructors, and that they extend their literacy reach, meaning that they take on literacy activities and engage in literacy practices far beyond their experiences and comfort zones. In the following I offer two examples of PWInc members whose work in the club placed them in positions where they needed to reach beyond their literacy comfort zones and rely on the pedagogical activities in this extracurricular space.

DOING THE WORK

> And I had to think about what I was gonna do to help out the club and not just myself or a few people but for everyone. … That really broke me out of my comfort zone.
>
> – Veronica

Veronica's quotation brings to our attention the commitment members brought to their club: helping the club achieve its goals often meant stepping out of one's comfort zone. Whether it was that specific phrase—"taking me out of my comfort zone"—or a version of it, such as "brought me out" or "bringing me forward," the sentiment was named as a powerful force by PWInc members. Charlene and Veronica are representative of most members who found that to do the work of the club, they would need to challenge themselves to engage in certain practices and behaviors that they had been reluctant to do in the past. The motivation to make the club successful and to do good work on behalf of the club provided the exigency for these women to engage unfamiliar literacy practices, refine existing literacy practices, and create new literacy and rhetorical identities.

Charlene

In the conversation excerpts that follow, original club member Charlene (Mawarine's sister) and I discussed her roles in the club, specifically the duties in the various offices that she's held. The narrative that Charlene told about the challenges that she faced to perform her roles effectively highlight the club's role in helping Charlene create a new identity, one that depended on her willingness

to take on the literacy challenge of these offices—essentially her willingness and motivation to step outside her literacy comfort zone:

> When I was the president, okay, I'm kinda quiet, and it's really hard, I don't like to be, I'm not a speaker. And it took, uh—that was really good for me because it brought me out, and I had to talk, and you know, bring the meetings together … And do a lot of research so that the club can continue on. You know, like we have an agenda that we have to do and stuff like that. So, you know, you gotta hunt up that research so you know what we're talking about … And that was new for me.

Charlene continued:

> I had to write. And so, I've never done that before, and so that was an experience for me. And I think I did pretty good cause they let me stay for awhile! … And then I was the secretary, but that was a horrible job, because I'm not a good speller, okay. And they were checking my spelling and stuff like that when I would come in to read the reports and stuff like that. It was, they were very nice about it. … But that is something that I have never been good at, you know. And that was a challenge for me. So, this club has really brought me out, cause I'm usually the type of person who just sits back and listens, you know, and every once in a while, someone will ask me something, I'll answer their questions and stuff. But basically, I just go along with everybody else. And the club has brought me out, and I've learned to like, to speak more and to put my opinions and things that I feel …

As important as the offices themselves is Charlene's description of her duties, the challenges they presented, and the impact on her that fulfilling her duties had. As we go back through this interview excerpt, we see that Charlene, who repeatedly described herself as "kinda quiet," noted that her duties as president "brought her out." She found herself, a person who liked to be in the background, having to lead the group as president. She had to prepare agendas, research potential projects, present information, and make her opinions known. This list points to how these activities, by necessity, engaged Charlene in activities and events that required complex literacy skills and practices (reading, writing, and speaking) and provided an opportunity to engage in literate behavior.

The difficulty that Charlene faced in reimagining her literacy identity is most clearly exemplified in her descriptions of her adjustment to being the secretary.

And it is this experience where we see most clearly how the club members' literacy expectations about properly prepared minutes and reports guided her actions. As she stated in the previous excerpt, being secretary was the most challenging office that she held, primarily because of the literacy requirements. She described her spelling challenges as problematic as well as pointed out how club members, though "they were nice about it," corrected her spelling. Not only was she facing her fears about her spelling, but she also faced the expectations of her club members to "get it right." When she, along with three other members, presented with me at a conference, Charlene provided even more detail about the literacy challenges of the secretary's position. In the following excerpt, in addition to focusing on her writing skills (or her perceived lack of writing skills), Charlene identified computer literacy as adding to her concerns about being the secretary:

> And when they gave me that role as to be the secretary at that time, that was the hardest thing I've ever done because I'm not a writer. … And I have to come out of my comfort zone because I had to go into the meetings and listen to what they were saying and then write it down on paper and then go home and type out all this information, what I'd learned through that meeting, that day … And it was hard for me because I was just learning how to use the computer. … And to come in and have to sit down and type all these words, paragraphs, and lines and stuff like that, you know, it was like, I went to school and I'm, I'm just not the brainy one here, of this, ok. And it was kinda hard for me, and so what I would do, I learned that the first week I would take a risk because it was so much. Then I knew that the following week I had to sit down and type all that stuff that I hadn't, you know, what we talked about, or I would forget, you know. And then, that was a hard time because I was a grown woman sitting at the computer crying because I couldn't get it all in the way that it should be, ok. And so, I had to have, ok, so what I would do is type all the information out and, bless my husband's heart, he would come and sit down and then he would help me with the grammar and the spelling and the stuff like that, you know. Because I would be typing, and I realized I had misspelled a word or did something wrong and I would go to delete, and I would delete maybe three lines and had to start all over again. And I was so frustrated 'cause I used to call her [niece and original club member Robyn who family call Niki], "Niki Niki," I can't do this, it's just too hard for me.

As she stated, in addition to turning to her husband for help, Charlene called on her niece and club member Robyn/Niki, who encouraged her and helped her learn how to be the secretary by answering questions and showing her what to include in the minutes and what to take out. The assistance that she received is significant because it points to the role of others in the club instructing and helping Charlene acquire new literacy skills including engaging with technological literacy practices and re-imagining her literacy identity. This assistance is exemplary of how club members take on literacy sponsorship roles (Brandt) as well. Robyn explained that Charlene's need for her assistance changed during her time as secretary: "over time, our post-meeting gatherings became shorter and less frequent, as Charlene became more comfortable with word processing, printing, and copying meeting minutes and agendas on her own (using her own home computer) and using templates I had introduced to her" (qtd. in Moss and Lyons-Robinson 139).

Being secretary challenged Charlene to read, write, think, and behave in ways that she had not done before. She had to "perform" the role of secretary—the official "writer" for the club—when she did not see herself as a writer. Charlene described her process of learning to take minutes as involving "going into the meetings and listening to what they were saying and then writ[ing] it down on paper." As those who have been secretaries of organizations know, taking minutes is more than transcribing spoken words. Charlene was learning how to make decisions about what was important to write down and how to write it down. She was engaging in decision-making about how to represent the club in its official documents. And as she was making these decisions, Charlene's role was being complicated by the computer.

Not yet computer literate, Charlene was faced with learning how to compose her minutes in a digital space. When she described herself as a "grown woman sitting at the computer crying," she was describing a woman trying to engage in multiple literacies simultaneously. Charlene faced the challenges of taking accurate minutes, preparing them properly, negotiating the computer hardware and software correctly, and, as signaled by her concern with proper spelling, getting the mechanics and grammar right. Her concern about "getting it right" stemmed in large part from the expectations of the club to do things properly so that the club looked good. I saw this concern for the club's image voiced by other members as well. Charlene knew that there was an expectation that anything that represented the club must be done correctly. She offered the following example:

> We would get to the part where you'd say, "Ok, are we now going to approve the minutes?" A certain person on this end [her sister] Mawarine, would always say, "Well, hold up here,

> well, you didn't spell this word right. And what were you trying to say here? You missed this part here."

Charlene understood that the community for whom she was writing had certain standards that she must meet. She also implicitly understood that the minutes were not her minutes but the club's minutes, in effect a community text (Moss). Like many documents produced for organizations by employers and/or members, ownership of the documents belonged to the larger group, not the individual who produced them. It is here where PWInc diverges from the writers Gere highlights in "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms" who were getting feedback on their individual texts, not community texts. Charlene, like other PWInc members, understood the importance and public nature of her literacy practices and the work these practices do for PWInc and their community, much like Black clubwomen in the 19th century, as noted by Gere and her co-author Sarah Robbins. What's important to note is that Charlene, though nervous and initially unsure, did what she needed to do, including heeding the warnings about any errors, and set about meeting the literacy standards as laid out by the club. She made use of a network of resources available to her, like her niece and husband, to meet the literacy challenges that being an active member of the club, especially one holding an office, required her to meet.

The final challenge for Charlene was reading her minutes to the group—the public presentation. For a woman who, at one time, considered herself a poor reader, Charlene was willing to meet another literacy challenge. This challenge, like all the others, was, whether Charlene knew it or not, creating a new identity for her. Note the physical and emotional discomfort that Charlene endured to meet the expectation of the club:

> And then after I would type it and make the copies and then the Friday [meeting] appeared … and there was all these ladies that I knew, friends and stuff, and I had to sit and read what I wrote to them. Now, I would read to myself, my books and stuff like that, but to read out loud, that was very hard for me. My stomach would get real tight ….

Reading the minutes in public, I argue, established Charlene's identity as a reader every bit as much as reading novels did. Reading in public provided her an opportunity to "perform" as a reader before and for an audience for whom what she read was important but also from whom she received a great deal of support. I suggest that the club expectations and role as audience signaled to Charlene that they were rejecting whatever negative opinions she had of her literacy abilities. In fact, they were providing support and teaching moments to help her. The club's presence was a necessary foundation for the re-imagining of her literacy identity.

Through the Charlene example, we see how, within this extracurricular site, the club members set expectations for written documents that dictated how Charlene performed as a writer, a reader, and a speaker. The literacy instruction Charlene received ranged from lower-order to higher-order issues, including correcting spelling, providing the right content, learning how to use a template for writing minutes (prepared by a club member), and learning how to read the minutes orally to the group. She received immediate feedback that helped her prepare for the next time, the next set of minutes. As Gere would probably attest, this "version of the extracurriculum extends beyond the academy to encompass the multiple contexts in which persons seek to improve their own writing," and it "avoids, as much as possible, reenactment of professionalization," which Gere critiques in those who "position the extracurriculum as a waystation on the route toward a fully professionalized academic department" (80). For Charlene, PWInc as the extracurriculum was the site that persuaded her to face her own insecurities about her literacies and to engage in literacy practices in front of a group of Black women who expected her to "get it [writing, speaking, and reading] right."

Veronica

Veronica, like Charlene, held many offices. While not as nervous about her literacy skills as Charlene, in our conversation, Veronica also pointed to her duties within PWInc as engaging in literacy practices and behaviors that "brought her forward." A self-described "social butterfly" who is outgoing and comfortable "speaking up," Veronica faced challenges that had an impact on her literacy identity. Her description of being taken out of her comfort zone as president is particularly interesting because Veronica points to a change in her thinking habits:

> Being vice-president, you're kind of behind the scenes 'cause you're helping out the president and you're, you know, you're gathering up information for the president, doin' what the president can't do, she just kinda passes it over to you. And that was fine with me 'cause I was behind the scenes and that was great. But when I became president, … I had to be structured in my thinking. And I had to think about what I was gonna do to help out the club and not just myself or a few people, but for everyone. And my goal and what the goals were. That really broke me out of my comfort zone.

Despite her discomfort, which her fellow members said they never noticed, the members of the club thought that Veronica was a "great president." What

is striking about Veronica's discussion is that she clearly articulates that she was willing to change the way she thought—"be structured in my thinking"—and put the club's goals first. Again, we are reminded, as Gere notes, of "an action undertaken by motivated individuals" (80). While my fieldnotes show Veronica to be an organized person with strong leadership skills, when she became an officer she certainly seemed to think that she had to make some changes in the way that she went about her work in the club. She had been the club treasurer and historian prior to being vice-president and president. In these positions, she engaged in literacy practices that were not part of her normal routine and that, like Charlene, caused her a high level of anxiety. However, again, Veronica was motivated to do her job well and found that taking on these duties and the literacy practices and behaviors attached to them pushed her to move beyond her comfort level, to move from "behind the scenes" to the front—"out there"—where her words (spoken and written) and actions represented the club. In the following excerpt, she describes her challenges and triumphs as club treasurer:

> I found out that being a treasurer, really, really brought me forward because I, I'd never even balanced my checkbook before that. … But now I had to sit down and actually think about the finances [of the club] and look at it and go into the banks and talk to the officials and make sure the money is right. I had to sit down there and write out a report. And my husband reminded me, he said, "you were so nervous about being the treasurer that all I ever heard was, 'I gotta do my report (laughter). It gotta be right. I gotta look at it." And I didn't know I was that manic about it, but apparently, I was. And it just kind of helped me and it helped in my life to understand what the finances were and understanding that writing it, and looking at it, and going over it really brought me forward in my personal life. And it helped in the, in the club, you know, look at the finances and, all the activities we had to do to raise the money and make sure the money was right and make sure I always go to the bank to have the change and keeping track of everything. That was difficult but it really brought me forward in, and I really appreciate everyone who helped out, and who helped me along the way. And being treasurer, she [Charlene] says I helped her, but I had to have help, too.

When Veronica announced that she had never balanced her own checkbook before becoming treasurer for PWInc, the other members on the panel were

surprised. Charlene, who became treasurer after Veronica, talked about how much Veronica helped her learn the treasurer's job. Yet, becoming treasurer represents one of those moments when the work of the club motivated Veronica to reshape her literacy identity. As a participant in this literacy event, Veronica had to record expenses and expenditures, read bank statements, check those bank statements against the record of expenses and expenditures that she recorded, write receipts to members, write checks to appropriate parties, discuss bank and club financial records with bank officials and club members, and prepare and read aloud her treasurer's report. She engaged in each of these literate activities monthly for two years. Like Charlene's description of being the club secretary, we see that being the PWInc treasurer was not an easy role for Veronica. However, like Charlene, she was motivated by the club's needs to engage in new literacy practices.

When Veronica says the club "brought me forward" or "broke me out of my comfort zone," we, as readers, can see that PWInc has provided Veronica a space to perform literacy practices within and beyond the club on behalf of the club. Hence, the literacy identity that Veronica began to establish through her work in PWInc was one of a club member who recognized the power of literacy's reach to multiple communities and the way that literacy could contribute to how others viewed her club. It's also important to recognize that Veronica added another layer to this discussion in that she discussed how her work in the club provided a pathway for changes in her personal life in how she dealt with her own finances. In Veronica, I argue, we see another dimension of literacy as a communal resource. When she utilized literacy to do the work of the club as treasurer, as chair of a committee, as president, or as historian, like Charlene, she was no longer an individual writing a report or doing research, she was PWInc engaging in these literacy events and practices.

CONCLUSION

While one may be tempted to look solely at these women as individuals improving or enhancing their literacy skills and/or broadening the spaces in which they engage in literate behaviors and literacy practices, I offer an alternative view: that is, the ethos is so powerful, the network of resources available to these women so far-reaching, that the club becomes a powerful force shaping the motivation of these women to step out of their literacy comfort zones and to take on these new or expanded identities. I am not suggesting that this is the only social network that these women drew on to expand their literacy identities; however, it was one of the primary networks that they drew on to take risks that they would not have done previous to joining the club. That Charlene and Veronica named their

club's needs as the force that pushed them to engage particular literacy practices is evidence of how important this community-based social network was to them. I point to the power of small, community-based social groups in the extracurriulum and the needs and concerns of those groups to intervene in literacy lives and to hold sway when larger institutions or even individual needs do not. Being part of a group of Black women committed to their community and to their club is impetus for the individual members to take on new literacy challenges and for the club and the individuals within the club to teach each other. Equally important is doing the club's work in a way that signals, as member Sharon stated, "it has to look good and be good." Looking and being good, or "getting it right," though often articulated by members in terms of correct spelling or accurate financial records, is more than just being correct. For these women, it was and is about striving to honor the club, enacting the NACW motto "lifting as we climb" (qtd. in Gere 84), which in this case includes nurturing and sustaining the literacy of its members.

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