

Chapter 12. Networking the Self and Subjects through Writing

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As a feminist rhetorical historiographer, I think about my positionality in relation to the historical subjects I recover as networked across space and time. Recently, my research has focused on the labor rhetorics of women who lived and worked in Chicago's West Side garment district in the early 20th century. There is vast space and time between me and my research subjects, and more differences of identity and experience than shared ones. This remains true even though my great-great grandmother, Tekla Maztak, was a garment worker who immigrated to Chicago in 1900. Though she and I share a familial lineage, I was not at first sure how my workplace labor of research, writing, and teaching might be in conversation with Tekla's garment making. Yet, as my research progressed, I noticed we were connected through how we related to the rhetorical modes we used to express the value and condition of labor. Specifically, my research subjects and I were networked—connected in patterned ways, though not through direct or linear relationships—by our access to and uses of writing.

As a writing professor, it has been at times all too easy for me to understand my workplace labor of writing as offering me a path to class mobility and transformation. What I better appreciated from studying historical women garment workers like my great-great grandmother is that many, including myself, experience writing as a fraught mode of expression because it is a site of inequitable access—it requires time, space, and materials to learn, produce and circulate—and is thus as much a barrier to claiming a middle-class identity and entry into a professional field as it is a pathway. Instead of writing, many garment workers favored embodied public actions such as protests, pickets, and parades to communicate their workplace labor was undervalued and exploited. Learning about women garment workers' relationships to writing helped me to reimagine my own. Instead of thinking of writing as a workplace product that made class mobility possible, I began to imagine it more as a process through which to build community, share and compare information, and support others in inquiry. For example, by talking with other writing professors about the difficulties of accessing the time, space, and resources needed for writing, I noticed that what seemed to be my individual workplace difficulties were in fact shared, as was the process of advocating for better conditions. In this way, I felt my own relationship to writing become more complicated and connected to the struggles and joys of other writers past and present.

Simultaneously, I began to understand that the promise of writing as a path to middle-class mobility was generational. As I learned more about my great-great-grandmother through the few records I could find about her life, I could glimpse her using writing to craft her own progress narrative into the American middle class. In 1900, Tekla was a machine operator, was married, and had recently immigrated from Poland at 20 years old. By 1910, Tekla Maztak had changed her name to Tillie Miller, and reported to a Census enumerator that she was a dressmaker, divorced, and had moved to a new, better tenement. Reading these reported details, I imagined Tekla using the Census enumerators' writing to memorialize her assimilationist and economic progress narrative in her Americanized name, specialized work role, and physical movement across the city. While Tekla was not writing herself, she used writing and bureaucratic processes to narrate her own transformation and mobility. This personal connection helped me to be more imaginative in noticing how other garment workers were using writing to narrate what their own progress looked like.

I hope other researchers might also notice how they are networked to the historical subjects they recover through their relationships to writing. When considering positionality, researchers might think about how their own values and beliefs about writing circulate in networks alongside those held by their research subjects. Ultimately, writing is a kind of labor, and noticing its accessibility and value across different moments of history is part of creating solidarity with research subjects.