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# The Public Work of Rhetoric

## Citizen-Scholars and Civic Engagement

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# The Community Literacy Advocacy Project

## Civic Revival through Rhetorical Activity in Rural Arkansas

**DAVID A. JOLLIFFE**

This essay analyzes an interesting, yet thorny, case in the public work of rhetoric. It tells the story of an academic office at a public, research university supporting the public, rhetorical work of a small town in eastern Arkansas. All corners of the town are striving to craft a new statement about it. Its citizens are making Herculean efforts to reshape the rhetoric that they employ with one another when they talk about civic survival and, ideally, economic turnaround. Its leaders are offering a whole new perspective when they characterize the town's current status and its potential to prospective citizens and employers. Confronting what many observers would characterize as the hallmarks of civic decay, Augusta, Arkansas—population 2,390, county seat of Woodruff County, population around 7,900—working in collaboration with the Office of the Brown Chair in English Literacy at the University of Arkansas, is announcing to its citizens, to the state, and to others who care to listen that it is the town that reads and writes together, the town where literacy makes a difference.

The thorny aspect of the case emerges from the new message itself. Sitting at the center of Augusta's rhetorical activity is a hotly contested term, *literacy,* and the rhetorical campaign to promote more and better reading and writing in the town has developed without much attention to the historical roots of the issues being addressed and the political and social implications of the work. So what should an academic collaborator in this civic campaign do? As I explain below, my path has been to help the movement grow in the direction it wants to grow and then to use the project as a teaching opportunity to help University of Arkansas students and the citizens involved to understand the deeper ideological issues involved and eventually, I hope, to act in responsible, productive ways about those issues.

In what follows I describe in some detail the rhetorical/revival campaign that Augusta has undertaken since 2005, document its successes in its first

year, and unpack several problematic issues that the project raises, issues that will eventually need to be addressed as part of an effort to teach an inclusive definition of literacy. To start, however, let me set out three perspectives that build a foundation for explaining how municipalities (and community literacy programs within them) craft rhetorical statements and how those statements can influence social change and, ideally, economic and material progress.

## How Do Towns, Cities, and Literacy Programs Make a Rhetorical Statement?

Both ancient and contemporary rhetorical theories provide explanations about how towns and cities craft rhetorical statements about themselves. The classical perspective is thoroughly Aristotelian; one contemporary perspective derives from social form theory; another contemporary theory examines the tropes underlying community literacy programs and, by extension, community-building efforts.

An Aristotelian rhetorician (which I unabashedly characterize myself as)[1] would contend that towns and cities make rhetorical statements about themselves in essentially the same way any text or any graphic—a picture, a cartoon, a chart, a graph, an advertisement, a billboard, and so on—does: by developing an argument that, in Stephen Toulmin's neo-Aristotelian terms, incorporates "data" and makes a claim, with the data and the claim connected by warrants: generally unspoken "because" statements, assumptions that the author/creator of the text hopes its readers/listeners/consumers share with him or her.[2] A verbal text manifests organizational patterns, choices of diction and syntax, imagistic and figurative language that fleshes out its central argument, appealing to the writer's character and credibility and the audiences' emotions and life states all the while. A graphic text does the same thing, only incorporating actual images—sights and sounds—as well as imagistic language.

Cities and towns take advantage of verbal and nonverbal texts in both official and unofficial documents to make a statement—that is, to offer an argument about what kind of city or town it is, why people live there, why people might visit or move there, and so on. Consider this example of an official document making a rhetorical statement for a city: if one searches for "Little Rock" on the Internet, one quickly finds a link titled "Little Rock City Limitless." (Notice, even from the outset, that the title's punning intertextuality with the phrase "city limits" creates a kind of "in" joke between the creator and the viewer, thus strengthening the former's ethos.) By clicking on the link, one gets to www.littlerock.com, the homepage of the Little Rock Convention and Visitors' Bureau. This homepage is dominated by a beautiful photograph of the Arkansas River as it flows past downtown Little Rock, with the words "River Magic" superimposed on it. The text on the page describes in detail the cultural and recreational activities happening in the near future in Little Rock, and it lists the two dozen or so organizations that are holding conventions in Little Rock over the coming months. Here is the enthymeme, cast in the Toulmin's terms:

Data: Little Rock has abundant cultural events and recreational possibilities available at all times.

Claim: Little Rock is a "magical" city, with "limitless" possibilities.

Warrant: The greater number and variety of recreational and cultural events that a city makes available to tourists and other visitors, the more attractive, "magical," and "limitless" it becomes to them.

As one processes this enthymeme, one glances at the portrait of President William Clinton over the link to the Clinton Library and Museum, at the graphic representations of local and touring Broadway shows that are coming to theaters in the city, at the announcements of upcoming concerts by the Arkansas Symphony, and the advertisement for the Arkansas Water Sports Association. The *ethos* of the city is strong: it is goodwilled; it is on your side. The *pathos* of the city is strong: it appeals to your sense of adventure, fun, excitement. Little Rock is apparently quite a hip place.

Unofficial "texts" about a town or city also make rhetorical statements. Consider Chicagoans' frequent invocation of the phrase "city of big shoulders," taken from Carl Sandburg's poem about the city. Here is the claim: Chicago is, despite its many cultural and commercial amenities, still a simple, solid, working-class city. Here are the "data": the famous cuisine is deep-dish pizza and hot dogs; the football team is the Bears (*da Bares*), "the monsters of the Midway"; the mayor (*da mare*) for much of the past half-century has been a plainspoken Irish American named Daley who talks tough with the media and makes sure the garbage is picked up. The ethos of the "city of big shoulders" and the pathos that its images conjure up work together to establish the warrant that the best American city is the down-to-earth, unpretentious one, where the work ethic that made America great remains at the center of civic life. The implicit claim is that Chicago is that city.

A second perspective on how cities and towns make rhetorical statements about themselves comes from the work of the contemporary communication theorist David Procter, who studies "how rural communities—read as small towns—communicate in a pattern that enhances their chances to survive and thrive."[3] Maintaining that that "language is a fundamental component in creating a sense of community," Procter explores "the ways citizens in a small town instill a sense of interdependence, fulfillment, and concern for one another" via "symbolic forms and cultural performances used to create those feelings of interdependence, fulfillment, and concern."[4] He explains: "As people talk about their town, they are doing more than expressing their individual support or disgust for their locality"; instead, "citizen rhetoric about locality-oriented events and acts is the materialization of a larger synthesis of

community sociopolitical beliefs and values." And, Procter notes further, "this citizen rhetoric functions to create community belief and motivation. Community rhetors . . . enact community by organizing experiences and then naming those experiences, thereby feeling communal with one another."[5]

Central to Procter's analysis is his concept of "civic communions": "specific and significant moments of community interaction directed toward civic issues." Civic communions embody "rhetorical processes and cultural performances that function to build community"; moreover, "they are fundamentally a rhetorical and performative civic sacrament functioning to bond citizenry around the social and political structures—local ways of life, community goals, and political operations—of a specific people."[6] Procter's analogy comparing religious and civic communions is instructive: "Just as church leaders recall important texts and parables that function to connect the faith community and guide religious behavior," Procter explains, "civic leaders recall important historic texts, people, and events that ultimately serve to solidify community identity and offer guides to appropriate civic values and practices." As a result, he argues, "organizers and citizens celebrate some features of community while devaluing others."[7]

Yet another contemporary perspective examines the rhetorical activity specifically of community literacy programs. Since the remainder of this essay describes how Augusta, Arkansas, has placed its Community Literacy Advocacy Project at the forefront of its civic revitalization project, this perspective is relevant to the analytic task at hand. In *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Local Publics,* Eleanor Long analyzes community literacy programs in terms of their dominant tropes, their rhetorical situations, their discursive features, and what might be termed their perlocutionary effects—the implications of their rhetorical work. Arguing that community literacy programs represent "symbolic constructs enacted in time and place around shared exigencies"—constructs that Long labels "local publics"—she explains that people develop community literacy programs "around distinct rhetorical agendas that range from socializing children into appropriate language use . . . to eliciting stakeholders' perspectives on a shared problem . . . to demanding respect under conditions that yield little of it."[8] In other words, when a community literacy program has an agenda, as it does in Augusta, Arkansas, to revitalize the community and support economic growth, then that agenda is purposefully rhetorical.

To analyze the rhetoric of community literacy programs, Long creates a five-element "point-of-comparison" model. For any program, Long maintains, one can name its "guiding metaphor," or "the image that describes the discursive space where ordinary people go public"; the "context," or the "location, as well as other context-specific features that give public literacies their meaning"; the "tenor of the discourse," or the "register—the affective quality of the discourse"; the "literacy," or the "key practices that comprise the discourse"; or "how people use writing and words to carry out their purposes for going public"; and the "rhetorical invention," or the "the generative processes by which people respond to the exigencies that call the local public into being."[9]



All three perspectives can be used, as I do below, to analyze the new rhetorical work that is ongoing in Augusta—new rhetorical activity that stands in contrast to the tacit, unpromising message that Augusta was communicating about itself in the first years of the new millennium. The work of the Augusta Community Literacy Advocacy Project, a collaborative effort of the White River Rural Health Center and the Office of the Brown Chair in English Literacy at the University of Arkansas, has yielded a sustained and continuing project of rhetorical activity and civic communions designed to promote community literacy and revive the dying town.

## Augusta on Life Support

Sitting as it does on U.S. 64, the "old highway" to Memphis for motorists who do not want to fight the truck traffic on Interstate 40, most of Augusta is hidden from the casual driver-through. Entering the town from the west, one crosses over the White River and sees the river port, the Bunge Corporation grain elevator, the liquor store and gas station, a supermarket and two general-merchandise stores, and a branch of the bank. Off the main road where the passer-by does not see them are the turn-of-the-century courthouse, the half-dozen churches, the lovely old homes that overlook the river, and the American Legion hut where civic events are held. The casual motorist also does not see the nearly deserted downtown or the elementary and high school where classes have been getting smaller and smaller.

By all demographic measures,[10] Augusta is in decline. In 2007, 2,390 people lived there, but the town lost 10.32 percent of its population between 2000 and 2007. In 2007, the unemployment rate in Augusta was 8.4 percent, compared to 4.6 percent nationally. In the twelve months between October 2006 and October 2007, Augusta lost 5.5 percent of its jobs, while jobs in the U.S. grew 1.4 percent during the same period. Augusta's per capita income in 2007 was $13,500, compared to $24,200 nationally; the average household income was $24,260, compared to $44,080 nationally. Nearly 82 percent of the households had an income of less than $50,000, whereas nationally 52 percent of the households brought in less than $50,000. In the 2000 census, 23.6 percent of all Augusta families lived below the federal poverty level, as compared to 9.2 percent nationally, and 28.9 percent of all individuals in the town lived in poverty, compared to 12.4 percent nationally. Nearly 22 percent of the population over the age of twenty-five lacked a high school diploma; about half of that number had eighth grade as their highest level of educational attainment. Only 6.4 percent of the population had a four-year college degree. In 2007 the Augusta public schools spent $4,804 per student, as compared to a national average of $6,058 per student.

This was the scenario that confronted a brave group of folks in 2005 who chose to begin reshaping Augusta's statement to the region, the state, the nation, and the world.

### The Augusta Recovery Initiative and the Community Literacy Advocacy Project

One poignant aspect of the Augusta story is the work of the Augusta Recovery Initiative, a citizens' group that assembled to find ways to save the town from decay and death. The group was convened by Dr. Steven Collier, executive director of the White River Rural Health Center, which has its central headquarters in Augusta. Beginning early in 2005, the group met regularly for a year, operating under the assumption that since the consequences of Augusta's decline were economic, the causes must be economic as well. The following notes from a meeting during the first year of operation demonstrate this economic focus: "Today we worked on an action plan, which was for Existing Business and Industry. . . . Economic development will drive everything. It is mandatory to follow action plans. In following an action plan, you will fill in the problems, like workforce availability and capability."[11]

Nine months later the focus of the Augusta Recovery Initiative had shifted. As Dr. Collier told me—and as he repeats regularly in presentations about Augusta—"we realized our problem wasn't economic—it was educational." This shift of emphasis is evident in the Initiative's meeting notes from October 2006: "Last year we started an Augusta improvement plan with brainstorming sessions. The topic of education kept coming up. We are now putting it on the front burner."

I had been introduced to Dr. Collier in September 2006 at a meeting of a group called the Crossroads Coalition, devoted to improving health care in the region. He and I talked at some length about how a community literacy project might provide a center of gravity for the Initiative's new focus on "education." Collier invited me to the Initiative's November 2006 meeting. Seated around the table was an amazing collection of dedicated citizens. Here is the roster of attendees, with my notes about each of them:

Raymond Bowen: Taught at Augusta High School for 35 years. Now retired but teaching algebra II and advanced math part-time.

Katina Biscoe: Nurse practitioner for White River Rural Health. Graduated from Augusta High School in 1991 and has children there now. Member of the Augusta School Board and serves on the Woodruff County Literacy Council.

Janice Turner: Recently moved to Augusta, her husband's hometown, after he retired. An ordained minister, she runs "The J Spot," a Christian book store, and is the new president of the Woodruff County Literacy Council. Has been the principal and administrator of a private school.



Danny Shields: The postmaster in Augusta. Wife and son teach in Augusta; daughter teaches in McCrory, ten miles to the east of Augusta.

Evelyn Coles: Farm owner, mother, and grandmother. Husband was on the School Board for many years. One son graduated from college and is in farming. Two other sons still in college.

Brenda Collins: Longtime resident of Augusta. Two children graduated from Augusta High School and two grandchildren still in the Augusta schools. Member of the city council and the Woodruff County Literacy Council.

Jimmy Rhodes: Lifetime resident of Augusta. Graduated from Augusta High School in 1992 and went to Arkansas State in Mountain Home for a degree in funeral science. As funeral director, he notes that "I'm burying too many young people." Serves on city council and plans to run for mayor.

Craig Meredith: Graduated from Augusta High School and joined the Navy, serving for four years, where he had the highest security clearance. Now working as a computer technician for White River Rural Health.

Regina Burkett: Community Development Coordinator for White River Rural Health and a licensed practical nurse.

Steven Collier: CEO of White River Rural Health Center. Graduated from Augusta High School. Went to Baylor University and took a degree in history. Got his medical degree from University of Arkansas for the Medical Sciences and did his residency in Pine Bluff. Was a practicing physician in central Arkansas for 20 years before "getting into the business side" and becoming CEO. White River Rural Health now has clinics in 17 towns in the area.

A thought occurred to me: seated around this table were representatives of all sorts of "constituencies" in this small town: education, health care, small business, government, religion, agriculture. Each was interested in helping to save Augusta. Each had bought into the notion that improving "education" could play a central role in the recovery initiative. Each was completely open to my argument that improving literacy—improving all citizens' abilities to read and write to the extent that they can live a rich, fulfilling personal life and participate in a changing economy—was *the* most vital aspect of the educational improvement plan.

To make this plan work, I argued, we could not simply focus solely on the schools and hope that they "fix" the literacy problem. Without wanting to endorse any political candidate, I argued that "it takes a village" to raise the profile of reading and writing and to improve education. Consider, I asked them, all the organizations and entities in Augusta that might say, if asked, that they were interested in helping folks read and write more fully and effectively: not only the schools but also the churches, the library, the local literacy

council, the local economic development council, the health clinics. Why not launch, I asked them, a Community Literacy Advocacy Project that would have a person at its helm who would actively seek out individuals and groups in Augusta who wanted to read and write in fuller, richer ways than they had in the past and who would forge "literacy liaisons" between and among all the constituencies who wanted to raise the profile of literacy in Augusta but who had not known about one another or worked together in the past.

Thus was born the idea for the Community Literacy Advocacy Project. After a quick marshaling of resources by White River Rural Health and the Office of the Brown Chair in English Literacy, Collier identified the miraculous Joy Lynn Bowen, a former teacher in Augusta public schools who knows (and is trusted by) nearly every person in Augusta and placed her on the staff of White River as the community literacy advocate.

## The Kickoff and the Initial Year

The Community Literacy Advocacy Project got off to a rousing start. A community kickoff event on August 16, 2007, drew seventy-five citizens and featured introductions of the project by Collier, Bowen, and Jolliffe and testimonials of support for the project by Carol Ann Dykes, a former Augusta resident who now works on the faculty of the University of Central Florida, and by Otto Loewer, the former dean of the University of Arkansas College of Engineering who now runs an economic development institute focusing on rural Arkansas. Throughout, our message was consistent. We were going to "celebrate" reading and writing; we were going to bring students, parents, government officials, church leaders, business owners, and not-for-profit workers together; we were going to emphasize the roles that reading and writing play in the twenty-first century. We were not going to berate students and citizens for having poor literacy abilities but instead do all we could to help them acquire those abilities.

Under Bowen's direction, the project sprung into action. Bowen set up or attended four meetings that involved what we came to call "literacy liaisons"—connections between and among local, state, or regional government and not-for-profit organizations that were interested in improving literacy but had not worked together in the past. The project went to work immediately on dealing with a pressing issue in literacy—namely, helping young (often single) parents both to establish a productive literacy environment for the preschool children in their homes and to connect with educational and social-service providers, which would help them in many cases complete their GEDs and move into postsecondary educational and job-training settings. The high point of the young/single parents' initiative was a daylong workshop, "Preparing Your Child to Read and Write in School," led by Judy Fox, a curriculum specialist for the Washington (Maryland) County Schools and attended by fifty-five parents and child-care and health-care workers.



For the elementary school population, the project purchased copies of the elementary school principal's "book of the month" and distributed them in doctors' and dentists' offices throughout the town. In addition, the project helped to sponsor a pep rally to kick off the Augusta schools' "million-word challenge" at the beginning of the year and another rally, deemed "Pump It Up," to prepare students to take the state standardized test.

The project established two connections with local business and industry councils, one of which resulted in a college-and-career-awareness day that seventy-five high school students attended in April, focusing in particular on the reading and writing demands that a college curriculum or a career would place on them. Bowen made contact with one of the largest churches in Augusta to solicit its members' help in working as tutors for students, young parents, and adults who might come to the Woodruff County Literacy Council. Working in collaboration with Jeannie Waller, a doctoral student in rhetoric, composition, and literacy at the University of Arkansas, the project worked with the Woodruff County Literacy Council to compile a book of personal essays written by and about veterans of the armed forces in the region. The volume will be published as part of the unveiling of a new veterans' memorial statue on the courthouse lawn.

The most vibrant site of activity for the Augusta Community Literacy Advocacy Project was Augusta High School. The project set up a joint faculty-student task force, a ten-member group that offered perspectives on why relatively few students in the past had taken the ACT examination and gone to college, what students perceived the college environment to be like, and how the project could help them effect the transition from high school to college. The task force recommended that the project offer ACT-improvement workshops, specifically focusing on the reading challenges the exam poses to test-takers; in response, the project offered three such workshops in 2007–8. To learn more fully about the level of intellectual pursuits in college, about fifteen students, all juniors, from the high school participated with several other schools in the region in the Arkansas Delta Oral History Project, another project sponsored by the Office of the Brown Chair in English Literacy. In the Delta project, about sixty-five students from four schools worked in collaborative Web-based writing groups, each led by a University of Arkansas student mentor, to plan, complete, publish, and perform essays, stories, and scripts that grew out of oral history interviews they conducted in their towns. The Augusta Community Literacy Advocacy Project helped these students find topics and interviewees and brought them to Helena, Arkansas, for the opening and closing events, and to Fayetteville in the middle of the term for a face-to-face working session with their groups. The project sponsored two celebratory luncheons for the Arkansas Delta Oral History Project students, events that were repeated later in the year for any high school student earning a 3.2 grade average or higher and then for all graduates.

The project thus tried to embody an ethos dominated by three terms: challenge, support, and celebration. Bowen and the growing group of citizens and civic leaders she recruited both tacitly and explicitly said to young parents, elementary school students, high school students, and adults who might want to learn to read and write more effectively, "We challenge you to improve your reading and writing; we will do all we can to support you if you take up this challenge; we will celebrate your success when you succeed."

In general, the students and citizens of Augusta caught the buzz of the literacy initiative and responded positively. At the high school level, for example, thirty-three students took the ACT examination, up from twenty-five in the previous year, and the average composite score for these students went up a half a point. Of the forty-seven graduates of Augusta High School in May 2008, eleven had been accepted into colleges or technical schools by the time of graduation, in contrast to six the previous year, and twenty-three had received some kind of scholarship that would help them pursue postsecondary education if they chose to. One graduating student wrote to Bowen: "I don't think I would have even thought I was capable of attending college without the support that has been given to me. Knowing that people outside of school are willing to provide assistance, encouragement, and connections helped me to believe I could dream dreams and achieve them. My plans are now to get a college education, become a teacher, and return to help others."

Among the young, often single parents, the enthusiasm ran similarly strong. One soon-to-be mother, a high school senior herself, said the daylong early literacy workshop made her feel more confident about being a mother and helping her child have fun as they worked on reading together. One participant in the Arkansas Delta Oral History Project described her weekend of work and campus culture at the University of Arkansas as "the best weekend of my life."

### Analyzing the Rhetorical Activity of the Community Literacy Advocacy Project

At its base, of course, the tacit aim of the Augusta Community Literacy Advocacy Project is persuasive: Bowen, Collier, the White River Rural Health Center, and the Office of the Brown Chair in English Literacy need to persuade the citizens of Augusta and Woodruff County that improving the "literacy climate" is a necessary, if not sufficient, step to bring the town and region back to life. All three theoretical perspectives set out earlier in this essay can be used to analyze how this persuasion is being effected.

The municipality of Augusta has not, so far, reshaped its Web site to proclaim itself as the town that reads and writes together, and so far no one has moved to hang banners around town like the ones from the Nicaraguan literacy campaign of the 1960s: "Every home a classroom / Every table a school desk / Every Nicaraguan a teacher!"[12] But the events and workshops sponsored



by the Community Literacy Advocacy Project do embody texts of various kinds—verbal and material—that can be analyzed from an Aristotelian perspective. For example, at the recent kickoff for year two of the project, held on August 12, 2008, the slogan printed on the program cover was "Shine a Light on Education," and at each seat, for each participant, was a small flashlight, courtesy of White River Rural Health Center. The sessions at the event both highlighted the project's successes in year one and announced the initiatives for year two: continuing work with young parents and their families, now supported by an additional grant from the Dollar General Foundation; a new emphasis on school and family literacy activities designed for youths age seven through fourteen, particularly boys; a continuation of the Arkansas Delta Oral History Project at Augusta High School and a new focus on helping students improve their reading and writing abilities via independent projects in their EAST (Environmental and Special Technology) lab course; an expansion of the project activities into all five major churches in Augusta, helping ministers see how they can build reading and writing activities into their services and outreach efforts; and a new initiative to develop community arts and literacy activities at the Woodruff County Library. If the claim in this Toulmin-model "enthymeme" is that Augusta needs to "shine a light on education" and the data comprise all the activities accomplished in year one and planned for year two, then the unspoken assumptions, the warrant, must be twofold: these activities constitute "the light" needed in the community, and there are still citizens of Augusta and Woodruff County who are in need of enlightenment.

The events and workshops emanating from the project qualify as the types of "civic communions" that Procter describes. The two year-opening kickoff events, the midyear community rally for literacy—at which 600 people showed up for a charity basketball game with "pep talks" about literacy during halftime—and the "celebration" luncheons for the high school students are certainly "significant moments of community interaction," directed toward the purported goal of civic improvement via literacy.[13] Congruent with Procter's analogy of civic and religious communions, the events, rallies, and workshops in Augusta frequently had an air of returning to "the good old days" in Augusta when the town was economically vibrant and the high school, in particular, was the center of intellectual life. These invocations gave the leaders of the project, the town, and the churches the opportunity, as Procter puts it, to "recall important texts and parables" as well as "important historic texts, people, and events that ultimately serve to solidify community identity and offer guides to appropriate civic values and practices."[14]

Finally, it is clear how the Augusta Community Literacy Advocacy Project functions rhetorically in the manner Long describes. In Long's model, the guiding metaphor for the project is embodied in the noun "advocacy" itself: the program as a whole is advocating for the town as it tries to revive its

economic base, and the components of the program are blatantly advocating for the clients being served. The various initiatives being developed for Augusta High School—its participation in the Arkansas Delta Oral History Project and the workshops targeted at reading comprehension and time management on the ACT examination—and for young parents and their children openly advocate for the high school students as potentially college-bound and for the parents as effective literacy sponsors and providers in their homes. In Long's model, the location of the Augusta Community Literacy Advocacy Project comprises the material conditions of Augusta and north-central Arkansas—a region marked by economic, employment, and population declines—as well as the institutional leadership of White River Rural Health Center and, in particular, its CEO Collier, of efforts to revive the town and the region. The tenor of the discourse surrounding the Community Literacy Advocacy Project is marked by two adjectives: "supportive" and "nostalgic." Virtually all the activities sponsored by the Community Literacy Advocacy Project are imbued with a "can-do" and "we-can" rhetoric—the young parents' programs embody a "we can raise our children to succeed" rhetoric; the school programs are redolent of such terms as "celebration" and "opportunity"; the local literacy council representatives openly use phrases reflecting rebirth. At the same time, however, a great deal of the discourse surrounding the Community Literacy Advocacy Program has been blatantly nostalgic, reminiscent of the "good old days" when Augusta was prosperous, when students graduating from Augusta High School could find good jobs in the area, when teachers lived in the town and were part of its cultural fabric. The literacies being promoted by the Augusta Community Literacy Advocacy Program are primarily school-based. While some efforts are under way to elicit and support reflective writing among the adult citizenry, particularly in regard to the veterans' memorial story project, the bulk of the work so far has been dedicated to helping young parents build a literacy environment that will prepare their preschool children for academic literacy and for helping high school students develop the literacy abilities to master the ACT examination and get into college. What Long calls in her *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Local Publics* the "rhetorical invention" of the program—which she expands to embrace "implications" or "how rhetorical invention translates into choices, practices, and actions"—is highly instrumental: the program aims to get more high school students to apply for and attend college, to get more preschool children ready for school-based literacy, and to get more adults ready for the twenty-first-century workplace.

## Public Rhetorical Activity as a Teaching Opportunity

For all its successes—young parents learning how to create environments conducive to reading in their homes, high school students thinking seriously about going to college, adults capturing stories about veterans—the Augusta



Community Literacy Advocacy Project can be the source of intellectual anxiety, particularly for scholars who study literacy theory and the history of literacy movements in this century. As the director of an academic office, housed in the state's flagship university, dedicated to supporting the community literacy project, I could have reacted to this concern by squelching the plans of the project's leaders, by putting the brakes on until we sorted out the historical, theoretical, and ideological issues involved. I have not done that, choosing instead to use the ongoing project as an opportunity to teach the providers and clients in the program, as well as students at the University of Arkansas studying the history and theory of literacy, about how such issues become manifest in specific contexts like Augusta.

In the new argument being promoted about Augusta, *literacy* is a metonym, a single term into which a wide range of semantic and emotional associations are packed, and that metonymy is itself a source of tension. Like most observers of the contemporary educational scene who want to do what they can to improve it, working with the general assumption that better education leads to a better life, the citizens of Augusta who support the project and the various clienteles who benefit from it tend to see literacy as a set of discrete skills, most of them school-based, that are disconnected from the nuances of local social, economic, and political circumstances. This view, of course, corresponds to what Brian Street calls the "autonomous" model of literacy, one that embodies "the apparent neutrality of literacy practices" and one that Street maintains needs to be replaced with an "ideological model" that focuses on "the significance [of literacy practices] for the distribution of power in society and for authority relations."[15] As the project continues, therefore, one goal of its leaders must be to help both the service providers and the clientele to understand that the "literacy climate" they perceive in Augusta and Woodruff County did not simply emerge de novo. It is the outgrowth of a regional culture that has a long history of social stratification, of an educational culture that has not always lived up to the goal of equal access and equal benefits for all students, of an agricultural economy that essentially took from the poor and gave to the rich as family farms gave way to agribusinesses.

The work of Deborah Brandt is instructive in considering how to finesse these tensions. In her magisterial study of literacy in Americans' lives, Brandt makes two salient points about literacy sponsorship, the process by which "any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract . . . support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy."[16] First, she explains, literacy sponsorship can actually lead to social stratification, rather than diminish it. Those who grow up with material conditions and opportunities conducive to incorporating reading and writing in their daily lives tend to rise socially and economically more than those who do not. But this social stratification is exactly what the Augusta Community Literacy Advocacy Project has the power to reduce, if not eliminate. The providers and supporters

of the project are openly facing the fact that young parents, students, and adult nonreaders in their town have generally lacked affirmative, supportive sponsors of literacy, and the project has some power to provide such sponsorship. Second, Brandt asserts that the trope of "rising standards" for literacy that one hears in the media so regularly—those cries of "literacy crisis" that seem to emerge every five years or so—is actually just the opposite side of the literacy-sponsorship coin. We do not have literacy crises, Brandt would argue; instead, we have a gap, a lack of sufficient, appropriate, affirmative literacy sponsorship. Again, the Augusta Community Literacy Advocacy Project has the potential to make up at least part of this lack, this gap.

Above all else, as the Augusta Community Literacy Advocacy Project grows, its leaders must emphasize a veil of caution about the view that Harvey Graff in his eponymous 1979 book labeled "the literacy myth," the notion that literacy is somehow concomitant with moral uprightness, is a necessary and sufficient condition for social and economic advancement, and has, by nature, the power to "liberate" individuals.[17] Expanding on this work, Robert Arnove and Harvey Graff, in the introduction to their 1987 edited collection, *National Literacy Campaigns,* maintain that "in the twentieth century . . . pronouncements about literacy deem it a process of critical consciousness raising and human liberation. Just as frequently, such declarations refer to literacy not as an end in itself, but as a means to other goals—to the ends of national development and to a social order that elites, both national and international, define."[18] Arnove and Graff explain further: "Literacy is invested with a special significance, but seldom in and of itself. Learning to read, possibly to write, involves the acquisition or conferral of a new status—membership in a religious community, citizenship in a nation-state. Literacy often carries tremendous symbolic weight, quite apart from any power and new capabilities it may bring. The attainment of literacy per se operates as a badge, a sign of initiation into a select group and/or a larger community."[19]

In other words, Arnove and Graff argue, what gets occluded in campaigns to improve literacy are the individual goals and needs of the literacy learner. "Throughout history," they write, "the provision of literacy skills to reform either individuals or their societies rarely has been linked to notions of people using these skills to advance their own ends."[20] Everyone involved with the Augusta Community Literacy Advocacy Project, I believe, wants literacy learners to improve their reading and writing abilities so that the town and region can attract new businesses and industries, so that more high school students will go on to college (Arkansas now ranks fiftieth in the United States in the percentage of adults who hold a college degree), and so that adults can be more adequately prepared for a changing, literacy-demanding job market. But the people involved with the project, present company included, must recognize that the literacy learners' personal, individual goals—to read to their kids at home, to write their life stories, to read their Bibles and write for



their church bulletins, and so on—must have the same priority as economic growth and civic revitalization. We all have our work cut out for us.

## Notes

1. Jolliffe, "On Reading."
2. Toulmin, *Uses of Argument.* I am arguing that Toulmin's argument structure is essentially an enthymeme set on its side, with "data" representing the "minor premise" of the enthymeme, the "claim" representing its "conclusion," and the "warrants" representing the unspoken assumptions upon which the enthymeme is built.
3. Procter, *Civic Communion,* 5.
4. Ibid., 7.
5. Ibid., 8.
6. Ibid., 10.
7. Ibid., 14.
8. Long, *Community Literacy,* 15.
9. Ibid., 16.
10. Demographic data come from the U.S. Census Bureau (http://www.factfinder.census.gov) and from Sperling's Best Places Report (http://www.bestplaces.net/City/Augusta-OVERVIEW-5052740000.aspx).
11. Augusta Recovery Initiative Meeting Notes, December 9, 2005.
12. Arnove and Graff, "National Literacy Campaigns," 604.
13. Procter, *Civic Communion,* 10.
14. Ibid., 14.
15. Street, "New Literacy," 430–31.
16. Brandt, "Sponsors of Literacy," 556.
17. Graff, *Literacy Myth.*
18. Arnove and Graff, "National Literacy Campaigns," 592.
19. Ibid., 596.
20. Ibid.

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# The Prospects for the Public Work of Rhetoric

## A Coda on Codes

SUSAN C. JARRATT

The stimulating essays in this book display rhetorics for our times: publics variously concrete and elusive, interventions at times tentative, of mixed success, but full of energy. Even the most vividly present settings become publics differently according to the rhetorical order, tasks, and understanding brought to bear on them (Coogan). For guidance, the authors reach back into the eighteenth-century public as Habermas envisioned it—"a collaborative search for the common good"—but also look forward, beyond the hesitations of the Wingspread participants, into a newly realized array of millennial publics. The "public workers" of this volume find a *polis*, as Hannah Arendt predicted: in "the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together . . . its true space [lying] between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be."[1] A final word in response to these essays must work against finality in an effort to keep alive their activity, their fraught yet hopeful qualities: to the manifold and variegated qualities of the public works they record. Although there are oppositions and advocacies here, the dominant themes are qualification, principled hesitation, a stepping back from the reassuring rhetorics of pro, con, and happy compromise.

Like the participants in the Wingspread Conference of the 1960s, twenty-first-century public rhetoricians are made somewhat uneasy by the rhetorics of our times. Ackerman and Coogan identify this phenomenon as a problem of history: "What made Becker uneasy—what makes all of us uneasy—were publics that could not be contained by (or easily explained by) the rhetorical tradition, either in substance, style or medium." Traditions must be made anew, and new histories—"lost geographies"—are called forth by contemporary problems.[2] Urging readers to envision a postmodern *paideia*, the editors invite rhetoric's history in, not as an obligatory grounding or an answer to a dilemma but as a resource. Rather than clarifying through a general enlightenment, postmodern rhetorical history might resort to refraction: to gather