

Re-Entangling Literacy: A Historical Study of Extracurricular Writing Practices

By

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### **Abstract**

Drawing from the archives of the Wisconsin Rural Writers' Association (WRWA), this dissertation examines how ordinary people take on the identity of writer and establish and maintain a writing practice. From its founding at the University of Wisconsin in 1948, the WRWA sought to encourage creative writing in rural communities around the state. The accounts of writing lives found in the WRWA's archives challenge human-centered notions of literate practice, calling attention to the role of material forces in sustaining extracurricular literacies. Reports of club activities note weather and geography in vivid detail alongside descriptions of meetings and member successes in publication, suggesting that these nonhuman actors played a vital role in members' writing practices. While the encouragement and literacy instruction of the WRWA leadership was important in supporting member writing, material forces – such as the rural places that informed the content of member writing and the systems of communication that allowed for the circulation of member writing – mattered even more. As a whole, my dissertation argues that writing is made possible not only through supportive mentors and positive cultural messages about the value of writing, but, crucially, also through the matter – objects, places, and systems – that accompany a writing life. While writing is, as New Literacy Studies has observed, inextricably linked to socio-cultural contexts, my research reveals that it is also deeply entangled with matter.

Bringing a materialist lens to bear on the archives of a community literacy organization, this research contributes to conversations in extracurricular literacy, writing groups, and community-university partnerships. To develop this materialist approach to writing, I draw on two bodies of scholarship: social histories of literacy, which demonstrate that the availability and circulation of printed material often defines where literacy can flourish, and the interdisciplinary

field of new materialism, which brings together scholarship from diverse fields including affect theory, animal studies, posthumanism, and actor-network theory to examine the vital force of matter in a range of contexts. Guided by this theoretical lens, my research tracks members' mentions of material forces across a variety of archival sources to provide an emic account of how objects, places, and other nonhuman actors matter for writers and writing. While many studies of extracurricular literacies, writing groups, and community-university partnerships focus primarily on institutions and relationships between writers, often using sponsorship as a lens to track the rhetorical and ideological underpinnings of literacy instruction, my research shifts the central object of analysis to writing, writers, and writing lives.

My first chapter, "Writing as Entanglement," uses the insights of new materialism to reveal how writing is made possible through the joint, reciprocal, and contingent work of human and nonhuman actors. To do this, I examine scenes of writing as captured in scholarship on sponsorship and writing groups, and in archival records of three WRWA members' writing lives. Although this scholarship often collects rich details about the objects that accompany writing, including typewriters, pencils, books, even playgrounds, food, and toys, these details are frequently overlooked; I re-read these accounts to argue that writing is, in fact, entangled with the places and objects of everyday life. Each subsequent chapter then examines a different facet of that entanglement, considering the effect of the organization's rural-romantic rhetoric; the role of place in developing a shared ethos as rural writers; and the systems of circulation that facilitated the sharing of member writing and also carried traces of the assumptions of rural deficit that underpinned their development. My dissertation's conclusion, "Writing Wisconsin Today," examines the current work of the organization, now named simply the Wisconsin Writers' Association, as well as other sites of extracurricular literacy instruction. This

examination of current writing groups and writing practices suggests that matter continues to matter for extracurricular writing. In particular, the site of literacy instruction continues to be an important factor in determining both who can access literacy learning and how new literacy practices are taken up.

## Acknowledgments

Though the work of writing often feels solitary, the writers and writing groups I've studied in this dissertation serve as striking evidence that no piece of writing is ever really written alone.

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My greatest thanks goes to Smith, my partner, my husband, my constant support.

## Chapter One: Writing as Entanglement

“State Group Sets Typewriters Clacking,” declares a February 19, 1950 article in the *Wisconsin State Journal*. The article, on the front page of the paper’s State section, profiles three women, Fidelia Van Antwerp, Bernadette Friedell, and Helen R. Stieve<sup>1</sup>, whose membership in the Wisconsin Rural Writers’ Association (WRWA) has supported their writing practice. The WRWA, founded in 1948 at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, was created, according to its first newsletter, “for everyone who has something to say, in written words, about the place in which he lives or the things with which he is familiar” (“What is the Rural Writers’ Association?”). Because the article, which features three members and describes the major structures through which the WRWA supported member writing, presents a microcosm of the organization, it’s a useful starting point for an investigation of the structures and supports that made writing possible for the rural writers of the WRWA, many of whom faced material and cultural barriers to identifying as writers. Of the three women whose successes are described in the *State Journal* article, Stieve represents most fully the kind of rural writer whom the WRWA sought to engage. Stieve, a mother and housewife, married to a farmer who is himself the son of a farmer, lives on the family farm in a rural area north of the small town of Baraboo in south central Wisconsin. The article depicts the WRWA as essential in supporting Stieve’s longstanding but previously unfulfilled desire to become a writer, and quotes her as saying that “all my life I’ve wanted to write. But it was hard to get started.”

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<sup>1</sup> The way women are named varies throughout the archives, so that Mary Zimmerman is at times Mary H. Zimmerman, while at others she is referred to as Mrs. Mary Zimmerman or, using her late husband’s name, Mrs. Louis P. Zimmerman. Similarly, Helen R. Stieve is, in this article, Mrs. Robert Stieve, and Bernadette Friedell is Mrs. John Friedell. However, all three women published under their own first name, with Friedell actually using her maiden name as well, so that she appears in *Pen & Plow* as Bernadette Furseth Friedell. For simplicity, I refer to the women in this study by their own first and last name, except when directly quoting archival material.

This difficulty in getting started likely springs at least in part from the discouragement and disinterest that rural writers like Stieve often faced. Pervasive stereotyping depicted rural places as culturally backward, with rural schools often derided as old-fashioned and inferior in comparison with schools in towns and cities.<sup>2</sup> Stieve herself seems to have been impacted by these negative portrayals of rural education, and in a report to the WRWA’s Advisory Board she mentions “the inferiority I felt, arising from my limited education” as an obstacle that membership in the WRWA has allowed her to overcome. Aspiring rural writers also faced barriers from within their communities, which Jerry Apps, a professor emeritus of Wisconsin’s College for Agriculture and Life Sciences and former County Extension Agent and 4-H specialist, has described. Discussing the influence of Robert Gard, founder and early leader of the WRWA, Apps explains that “what Gard managed to do was bring rural poets out of the closet. Because if you were a farmer in Oneida County in 1950, you didn’t want anyone to know you were writing poetry. Gard made it okay” (J. Smith). This suspicion of writing from inside rural communities seems to have been another factor in Stieve’s difficulty with becoming a writer, as she notes in the newspaper article that, prior to her membership in the WRWA, her husband “didn’t take my hobby too seriously.”

And yet, despite the obstacles Stieve faced – her own sense of inferiority, her husband’s lack of support for her writing, pervasive assumptions that writers and writing belonged elsewhere – the article presents her as a *writer*, rather than the more readily available identities of

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<sup>2</sup> These stereotypes were rooted, rather ironically, in urban-based rural reforms efforts, beginning around the turn of the twentieth century with the Country Life Movement commissioned by President Theodore Roosevelt. The major aims of the Country Life Movement and the reformers it inspired were the modernizing of rural life through the introduction of technologies such as electricity, telephones, and automobiles and the improvement of rural schools, often through school consolidation and curricular reforms that included a broader array of subjects, such as music and art, as well as more direct vocational material in agriculture and home economics or domestic science (see, e.g., Fuller, *The Old Country School*; Kline; Danbom, *Born in the Country*).

mother or housewife. In the less than two years from the founding of the WRWA, Stieve moved from simply *wanting* to write to being actively and publicly engaged in writing. In addition to being featured in the *State Journal* article, her name also appears in papers across the state as they reported on the work of the WRWA. She won honorable mention for a short story in the first state-wide writing contest run by the WRWA; that story was subsequently included in *Pen & Plow*, an anthology published and distributed by the University of Wisconsin. In a column in Madison's *Capital Times*, prominent regional poet August Derleth called this story "promising" ("Minority Report"). Stieve also rose to a leadership role within the WRWA as she was appointed to the WRWA Advisory Board and invited to speak alongside professional writers on a panel discussion at the WRWA's 1952 Green Lake Conference.

The organization's archives tell the story of many other writers similarly impacted by their membership in the WRWA. Thousands of rural writers, including some who had been writing for years in secret and others who had long desired a means of self-expression but lacked the encouragement or the resources to begin, embarked on a project of writing rural Wisconsin life. They wrote poems, stories, articles, and plays about the people, folklore, and history of rural Wisconsin, and they published this writing in venues as various as farm journals like *The Furrow* and *Hoard's Dairyman*, small literary magazines, and local and state newspapers including the *Milwaukee Journal*, the *Waukesha Freeman*, and the *Portage Daily Register*. The WRWA also encouraged the circulation of writing in public spaces, and members and clubs frequently used their writing as a means of civic engagement, writing and performing plays at the Farmers' Bureau, 4-H events, and homemakers' clubs, and hosting readings, teaching writing, and organizing writing contests at schools and nursing homes.

What made this writing possible? How did Stieve transform from merely wanting to write to writing, in her words, “regularly, earnestly, and prolifically”? More broadly, what supports the work of writers in what Gere calls the extracurriculum, who lack institutional support and who may, as the rural writers of the WRWA did, face scorn in their attempt to take on the identity of writer?

In response to these questions, I propose a theory of writing as entanglement. I argue that writing is made possible not only through the instruction and encouragement provided by human sponsors, but also through the books, pens, paper, and writing spaces that make up a writing practice, as well as the places, landscapes, and histories that bolster writing identity. In this view, writing is, as Laura Micciche argues, “radically distributed across time and space” and “always intertwined with a whole range of others” (489). In the case of the WRWA, these others included the rural people, places, and folklore that the leadership continually suggested members take up as subjects for their writing. As a result of this encouragement, rural knowledge was no longer a liability, something that marked aspiring writers as hopelessly distant from urban centers of education and literature, but instead served to authorize members’ identities as writers. Because the WRWA’s archives gather both writing and accounts of writing practices from a diverse group of rural writers, this organization is particularly well-suited to an investigation of writing as a material practice. The archives are rich with accounts of not just what members wrote, but of how that writing was accomplished, and the records point to the vital role of objects, places, and systems of communication and transportation in members’ writing practices.

These records include accounts of club activities that discuss writing alongside weather, landscape, and communication systems, suggesting that, for these writers, literacy was necessarily intertwined with a whole host of material forces that supported, constrained, and

mediated their writing practices and writerly identities. Given Wisconsin's harsh winters, weather is a constant presence in the archives and was frequently noted alongside discussions of club meetings and regional conferences. For example, Evelyn Brown of the Hamburg Writers' group in northern Wisconsin's Marathon County notes that "it was cold and 'blizzardly' last night when this group of Rural Writers met at Naugart School, but it was heart-warming to know that there were those who would defy the raging elements to come to the meeting" ("Report"). While weather in this instance constrained some members' access to the literacy instruction provided by the WRWA, the organization also used technologies such as the postal system to distribute newsletters and periodicals and support the Round Robin correspondence clubs, and the radio, with programs broadcast over WHA, the University-sponsored station, to extend their reach into geographically remote rural communities. The WRWA's newsletter was one major means by which literacy instruction and member writing circulated, and a multi-page article in one newsletter which describes the sorting and mailing procedures calls attention to the newsletter's material nature ("Our First Issue"). This lengthy discussion of the logistics of printing and mailing the newsletter using the university's second class mail permit included detailed descriptions of the procedure for sorting the newsletters according to destination and the heft of the overflowing mail bags, suggesting that the production and distribution of the newsletter was a material as much as a cerebral endeavor. These artifacts reveal one way that particular systems for circulating writing played a vital role in supporting members' writing practices.

### **A Theory of Writing as Entanglement**

The central work of this dissertation is to examine the material, social, cultural, and historical conditions that make extracurricular writing possible. To do this, I begin by articulating a theory of writing as entangled with not only social forces but also with the objects, systems, and places and everyday life. My choice of the term entanglement to describe this phenomenon acknowledges that the practice of literacy is necessarily already entangled with the pens, paper, keyboards, and other objects that allow for its composition and circulation; this term also calls attention to the ways that popular and scholarly understandings of literacy have effectively disentangled literacy from its material context.

This approach makes both a theoretical and a methodological contribution to writing studies. I argue for an expanded understanding of writing as the joint, collaborative, and reciprocal work of human and nonhuman actors, and my research reveals that access to literacy is determined by material as well as cultural forces. This material approach to literacy aligns to our field's interest in understanding who is able to access the tools and benefits of literacy and to what ends these tools are used. Put more simply, objects, systems, and places matter a great deal for literate practice, and so scholarship in literacy would benefit from attending more systematically to the role of these nonhuman agents. Although research that attends to the nonhuman is often critiqued for overlooking the significance of human action and ideology (see, e.g., Scott and Welch), my use of actor-network theory and attention to nonhuman actors and material systems allows me to attend more closely to how objects and systems are themselves inflected by and replicate the ideologies that contributed to their creation.

In terms of methodology, my work insists on the importance of flexible, recursive reading that foregrounds the meaning writers make of their own writing and writing lives. As a result, my attention to the work of nonhuman actors is guided by members' own accounts of

their writing practices. My methodology also shifts the central object of study; while most studies of extracurricular literacies focus on sponsoring institutions and relationships, a theory of writing as entanglement shifts the object of analysis to writing, writers, and writing lives. As the editors of *Writing and Community Engagement* have observed, community literacy research has revealed a great deal about the structures of university-community partnerships, but we know comparatively little about the writing itself. In attending centrally to writing and the conditions that make that writing possible, my work aims to fill that gap.

To develop a theory of writing as entanglement, I draw together two quite different bodies of scholarship, the social history of literacy and interdisciplinary work in new materialism. David Vincent, a British social historian, argues that the rise of mass literacy in Europe and concomitant efforts on the part of states to count literacy rates resulted in the splitting of literacy from its material and social context. While New Literacy Studies has sought to address literacy's disentanglement from culture through increased attention to the social and ideological forces at work in literacy (Brandt, Heath, Scribner and Cole, Street), the material stuff of literacy – the way that literacy is intertwined with not only people but also objects – has received less attention. Previous scholarship has considered material dimensions of literacy, including the environmental consequences of mass print literacy (Mortensen) and how, when access to it is limited, paper becomes visible as a technology that matters for literacy (Prendergast and Ličko, Canagarajah). These studies show that literacy is richly interlinked with its material context. Other scholars suggest the agency of nonhuman actors in literate practice, with Trimbur and Press calling attention to the page as itself a unit of meaning that acts on readers and writers, and Brandt and Clinton arguing that just as human agents mediate literacy practices, so too do objects. My research extends this scholarship by tracing the role of a wide-

ranging set of nonhuman actors, including objects, systems, and places, across archival accounts of the writing and writing lives of thousands of rural writers.

This interest in the material dimensions of literate practice is supported by recent advances in the natural sciences. The scholarship of Karen Barad, a feminist theorist whose research, grounded in theoretical physics, challenges distinctions between the social and the natural, provides an interdisciplinary foundation for a view of literacy as entanglement. In redefining agency as the result of a set of changing conditions and relations, rather than the attribute of any particular actor, Barad's work unsettles human-centered accounts of literacy learning and literate practice, suggesting instead that literacy is necessarily entangled with its material context.

Barad's research participates more broadly in the emergent, interdisciplinary field of new materialism, which draws on advances in the natural sciences and other fields to examine the vital force of matter in a range of contexts. This field has generated two crucial insights that contribute to my research: first, it characterizes matter as essentially active, and second, it redefines the nature and location of agency. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost's introduction to their edited collection *New Materialisms* traces three threads within new materialist scholarship: an ontological reorientation that considers the agency of matter, a reconsideration of biopolitical and bioethical issues in light of new theories about the status of life and the nature of the human, and a re-examination of the relationship between material elements of daily life and broader geopolitical and socioeconomic structures (7). Because it highlights the agentic force of objects and other nonhumans, the first strand is most relevant for writing studies. While matter has often been viewed as inert backdrop to a human-centered writing process, the insights of new materialism suggest that literacy scholars should take seriously the force of matter as it

intervenes in writing. Particularly relevant here is Jane Bennett's articulation of a vibrant materialism and her definition of distributive agency, in which agency is not possessed by any one actor but is rather dispersed across a network of human and nonhuman actors. Similarly, I see the conditions that make writing possible as emerging from the collective action and agency of a wide range of actors that includes both the human who sits down to write, as well as the pens, paper, desk, domestic scene, and external landscape. New materialism's understanding of matter as active is in accord as well with recent research in literacy studies that expands possible sponsors beyond the human, suggesting that literacy can be sponsored by texts (Young), testimony (Lathan), and classroom and disciplinary practices (M. Smith). This recent work suggests a view of literacy as a vibrant, interactive practice happening in concert with human and nonhuman actors.

New materialism has begun to enter English studies, particularly through theories of rhetoric and rhetoricity that consider the terrain of rhetoric beyond the human (Rickert, Davis) and through composition studies. Laura Micciche's recent *College English* article positions new materialism in opposition to the social turn, which she asserts "has hardened into a repressive orthodoxy and failed to keep pace with a changing world" (488). In Micciche's assessment, the social turn has ultimately entailed "a refusal to engage nature or biology" and an exclusive focus on culture and language, and Micciche offers new materialism's emphasis on matter, bodies, the environment, and other factors as an alternative to what she sees as the narrow analytic frame presented by the social turn (488).

Micciche's characterization of writing as "radically distributed" and necessarily intertwined with nonhuman actors resonates with other scholarship within composition and rhetoric, including postprocess theory. In its foregrounding of textual production, defined as

“interpretive, public, and situated” (Kent xvi), postprocess theory encourages us to think about the ways in which texts are entangled with objects. In this vein, Byron Hawk argues that “writing, rhetoric, and communication function at a variety of levels and through multiple species and objects” (Hawk 81). However, postprocess theory’s attention to materiality is incomplete, and in particular Barbara Couture suggests there’s a disconnect between postprocess theory and the “material means” of teaching writing, by which she means the writing tasks, scoring guides, rubrics, and so on that are an integral part of daily classroom practice. Because the archives of the WRWA include not only records of members’ writing but also detailed accounts of club activities and members’ writing lives, this site bridges the gap Couture defines between theories that examine the agency of matter in literacy and the daily, material practice of writing. My research, then, constitutes a historical case study that tests the explanatory power of new materialism as it relates to literacy studies broadly and writing more specifically.

This project begins with an examination of the vital force of matter for the rural writers of the WRWA, attending in particular to the role of desks, typewriters, and rural landscape for the women profiled in the *State Journal* article. Because she most fully typifies the WRWA’s intended membership and because her accounts of her writing life are the richest, I pay special attention to the writing practice of Helen R. Stieve. First, I begin with some background about the WRWA and how it is particularly well-suited to an examination of writing as entanglement.

### **Rural Writing, the Extracurriculum, and Materiality**

The WRWA was founded in 1948 after nine people from rural areas of Wisconsin came to the University of Wisconsin in Madison for a three-day playwriting workshop with Robert Gard, a professor in the University’s Extension division and founder of the Wisconsin Idea

Theater. The group grew rapidly, with membership reaching 1,000 within the first year, a success the *State Journal* article attributes to the Association's role in "satisfying a basic need for expression of hundreds of farm folk throughout the state." The WRWA supported rural writers through assistance in founding local writing groups, running an annual writing contest, and hosting an annual conference in rural Green Lake, which connected members with professional writers and editors as well as members from other clubs around the state. However, rather than acting as simply a neutral promoter of writing, the WRWA actively shaped the tone and content of its members' writing, the venues in which members published and performed that writing, and the reading that informed their writing practice.

The WRWA's site in the extracurriculum and its work with rural writers make it a particularly rich site for an examination of literacy as a material practice. In contrast with the WRWA's extracurricular literacies, which exist at the periphery of both public understandings of literacy and most scholarship in literacy studies, school literacies have a long history of use in service to state surveillance and control. Vincent, Schmandt-Besserat, and Clanchy all point to a historical connection between the development of mass literacy and the growth of the apparatus of the state, particularly taxation and bureaucratic record-keeping. Recent scholarship, including Kate Vieira's work on migrants and literacy, continues in that vein by seeing literacy as "a navigational technology" that, in concert with the will of the state, constrains the movement of those with the least access to it ("On the Social Consequences of Literacy").

The study of extracurricular writing, however, tells a different story. These studies reveal how personal writing, perhaps because it has little explicit economic use value, escapes certain kinds of regulation by the state. Because this writing is not done for the workplace, is not measured on a standardized exam in school, the state evinces little interest in it. And yet it is not

without political valence. Studies of extracurricular literacies demonstrate the power of writing groups to meet the needs of writers with a wide range of skills and motivations for writing. Anne Ruggles Gere's study of the literate practices of club women, for example, show how reading and writing are intertwined with other patterns of civic engagement. These studies also point to the potential for political relevance even within writing groups primarily focused on personal expression. Caroline Heller's study of a women's writing group in San Francisco's Tenderloin district examines the personal, social, and political functions served by the workshop and suggests that the four can be seen as working in tandem. Beth Daniell's work with a women's Al-Anon group also makes a convincing case for the connection between the personal and the political in writing groups. She argues that, for the women she studies, vernacular literacies are more important to their identities than their public literacies; however, these identities are also political (127-128). Jeff Park's study of a writing group held weekly by the Canadian Mental Health Association focuses on personal and expressive writing, and Park links his argument about the value of writing groups to such frequently-maligned scholars as Macrorie, Elbow, and Murray; however, like Daniell and Heller, Park also argues that this personal writing has a social and political dimension (36). The frequent invocation of the political consequences of even personal writing forms a forceful rebuttal to criticisms of extracurricular or non-academic writing as merely personal or expressive. Because the extracurriculum is one site where the state is less thoroughly engaged, studies of extracurricular writing have the potential to reveal the interconnected nature of the stuff of writing - to see how objects, social forces, cultural habits, and history all come to bear, even in the most ordinary writing situations, such as when a woman sits down at a typewriter to tap out a story about her grandmother.

The WRWA occupied a unique site between the extracurriculum and the University. Although the WRWA was not formally connected to the University and took care to portray itself as a grassroots effort on the part of rural people, its early leadership included Extension professors. Further, the WRWA leadership made skillful use of the resources and cultural capital of the University. The WRWA leadership was particularly skilled in attracting publicity and shaping its public image, traits which were made possible in large part through the WRWA's relationship with the University of Wisconsin. Although a press release spurring the writing of the *State Journal* article featuring Friedell, Stieve, and Van Antwerp is not extant, the archives include many examples of university-issued press releases that were picked up, often times verbatim, by news outlets around the state.<sup>3</sup> The article picks up several phrases that are characteristic of the WRWA's rural-romantic rhetoric, including the reference to a "homegrown literature of the people," and its description of the WRWA's role in bringing together "people in the rural areas who would like to write poems, stories, or plays" mirrors very closely the language of the WRWA's first newsletter. The use of these phrases suggests that the article was informed either by a University-issued press release or by other communication from the WRWA leadership. The article was also likely shaped to reflect general characteristics of the membership as a whole. Though many of the notable leaders were men, the membership as a whole was largely female, a fact noted in several local clubs' histories, so it seems no accident that the three members profiled in the article are all women.<sup>4</sup> The WRWA's efficacy in

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the university issued a press release announcing the publication of the first issue of *Pen & Plow*. The press release begins with a sentence celebrating the creative work done by the state's rural people: "Many of the strong fingers that milk a cow or feed a hungry harvest crew are guiding pens toward satisfying creative expression in Wisconsin." This exact phrase was picked up by papers across the state, including the *Waupaca Post*, the *Oconto County Reporter*, and the *La Crosse Tribune & Leader-Press*.

<sup>4</sup> The predominantly female membership is also suggested by the overwhelming number of women who won the annual writing contest. For example, only two of the twenty nine winners of the first annual

marshalling the resources of the University to attract publicity for its members and shape its public identity highlights an important material effect of this institutional affiliation.

While literacy scholars often have difficulty finding informants who will identify as writers (see, e.g., Brandt, Wells), the WRWA's archives collect the writing and writing lives of thousands of rural people who eagerly adopted the identity of writer. Further, the WRWA's work with rural writers challenges longstanding assumptions about literacy as essentially urban in nature. In the popular imagination, the writer is often a glamorous urbanite – think, for example, of Hemingway and Fitzgerald in Paris, or the New York School poets, like Frank O'Hara, writing poems as he wanders through Manhattan on his lunch break from working in the Museum of Modern Art. In contrast, the rural is often thought of as a-literate, a place aspiring writers must flee if they are to be successful. Historians of education have sometimes inadvertently supported this anti-rural bias. Trollinger and Kaestle's study of magazine reading in 1920 suggests that, alongside parental educational attainment, urban residence itself can drive literacy development, a finding that rests on an understanding of urban areas as necessarily "more print-laden and literate" (205).

Although scholarship in rural literacies has tended to represent these negative views of the rural as primarily a matter of prejudice and stereotyping, research in print culture reveals that objects and their circulation also play a crucial role in defining the kinds of places where literacy is able to flourish. Eisenstein's landmark study of the effects of the printing press in early modern Europe argues that the population initially impacted by the advent of printing was

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writing contest were men. This sense of being outnumbered by women seems to have led the men of one local chapter to break off and create their own all-male club, The Raconteurs, which held an annual writing contest with the theme "Why Men are Better Writers Than Women." In its first year, all three prizes went to women. The role of gender and domesticity in the WRWA is discussed in a bit more detail in chapter two.

relatively small and largely urban (30-31). Other historians further note that the means of literacy's production have historically been located in cities, as have major centers of education (Vincent 12). Attention to the role of matter in literacy practices, however, suggests that links between literacy and urban areas are more a result of the circulation of literate material and the availability of literacy instruction than any sort of inherent link between urban cultural habits or temperament and literacy. As a result, my research reveals that, rather being primarily a matter of culture, intellect, or temperament, literacy is an inextricably material practice.

The archives of the WRWA provide insight into a historical moment when, due to changes in the postal service and printing technology, the relationship between rural places and literacy was again in flux. Although there may have been, prior to the twentieth century, some truth to characterizations of urban areas as necessarily more "print-laden," by the time the WRWA was created, changes in printing technologies and the postal system drove a dramatic increase in the volume and variety of print circulating in rural areas. As chapter four discusses in more detail, the creation of second class and the subsequent establishment of rural free delivery as a permanent and universal service meant that, shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, residents of even the most remote farmhouse could have everything from local papers and agricultural bulletins to catalogs and paperbacks delivered directly to their homes.

The WRWA's work with rural writers also suggests that importance of printed material for the development of literacy. In addition to disseminating literacy instruction via the newsletter, the WRWA also encouraged reading and book buying. Newsletters frequently included bibliographies of helpful books for writers. Leaders and columnists suggested that members get books from their local library, and listed pamphlets about local history that could be acquired through writing to state or local historical societies. The WRWA itself shortly took

charge of making books and pamphlets available to members through its Book Shelf, which also sold typing paper and envelopes.

In addition to the new systems and technologies that circulated texts, rural reform movements at this time were increasingly involved in recruiting rural people into writing. The Grange and 4-H both encouraged members to take up complex literacy practices (McCracken, Ostrander), and farm journals encouraged them to write as lay experts (Brazeau). These farm journals not only provided discipline-specific writing instruction but also encouraged farmers to take up, through writing, the identity of teacher in a professional community of farmers. Brazeau's article highlights the mockery farm journals aimed at farmers who hewed to traditional, unscientific methods, refusing to read and take up the advice of the Department of Agriculture and their state university's Extension Division. She points to farm journal article that contrast "book farmers," a term used approvingly to denote those who read and contribute through writing to the agricultural press, with older farmers whose refusal to write meant also a refusal to teach others or participate in the professionalization of farming (Brazeau 411).

The prevalence of literacy instruction delivered alongside agricultural information raises two important, interrelated points about the way literacy was imbricated in rural reform: one, that the adoption of modern, scientific farming methods encouraged by university extension programs and state departments of agriculture entailed increased literacy demands, as farmers were expected to not only consume texts educating them about appropriate methods but to also produce writing as a means of engaging with a community of like-minded farmers; and two, that these increasing literacy demands called for additional sites of extracurricular literacy instruction. Thus, rural literacy practices were a matter not only gaining and disseminating information, but also of performing an identity as a modern, scientific farmer whose agricultural

practices kept pace with expert recommendations. The central role of literacy in rural reform suggests that literacy – particularly writing – operated as a modernizing technology, similar to rural electrification, telephony, and automobiles, which were all embraced by reformers. Like the farm journals in Brazeau’s study, the WRWA offered a site-specific form of writing instruction, encouraging members to take up the identity of writer as rural sociologist and to engage in recording and preserving rural life. Rural reform efforts placed a high value on literacy, and so, by the time the WRWA appealed to rural people to begin crafting a written record of rural Wisconsin, rural people were already widely encouraged to think of rural identity as compatible with writing.

Although many members reported having felt that their interest in writing marked them as odd in their rural communities, by the WRWA’s founding in the mid-century, Wisconsin’s rural communities were increasingly connected to the print material that plays a significant role in making literacy possible. Further, the WRWA’s focus on the rural as inspiration for writing meant that the material conditions of rural life – the weather, landscape, geography, places, and traditions – became integral components of members’ writing, not simply as content or inspiration, but as vital forces that mediated their writing practices.

### **Scenes of Writing, Writing Lives, and Entanglement**

Attending to writing as a material phenomenon requires analysis of a broad array of writing artifacts - not just the texts writers produce, but their accounts of their writing lives, photographs, and other ephemera that help us to more fully understand what makes writing possible. For this reason, I focus in this study on not just writing and writers, but on the *scene of*

*writing*<sup>5</sup>, by which I mean the places, objects, and other material forces that accompany a writing practice. Examining the scene of writing allows us to see writing as a diffuse, embodied, and volatile process, influenced not only by the deliberate work of the writer but shaped also by the material context of that writing. Accordingly, this study is concerned not only with literacy practices or literacy events, but with *writing lives*. In examining writing lives, I analyze three dimensions of literate practice: the activity of writing, the writing itself, and how a writing practice is integrated into the activities of daily life. This final dimension – how people establish and maintain a writing practice alongside the daily demands of domestic and family life, of work and community obligations – is particularly pressing for the writers in this study, predominantly rural women, who faced a host of material and cultural barriers to writing. Because I view writing as entangled with both matter and culture, this study asks how the writers of the WRWA integrated their writerly identities with existing aspects of rural culture and life, such as the literacy practices of 4-H clubs, Farmers' Bureaus, and women's clubs; I also attend to moments when these identities and this writing could not be smoothly interwoven.

Scenes of writing as captured in literacy studies frequently include rich details about the objects and places that accompany a writing life, though the role of these nonhuman actors for literate practice is most often left undiscussed. The accounts of literacy learning in Deborah Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives*, for example, are frequently accompanied by discussions of books that were particularly meaningful in childhood, or notebooks in which aspiring writers first scrawled secret poems. Describing reading and writing activity in homes in Roadville, Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words* notes not just books, but also kitchen tables, bread, coloring books, and stationery as objects present at the scene of writing. Bruce Fehler's study of

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<sup>5</sup> Though I use the term somewhat differently, this phrase is certainly indebted to Linda Brodkey's "Modernism and the Scene(s) of Writing."

the literacy sponsorship in Texas settlement houses in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries offers a particularly clear example of the role of objects for literacy learning. Although Fehler ostensibly presents a fairly straightforward case of intentional, though fraught, human sponsorship, even this case shows the entanglement of human intentions, literacy practices, and matter, something Fehler indirectly acknowledges when listing among the “persuasive tools” available to the settlement houses “language classes, playgrounds, and even food” (355). In fact, these things are not merely “tools” but are in fact integral to the literacy work done by settlement houses, so that their sponsorship is entangled with the child care offered to mothers who attended classes and with the free lunches offered to kindergarteners. Although scholars in literacy often presents objects as mute accompanists to the human work of reading and writing, my work argues that these objects exert an agentic force in making literacy learning possible.

For further examination of how writing practices are sustained, mediated, and regulated not only by human sponsors but also by a whole host of material forces, I return now to the three women, Bernadette Friedell, Fidelia Van Antwerp, and Helen R. Stieve, profiled in the *State Journal* article. The article includes a photograph of each woman, posed as if caught in the moment of writing. Though the photographs claim to present a scene of writing, this picture is necessarily incomplete, and so further research is necessary to understand the context of the writing. From these photographs I read outward in an attempt to comprehend more fully each woman’s writing practice and writerly identity, beginning with the text of the article itself and continuing to the women’s writing, accounts of their writing lives, and newspaper articles and other artifacts that record their broader community engagement. This collection of artifacts presents a rich portrait of each woman’s writing life, and in particular how this writing is intertwined with an array of cultural, rhetorical, spatial, and material forces.

Fidelia Van Antwerp, who went on to become an important early leader of the WRWA, is presented as a “retired school teacher who’s having fun with a typewriter.” The article reports that “the writing bug bit her” as a student at Beloit College, where she was the humor editor of the campus magazine *The Codax*. Friedell is presented primarily as a housewife and mother, though her degree in journalism is mentioned in passing. At the time of the article, her husband was a senior in journalism at the university, and they lived at Badger Village, university housing created for veterans and their families after World War II. Although Van Antwerp and Friedell, as women writing about rural people and rural topics, are typical in some ways of the WRWA membership as a whole, their college educations, previous writing experience, and residence in towns rather than rural areas sets them apart from the “farm folk” the WRWA desired to support. Stieve, who lives outside the small town of Baraboo and is described as a farmwife, is more fully representative of the WRWA’s understanding of the rural writer.



—State Journal Staff photo  
Fidelia Van Antwerp, chairman of the state advisory board of the writer's group, is currently working on a series of stories of early Kilbourn City, as Wisconsin Dells was once known.

fig. 1 Van Antwerp (photograph courtesy Wisconsin State-Journal staff)

All three women are pictured in front of a typewriter, an object that certifies their identities as writers, rather than housewives, schoolteachers, or mothers. The typewriter also suggests the material, modern practice of writing by machine. Although the photographs present the typewriter as the normative means of composing, archival records suggest that relatively few members actually drafted on the typewriter. Newsletter articles about appropriate typewritten formatting and the need for clean copies suggest that many members would have been uncomfortable with the technology of the typewriter. The February 1950 WRWA newsletter includes directions for formatting manuscripts for submission, and includes as the first two tips “I. Type them.” and “II. Keep them clean and neat.” Newsletter columns return frequently to this need for clean formatting, further suggesting that few members would have been fully comfortable with composing via typewriter. The presence of typewriters in the *State Journal* article, then, is likely intended to portray writing as modern and technical, even when done by rural women.



Mrs. John Friedell, formerly of Edgerton and now of Badger village, is shown above at her typewriter. A member of the Wisconsin

—State Journal Staff photo Rural Writers assn., she finds her activities hampered a bit by Johnny, the Friedell youngster, and hence does a lot of her writing at night.

fig. 2 Friedell (photograph courtesy *Wisconsin State-Journal* staff)



—State Journal Staff photo  
Mrs. Robert Stieve, who lives north of Baraboo, finds that her inspiration comes "within 50 feet of my front door." Above, she is looking out a window to the rural scene without.

fig. 3 Stieve (photograph courtesy *Wisconsin State-Journal* staff)

Stieve's photograph suggests most clearly the agentic force of nonhuman actors in a writing practice. Stieve sits at her desk, pencil in hand, gazing down at her paper. When describing her husband's initial lack of support for her writing, she invoked this desk as proof that her success in the WRWA changed her husband's mind about her "hobby." She explains that "well, he gave me this desk for Christmas, so you can draw your own conclusions," suggesting that the desk itself presents an argument for the value of her writing. Simply having an official writing desk helps bolster Stieve's claim to writerly identity, both for Stieve and for the audience of the *State Journal*. However, the desk has an influence beyond acting as a metonym for her husband's support. Placed in front of the window, it situates Stieve in front of the rural scene that she says inspires her writing. The desk acts on her, positioning her before a rural landscape, and that landscape moves her to write. Because it is situated in front of the window overlooking the

rural landscape, the desk exerts an agentic force in fixing her as a rural writer. The *State Journal* article, as well as Stieve's writing and accounts of her writing practice, also suggests the significance of rural landscape for Stieve's writing life. While the WRWA encouraged her to write, the actual material for her writing came not from the organization's leadership in Madison, but from, as the photograph's caption quotes her as saying, "within 50 feet of my front door." This landscape acts as both inspiration and sponsor, providing the content for her writing and also authorizing her identity as writer.

In addition to suggesting the role of objects in writing practices, all three photographs also reveal the intervention of the domestic in this writing. In Van Antwerp's photograph, a set of stairs are visible in the background, suggesting that she writes among the activity and distractions or a common area of her home, rather than in a quiet room set aside specifically for that purpose. Daily life, and particularly gendered domestic work, are a particularly notable force for Friedell and Stieve, who both have young children. Though these photographs and the accompanying text attempt to present writing as compatible with domestic life and conservative gender roles, in the end they suggest a certain tension between writing and daily life. This seems especially true for Friedell, whose typewriter is perched on top of a table cloth at what look to be either a kitchen table or a dining table. Although Friedell is photographed typing while her son plays happily in his high chair, it seems unlikely that she actually got much writing done this way, and in fact the article explains that "she works nights, as a rule, because Johnny, the infant, demands a lot of attention during the day." For Friedell, motherhood is her primary duty, and her writing must be fit into whatever time remains. The article is careful to note that Stieve, too, does not shirk her domestic duties, noting that, while Stieve "likes to spend an hour or so a day at her

writing,” she ensures that “it doesn’t interfere with her housework and meals for her husband and their two children, Diane, 9, and Gary, 7.”

While the *State Journal* article suggests the interlinked effects of material and cultural forces for these women’s writing practices, a full account of their writing lives must also take the writing itself into account. The objects, places, speech patterns, and structures of rural life rise constantly to the surface in these women’s writing. Wisconsin history and culture both play an important role in each woman’s writing. The article reports that Van Antwerp is working on a series of short stories about the Wisconsin Dells, where she lives. Friedell’s prize winning short story, “Dry Spell,” follows a farmer faced with a drought that threatens to devastate his crops, and the article reports that Stieve’s short story, “Blessings Can Be Arranged,” which takes place in a farmhouse on Thanksgiving Day, was inspired by her grandmother. The rural also enters their writing through dialect – in Stieve’s story, Pa describes Ma as “fidgety as a hot frog in a hot skillet” and later remarks on the “autymobeel” in which their relatives arrives – and through the folksy wisdom of what seems to be a bygone era.

For Stieve and the other writers of the WRWA, the stuff of rural life played a vital role in their writing practice. When Stieve sits down at her desk to write, these other voices, the places and objects of rural life, enter her and her writing. She sits to compose. The room, the act of composition are both studded with human and nonhuman agents, acting in concert to produce a text.

### **Weather, Books, and Knick-Knacks: Matter in the Archives**

In examining the writing lives of three particular members of the WRWA, this introduction has begun to point to the interlinking of matter, culture, and literacy. While this

chapter has focused on three particular women, the phenomenon described here is widely observable in the WRWA's archives. Members return continually to descriptions of weather, landscape, buildings, and other nonhuman forces in their discussions of their club activities and writing practices. In particular, an attunement to place is frequently mentioned as a trait of the rural writer; one newsletter article, for example, observes that "the impulse which leads to writing generally springs from an acute perception of, and sensitivity to one's surroundings" ("Trips Afield").

While New Literacy Studies has most often focused on literacy's connection to culture, my research attends to the material dimension of literate practice. Friedell, Van Antwerp, and Stieve's writing all suggests that reform efforts, which are typically understood as cultural or ideological projects, also have important material effects for writers. Rural reform, and particularly agencies such as 4-H and the Grange that explicitly included literacy instruction, created paths for rural people to integrate rural and writerly identities. In particular, rural people were encouraged to see the stuff of their daily lives and family and community histories as legitimate content for writing, and as a result, rural knowledge became an important asset for literate practice. Further, the rural was characterized as compatible with writing, and some members even argued that rural places and farm labor were especially well-suited to a writing life.

More broadly, in their constant intertwining of geography, weather, landscape, books, and material forces with descriptions of writing and writing practices, the WRWA's archives support a theory of writing as entanglement. In fact, objects are a constant presence in archival accounts, and for an organization centrally engaged in literacy work, the WRWA expended a great deal of time, energy, attention, and words on objects that seem peripheral to the work of

writing. Even at Green Lake, the annual conference, celebrated as a site of literary inspiration for writers, objects take a prominent role, most notably in the white elephant sale organized each year. Even as members packed their pens, pencils, and notebooks, their copies of magazines in which they had been published, they also packed knick-knacks and oddities to be sold. My research suggests that these objects, rather than being a distraction from the work of writing, were in fact central to members' writing practices and identities as writers.

### **Chapter Outlines**

As a whole, this dissertation argues for an understanding of writing as entangled with the objects, systems, and places of everyday life. This chapter has developed a theory of writing as entanglement through the specific case of three women members of the WRWA, and each subsequent chapter examines a specific facet of this entanglement.

Chapter Two, "Rural-Romantic Rhetoric, Materiality, and Writers," considers the material consequences of the WRWA's official rhetoric for the writing and writing identities of the rural writers they sought to engage. I trace the evolution and impact of the WRWA's Creed, which defined the organization's mission in lofty language that connected writing with democracy, self-education, and enlightenment, from its origins in the constitution of one small local club to its elaboration through letters sent among members of the Advisory Board and its eventual inclusion in the newsletter and other promotional materials. The language of the Creed, which invited some writers and approaches to writing while implicitly suppressing others, had a longstanding impact on the official rhetoric of the WRWA, seen for example in the whimsical and folksy metaphors in the organization's 25 year history. Through examining the sources and

circulation of the WRWA's rural-romantic rhetoric, this chapter argues that rhetoric is necessarily material and often exceeds human intentions.

Chapter Three, "Rural Space as Commonplace," considers the role of place in supporting member writing. I trace how embodied place knowledge builds a collective place-ethos for rural writers, and I examine in particular the Lakeshore Writers, a small but especially active club, whose engagement with place was crucial in challenging common definitions of the rural. They defined the rural not in contrast to the urban but in connection with other rural spaces, and their inclusion of Native American voices challenged assumptions of the rural as an implicitly white space. The Lakeshore Writers used writing as a means of engaging more deeply with the people and places around them, undertaking field trips to notable sites, organizing writing contests for local schools, visiting nursing homes, and circulating a self-published anthology of member writing. This chapter argues that place – and not just scenic sites of inspiration, but also the places of ordinary life, including libraries, schools, civic buildings – serves as a vital inventional resource for writers.

Chapter Four, "Systems of Circulation and Technologies of Communication," examines the networks that supported the sharing and publication of member writing. Through analysis of newsletters, anthologies of member writing, and accounts of clubs' use of local radio stations and newspapers to attract publicity, I consider circulation as a key force in sustaining member writing practices. I attend in particular to the force of second-class mail, rural free delivery, and rural radio in facilitating the circulation of member writing, shaping the content of that writing, and influencing members' engagement with each other's writing. These systems are not neutral transmitters of writing, but carry traces of the assumptions of rural deficit that underpinned their development and thereby shape member writing and writing identity.

The conclusion, “Writing Wisconsin Today,” examines the current work of the organization, now named simply the Wisconsin Writers’ Association, as well as other organizations in Wisconsin and the Midwest that support extracurricular literacies. This conclusion notes the continuing influence of material forces, particularly space, in shaping access to literacy learning. Finally, I offer directions for future research and a discussion of the implications of this study.

This dissertation also includes interchapters consisting of excerpts of WRWA member writing drawn from the first ten years of WRWA periodicals, including *Pen & Plow*, *Creative Wisconsin*, and the WRWA newsletter. This structure is inspired in part by Jennifer Sinor’s *The Extraordinary Work of Ordinary Writing: Annie Ray’s Diary*, which includes lengthy excerpts from the diary, a decision made because Sinor “wanted to ensure that readers had the experience of reading a large amount of ordinary writing, rather than only selected excerpts framed by my own text” (21). Similarly, I’ve chosen to include member writing without commentary or critique as a way of honoring the rural writers whose work has taught me so much about the challenges and rewards of sustaining a writing practice in the midst of the demands of ordinary life. Rather than retyping these texts, I present them in the original format in which they were published. One of the joys of archival research, in my experience, is its materiality, and these documents, whether typed on a typewriter or set in a letterpress, retain the marks of their makers, including uneven pressure, odd alignment, and the occasional typographical error. In retaining this original format I hope to share some of that materiality with my readers. I’ve organized these interchapters into four loose themes – Writing Wisconsin Landscape, Writing Women’s Lives, Writing Wisconsin History, and On Writing – that reflect trends in member writing.

NB: For permissions reasons, the actual text of these writings is not included in this document. Instead, I have included the author's name, text name, and original place of publication. These texts can be found at the University of Wisconsin archives. I am also happy to provide them if requested by email.

Through analysis of a variety of artifacts, including member writing, members' accounts of their writing lives, reports of club activities, internal board meeting minutes, and WRWA publicity in newspapers, this dissertation examines the writing practices of a large and diverse group of rural writers, a group especially interesting for its eager embrace of writing in the face of discouragement and disinterest from within and beyond their communities. As a whole, this dissertation calls for more attention to the objects, places, and systems that, although they are often unnoticed, make a striking difference for writers and writing.

**Interchapter: Writing Wisconsin Landscape**

Mary J. Harden, "Upset in Prayer Meeting," *Pen & Plow*, July 1949

Wilhelmina Schroeder Guerink, "The Twister," excerpted from *Pen & Plow*, July 1949

Bernadette Furseth Friedell, "Dry Spell," excerpted from *Pen & Plow*, July 1949

Faith Mary Oemig, "Spring Snow," February 1950 newsletter

Mary Woodard Greene, "Resting Sod," June 1950 newsletter

Alice Dixon Taylor, "It Happened in Wisconsin," Winter 1956 newsletter

Helen C. Smith, "Perception," Winter 1956 newsletter

## Chapter Two: Rural-Romantic Rhetoric, Materiality, and Writers

Although the WRWA's literacy work is its most immediately obvious feature, that work was decidedly rhetorical in nature. Rather than simply encouraging creative writing generally, the WRWA sought to enlist its members in a cultural project of recording and preserving a particular view of rural Wisconsin life, one that was typically filtered through a nostalgic tone and entailed picturesque descriptions of rural landscape and customs. The organization's first newsletter article defined members as rural people, noting that while they would not "rule out someone who lives in the city" they are most interested in "the literary interpretation of country and farm life," something to which rural people are presumably better suited ("What is the Rural Writers' Association?"). Further, members' writing was to be rural in content, and the newsletter clarified that members "will be expected to write about the things they see and do everyday, the people they know, and the countryside in which they live" ("What is the Rural Writers' Association?").

This romantic and nostalgic approach to the rural was a constant, though typically implicit, presence in the WRWA's communication with members. According to the WRWA Creed, the organization's central aims included the encouragement of "cultural aspects of rural Wisconsin life" and "preservation of the local history and folklore of the passing era." To this end, it connected members with resources for writing local history, such as two pamphlets, "Forty Four-Minute Cuttings From Wisconsin History" and the "It Happened Here Series," advertised in the February 1949 newsletter as helpful for "writers who are interested in treating historical subjects, and are seeking a source of local color" ("An Invaluable Pamphlet" 3). Writing recognized in the annual contest and published in WRWA periodicals almost inevitably looked fondly back at a rural past; characteristic titles include "Ravished: The Story of a Ruined

Farm,” “Village Sequence,” “The Chocolate Milk Cow,” and “Early Spring,” all published in the July 1949 *Pen & Plow*.

The WRWA’s rural-romantic rhetoric was characterized by heightened diction, pastoral imagery, and a nostalgic approach to the rural. It encouraged rural people to think of their rural surroundings, including the people, landscape, histories, and traditions of their communities as material for writing, and in doing so, it figured rural knowledge as an essential asset for writing practice. An early example of this rhetoric can be found in founder Robert Gard’s introduction to the first *Pen & Plow*, the final two sentences of which were republished as the final page in each newsletter: “Here is rural Wisconsin – the land, the wind, the rain, the faiths. This is Wisconsin in terms of people who live on the land and love it – people who understand the true meaning of the seasons.”<sup>6</sup> In this introduction, Gard presents the member writing of *Pen & Plow* as manifesting an authentic vision of the rural, suggesting that those who read the member writing contained within will also gain insight into the true nature of rural Wisconsin; however, this vision of the rural is circumscribed, as those who conjure it must not only know the land, but must also “love it.” Even in this earliest example of the WRWA’s rural-romantic rhetoric, leadership plays an active role in shaping members’ characterizations of the rural and readers’ interpretations of member work.

These two sentences from the Foreword to *Pen & Plow* had a long life in the organization, both through their frequent reprinting in newsletters and other documents and also in their influence on the tone and imagery taken up by other writers. In a history of the WRWA

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<sup>6</sup> In the original version of this statement published in *Pen & Plow*, an additional phrase was included at the end of the final sentence: “and man’s relationship to man and his God.” This language suggests a link between writing, rurality, and religious/cultural practices of Christianity and is in accord with language found elsewhere that characterizes the rural as an implicitly Christian space. I have found no commentary about why this phrase was dropped; however, the reference to “faiths” retained in the version frequently reprinted does similar, though slightly more oblique, rhetorical work.

printed in the program for the organization's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in 1973, Helen C. Smith again cited Gard's introduction, then elaborated on the development of the organization following the publication of the first *Pen & Plow*. According to Smith, member writing presented a broad range of human experience:

Yes, here was the fabric made of sounds, lonely sounds – the long drawn-out whistle of a streamliner in the night as it rushes across the countryside on its way to some far off city mecca; the wind as it moans and howls and shrieks about the chimney, holding in its sounding all the grief, all the fear of generations of listeners; the deep tones of surf beating against the shore on a windless night; the voice of a solitary child busily conversing with an imaginary playmate; and the sobs of one lost in sorrow.

Though Smith was writing this history in 1973, her vision of the rural remains solidly insulated against technological progress and modernity; no cars or televisions or radios intrude on this rural scene, and even the streamliner that rushes through the landscape is an artifact of the immediate postwar era. Though this history was written for a celebration to be held in Madison, this passage persists in imagining cities as “far off.” In content, diction, and tone, Smith's history provides a striking example of the longstanding effect of the WRWA's rural-romantic rhetoric, with her writing including the characteristic dramatic depictions of an anthropomorphized nature and an accumulation of rich descriptive phrases. Again, this language renders a vision of the rural as imbued with strong emotion, often melancholy, and as existing firmly outside of time.

The WRWA's support of rural writers' literacy practices went hand in hand with a rural-romantic rhetoric that sought to shape not only members' writing but also their sense of themselves as writers – and specifically as *Wisconsin rural* writers. This rural-romantic rhetoric was articulated and reinforced in a variety of ways, including through in-person visits from

leadership to clubs and through the newsletter, which delivered literacy instruction intended to help members draft, refine, and publish rural writing and also celebrated member success in writing and publication. The WRWA's rural-romantic rhetoric was underpinned by both social and historical influences, including the rural reform efforts of the Country Life Movement and the Wisconsin Idea's mandate that the University reach out to rural communities, as well as material forces, such as the objects that aligned members' writing with middlebrow forms of civic engagement and conservative gender ideologies. In addition to being shaped by social, historical, and material forces, this rural-romantic rhetoric also had material effects, inviting some writers and perspectives but also excluding or suppressing others, shaping not only discourse about writing but also uses of civic and private spaces.

Using a series of letters and board meeting minutes archived as the Report to the Philosophy Committee as its central case study, this chapter traces the development and effects of the WRWA's rural-romantic rhetoric. I argue that this rhetoric consists not simply of words and ideas – the lofty language of the Creed, the encouraging writing instruction distributed in the newsletter, the publication of member writing in university-distributed anthologies – but is in fact entangled with matter. Following Karen Barad's work in thinking the scientific and the social together as a way of examining how, in her words, “matter matters,” this chapter examines both the social and historical context that infused the WRWA's rhetoric, as well as the material forces that underpinned its support of rural writers. Building on the introduction's articulation of a theory of writing as entanglement, this chapter begins by further elaborating how rhetoric is entangled with matter. I then use this framework to examine the WRWA's use of rural-romantic rhetoric with members. The central work of this chapter is to trace the impact of this rhetoric on

members' writing and writing identity, paying particular attention to the vital role of objects as agents in this rhetoric, bolstering, mediating, and dampening its effects.

### **A Theory of Rhetoric and Matter**

The WRWA's rural-romantic rhetoric bears a striking resemblance to the preservationist impulse identified by Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen E. Schell as one of the three rhetorics or metaphoric lenses that shape our understandings of rural people and places.

Donehower, Hogg, and Schell's co-authored *Rural Literacies* examines how "rural life and literacies have been defined by rhetorics of modernization, preservation, and abandonment" (or, as the title of the first chapters puts it, "lack, lag, and the rosy past") ("Constructing Rural Literacies" 11). While preservation is linked to a desire to celebrate the rural as distinct from the urban, metaphors of abandonment reflect a tendency to allow spaces deemed rural to return to a "state of nature." The third metaphor, modernization, deals with the rural by attempting to make it align more closely to suburban and urban culture, technology, and economy (*Reclaiming the Rural*, "Preface, xi). These three metaphoric lenses often create what Donehower, Hogg, and Schell label "dualistic narratives," which have the effect of either "depicting rural places and people as lacking educational, economic, and cultural resources" or, conversely of "celebrating and mythologizing our rural past and character" (*Reclaiming the Rural*, "Preface," xi). Whether the rural is celebrated or denigrated, these narratives are powerful mediators for understandings of rural people, places, and traditions. The intended message of the WRWA's rhetoric is most closely aligned with the preservationist impulse, as the WRWA sought to preserve the folklore and traditions of rural life, which they saw as existing in a "passing era." However, these dualistic narratives actually reinforce each other; while the WRWA looked fondly toward the

“rosy past,” its writer-members also articulated views linked to lag and lack. Though the WRWA intended to characterize rural people and rural ways of life as worthy of preserving through writing, their romantic and ahistorical view of the rural had the effect of treating rural people as oddities, rather than as fellow-writers engaged in meaning-making through the practices of research, drafting, and publication.

Scholars working in rural literacies have used these rhetorics identified by Donehower, Hogg, and Schell to examine a wide range of topics. Using rhetorical theory, studies have examined rural water disputes (Kmetz), critical agricultural literacy (Brewster), and neoliberal economic rhetorics presented by agricultural publications (Ryan). Historical studies in rural literacies have examined the development of historical and critical literacies in New Mexico (Baca) and challenged stereotypes of rural women’s labor as drudgery (Greer). Historical studies have also considered how particular institutions and rural reform movements have impacted rural literate and rhetorical practice, such as the Grange’s rhetorical sponsorship of women’s oratory (Ostrander) and 4-H’s sponsorship of hybrid literacy practices that are both practical and intellectual (McCracken). Through examination of the rural as a contemporary and historical site of complex literate and rhetorical practice, this scholarship has made a significant contribution to challenging both popular conceptions of the rural as either “nowhere” or the bygone artifact of a passing age and also composition and rhetoric’s tendency to focus on the literacies and rhetorics of the city.

Work in rural literacies varies, however, in the extent to which it acknowledges the material sources of the power relations and literate and rhetorical practices it examines. Several studies, particularly those engaging rural labor or practical aspects of rural life, seem to take as a given that these practices are necessarily bound up with material and daily realities of rural life.

For example, Kmetz's study of native people's and ranchers' ethos treats ethos as a communal practice located in place, arguing that "the physical location of the rhetorical act contains a character of its own that shapes communal values and the rhetor's performance of those values" (20). Greer's chapter on rural literacy and labor, building on Mike Rose's project of documenting the analytical and rhetorical skills required by workers doing jobs typically thought of as low-skilled, examines the social value of rural labor. Greer's analysis, which is deeply enmeshed in description of particular tasks, such as tending livestock, weaving cloth, and preserving produce, argues that women's rural labor is not simply drudgery, but requires "technical expertise, reasoning skills, intellectual flexibility, and rhetorical sophistication" (91). As a result, Greer's study of rural labor merges the cerebral and the material. It may be the case that the sites of study for rural literacies – land- and water-use debates in rural communities, diaries and other accounts of rural life, organizations involved in improving agricultural practices – call scholars' attention to the vital force of material aspects of literate and rhetorical practice. The autobiography of Myrtle Tenney Booth, for example, the central object of Greer's study, places detailed descriptions of mundane chores alongside discussions of the social value of such labor, suggesting that the bodily and the material are integrally linked to the civic. Similarly, in her study of the rural literacies required for life in an upper Midwestern community, Edmondson defines texts as "corn piles, trains, and the objects, symbols, and things of rural life" (2). This broad definition of texts as not only literate but also material has to do with a particularly rural kind of literacy, suggesting that rural knowledge attunes rural people to the literate and rhetorical effects of objects.

However, while the material realities of rural life are a nearly ubiquitous part of scholarship in rural literacies, this work has tended not to explicitly attend to the material or to

use materialism as a lens for examining rural literate and rhetorical practice. While the rhetorics identified by scholars in rural literacies are useful in an analysis of the complex and fraught nature of the WRWA's work with rural writers, this framework, which figures rhetoric as primarily discursive, as an intentional and human act, does not fully encapsulate the impact of the WRWA's rural-romantic rhetoric on the rural people it sought to engage. A fuller theory must deliberately take into account the material underpinnings and consequences of this rhetoric. In examining the work of the WRWA, I view this rural-romantic rhetoric as a set of material-discursive practices that act on writers, influencing their writing, their writing identity, and their relations with the world. However, this rhetoric was not simply top-down, emanating solely from the deliberate work of the leadership. Rather, this rhetoric was shaped by rural culture and history, member practices, and a host of material and bodily influences. Thus, this rhetoric was the emergent and evolving work of a number of human and non-human agents. Following Rickert's work on ambient rhetoric, which asserts that rhetoric is "grounded in the material relations from which it springs" (x), I argue that the rural-romantic rhetoric of the WRWA was material as well as discursive.

In the case of the WRWA, rhetoric performed a regulatory function, shaping both the tone and content of member writing. It also influenced how members thought of themselves as writers, shaping them into self-consciously *rural* writers who surveyed the world around them for writing inspiration, provided and solicited feedback on works in progress, and published in venues deemed appropriate for rural writing. Moreover, full participation in the work of the association was in fact contingent on aligning one's writing and talk about writing with this rhetoric. Work that aligned to this vision of the rural was celebrated in WRWA periodicals and awarded prizes at the annual conference, and clubs whose practices met with WRWA

expectations were written up approvingly in the newsletter. Failure to meet these expectations was met with censure. In at least one case, full participation in organization activities was actually withdrawn because a club was deemed to be not really writers. The Eau Claire club was chosen to host the fall 1960 conference, but Eva John Kuhn, then president, unexpectedly took that designation away, telling the group that “there wasn’t a writer among them, and that they lacked leadership” (Sleater and Kosmo 1). In a letter to Kamarck protesting this decision, Eau Claire Writers’ Club President Sleater and Vice President Kosmo insist that they had followed all of Kuhn’s guidelines about securing publicity for the event; further, they argue that they *are* writers, noting that “the members were very upset, for they do publish their material” (Sleater and Kosmo 1). Though the full reasons for the rescinding of Eau Claire’s hosting responsibilities are not recorded, it seems the members ran afoul of Kuhn’s expectations and were accordingly punished.

Beyond these writing-related effects, however, this rhetoric also impacted members’ engagement with their world. The WRWA saw writing as an act of community engagement, and clubs and individuals used writing as part of community service activities, hosting, for example, writing contests for high school students; performing plays and reading writing for civic clubs such as 4-H, the Farmers’ Bureau, and women’s clubs; and organizing trips to nursing homes and sanitariums to share their writing with residents. This rhetoric also material effects that exceeded members’ literacy practices, shaping in an immediate and material way members’ relations to the world around them, including the rural people whom they were meant to preserve in writing and the rural landscape and customs they were encouraged to see as romantic and picturesque, at once a site of nostalgia and an ahistorical oddity removed from modern life. In

this way, the WRWA's rural-romantic rhetoric shifted not only members' writing practices but also their practices of dwelling in rural spaces.

Archival records also point to the bodily dimensions of the WRWA's rural-romantic rhetoric. In a newsletter description of the 1952 Green Lake Conference, Helen C. Smith describes in some detail her meeting with the regionally notable poet August Derleth. In addition to publishing his own work, Derleth also wrote a regular column for Madison's *Capital Times*, in which he took on the role of arbiter of local literary talent. As a result, Derleth was both a representative of the kind of the writing the WRWA endorsed and also a critic of its members' efforts. In a 1950 column titled "Minority Report" Derleth weighed in on the merits of several recent publications of Midwestern writing, including the first issue of *Pen & Plow*. Commenting on the mission of the WRWA broadly, Derleth asserted that "it will probably never turn up much really outstanding work, but if it turns up only one genuinely meritorious work, it will have served a good purpose." He seems generally unimpressed by *Pen & Plow*, explaining that the "first issue contains nothing which would particularly stir readers," though he goes on to note a few "praiseworthy poems" and to describe as "promising" stories written by Beatrice Linehan and Helen R. Stieve. Given the confidence with which he passed judgment on even prize-winning WRWA member writing, he may have struck a rather intimidating figure at the conference. Though, in the particular encounter Smith describes, it seems unlikely that Derleth had anything in mind beyond politely greeting an aspiring writers, this encounter – and, in particular, his hand, which becomes the focus of Smith's report – had rhetorical effects that outlasted his intentions. In describing meeting Derleth, Smith exclaims

Eventually even my great-grandchildren will get tired of hearing me tell about the day in Sept. 1952 when I shook hands with August Derleth!

“Mrs. Smith!” he said. He offered his hand --- I held out mine --- and for a time afterwards I wondered if I’d ever be able to use my crushed hand again? (H. Smith, “Report on Green Lake by One Who Was There” 7)

According to this description, the hand itself, and the meeting between Derleth’s and Smith’s hands, has significant but rather mysterious effects beyond Derleth’s actual words of greeting. For all her enthusiasm about this meeting, Smith does not define exactly what the impact of the encounter was – in fact, she moves on rather quickly afterwards to similarly gushy descriptions of the other writers and professors she met at the conference – but rather seems to assume that both her reader and the imagined future great-grandchildren will understand its import. This description, with its assumption that simply coming into physical contact with a notable figure is something worth remembering and retelling over years, calls up Coole and Frost’s assertion that bodies can exhibit agentic capacities distinct from human intent (19-20). Whatever Derleth intended in this encounter, his *hand* had long-lasting effects that were surely distinct from those intentions.

The WRWA’s rural-romantic rhetoric demonstrates how thoroughly rhetoric is entangled with matter. While classical theories of rhetoric have posited an autonomous rhetor capable of coolly assessing the rhetorical situation and selecting the most persuasive available means for effecting his will, my analysis of the work of the WRWA, as well as recent rhetorical theory, challenge this assumption. Instead, a theory of rhetoric as entangled with matter asserts that the source and impact of rhetorical action is always more complex and often indeterminate. This analysis makes two primary contributions to rhetorical theory: it challenges assumptions about the rhetor as exerting agency over a rhetorical situation, arguing instead that agency is diffuse

and emergent; it also highlights the vital role of matter in rhetoric, claiming not only that matter mediates deliberate human rhetoric, but that matter exerts a rhetorical force of its own.

### **Report to the Philosophy Committee: The Development and Impact of Rural-Romantic Rhetoric**

The development of the WRWA's rural-romantic rhetoric can be seen most clearly through examination of the debate in the organization's early years about the word "rural." This debate is contained primarily within a single archival folder, titled "Report to the Philosophy Committee." This folder contains the letters written by Advisory Board members as well as meeting minutes from the April 14, 1951 meeting that preceded the first publication of the Creed. As a result, this single folder serves as a valuable site for exploration of how the WRWA's rural-romantic rhetoric was shaped through written and informal communication between the leadership.

Although the organization was founded with rural people, rural topics, and rural audiences clearly at the forefront, the significance of the word rural to the organization's work was a matter of some contention almost immediately. At the first meeting of the newly-formed Advisory Board, on January 22, 1950, board members discussed the organization's current activities, planned for the future, and attempted to begin formulating "a practice working philosophy" [sic] to guide future growth (Kamarck, "Report on Meeting of the Advisory Board" 3). As summarized by Kamarck in a newsletter article that February, a central matter for discussion was the question "What is the Association?" According to Kamarck, after the organization's first year and a half of simply making contact with interested rural writers, "the board felt that the time had come to formulate a definite working philosophy to serve as a reference point in determining patterns of growth, and to guide the Association in making day to

day decisions” (Kamarck, “Report on Meeting of the Advisory Board” 3). As an initial step toward developing this philosophy, the members of the Advisory Board were reconstituted as the philosophy committee, and they decided to hold their discussion through the medium of a round-robin letter.<sup>7</sup> The April 14, 1951 meeting of the Advisory Board took up the ideas presented in these letters, and the summer 1951 newsletter published for the first time the philosophy of the WRWA, later reprinted in membership brochures, incorporation documents, and elsewhere as the Creed.

The Creed was developed through the round robin discussion held by members of the Advisory Board following their first meeting on January 22, 1950. At this time, the Advisory Board had twelve members, which included Gard and another professor, Andrew Hopkins. The board included five women and seven men and was approximately representative of the geographic reach of the WRWA, with board members coming from the north of the state in Wausau, the east in Two Rivers, the south in Whitewater, and the Dells and Baraboo in central Wisconsin, as well as Madison. Present at the first meeting of the board were Evelyn Brown, Fidelia Van Antwerp, F. W. Southworth, Helen Stieve, Mary Zimmerman, Inga Gilson Caldwell, and Robert Gard; also present were WRWA staff members Edward Kamarck and Paul Knoke.

These board members were primarily prominent early members of the WRWA, with many of these names appearing frequently in the newsletter, periodicals, and histories of the organizations. According to the articles of incorporation, both Fidelia Van Antwerp and Evelyn A. Brown were charter members. Van Antwerp was also the WRWA’s first president and, after

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<sup>7</sup> Kamarck doesn’t define the term round-robin here, but based on the procedure used for the round robin correspondence clubs, it likely worked like this: the first member composed his or her thoughts, then mailed that document (which some members called a report and others a letter) to the next member on the list, who then added his or her own contribution and mailed both documents on to the next letter. The final member would then receive the complete record of the committee’s deliberations. The round robin correspondence clubs are discussed in more detail in chapter four.

her death in 1956, was fondly remembered in board meeting minutes as well as in the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary history written by Helen C. Smith. The Fidelia Van Antwerp Traveling Trophy, a silver trophy honoring her memory, was awarded yearly to the club earning the most points for service. Inga Caldwell, Mary Zimmerman, F. W. Southworth, and Helen R. Stieve all published work in the inaugural *Pen & Plow* in 1949; Caldwell, Zimmerman, and Southworth were also winners of the Jade Ring, the WRWA's yearly writing prize, in the early years of the WRWA. Nelson frequently published articles in the WRWA newsletter, served as acting president in 1960, and is remembered warmly in the 25 year history for his sharing of "practical marketing tips" (4). Though Swanton's name appears less frequently in WRWA archives, he was a valued presence on the board because of his connection with the American Country Life Association. Despite Swanton's involvement in rural life through the American Country Life Association, he writes about rural people from a distance, noting for example that "Pen and Plow gives these people an avenue of expression and a sense of pride" ("Report of Milo K. Swanton"). Swanton depicts himself as also engaged in helping rural people, rather than being one of the rural people whom the WRWA sought to assist. Stieve, a housewife and mother, the only board member to explicitly identify as rural, is in some ways the outlier of the group; in contrast with the other members' description of the ways the WRWA helped rural people who is married to a farmer, Stieve positions herself as a recipient of this aid and encouragement. As such, her letter and other artifacts connected to her writing life provide valuable insight into the difficult position of rural people within the WRWA. Even as the WRWA aimed to engage rural people, it insisted they be the objects of assistance and instruction from people who themselves resisted rural identification, even if they lived in rural areas or small towns.

Following this first Advisory Board meeting, members began circulating their thoughts about the aims and direction of the WRWA. Though not all of the letters are dated, it seems that the discussion began with Chairman Fidelia Van Antwerp and concluded with Al Nelson, who was presumably left last because he was not in attendance at the original meeting, though he assures his reader that he has “read the reports of the meeting very carefully.” Eight letters written by board members are archived in the Report to the Philosophy Committee folder; it’s not clear whether the other four board members failed to respond, or if their letters were lost.<sup>8</sup>

Nearly all of these eight letters take up two themes central to the development of the WRWA’s rural-romantic rhetoric, the organization’s use of the term “rural” and the levels of approach framework, which was designed to make writing more accessible through welcoming both sociological writing, or writing aimed primarily at recording local history, folklore, and traditions, and artistic writing.<sup>9</sup> These letters also demonstrate the collaborative and iterative process through which the Creed was drafted. In this section, I examine these artifacts as a central example of the development of the WRWA’s rural-romantic rhetoric. I begin by analyzing the two themes – the rural and the levels of approach – most important in the eight letters and then trace the development of the Creed through these letters.

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<sup>8</sup> Though Advisory Board members were the only ones to play a formal role in this discussion, Van Antwerp’s letter, which comments on “a number of letters received since the meeting of the Advisory Board,” suggests that some portion of the membership at large may have also weighed in on these issues. The summary of the meeting was published in the February 1950 newsletter, making it plausible that enthusiastic members could already have written in by the early March dates on Swanton and Stieve’s letters.

<sup>9</sup> The levels of approach framework seems not to have had much of a life beyond these letters. The framework was presumably articulated in the “summary” referenced by several board members in their letters. This summary, which was presumably drafted after the meeting and circulated privately among board members, was most likely written by Kamarck and seems to have included a summary of the organization’s history, aims, and philosophy, including the levels of approach framework. This summary must have been distinct from the one presented to the general membership in the newsletter, because the newsletter account makes no reference to the levels of approach, suggesting that even as board members hoped this framework would make writing more accessible to less well-educated or less-experienced members, they also harbored a concern that it had the potential to alienate or offend.

*Construction of Rural People and Rural Places*

A central concern of the letters is the inclusion of the term rural in the organization's name, as well as the connection between ideas of rurality, the rural as content, and the mission of the organization. The significance of this debate is demonstrated by the fact that every board member weighs in some way on the word "rural." Inga Caldwell's letter begins with the assertion that "the Rural Writers' Association should retain its present name and its present aims in order to be of the greatest good to the greatest number." Evelyn Brown insists that the rural approach is essential, as the WRWA has "filled an actual need in the lives of rural folks." In contrast, Al Nelson's letter argues the opposite case, explaining that he is "in favor of calling the group the 'Wisconsin Writers Association' and dropping the term 'rural.'"

This debate is particularly notable because it demonstrates that the definition of terms can significantly influence organizations' interventions in communities; here, the way the WRWA conceived of the term "rural" had a profound impact on the nature of its partnership with rural people and communities. Despite differences in terms of how members frame the importance of the rural for the WRWA, most of the letters – with the notable exception of Helen R. Stieve – are united by the writers' disinclination to identify as rural themselves. For the most part, the board members share an understanding of the WRWA as engaged in helping rural people – and they carefully avoid being themselves seen as either rural or as in need of help.

Though the majority of writers supported the retention of the term "rural" in the organization's name, they did so for quite different reasons. Some writers, such as Mary Zimmerman, suggested that "rural" positioned the WRWA alongside other organizations aimed at cultural development in rural areas, such as the Rural Artists Group and local and county

historical societies. Other writers saw the rural as providing content for writing, or they connected the rural with nostalgia and memories of childhood. Still others saw the WRWA's labeling of itself as rural as responding to cultural deficit in rural areas

Many letters insist on the beneficial influence of the WRWA in rural communities. Swanton explains that he approves of the WRWA because "your aims include the fostering of rural culture and the building of creative ability, which are in line with my thinking in the American Country Life Association." Swanton goes on to argue that the WRWA and rural people are connected by a "unity of interest," as "not only does the Wisconsin Rural Writers' Association need the rural interest, but at the same time the rural people greatly need the writers' interest."

For Swanton, the rural is also linked to a notion of the rural as part of the shared history of Wisconsinites. Arguing against dropping the word "rural" word from the group's name, Swanton claims that

Thoughts of rural life, backgrounds of rural experience and the fostering of rural ideals are sufficiently important in the lives of a vast percentage of our people as to be a real common denominator of interest – a basis for definite fellowship. This need not exclude residents of the city. As a matter of fact, it will be an avenue through which they can keep alive the experience of their childhood as well as their own family lore of the past.

For Swanton, then, the rural is linked to childhood and nostalgia, a conception echoed by several other writers.

Swanton's linking of the rural with family history and bygone times illustrates one danger of the preservationist or celebratory impulse identified by Donehower, Hogg, and Schell. Donehower argues that "the preservationist impulse need not have negative consequences";

furthermore, she acknowledges that “its rhetoric is an important tool in gaining support for work that sustains rural life” (“Rhetorics and Realities” 44). However, this preservationist impulse can become problematic because “preservationist policies that seek to turn rural communities into museums essentially ensure that these communities cease to exist, as no one actually lives in a museum” (44). Thus, at the same time as the WRWA’s desire to preserve “the local history and folklore of the passing era” inspired much research into and writing about rural communities, it also influenced writer-members’ perception of these communities as existing separately from non-rural areas. Thought of this way, the rural becomes a site for recovery and preservation, rather than an active space of community life.

However, not all writer-members saw such a firm division between rural and urban people and topics. Nelson argues that the distinction between rural life and urban life is no longer so firm as it once was. His report attempts to develop a shared Wisconsin identity, musing, “Are we not interested in developing a ‘state’ culture rather than a ‘rural culture’? Why have a division between any writers in the state.” In imagining the WRWA as a vehicle for this state culture, he suggests

Let us now offer all writers in the state a chance to join this association, so that all of us can work together for a better interpretation of all phases of our Wisconsin Life. Surely, it will be a better and richer Badger Life is there is an exchange of cultural information and interests between city and rural writers. In fact, many city writers who have rural experiences, write of those things, and vice versa, I am sure.

Though his understanding of the state’s nature differs from the claims made by other members and the leadership of the WRWA, Nelson shares their assertion that place should impact the content of the writing. His understanding of the mission of the WRWA seems to be captured in

his claim that the member-writers can create “a better interpretation of all phases of our Wisconsin Life.” However, rather than calling up the rural image of fields and seasons, as the foreword to *Pen & Plow* does, Nelson calls up the image of the badger as metonymic representation for Wisconsin and “Wisconsin Life.”

Van Antwerp’s letter is the most neutral in its attitude towards rural people, noting simply that “I get the idea there is a real appreciation of the opportunity to share a common interest – talk things over.” Moreover, she notes that “a lot of fun and friendliness” is developing as a result of local chapter meetings. She does suggest that more outreach is needed, noting that “I believe there are still many people who have not yet awakened to the fact that Association is for them.” Van Antwerp’s suggestion that the WRWA send guest speakers to civic clubs and other organizations to advertise the WRWA and promote membership implies a stance that is broadly inclusive and welcoming.

In addition to this discussion about the meaning of the term “rural,” messages encouraging rural writers to rely on rural life for their subject were everywhere. Caldwell’s letter treats rural writers and rural content as basically equivalent, explaining that “the theme of the writing should primarily be kept rural in character in order to bring out that rural talent which is the organization’s aim.” Newsletters also included frequent encouragement to write about rural subjects. An article from the Spring 1952 newsletter, “There’s Gold in the Crossroads,” illustrates this point:

There is gold in the small towns, the neighborhood block, and the crossroads for the writer who goes out and digs. Space is too limited here to go into detail, but the following will serve to show what newspapers want and are willing to pay for. (9)

The author, T. Ellis Evans, then goes on in a cheerfully mercenary style to suggest that writers in small towns write articles about the birthdays and anniversaries of the elderly, as well as any historical oddities they might find in their town. (“History is an endless source of income,” he notes.) Though the official statements by the leadership of the WRWA are never quite so frank about the financial value of rural knowledge, Evans’s message – rural people should write about rural subjects – is closely aligned to the implicit content of the creed and other statements of philosophy.

Against this romantic view of rural life is an opposing view of rural life as destitute of culture. Attempts to address this perceived lack of cultural opportunities in rural Wisconsin is a common theme in the WRWA’s archives. Brown begins her letter by arguing that the “Wisconsin Rural Writers’ Association has filled an actual need in lives of rural folk.” Similarly, Caldwell notes that “there are so few cultural opportunities in most rural areas, that the Rural Writers’ Organization is a step in the right direction.” Caldwell goes on to argue that the WRWA “meets the needs of rural people in that it provides a means of self expression, directed study and an opportunity to have their attempts at creative writing evaluated by sympathetic critics in small groups.” This is especially important for rural people, Caldwell argues, because “there are so many opportunities for urban self expression and cultural growth not available to the rural population.” The effect of this rhetoric of lack is to place rural people and rural places at arm’s length, as writer-members like Brown and Caldwell distinguish themselves from the rural people whose voices the WRWA intended to promote.

Even Swanton, who is so approving of the WRWA’s work in rural communities and who notes that the WRWA’s goals, which are in his words “the fostering of rural culture and the building of creative ability,” are in line with his own works in the *American Country Life*

Association, cannot resist the pervasive stereotype of rural people as in need. He closes his letter by explaining that “not only does the Wisconsin Rural Writers’ Association need the rural interest, but at the same time the rural people greatly need the writers’ interest.” Not only does this assertion position rural people as in need, it also marks rural people as separate from “the writers.” This formulation, in which “writers” descend from non-rural areas to assist rural people and to record their ways of life, leaves little room for rural people themselves to make their own meaning of their lives, histories, and cultures. This deficit perspective serves to other the very people whom the WRWA ostensibly sought to include.

While the WRWA’s official, public-facing rhetoric posited the rural as a source of inspiration for writing and as the historical and cultural backdrop for the state’s identity, many writer-members describe rural people as in need of assistance and cultural opportunities. While mythologizing narratives seek to promote rural life as special and worthy of preservation, these narratives also place the actual people who live in rural places at a distance. If rural places are worthy of preservation, then they are part of the past, leaving no space in this conception for the actual people living in those places. Thus, as suggested by several of the non-rural-identified board members whose letters are contained in this folder, the argument moves from recording or celebrating rural life and tradition to helping (presumably needy and lacking) rural people gain access to literacy and cultural opportunities.

### *Levels of Approach: The Sociological and the Artistic*

The levels of approach framework, another recurrent topics in the letters, provides further insight into how the members of the advisory board viewed the literary potential of rural people. At the same time as the WRWA articulated an explicitly positive view of the writing potential

inherent in all rural Wisconsinites, it also faced the assumption, engrained by many years of public discourse about the backwardness of rural schools and the cultural shortcomings of rural places, that some of the rural people it hoped to engage might not be prepared to do serious literary writing. The WRWA's answer to this problem was to formulate two distinct "levels of approach," the artistic and the sociological, as a way of making the work of writing accessible to a wider range of potential writers. Though the archives do not contain the original statement of the "levels of approach," which seems to have been formulated at the first Advisory Board meeting and presented in the summary to which the philosophy committee responds, the content of the approach can be reconstructed through the letters written by the philosophy committee.

Swanton's letter offers perhaps the most precise statement of the "levels of approach." Swanton compliments Kamarek on this "twofold" approach, explaining that the sociological approach "takes into consideration the fact that a vast majority of people cannot go into the field of writing to any great degree. As a hobby and a means of enriching their lives it is very important." Swanton explained that the artistic approach "offers something more for those with greater talent and more time." Thus, it seems that the sociological approach entailed writing for the purpose of recording folklore and tales of rural Wisconsin life, while the artistic approach focused on writing as literary craft. Though it was not explicitly referred to beyond these letters, the underlying idea of the levels of approach framework shaped a core element of the WRWA's rhetoric, with its influence shown through articles in the newsletter urging rural people to record folklore, as well as the eventual founding of the Oral History division in 1972, whose explicit aim was the preservation of the stories of the elderly about rural life.

Several other letters show board members engaging with this formulation in a variety of ways, and not all are so approving as Swanton. Zimmerman eloquently stated her objection to the framework:

I think it would be a mistake to think in terms of levels of approach. There are so many gradations between the “almost sociological one” and the “artistic one” that although A and Z are obviously distinguishable the middle approaches which might be the zenith of the sociological level as well as the nadir of the artistic are less readily classified and it is very difficult to distinguish between L M N O and P. Obviously, there are levels. Let them be like those hypothetical children that are seen but not heard (about). Let’s bolster everyone’s talent – gold, silver, copper, uranium, etc.

For Zimmerman, then, there are two difficulties in the levels of approach framework. One is technical, as Zimmermann points out that it’s difficult to actually determine clear distinctions between artistic and sociological work. More revealing is Zimmerman’s evident belief that the levels of approach would create a hierarchy not adequately suited to her desire to “bolster everyone’s talent.”

While the creation of this hierarchy seems to have been precisely what the WRWA hoped to avoid, as they held up both approaches as equally laudable, the fact that none of the writers of the letters identify themselves as engaging in “sociological” work suggests that this form of writing was in fact seen as inferior. In his letter, Nelson seems to approve of the sociological approach for others. However, he is careful to represent his own status as an accomplished writer, describing himself as a professional writer. Nelson seems to draw a less firm line than some other members between his own work as a professional writer and the less-experienced writers the sociological approach seems to have been designed to engage. Nelson’s letter

continues with a statement that “I believe that all writers are vitally interested in accurate market information. The person who writes merely to express himself is often simulated to greater efforts if his writings are published.”<sup>10</sup> For Nelson, then, it seems that the mark of a serious writer is publication and economic success. However, this view does not necessarily exclude writers who are initially less experienced or write with less professional aims, such as self-expression. While Nelson distinguishes himself from other, less accomplished writers, his letter still seems to express a belief that the WRWA can and should serve writers at varying levels of skill and with a range of motivations and goals.

Nelson’s letter ends with an approving comment about the first issue of *Pen & Plow*: “I was VERY pleasantly surprised in reading PEN and PLOW. It shows an unusually high quality of publishable material.” Evidently Nelson feels confident that the skills of a writer who begins writing “merely to express himself” can be encouraged and refined through instruction and publication, two categories that made up much of the WRWA’s work with both novice and more experienced writers. In terms of the levels of approach framework, then, it seems that Nelson thought it possible for writers to move from the sociological to the artistic level without any great difficulty.

However, the levels of approach framework did create a hierarchy, and this hierarchy can be seen in Stieve’s letter. Even Stieve, who identifies herself as a rural person and speaks of her “limited education,” characterizes sociological writing as something done by other, less serious or skillful writers. She explains that she has found, through her local club, “willing listeners with which to discuss those ambitions, triumphs, discouragements, and problems peculiar among

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<sup>10</sup> Chapter four, which addresses the WRWA’s encouragement for members to circulate their writing, both through informal sharing and through publication, addresses in more detail the organization’s ways of thinking about the value and potential liabilities of publication.

writers.” It is a tribute to the WRWA’s work with rural writers that Stieve feels comfortable claiming the mantle of “writer” after only a year and a half of membership. However, claiming this status seems – at least according to the terms by which the WRWA encouraged rural people to think of themselves as writers – also to have encouraged her to think of other writers as potentially less serious. Distancing herself from sociological writers, Stieve explains that the fellowship she has found in her local club “may be even more important to those who write from the ‘sociological’ standpoint.” Though Stieve explains that she has been inspired to write about the rural people and places around her, she is careful to clarify her status as an artistic or literary writer, suggesting a clear inferior status for sociological writing and writers.

The intention of the levels of approach framework seems to have been to make the organization more broadly accessible to writers with a range of skill and experience levels. This welcoming position was an important part of the group’s ethos and is reflected in the letter of Fidelia Van Antwerp, an important early leader of the organization. She remarks on the rapid growth of the WRWA but says that the group still has more work to do in welcoming new members. However, the attempt at welcoming a wider variety of members seems to have resulted in the creation of hierarchical distinctions among writers, with some being seen as doing artistic work worthy of publication and other depicted as writing merely for the preservation of local folklore or for personal expression. The effects of this level of approach framework demonstrate the power of the organization’s official rhetoric on the engagement of its members, as members used this framework to categorize their own writing and the writing done by others.

Moreover, because the sociological approach was explicitly rural and preservationist in its aim, the levels of approach framework also inadvertently participated in the very devaluing of rural people it sought to combat. At the same time as rural people were invited to draw on their

rural knowledge for the creation of sociological work, this work was implicitly characterized as inferior. Rural people were invited to write about rural life – but if they took up that invitation, they risked having their work seen merely as sociological, rather than literary or artistic.

### *The WRWA Creed*

Ultimately, the most tangible outcome of these letters was the WRWA's Creed. The central ideas of the Creed – that writing could be done by all and should be shared, and that this writing could contribute to the cultural life of Wisconsin – aligned closely with the WRWA's stated mission dating back to the first newsletter. However, the particular language in which these ideas are expressed reveal the contours of the rural-romantic rhetoric that became a hallmark of the WRWA's outreach to rural people. The opening section of the Creed illustrates the romantic language, elevated register, and high-minded tone that characterize this rhetoric:

Man's deepest experience of life, even in a goodly company, is essentially solitary. At the same time, he is moved to share his moments of intense feeling, his present experiences, and his rich memories of the past. In re-creating in moments of tranquility this turbulent present and the near and distant past to be shared by the less articulate, the WRWA has its being and its meaning.<sup>11</sup>

This brief opening section demonstrates three ideas that became central themes of the WRWA's work. The Creed begins by calling up the tension between an assumed ordinary and inevitable loneliness and the urge to share private feelings, experiences, and memories. The WRWA leadership seems to have believed that this loneliness would be heightened for the organization's rural members, who as writers required a certain amount of solitude for their work but also

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<sup>11</sup> The precise language of the Creed evolved over the years, though apparently without public discussion of these revisions. See figures 4-6 for examples of the Creed's evolution.

necessarily desired an audience for that writing. In an early newsletter, Kamarck encouraged members to form writing groups, suggesting that “meeting as a group is a most wonderful counteragent to the stultifying loneliness which writing requires” (“Formation of Local Writing Groups”). This section of the Creed also hints at the nostalgia that inflected the WRWA’s vision of the rural. Through its definition of the present as “turbulent,” the Creed suggests that modern life is volatile and the past, whether near or distant, is preferable; this emphasis on the past is found also in the organization’s many urgings for members to write the history of their local area and to collect stories from elderly residents of their towns. Similarly, the phrase “re-creating in moments of tranquility” calls up Wordsworth’s definition of poetry as “emotion recollected in tranquility,” thereby linking the work of WRWA writers with the Romantic poets’ valuing of nature as a prime site for poetic inspiration. Finally, this section, in referring to the idea that writers could speak for “the less articulate,” also implicitly calls up the hierarchy between accomplished and aspiring writers that posed a problem for the organization. Though the WRWA leadership explicitly desired to engage rural people, prevailing and longstanding stereotypes also held that rural people were necessarily less well-educated, less interested in literate practice and perhaps simply less temperamentally inclined to engage in reading and writing. The leadership attempted to overcome these obstacles through constant encouragement and literacy instruction delivered in a number of different ways, but the worry that rural people might not be truly up to the task of creating literature continued to haunt the leadership’s outreach to interested rural writers.

The third section, which links culture and language, evokes the literacy myth described by Harvey J. Graff:

Let us believe the mark of the cultured man is the ability to express himself clearly, fluently, and grammatically in his own language; that this ability can be gained best through assiduous study of basic principles of creative writing; that with this comes understanding and discrimination; and that the democratic process of government is safest in the hands of a cultured, enlightened people.

Here the WRWA clearly delineates a collectivist, supportive ethos (“Let us believe in each other”), followed by an articulation of the value of creative writing as a vehicle for democratic engagement.

## REPORT ON LAKESHORE WRITERS

We recently received a neat little magazine from the Lakeshore Writers' Club in Manitowoc County. One of the more active clubs affiliated with the Association, the contents of their first magazine might be of interest to other members in the state.

In the magazine is a copy of their constitution, Article II, being so worthwhile that we are reprinting it here, listing the purposes of the club as follows:

Section 1. The purpose of this organization shall be to encourage the literary interpretation of the life in this area through creative writing of plays, essays, stories, and poems.

Section 2. Objectives:

- A. To encourage creative writing.
- B. Preserve for posterity the spirit and story of our area.
- C. Publish material written by members.

Also included in this first edition are a number of poems, a couple of stories and a few tips on their coming picnic, and additions to the public library that might be of interest to members of the club.

Mrs. W. J. Scott is the editor of the magazine with these people listed as officers in the club: President, Rev. W. J. Scott, Two Rivers; Vice-President, Miss Ruth Gleichner, Two Rivers; Secretary, Mrs. Emil Wenzlaff, Reedsville; Treasurer, Mrs. Milan Krueger, Reedsville; and Reporter, Miss Josephine Herian, Two Rivers.

fig. 4 the Constitution of the Lakeshore Writers, which seems to have informed the Creed, published in the October 1949 Newsletter

Man's deepest experience of life, even in a goodly company, is essentially solitary. At the same time, he is moved to share his moments of intense feeling, his present experiences and the rich memories of the past. In re-creating in moments of tranquility this turbulent present and the near and distant past to be shared by the less articulate, the WRWA has its being and its meaning.

Let us believe in each other, knowing full well each has tasted bitter with sweet; sorrow with gladness; toil with rest. Let us believe in ourselves and our talents while weaving word pictures of past and present which grow more beautiful and priceless with age. Let us believe in the goodness of people - whether they be great or small, young or old, rash or plodding - for from all this will our writings grow.

Let us believe that the mark of the cultured man is the ability to express himself clearly, fluently and grammatically in his own language; that this can best be attained through the assiduous study of basic principles necessitated by creative writing; that with this comes understanding and discrimination; and that the democratic processes of government are safe in the hands of a cultured people.

Let our purpose be to encourage -

1. literary expression.
2. a sympathy and appreciation for the fine arts.
3. a richer cultural life in rural Wisconsin.
4. a preservation of the local history and folklore of a passing era.
5. the continual enrichment of our lives through constant self-education and worthy discussion.

fig. 5 Summer 1951 newsletter, first presentation of the "aims and philosophy" of the WRWA put forth to the general membership

(1) To promote creative writing for and of Wisconsin; to write in story, article, poem, and play of the lives of the people of Wisconsin; to fulfill the spirit and intent of the preamble of the Association:

"Man's deepest experience of life is essentially solitary; at the same time, he desires to communicate to others his moments of intense feeling, his present experience, the rich memories of the past. In the recreating and the sharing of these feelings, experiences, and memories, the Wisconsin Regional Writers' Association has its being and its meaning.

"Let us believe in each other, remembering each has tasted bitter with sweet, sorrow with gladness, toil with rest. Let us believe in ourselves and our talents. Let us believe in the worth of the individual and seek to understand him--whether he be great or small, young or old, rash or deliberate, brilliant or plodding--for from sympathy and understanding will our writings grow.

"Let us believe that the mark of the cultured man is the ability to express himself competently in language; that this ability can be gained best through study and application of the basic principles of creative writing; that with this study and application grow enlightenment and discrimination; and that the democratic process of government is safest in the hands of a cultured, enlightened people.

"Let our purpose be to encourage: Literary expression; appreciation for the fine arts; cultural aspects of Wisconsin life; preservation of the local history and folklore of the passing era; enrichment of our lives through self-education and worthy discussion."

fig. 6 Creed as published in the WRWA's Articles of Incorporation, January 1953.

Almost as interesting as the content of the Creed, however, is the collaborative means by which it was drafted. Four of the eight letters in the Philosophy Committee folder include language that directly aligns to the language of the Creed as it was first published in the Summer 1951 newsletter. The section of Zimmerman's report titled "Re: Philosophy" begins with a paragraph that mirrors the first section of the Creed, while Brown's report includes the second section. Southworth's report, titled "Credo of the Wisconsin Rural Writers' Association," consists entirely of the third section of the Creed, and Stieve's letter concludes with the bulleted list that ends the Creed. In short, these four letters each include one section of what ultimately became the first draft of the Creed, and it seems that the Creed was assembled by simply placing these four sections alongside each other. It's unclear exactly how this drafting process was organized; in particular, there is no explanation of why these four Board Members of the twelve

total would have been assigned to draft the Creed. (And it seems like a notable omission that no language from the letter of Fidelia Van Antwerp, arguably the most influential of the early leaders aside from Gard and Kamarck, made its way into the Creed. Her letter concludes with the suggestion that, given the rapid increase in membership and activities, “the slogan of the Wisconsin Rural Writers’ Association might appropriately be, ‘Growing with the needs of its members.’” This suggestion was not taken up.)

What is clear, however, is that the process of drafting a Creed, which several writers refer to as a “philosophy,” exerted pressure on these writers. In particular, all four writers use diction and tone that is markedly elevated and at odds with the other contents of their letters. For example, Brown’s call for members to “believe in ourselves and our talents while weaving word pictures of past and present with grow more beautiful and priceless with age” is directly followed by straightforward comments about her ideas for the growth of the WRWA, as she notes that “I should like to see writers’ clubs develop in schools” and “I’d like to see our Newsletter develop into a magazine.” Similarly, Zimmerman’s letter begins with a comment on the levels of approach stated in quite direct language (“I think it would be a mistake to think in terms of levels of approach”), and this language shifts quite noticeably when she begins the section titled “Re: Philosophy,” in which she comments on “man’s deepest experience of life.”

In addition to this shift into an elevated register when drafting their portion of the Creed, it’s also remarkable that the four writers’ sections were similar enough in style that they could be assembled with little editing and not feel cobbled together. The Creed, even in its first publication, does not read like a document written by four different writers from four different locations in the state; instead, these writers express a shared view of the mission of the organization, and they use relatively consistent language to do so. Though the WRWA’s rural-

romantic rhetoric had yet to be fully articulated, it was already powerful enough, less than a year into the organization's founding, to profoundly shape the writing of four Board Members who'd just met.

### **Cultural, Historical, and Material Origins of the WRWA's Rural-Romantic Rhetoric**

Though these letters serve as a significant site for the evolution of the WRWA's rural-romantic rhetoric, this rhetoric did not emerge whole cloth from the minds or writing of the Philosophy Committee. The unacknowledged early source of the Creed is the Constitution of the Lakeshore Writers, first published in the first edition of their anthology, *The Lakeshore Writer*, in 1949, and reprinted in the October 1949 newsletter. This Constitution maps out the general aims and initiatives that would shape the WRWA's work, including encouraging "the literary interpretation of the life in this area through creative writing" and preserving "for posterity the spirit and story of our area." That the Constitution of one small club (the Lakeshore Writers history lists just twelve members at the time of the drafting of their Constitution) could shape the goals of the entire statewide organization demonstrates the multidirectional and unpredictable nature of this rhetoric. While the Philosophy Committee set out to articulate the "aims and philosophy" for the WRWA, these leaders were not immune to influence from ordinary members.

The WRWA's rural-romantic rhetoric and the underlying assumptions and values it represents were shaped as well by a variety of cultural, historical, and material factors. This section examines the roots of the WRWA's rural-romantic rhetoric in rural reform movements, the Wisconsin Idea, middlebrow cultural values, and conservative gender ideologies; it also argues that these cultural and historical influences were underwritten by objects that aligned

rural-romantic rhetoric and member writing with prevailing patterns of social engagement, thereby making the work of writing of legible to rural communities.

*The Country Life Movement and the Tradition of Rural Outreach*

The WRWA's rural-romantic rhetoric was informed by a long tradition of urban and university intervention in rural communities. The Grange, 4-H, Homemakers' Clubs, and the Farm Bureau all sought to engage rural people in social and cultural life. Universities and state Department of Agriculture programs worked together to distribute advances in farming, home economics, childcare, and education to rural families through textual means, such as monthly agricultural bulletins, radio shows, and in-person visits from county agents. Though some of these organizations had been founded by farmers, many of these rural reform efforts were urban in origin and thus reflected common views of rural deficit. Even the Grange, which was founded by a Minnesota farmer in 1867, reflected to some extent this understanding of the rural as a problem, and the Grange was intended to correct the "boredom and the absence of social and intellectual stimulation" that characterized farm life through "providing educational and recreational programs" (Danbom, *Born in the Country* 154). Around the turn of the century, with the founding of the Country Life Commission, these rural reform efforts proliferated. As a result of the Country Life Movement and the USDA Cooperative Extension (founded with the Smith-Lever Act in 1912), by 1920, farm families "faced an extensive mediating network of public and private agencies committed to the goal of industrializing agriculture and urbanizing rural life" (Kline 15-16). Newspaper coverage of WRWA activities, which often positioned WRWA activities on the same page as reports on 4-H, Homemakers' Clubs, PTA meetings, and women's church groups, suggest that the WRWA should be read as one node in this urbanizing network.

Reading the WRWA's rhetoric across this urbanizing network calls attention to the material elements of this rhetoric. This section discusses the historical and social context that informed the WRWA's rural-romantic rhetoric and pays particular attention to the ways in which matter is intertwined with that rhetoric.

Nationally, the leading voices in rural reform came from the Country Life Movement, an organization made up primarily of urban reformers, including educators, religious leaders, social scientists, and philanthropists, who were energized by concerns about the migration of rural families and youth from the farm to the city. Though Country Lifers generally believed that America was becoming an urban nation and welcomed the progress they believed this urbanization represented, they were concerned that the modern conveniences available in cities would draw the best and brightest away from rural areas; without their proposed reforms, they worried that rural areas would soon be "populated mainly by ignorant and inefficient people" (Danbom, *Born in the Country* 168). Country Lifers believed that the blame for the problem of rural decline and out-migration lay partly with rural people themselves, as "the dullness and stultification of rural life" was exacerbated by "the reluctance of rural people to develop social institutions and resources that would satisfy bright young men and women" (Danbom, *Born in the Country* 167).

The Country Life Movement had its origins in the American Country Life Commission, founded in 1909 at the behest of President Theodore Roosevelt and chaired by Cornell University's Liberty Hyde Bailey. The Commission's Report, published in 1912, after it held thirty public hearings, received over 100,000 responses to questionnaires, and heard the reports from over two hundred meetings in public schools (Kline 12), suggested widespread discontent with rural life and argued for an array of rural reforms, including the beautification and

modernization of rural homes, the re-energization of the rural church, more efficient production and marketing of farm products, and rural school reform. Although concerns about shifting population patterns were based in fact – between 1890 and 1910, the rural population of the United States decreased from 63.9 percent to 53.7 percent (Bowers qtd in McCracken 140), with that number further dipping to 25 percent in 1930 and 15 percent by 1950 (Kline 2) – there’s less truth to the aspects of the Commission’s Report that suggest rural people on the whole were dissatisfied with their lives and desired outside assistance; data from surveys was not analyzed or included in the report, and “a recent analysis of its replies shows that, contrary to the commission’s report, ‘a *majority* of the total sample and of the farmers were *unqualifiedly satisfied* with the conditions of their homes, rural sanitation, and communications services” (Kline 14).

In addition to seeing rural places as generally backwards, the Country Life Movement took a particularly dim view of rural schools. Country Lifers proposed sweeping curricular and structural changes to rural schools; at the same time as they wished to include more directly vocational material in agriculture and home economics as a way of encouraging rural young people to stay on the farm, they also urged the consolidation of one room schoolhouses in favor of ostensibly more efficient centralized schools, which typically required rural children to be bused to towns (Tyack; Danbom, *Born in the Country* 169-170). Rural people themselves were often less than eager for these reforms; Danbom argues that rural school reforms were imposed by outsiders and not welcomed by rural families (“Rural Education and the Country Life Movement, 1900-1920”), and Fuller has documented resistance to school consolidation, which brought about the closure of many one-room schools.

These paradoxical reform efforts, which worked to make the curriculum more rural while removing control of the schools from rural people themselves, became a trademark of rural reform. This tension is especially clear in discussion of the need to extend technologies and other modern conveniences to rural places. Electrification, telephone, radio, and improved roads were all eagerly supported by rural reformers as ways of extending modern (and presumably urban) conveniences to rural areas, with the assumption that these technologies could modernize rural places and thereby fix rural people in rural places. Kline uses the term “urbanize” to describe this process and defines “urbanization” as a cultural, rather than demographic, process. He examines the twin goals of rural reformers, the use of improved communication and transportation technologies to connect rural areas to the city and the incorporation of “modern conveniences” such as electricity to the farmhouse (Kline 7). Kline’s analysis of rural reform reveals the extent to which “modern” and urban cultural habits and values are intertwined with objects and technologies, which were investing with agency and thought capable of shifting rural people’s habits and values and bringing them in line with the urban, modern mainstream.

In the end, the Country Life Movement is notable less for its impact on rural life and more for what it indicates about changing attitudes toward farmers and rural life (Danbom, *Born in the Country*). Previously, America had been a rural nation, with the farmer being the norm; now, farmers were seen as “peculiar,” defined as “objects of concern.” In other words, “the farmer had been transformed from paragon to problem, and rural America from backbone to backwater” (Danbom, *Born in the Country* 175).

There’s evidence that members understood the leadership of the WRWA in the context of this culture of rural intervention. The history of the Waukesha Writers Workshop mentions a visit from “Mr. Edward Kamarck, a member and advisor for WRWA, a Cornell graduate, and an

agent whose special duty was the ‘stimulation and encouragement of creative endeavor among rural people’.” Notably, this history refers to Kamarck as Mr., not Professor, and uses the term “agent,” suggesting that members understood him not as a professor/representative of the university but as something like the County Extension Agents who came to work with farmers. It also suggests that the WRWA was - at least for this club - successful in its presentation of itself as a grassroots, fairly non-hierarchical organization; Kamarck is called “a member and advisor” when in fact he was a leader and founding member, as well as publisher of the newsletter. Despite his standing with the WRWA, this club at least seems to have understood Kamarck primarily as a fellow member and writer.

Member writing points also to the influence of these outside interventions. The prize-winning stories written by Bernadette Friedell and Helen Stieve<sup>12</sup> both call attention to the influence of outside agencies and assistance in rural areas. Friedell’s story begins by invoking “the era of scientific agriculture” and the modernizing forces of high school education and the scientific farming methods distributed through the Agriculture Department’s monthly bulletins. The farmer of Friedell’s story, after watching what he calls “rain hawks” flying in the early evening, admonishes himself that “a man nowadays can’t figure out the amount of potash needed to bring up potassium percentage in his soil one moment and get hopeful ideas about rain from the flight of rain hawks the next.” While Friedell’s story highlights the contrast between traditional rural ways of knowing and the imperative to follow the modernizing advice distributed by state agencies and become a “scientific farmer,” Stieve’s story is set during an earlier time, 1918, when modernizing technologies were first making inroads into rural areas. Stieve’s story concerns the conflict between two branches of one family, which is exacerbated

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<sup>12</sup> Excerpts from both stories are included in interchapters; Friedell’s is found in *Writing Wisconsin Landscape*, while Stieve’s is in *Writing Women’s Lives*.

when the family matriarch, Grandma Waring, expectedly moves from her son and daughter-in-law's house and in with the narrator's family. The two families are distinguished in part by their approach to technology and tradition, with Aunt Abbie, the daughter-in-law, presented as a frail woman who surrounds herself with modern conveniences. The story implicitly critiques this urge to modernize, as Ma derides Aunt Abbie's "policy of tryin' to keep up with the Joneses" and remarks on Abbie's new, storebought dress. Although Abbie and Ben have adopted modern conveniences – "Ben's house is so much warmer in winter, an' with no wood to lug either," Ma notes – hearty, homespun wisdom and homespun remedies win out in the end. After the children fall into a frozen lake, Ma refuses Grandma's suggestion of a hot whiskey toddy, arguing that "they ain't usin' them old-fashioned remedies nowadays." Despite her initial resistance, the story closes with family peace restored as Ma acquiesces to Grandma's traditional wisdom. Thus, Stieve's story, which celebrates traditional wisdom and rural ways of life, aligns to the WRWA's rural-romantic rhetoric and mythologizing of the rural.

The WRWA's rural-romantic rhetoric and efforts at rural outreach were also influenced by the Wisconsin Idea, famously articulated in 1912 by University President Charles Van Hise as the principle that "the boundaries of the university are the boundaries of the state." This mandate that "the university should improve people's lives beyond the classroom" ("Wisconsin Idea") lent support to existing rural outreach programs, particularly those organized in concert with the university's Extension Division, which has often operated as the practical means for the implementation of the Wisconsin Idea, and spurred the creation of others. The university's tradition of rural outreach through Extension pre-dates even the official founding of the Extension Division in 1907, with Farmers Institutes beginning in 1885 and Teachers' Institutes beginning in 1888. The Extension's official history defines the Wisconsin Idea as a central facet

of Wisconsin culture, arguing that “many of Wisconsin’s institutions, organizations, traditions, and achievements as one of the most progressive states in the Union, are directly attributable to the Wisconsin Idea – education for people where they live and work, with practical applications for their daily lives.” This desire to extend “the beneficent influence of the university,” as Van Hise termed it, into rural communities across the state influenced both the practical efforts of the WRWA, as it sent professors, professional writers, and editors into rural areas of the state to meet with interested writers, and its rhetoric, as it cast its work in terms of democratic engagement and social uplift.

Although the Wisconsin Idea and Extension programming originally focused on practical education in topics like agriculture, domestic science, and education, it quickly expanded to include arts programming as well. Inspired by Danish “folk schools” during his studies at the University of Copenhagen and the Royal Agricultural College in Denmark, Chris L. Christensen, Dean of the College of Agriculture, instituted an artists in residence program at the College of Agriculture, beginning with famed American Regionalist painters John Steuart Curry, Grant Wood, and Thomas Hart Benton in 1936 (J. Smith). Curry used his residency to teach painting to Farm and Industry Short Course students and travel with UW Extension agents and rural sociologist John Rector Barton (J. Smith). Barton became a leading figure in the Rural Artists movement, which identified rural artists and supported their work through exhibits on campus in Madison. Barton’s introduction to the seminal *Rural Artists of Wisconsin*, published in 1948, describes a “rural art movement” that is growing in the state and mentions “parallel growth in the fields of rural drama, social recreation forms, regional and rural literature, and group music,” which he says present “a striking illustration of the need of many rural people to participate in these art and group activities” (5).

The WRWA positioned its work alongside this movement and occasionally invoked the Wisconsin Idea as part of its mission. Mary Zimmerman, writing to the Advisory Board, discusses the work of the WRWA in connection with the renewed interest in rural arts and culture, arguing that the WRWA is “only a facet of the resurgence of interest in and practice of the folk arts that we find in folk dancing, the Rural Artists Group, the Wisconsin Idea Theater and the local, county, and state Folklore and Historical Societies – to mention a few” (“Report of Mrs. Louis P. Zimmerman”). “Paris in Wisconsin,” a brief article by Gard published in the inaugural issue of *Creative Wisconsin* in January 1954, invokes the Wisconsin Idea to explain the preponderance of art in rural Wisconsin. When the article’s visiting Frenchman comments incredulously on the man and woman painting “right on the main street of this American hamlet,” the narrator responds that “Art’s an everyday thing here now. It’s just a part of the Wisconsin Idea. Matter of fact, if you’ll step over to the town hall with me, I think you’ll hear a group of farmers talking about creative writing” (19).

WRWA Leaders also used the language of the Wisconsin Idea to suggest a connection between the WRWA’s work in rural communities and the university’s commitment to rural outreach. Fidelia Van Antwerp, in a “brief geographic analysis” of the organization’s “Sustaining Membership” in the summer 1951 newsletter, commented that “ ‘the boundaries of the Campus’ are crowding the ‘boundaries of the State’ to such an extent that some members, though living in Wisconsin, have post offices that spill over into adjoining states” (13). Neita Friend, writing in the 1958 fall newsletter, also used Van Hise’s famous formulation of the Wisconsin Idea to describe the role of Creative Wisconsin in defining “a unique literary movement in Wisconsin,” arguing that “this is one reason to extend the magazine beyond Wisconsin’s borders” (6).

In addition to this philosophical connection between the WRWA and the Wisconsin Idea, there were also practical and professional connections. Gard and Kamarck were both professors in the Extension Division and used that connection to the university to legitimize the work of the WRWA, especially in its earliest years. The WRWA also offered writing classes in partnership with Extension, both as correspondence courses and through the Extension centers in rural communities around the state. The archives point as well to connections between Gard and Barton, and the first issue of *Pen & Plow* uses images from *Rural Artists of Wisconsin* as illustrations. The WRWA's particular contribution to rural reform efforts was through writing. It hoped, through engaging rural people in writing about rural places, folklore, and history, to both preserve what they assumed was a vanishing rural culture and to uplift the rural people whom they saw as in need.

#### *The WRWA as a Vehicle for Middlebrow Cultural Values*

Though the WRWA wished to preserve the rural character of Wisconsin – at least according to the romantic, nostalgic terms in which it defined the rural – it also sought to bring members' expressions of rural culture in line with middlebrow attitudes, particularly those connected to self-improvement through education, the pursuit of wealth, and consumption of cultural goods. Thus, its rural-romantic rhetoric was infused with middlebrow cultural habits. Although the term “middlebrow” has often been used as a pejorative, as in Virginia Woolf's description of the middlebrow as a person “betwixt and between” (qtd in Rubin xiii), here it is a useful framework for analyzing the cultural component of the WRWA's project, particularly the ways in which the organization attempted to coach members in reading and book-buying habits that would bring them into the American cultural mainstream.

The WRWA's educational component, particularly its cooperation with Extension in offering writing classes specifically created for WRWA members, was consonant with middlebrow culture's emphasis on self-improvement through education. Joan Shelley Rubin's *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* points to the multiple ways that, particularly in the three decades following World War I, literature and other forms of "high" culture were made available to the general public. These included development of "great books" discussion groups; university and college extension programs in the humanities and other disciplines, sometimes over the radio; radio broadcasting of literary critics in the 1930s; establishment of *New York Herald Tribune's Books* and *Saturday Review of Literature*; and "outline" versions of books. At the same time, older forms for conveying culture to the masses, such as correspondence courses, speakers and lecturers, and women's study groups, flourished (Rubin xi-xii). Further, the education offered by the WRWA, though not a formal degree program, did carry the prestige of the university, something increasingly important in this time period. Bledstein argues that without a firm class structure, as in England, higher education in the United States increasingly came to serve a certifying role and was seen as "an instrument of ambition and a vehicle to status in the occupational world" (34).

Though the Extension coursework offered by the WRWA did not lead to a formal degree or promise occupational advancement, it did offer members opportunities to come into contact with professional writers and editors, some of who became advocates for members' writing. After taking a class with Al Nelson at the Vocational School in Manitowoc, Mrs. Walter Zander's brief reminiscence, "My Home Town" was published in the *Milwaukee Sentinel* alongside other writings by Nelson's students. For some members, these courses became an avenue toward ongoing mentorship, and a *Milwaukee Journal* article describes the role of

Extension in developing the writing talent of one Mrs. Yarber, an African-American writer living in Racine. Her success is portrayed as a matter of determination and self-education, as “despite all her domestic duties, Mrs. Yarber two years ago enrolled in an evening writing course at the University of Wisconsin extension in Racine” (“Mother of 15). Yarber took two 24-week writing courses with Edward Harris Heth, described in the article as a “widely known Wisconsin author,” and at the time of the article was currently enrolled in a third. The article suggests that the writer requires outside assistance to recognize their own work, and Yarber says about Heth that “he tells me when I've written something good when I don't realize it myself” (“Mother of 15”). Although Yarber had been writing before enrolling in the Extension course, this official coursework and the mentorship relationship that seems to have developed encouraged her to take her writing more seriously, and the article notes that she “has managed to find enough spare time to start what she hopes will be a writing career” (“Mother of 15).

In addition to the pursuit of education, middlebrow culture entailed also a certain kind of invisibility, which Chicago journalist George Ade's newspaper piece “The Advantage of Being ‘Middle Class’” describes as being “respectably in the background” (qtd in Bledstein 40). This aspiration to invisibility carried over into manuscript conventions, and WRWA guidance to members about how to prepare manuscripts for submission to editors focused on meeting conventions so as to not call attention to their amateur status. The typewritten page has proven to be a vehicle for not only information but also cultural values. For mid-Victorians, the printed page embodied the virtues of “detachment, calm consideration, order, permanence, and responsibility for judgment” (Bledstein 76); for the WRWA, the correctly formatted manuscript signaled one's membership in middlebrow literary culture.

This implicit assimilation into middlebrow culture highlights yet again the significance of objects for the rhetorical and literacy work of the WRWA. The WRWA frequently recommended books intended to help members with their writing, and although one newsletter article mentions the library as a resource, on the whole, the WRWA seems to have expected that members would want to possess, not simply read, the books they suggested. The newsletter advertised the organization's Book Shelf, which allowed members to order books, as well as paper, typewriter ribbons, and other essentials. The Book Shelf also sold used books from time to time, with one rather large collection being donated by Neita Friend; in this case, the books take on a doubled significance for aspiring members, as their authority is reinforced by both the WRWA's endorsement and previous ownership by a former president and successful writer. The Book Shelf was likely inspired by both practical concerns – writers in rural areas may not have had ready access to books and typing supplies – and the WRWA's desire to shape its members' writing and reading habits. The Book Shelf demonstrates the vital role of objects in the WRWA's rural-romantic rhetoric.

This sense of books and writing supplies as vital to the WRWA's rhetoric is reinforced by Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives*, which comments on book buying as a practice that cuts across class and socioeconomic status (152); here also these objects have a symbolic as well as practical value. One informant, for example, recalls books he believes were written in Polish, the language of his ancestors, which he seems to have not been able to read. So they were preserved in his rural Wisconsin home for their symbolic value, a way of certifying their status as a "reading family," as another informant puts it, as much as their actual written content (Brandt 153). Much as school-based writing has tended to emphasize reading as a model for writing, which Brandt explains serves as "a way to curtail or control writing," the leadership of the

WRWA encouraged the buying and reading of approved books, which they believed would help develop members' writing. These books, along with the practice of book buying and giving books as gifts, situated writing and reading within a middlebrow cultural context.

The middlebrow cultural project of the WRWA was inflected as well by gender ideology. It seems worth noting that all three members profiled in the *State Journal* article are women. Though many of the notable leaders, including founders Robert Gard and Edward Kamarck, were men, it seems that the membership as a whole was heavily female, a fact noted in both the Lakeshore Writers and Waukesha Writers histories. The Lakeshore Writers included one man, the Rev. Wylock J. E. Scott, among their founding members, and Scott, like the three other male members recorded in the history, joined alongside his wife. The preponderance of women in the club was significant enough that when William Millman joined in 1958, the history notes that "our president will not be the 'Lone Wolf' in our group any longer" and goes on to say, presumably facetiously given the club's overwhelmingly female membership, "Keep up your courage boys, you may outnumber the women some day" (7). The Waukesha Writers history comments that "Publicity about the March writers states that 'most of the writers are housewives,' but school teachers, active and retired, were on the list of creators, some of whom had already published" (2).

The WRWA's appeal to women writers, particularly housewives, has several likely sources, including the practical, as women who do not work outside the home are more likely to have time for regular meetings, and the cultural, as newspaper coverage of WRWA activity alongside reports from homemakers' clubs, women's clubs, and 4-H groups suggest the group was seen as an acceptable form of civic engagement. The heavily female membership also likely reflects perceptions of personal or expressive writing as a feminized activity belonging to the

private sphere. Male members' columns in the newsletter often reference the money they make from writing, such as Al Nelson's comment that "I am a professional writer, earning my living entirely from magazine contributions" ("Report of Al P. Nelson"). This trend suggests that when writing has a clear economic value, the activity of writing and identity of writer moves from a private matter of personal expression into the male public sphere.

Further, the WRWA's rural-romantic rhetoric presents writing as compatible with prevailing conservative gender ideologies. Here, writing is not a wild force that sends writers abroad in search of inspiration but is compatible with a respectable bourgeois domesticity. In fact, some members make connections the practice of writing and the regulation of temperament and mood. Stieve claims that writing has made her a more contented and happier person and Wilhelmina Guerink describes writing as helping her to develop a "well-adjusted personality" statements, which echo broader popular beliefs about personality. Rubin discusses the rise of terms like "self-realization" and "self-expression," which entailed "the therapeutic release of emotion" (Rubin 23). In this case, writing is the vehicle for this release of emotion, and Stieve and Guerink's description suggest a view of writing as a civilizing force that seeks to bring those it inhabits back into the mainstream of acceptable social behavior.

In fact, member Wilhelmina Guerink described writing as particularly compatible with women's domestic labor. Guerink suggests that farm women are uniquely suited to writing because the repetitive nature of women's chores, which "need only the use of hands and feet" leave the mind free to engage in creative pursuits. During these chores, "the inquisitive, creative mind can detach itself and go free to pursue whatever subjects attract its interest" (13). For Guerink, "thinking and letter writing" have long been hobbies, and she links these hobbies to the rural landscape she is free to observe while engaged in farm work: "While my hands are busy in

the dishpan or washtub, my eyes lift themselves to the tree-studded skyline, the ever-changing panorama of field and hill, the beauty of dawn and sunset, of cloud formations which seem to form and re-form glorified backdrops for scene after scene of life's realities as heaven reveals them" (14). Guerink describes the product of these musings as having a visceral force; these thoughts inhabit her and demand release, "clamoring for expression" (14). She uses childbirth as a metaphor for this feeling, as she explains that "my mind had conceived and was now ready to give birth to a whole flock of mental offspring" (14) However, she still requires a supportive listener as she births this "offspring," and she asks "but where was there a compassionate pair of arms holding a receiving blanket to wrap these fledglings of mine?" (14). Guerink then reports that she has found the answer "when I discovered WRWA and found, to my delighted surprise, that the state was full of folk like me, all with a similar problem" (15).

Although this perception of expressive writing as women's work likely encouraged many female writers, domestic duties likely also impinged on some women's ability to maintain a writing practice, as in the case of Bernadette Friedell, whose involvement with the WRWA seems to have been brief. Despite her prize-winning short story and her feature in the *State Journal* article, she does not appear again in the newspaper archives as a writer. Rather, her name is recorded – always as Mrs. John Friedell – in connection with the PTA and the women's group at her Lutheran Church. These archives show that her husband used his degree in journalism to become a sports reporter, and in 1954 they moved to Racine for his job with the *Journal-Times*. In this respect, Friedell is likely representative of at least a portion of the WRWA's membership, whose engagement with the organization ebbed and flowed as other responsibilities intruded on the time needed for sustained writing. This apparent retreat from a writing life could be read in two ways. The most obvious interpretation is to see this as a defeat,

yet another story of conservative gender expectations crowding out creative work. However, if we understand the WRWA and affiliated writing groups as one form of civic engagement among many available to rural people – an interpretation supported by newspaper coverage of the WRWA alongside 4-H, Homemakers’ Clubs, and church groups, as well as shared membership across and partnership with success groups – it’s possible to see this instead as a shift in the site of writing and civic engagement. Given Friedell’s degree in journalism and her interest in writing, it’s not surprising that her role in these organizations is often given as publicity, and it seems likely she continued to use her writing skills in a different capacity.

Though the WRWA clearly saw its work as centrally cultural and literary, this section has begun to demonstrate how this work was entangled with objects that both bolstered and mediated the force of the WRWA’s deliberate rhetoric. The WRWA’s encouragement for members to buy particular books aligned its work with middlebrow ideas about self-improvement through education. Its complex relationship to gender ideologies and women’s domestic and rural labor, however, show that its explicitly welcoming messages was at times at odds with the realities of social demands made on women. I turn now to a final consideration of other objects at play in the WRWA’s rural-romantic rhetoric.

### *Objects as Rhetorical Agents*

In addition to the objects discussed above – the books, paper, and typewriter ribbons offered for sale through the Book Shelf, the rain hawks and hot toddies that conjure an earlier era of farming – matter enters into the WRWA’s rural-romantic rhetoric in other ways. In fact, for an organization centrally engaged in literacy work, the WRWA expended a great deal of time, energy, attention, and words on objects. Members made earrings and necklaces and sold them at

fundraisers for the organization. Some clubs organized Christmas tree sales as fundraisers for *Creative Wisconsin*. One member wrote the newsletter to suggest the membership embark on the collective creation of a quilt, and the newsletter published her pattern so that each club or individual member could make his or her own square to be sewn together. Even at Green Lake, the annual conference, celebrated as a site of literary inspiration for writers, objects take a prominent role. Clubs competed each year in contests that required them to make publicity posters or create scrapbooks recording their activity. A white elephant sale was also organized each year. Even as members packed their pens, pencils, and notebooks, their copies of magazines in which they had been published, they also packed knick-knacks and oddities to be sold.

Given the attention the WRWA's own materials expend on these objects, it would be foolish to discount them as ephemera, or as peripheral to the real work of the organization. Instead, like the worms, electrical grids, and debris floating in the Chesapeake that Bennett describes, they actively participate in the organization's literacy work and in its understanding of itself. The objects described above do significant rhetorical work in aligning the work of the WRWA with other forms of civic engagement, including women's clubs, church organizations, and PTAs, thereby ensuring a middlebrow respectability and making the work of the WRWA intelligible in at least one respect to non-writers who might be inclined to find a club formed solely around writing suspect. These objects also reinforce the gendering of writing, particularly personal writing, and writing clubs more broadly as female.

The significance of the nonhuman for the WRWA's rhetoric can also be seen in its attitudes toward rural landscape, weather, and geography. Although sometimes ambivalent about rural people, the Country Life Movement placed a high value on rural *places*, investing them with symbolic value as the spiritual center of American identity and associating the decline in

rural life with “the collapse of the family” (McCracken 121) or fearing that “American democracy would deteriorate” without a viable rural culture (Edmondson 64). President Roosevelt’s introduction to the *Report of the Country Life Commission* concludes with a rousing argument for the importance of “men in the open country, who will be in the future, as in the past, the stay and strength of the nation in time of war, and its guiding and controlling spirit in the time of peace” (9). This elevation of the rural to a symbolic space allowed rural writers to draw on their knowledge of rural space, history, and culture as both the content of their writing and a means of legitimizing their identities as writers.

In total, the WRWA’s rural-romantic rhetoric developed through a collaborative writing process supported by the mechanism of the round robin and the postal service. This rhetoric was most clearly expressed by the Creed, which continued to influence member writing and the organization’s understanding of itself for many years beyond its initial drafting. However, this rhetoric was not the product of an entirely human or intentional process, but was rather infused with the history, culture, objects, and places of rural Wisconsin. Tracing the evolution of this rhetoric helps us to understand not only how the WRWA engaged its members, but also suggests that similar institutions should attend more closely to the forces underlying their own mission statements and philosophies, for these texts often carry with them traces of a wide assortment of histories, ideologies, and values.

### **Conclusion: The Influence of the WRWA’s Rural-Romantic Rhetoric**

The rural-romantic rhetoric of the WRWA had wide-ranging consequences for the WRWA’s engagement with rural people and for rural writers’ writing and relationships to rural places. The Creed in particular seems to have had a long life in the organization, as even Helen

C. Smith's history in the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Fall Conference program echoes the Creed's register and use of imagery. Smith describes "the sailor, the lumberjack, and the cowboy" as all contributing to the folk literature of Wisconsin (1); she goes on to characterize the writing done by members as "the fabric made of sounds, lonely sounds . . . the nostalgias that all of us have, the cry for lost youth, the longing for the hills, the streams, the fields, or the streets, the skyscrapers, the little shops of home" (2). Smith's use of nature imagery here in connection with nostalgia (though she also includes skyscrapers; by this time, the organization had renamed itself the Wisconsin Regional Writers Association, in a desire to be more broadly inclusive) echoes Swanton's linking of the rural with nostalgia more than twenty years earlier. This continuity of imagery in official documents suggests that the rural, particularly as represented through an elevated register and pastoral imagery, remained very much at the heart of the WRWA's conception of itself.

This rhetoric also impacted the actual writing done by members. Because the rural was to serve as content, the topics and genres available to writers were somewhat limited, with writers frequently taking up pastoral subjects and a romantic tone. Furthermore, the WRWA's officially celebratory stance toward rural life dictated that writing's tone. The WRWA enforced its viewpoint through several mechanisms, including the newsletters and official publications, such as *Pen & Plow* and *Creative Wisconsin*, as well as the awarding of prizes such as the Jade Ring. Prizes and publication would have served as powerful statements about what counted as "good" writing for the WRWA.

The Summer 1952 issue of *Pen & Plow*, for example, invokes the rural and the romantic both through its cover illustration, which shows a boy in a field holding a rifle with large clouds and a farmhouse in the background, and through the content published within. Each title on the

table of contents is preceded by a brief description, with characteristic titles including “buildings have souls . . . The Barn,” “pageant of human generations, a short story . . . House; Block 3, Lot One,” and “unfinished chores and the last call. . . Farmer’s Burial [sic].” Jade Ring-winning writing seems to have been similarly influenced by the WRWA’s rhetoric around the rural. A history of the Waukesha Writers Workshop proudly lists two of its club’s members as winners, and the titles suggest the work was appropriately rural in nature. Mrs. Harvey Krebs won honorable mention for an article title “A Tale of the Dunbar Oak” and Alice Davis was awarded special mention for a poem titled “Wild Geese” (3).

In addition to impacting member writing, this rhetoric also seems to have impacted members’ relationships with the rural communities around them. Helen Stieve’s letter serves as a striking example of this. Her report notes that the encouragement to write about rural subjects has been useful. She explains that her membership in the organization has

focused my attention on the rural life I know best, and has helped me to recognize the wealth of material right here in my own community. From that viewpoint, I have acquired a greater understanding of these people and their problems. I have listened most attentively to local stories and folklore, become intrigued by local history.

The WRWA’s rural-romantic rhetoric provided Stieve with the encouragement to write, and her rural knowledge provided content for that writing. However, the cost of this support seems to be a circumscribing of appropriate topics (“the rural life I know best”) as well as dependence on the organization for validation of her work. Much as the non-rural-identified writers of the Philosophy Committee holds themselves at arm’s length from the rural, it also seems that writing about rural life has distanced Stieve from it; at the same time as she claims rural knowledge, she also refers to “these people and their problems.” Though Stieve’s is the only report written by a

member who explicitly claims rural identity, even she is unable to resist placing herself outside that rural context. Stieve's letter demonstrates the extra-literary influence of the WRWA's rural-romantic rhetoric, which both invited rural people and rural knowledge and also participated in a discourse that characterized rural people as culturally and educationally lacking.

This analysis of the origins and consequences of the WRWA's rural-romantic has several implications beyond these particular rural writers. Practically, it illustrates that the rhetoric used by community literacy and other organizations matters; it impacts how writers engage with the organization and other members and how members identify as writers, as well as what they write. Moreover, specific terminology matters. The WRWA's choice to initially position itself as reaching out to rural communities meant that it spent time in its early years discussing exactly what rural meant – who that term invited and excluded, how that term suggested content for writing, and with what groups the organization should see itself as aligned. This discourse around the word rural seems to have been helpful in clarifying the organization's aims. At the same time, because the term is contested and has a complicated history of being used to both celebrate and denigrate rural people and rural places, this conversation also meant that the WRWA was unable to resist sometimes participating in the discourse of crisis and deficit commonly associated with rural life at the time.

This research also has theoretical implications for how we think of the origins and consequences of rhetoric. The links between the WRWA's rural-romantic rhetoric and an array of cultural, historical, and material forces challenge a human-centered notion of rhetoric, suggesting instead that rhetoric is an emergent and unpredictable force that emerges through both discursive and material processes. Although the Creed is a clear site of written and deliberate rhetoric, this rhetoric was also effected through bodies – think of August Derleth's hand, the

images of the women in the State-Journal article, whose appearance and location within a domestic scene align writing with middlebrow cultural values and conservative gender ideologies – and objects, including books, typewriters, quilts, Christmas trees, and assorted knick-knacks on offer at the Green Lake White Elephant Sale. In effect, the rhetoric that shapes our writing and our understandings of ourselves has roots we cannot entirely see and is transmitted and transformed through means we cannot entirely control or predict.

**Interchapter: Writing Women's Lives**

Helen R. Stieve, "Blessings Can Be Arranged," excerpted from *Pen & Plow*, July 1949

Marianne O'Neil, "Kaffee Klatch," *Pen & Plow*, July 1949

Bernice Ver Haagh, "Dil-Emma," Winter 1956 newsletter

Dorothy Litersky, "Spring Housecleaning," Spring 1957 newsletter

### Chapter Three: Rural Space as Commonplace

The first newsletter published by the WRWA begins by explaining that “the Wisconsin Rural Writers’ Association has been established for the purpose of drawing together all the folks in rural areas in the State who have written, or would like to try writing, a play, a story, or a poem” (“What is the Rural Writers’ Association?”). This earliest description of the WRWA’s mission is notable for several reasons, including its inclusive spirit, as membership is open even to those who have not actually written anything yet, but merely desire to, as well as its emphasis on the rural, which remained an important and contested concept throughout the WRWA’s first decade. This newsletter article continues with a description of the WRWA’s intended membership, noting that they would not “rule out someone who lives in the city, but we are particularly interested in the literary interpretation of the country and farm life” (“What is the Rural Writers’ Association?”). Given this interest, rural people were seen as particularly well-suited to writing, and rural knowledge was viewed as an asset for the aspiring writer. The writers of the WRWA were expected to use this rural knowledge to capture the daily and ordinary aspects of rural life, and the opening paragraph of the newsletter article concludes by stating that members “will be expected to write about the things they see and do everyday, the people they know, and the countryside in which they live” (“What is the Rural Writers’ Association?”). As a result, rural places, traditions, and histories became a vital presence in member writing, and this writing reflects members’ eagerness to take up these subjects, with tractors, livestock, and notable figures of local history featuring prominently in the newsletter, *Creative Wisconsin*, *Pen & Plow*, and other WRWA periodicals. With the encouragement of the WRWA leadership, rural places became both inspiration and content for writing, and this rural knowledge legitimized members’ writing efforts.

Rural place also played a less obvious role in the work of the WRWA, to which the introductory sentence's use of spatial imagery alludes. In this earliest articulation of the WRWA's mission, the leadership imagines itself performing a gathering function that is specifically spatial in nature, "drawing together" writers from geographically isolated rural sites across the state. This spatial work happened across several dimensions, including the WRWA's encouragement of the founding of local chapters so that writers could support other writers in their own communities; leadership's visits to local clubs and establishment of creative writing courses, often under the auspices of University Extension; the publication of a newsletter and other text-based means to connect clubs and members to other clubs and to experts; and, finally, a series of conferences and workshops that brought members together bodily in a shared time and space. As the motto often published beneath the title of the newsletter, "Toward a Creative Interpretation of State and Region," suggests, the WRWA took seriously its mandate to represent Wisconsin, and it engaged in continual outreach to communities across the state, attempting to extend its reach across all of Wisconsin.

At the same time, however, these rural spaces were typically figured in relation to the state's urban and suburban cultural and educational centers, and "drawing together" rural writers most often meant drawing them toward Madison and the University or moving experts from Madison out to rural areas. A 1951 newsletter article by Fidelia Van Antwerp comments on the locations of the largest groups of sustaining members, noting that Madison has the largest number of sustaining members, which she comments is "not surprising" because they are "close to the source of inspiration, the state University" (Van Antwerp, "Sustaining Membership" 12). However, Van Antwerp goes on to observe with some puzzlement that the next largest group is in Rhinelander, in far northern Wisconsin, suggesting that distance from Madison and the

University was seen, at least by some leaders, as a hindrance to membership and active writing. In this view, rural spaces were rich in writing and writers, both active and incipient, but these writers were also dependent on outside experts who provided literacy instruction and ongoing encouragement and support.

The effect of this discourse surrounding the rural and writing was complex and contradictory. At the same time as rural spaces were characterized as a rich source of inspiration for writing and rural people portrayed as ideally suited to this writing task, rural places were also figured as remote, in need of outside intervention from experts located in Madison, Milwaukee, and other urban and educational centers.

This chapter considers the role of space and place in supporting the writing of members of the Wisconsin Rural Writers' Association. I consider both the official rhetoric of the leadership with regard to the relationship between rural place and writing and the practices of local clubs, which often varied from official statements in notable ways. I trace how embodied place knowledge built a collective place-ethos for rural writers, and I examine in particular the Lakeshore Writers, a small but especially active club, whose engagement with place was crucial in challenging common definitions of the rural as isolated and provincial and existing only in relationship to cities. They defined the rural not in contrast to the urban but in connection with other rural spaces, and their inclusion of Native American voices challenges assumptions of the rural as implicitly white. For the Lakeshore Writers, the practice of writing was inherently civic and public, and they used writing as a means of engaging more deeply with the people and places around them, undertaking field trips to notable sites, organizing writing contests for local schools, visiting nursing homes and the sanatorium, and circulating a self-publishing anthology of member writing.

Drawing on Carolyn Miller’s work on the Aristotelian *topos*, this chapter examines how, for many of the writers of the WRWA, rural place functioned as a commonplace, supporting both their writing and their sense of themselves as writers. This chapter argues that place – and not just scenic sites of inspiration, but also the places of ordinary life, including libraries, schools, and civic buildings – serves as a vital inventional resource for writers. Rather than being a problem, rather than distracting from the work of writing, the writing practices of WRWA members and clubs suggest that place is in fact integral to the work of writing; in fact, these writing practices reveal that the work of writing includes not only drafting and revision but also circulation through public and private spaces. As a result, this chapter suggests that writing is entangled with the ordinary places and activities of rural life.

### **Location and (Rural) Writing: Scholarly Approaches to Writing and Place**

Place has entered scholarship in composition and rhetoric largely as metaphor, with the material dimensions of place receiving less attention<sup>13</sup>. Nedra Reynolds’s *Geographies of Writing* highlights the material and metaphorical dimensions of place in this scholarship, arguing that “composition studies needs cultural writing theories and material literacy practices that engage with the metaphorical - ways to imagine space - without ignoring places and spaces - the actual locations where writers write, learners learn, and workers work” (3). Malea Powell’s 2012 CCCC Chair’s Address, which used the lens of story to examine space and place, continues this

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<sup>13</sup> Throughout, I use the term “place” to refer to the material – the boundaries and physical dimensions of rural landscape, civic buildings and private residences, the roads connecting rural towns – and “space” to designate how those places are transformed through social practice. In using these terms this way, I follow Michel de Certeau, who defined space as “a practiced place” (117) and Henri Lefebvre, who sees space as socially produced. Because this chapter calls for renewed attention to the material dimensions of space and place, I tend to use the term place as a way of highlighting how physical location acts on writers and writing.

examination of place as both metaphor and material; for Powell, place is the literal location, while spaces are constructed, “made recursively through specific, material practices rooted in specific land bases, through the cultural practices linked to that place, and through the accompanying theoretical practices that arise from that place” (388). In Powell’s understanding, then, space is at once material, cultural, and theoretical. Composition and rhetoric has not engaged all of these dimensions equally, however, and the trend in scholarship has been to treat space and place figuratively. For evidence of the interest in metaphorical approaches to space, Reynolds points to the popularity of movement metaphors, such as border crossing and traveling theories. Calling for similarly increased attention to the material, Reynolds goes on to argue that “imagining acts of writing as material - carving text out of time and space, in particular circumstances that differ for each writer - opens up new spaces in which to study and understand literacy and the construction of meaning” (3-4). For Reynolds, understanding writing as a material practice entails close study of where and how writers write; such a study necessarily assumes that place matters and plays an active role in the writing process.

Despite Reynolds’s call for theories of place that are both metaphorical and material and Powell’s insistence on space as being at once cultural, material, and theoretical, recent scholarship in composition and rhetoric tends to deal with place primarily as an abstraction. Characteristic of this is the recent double special issue of *College Composition and Communication* on Writing and Location. Although Kathleen Blake Yancey’s introduction states that the special issue inquires into “the relationship of location to composing” (5), this special issue, which consists of both brief vignettes describing particular writing practices and full-length articles, tends to treat both location and composing quite broadly, without much attention to how the material dimensions of place impact writing. Emily Legg’s “Daughters of the

Seminaries: Re-landscaping History Through the Composition Courses at Cherokee National Female Seminary” recovers composition practices at Cherokee National Female Seminary as a means of challenging canonical histories of nineteenth century composition instruction, which have typically focused on male-dominated institutions located in the northeast. Legg situates her scholarship within revisionist history, arguing that “our locations of writing have been landscaped by the annals of history” and suggesting that listening to these buried landscaped locations allows us to “turn our labors to re-landscaping what has been pruned away” (68). Although this metaphor of landscape vividly captures the work of recovering lost histories, Legg treats location primarily as an abstraction. The one moment in Legg’s article where place becomes material and literal is when she argues that disciplinary histories have been shaped by the more ready accessibility of archives in northeastern schools (71).

Similarly, Alexandria Peary’s “Walls with a Word Count: The Textrooms of the Extracurriculum,” which examines the literacy instruction provided through print, using the examples of the nineteenth century women’s magazine *Godey’s Lady’s Book* and three twenty-first century blogs, uses space primarily as a metaphor. Peary argues that “texts – not just rooms – have long served as venues for writing instruction” and coins the term “textroom” to connote writing instruction that happens through print (43). Although Peary’s article is an astute assessment of extracurricular writing instruction effected through print and online media, including the ideological aims of such instruction, it’s unclear exactly how the spatial metaphor furthers her argument. While she argues that we should “redefine the location of writing instruction to include the convergence of learners and instructors in textual spaces alongside three-dimensional ones to gain a fuller understanding of how individuals learn about writing” (44), Peary’s textrooms remain very much textual. They’re made of words, and a result

they lack materiality; these are spaces without bodies or affect, spaces that lack the force to act meaningfully on writers.

Interestingly enough, it is the vignettes in the special issue that attend most closely to the material dimensions of place, perhaps because, in their brevity and anecdotal approach, they examine how a particular literacy practice is inflected by its location. Michael J. Faris's vignette mentions his use of Facebook to share conditions about the coffee shops in which he and his friends write - too hot, too cold, too crowded, and so on - thereby demonstrating one small way in which material conditions make a practical and immediate difference for writing. Laura Micciche, writing about the friendship notebook she kept with two friends during middle school, examines how location can grant writing power. In Micciche's vignette, the girls write several paragraphs each day, commenting on boring teachers, a cute boy's new hair style, pop culture, the weekend ahead. In the particular case she discusses, the writing has force because it's done in school - and particularly because, according to the rules of school, it's illicit. Location is an integral part of this writing practice, transforming utterly ordinary sentences about the girls' everyday life into an urgent, collaborative artifact.

Stacey Pigg's "Emplacing Mobile Composing Habits: A Study of Academic Writing in Networked Social Spaces" is the one article in the special issue that explicitly attends to how place materially impacts learning and writing practices. Pigg's article follows the writing practices of several students, examining how public social spaces support that writing. Pigg calls for attention to "the agentive role physical environments play in interactions with bodies and virtual spaces" (255). In contrast with the views of place in popular discourse, in which place has at most only a limited and brief agency, with the human mind retaining control over the writing

process, scholarship such as Pigg's that attends to the role of material place in writing implies that *where* writers write plays a dynamic role in *how* they write.

Although composition studies' and literacy studies' attention to the material dimensions of place has been intermittent, scholarship from within rhetoric has highlighted the significance of place. In particular, the concept of rhetorical space has demonstrated the practical effects of place for rhetors. Roxanne Mountford and Nan Johnson define rhetorical space in somewhat different terms, with Mountford's definition being the broader of the two. For Mountford, rhetorical space is "the effect of physical spaces on a communicative event" (41-42), and she uses this concept to examine how the location and design of the pulpit matters for preachers. Johnson is particularly interested in the relationship of place to authority, and she uses rhetorical space to indicate "which rhetorical situations carry political power and which do not" (175). Johnson develops this take on rhetorical space through an examination of nineteenth century parlor rhetorics, which instructed women in forms such as letter writing that circulated only within the feminized domestic sphere, thereby limiting their political efficacy. Jessica Enoch's "A Woman's Place is in the School: Rhetorics of Gendered Space in Nineteenth-Century America" examines place in even more specifically material terms, considering how renovations to nineteenth century schools transformed the school house "from a public, exposed, masculine space to an enclosed, private, and feminine space" (276). These renovations, which Enoch characterizes as both material and discursive, had significant practical effects both for individual women, who could now enter the profession of teaching, and for public understandings of the nature of education; at the same time as these renovations brought the school in line with the domestic sphere, thereby making the school a suitable place for women to circulate, public understandings of pedagogy were similarly transformed from primarily disciplinary to a

nurturing process. This rhetorical scholarship, which highlights how place plays a part in granting and circumscribing rhetors' power and in gendering or otherwise characterizing who may use particular places and how, suggests that literacy would benefit from a similarly close and material attention to place.

Beyond composition and rhetoric, scholarship in geography and anthropology suggests a more dynamic relationship between place and people, one in which places have agency and affect the humans they encounter. Julie Cruikshank's *Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, and Social Imagination* examines contrasting depictions of glaciers in Canada's Mount Saint Elias mountain ranges by Aboriginal peoples and European settlers. In contrast with the European settlers' understanding of the glaciers as inanimate, a blank terrain to be explored and mapped, the Aboriginal Athapaskan and Tlingit peoples saw these glaciers as sentient and affectable, and they understood themselves to be engaged in a delicate and evolving relationship with them. As a result, Cruikshank explains that "glaciers appear as actors in this book . . . glaciers take action and respond to their surroundings. They are sensitive to smells and they listen. They make moral judgments and they punish infractions" (3). Cruikshank's argument for the agency of glaciers is rooted in part in the differing structures of English and Native language, which she asserts shape what entities we understand as being capable of acting. Athapaskan and Tlingit, which have fewer nouns but more verbs than English, "often define landscape in terms of its actions" (3). As a result, in Athapaskan languages, "actions are often attributed to entities, such as glaciers, that English speakers would regard as inanimate" (4). This argument – that the grammatical structures of English shape how we understand action and agency, with other languages regarding nonhumans and language quite differently – undermines assumptions that the division between the human and the nonhuman are natural. Further,

Cruikshank characterizes encounters between people and places as potential sites of knowledge production, arguing that “in some cases, meetings between humans or landscapes may generate insights on all sides” (10). In contrast with both popular and scholarly views of place as static or only momentarily capable of affecting people, for Cruikshank, people and place are involved in an ongoing relationship in which both parties are impacted.

Research in geography and literary geography, primarily by British scholars, has examined more specifically how writers relate to place. Catherine Brace and Adeline Johns-Putra’s “Recovering inspiration in the spaces of creative writing” engages with Miles Ogborn’s call for closer work between literary studies and geography, or what Ogborn terms the relationships between “words and spaces.” Brace and Johns-Putra’s paper reports on a collaborative study between scholars in literary studies and geography that explored the writing practice and creative process of extracurricular writers, or what the authors call “writers who write for pleasure.” In attempting to understand how these writers experience inspiration, these scholars turn to place and space, arguing that inspiration is “realised in part through a set of embodied practices in space” (400). These practices include, in addition to the writer, a number of nonhuman actors, which Brace and Johns-Putra define as “the assemblage of spaces, objects, materials, technologies, skills and institutional structures that enable the work” (400). Like Cruikshank’s insistence that we see glaciers as actors, Brace and Johns-Putra begin by assuming that nonhumans are also capable of action and in fact play a vital role in supporting writing. Given the geographic lens of this research, it’s no surprise that this research, which inquires into “the ephemeral practices of the writing process,” links those practices to “different sites, both indoors and outdoors” (400). In other words, this scholarship is predicated on the belief that a study of something as intangible as creative writing benefits from close attention to the physical

places that accompany that writing. Through a careful analysis of the rural writers of the WRWA articulate the significance of place for their work, this study contributes to furthering our understanding of how place matters for writers and writing.

### **Ordinary and Extraordinary: Place and Writing in the Popular Imagination**

While scholarly research into space and place has sought to articulate a coherent theory of the relationship between writing and location, popular discourse around space and place likely holds more sway for extracurricular writers such as the members of the WRWA. In popular discourse, the relationship between writing and place has typically been figured in one of two ways: place is either extraordinary, as in a scenic vista that inspires writing, or ordinary, bound up with the quotidian and domestic obligations that interrupt writing. In other words, in the popular imagination, extraordinary place – places outside daily life, places that are beautiful or otherwise remarkable – can positively impact writing, while ordinary place – grocery stores, kitchens, schools, and other unremarkable, unbeautiful sites – is detrimental to writing. These opposing ways of figuring place mark writing as necessarily in tension with daily life.

Extraordinary place is most often understood as inspiration or content for writing. Popular discourse around writing, particularly as captured by interviews with writers and craft books for aspiring writers, tends to depict place as having a fairly straightforward and instrumental relationship to writing. Typically, place is characterized as a source of inspiration or content for writing, as in the chapter on “Poetry of Place” in Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux’s *The Poet’s Companion*, a book of craft lessons and writing exercises. The chapter begins by discussing several poets famously associated with particular places (Robert Frost and Donald Hall and New England, Garrett Hongo and Hawaii, Philip Levine and Detroit) and then includes

examples of several poems that use place as their subject. The exercises for this chapter encourage writers to draw on their memories of place as a starting point for a poem, urging writers to “use place names and street names, the names of neighborhoods, neighbors, and friends” and to “be detailed and specific” (79). This emphasis on the concrete and on specificity, which is typical of craft books like this one, seems rooted in the belief that the right detail can transport a place or an experience wholesale to a reader.

When viewed this way – as content – place becomes something simply decanted into the text, with neither the place nor the writer changed through the act of writing. Place as content posits place as inert, passive, waiting to be captured through art. Further, place as content suggests that place can be extracted and represented wholesale in a piece of writing. Discussing place as inspiration for writing, on the other hand, allows place a bit more agency. Following inspiration’s etymological link to breath and divine influence, to say that place inspires allows that places can *move* people: a place – when sufficiently beautiful otherwise striking – breathes into the writer, and the writer takes up his pen. This kind of place-agency is limited, however, in both its force and its duration, suggesting merely a brief nudge that sets the human mind in motion.

While extraordinary place – beautiful landscapes, scenic vistas, quiet retreats – is often thought of in positive terms as subject or inspiration for writing, ordinary place is typically figured as a problem. Linda Brodkey’s “Modernism and the Scene(s) of Writing” discusses this trope, calling up the image of the writer working by candlelight in a cold garret. In this view, writing requires removal from the demands of ordinary life, and the space of the writer is a kind of no-place, cut off from anything that might interfere with the solitary act of writing. This isolation is spatial, temporal, and social, as the writer’s solitude demands not only the absence of

the distractions of daily life, but also a dedicated space and time devoted to writing alone. Understanding the writing life as entailing a fairly radical isolation has striking consequences for *who* can take up writing; if writing requires space and time away from ordinary life, becoming a writer is especially difficult for those who have domestic, family, or work obligations. In particular, for the rural writers of the WRWA, many of whom were women with childcare, domestic, and farm duties, this kind of remove from ordinary life would likely have seemed an impossible indulgence.

Drawing, presumably, on this understanding of ordinary places as detrimental to a writing practice, advice to writers describes ways to create a special writing space that will shield the act of writing from the distractions and demands of daily life. The ideal writing space is often thought of as a kind of no-place, where writers can work at a remove from the demands of daily life. Describing writing spaces in *The Writing Life*, Annie Dillard cautions that “appealing workplaces are to be avoided.” Rather, “one wants a room with no view, so imagination can meet memory in the dark” (26). For Dillard, place is a threat to writing. Thus, “no view” is preferable to a scenic landscape, which might encroach on the necessary workings of imagination and memory, which for Dillard are preferable sources of inspiration to one’s immediate environment. Absent this special writing place, the demands of daily life impinge on writers. Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own,” for example, attributes the lack of poetry and plays written by women to the fact that women had often written in the drawing room, amidst the distractions of domestic life.

In response to this conception of ordinary place as a problem, writers attend retreats, colonies, and conferences, in the hope that a beautiful space away from their ordinary lives will produce more and better writing. Breadloaf, hosted each summer at Middlebury College in

Vermont, is the country's oldest writers' conference. Other notable conferences include Sewanee, held at The University of The South, Taos, and Squaw Valley. The rhetoric of prestigious conferences tends to focus on the literary and collegial atmosphere they provide, as in the description of Breadloaf on Middlebury's website:

For the past 90 years, the workshops, lectures, and classes, held in the shadow of the Green Mountains, have introduced generations of participants to rigorous practical and theoretical approaches to the craft of writing, and given America itself proven models of literary instruction.

In addition to these famous conferences for which admission is highly competitive, many universities, presses, and literary organizations have begun running their own retreats and conferences in recent years. The magazine *Poets and Writers* publishes a yearly "Writers' Retreats" issue that promotes a wide range of retreats, conferences, and residencies. The Editor's Note that introduces each Writers' Retreats issue tends to characterize writing as a lonely undertaking, with retreats and conferences as a necessary corrective to that isolation. The 2010 Editor's Note, for example, recalls the editor Kevin Larimer's realization after attending his first conference that "the solitary acts of composition and revision are only two elements within the whole gamut of literary experience" (8). Larimer's Note goes on to observe the frequency of talk among writers about the ability of conferences to "facilitate that crucial feeling of belonging, not to mention a sharing of ideas, healthy disagreement and debate, concentrated writing time, and yes, social as well as professional networking" (8). The March/April 2015 *Poets & Writers* begins with eleven authors' accounts of "life-changing retreats," many of which attribute transformation to the place itself. For example, memoirist Melissa Febos, writing about her time at the MacDowell Colony, during which she wrote many more hours per day than she'd

previously thought possible, claims that “those woods taught me I could expect more of myself” (65). This popular discourse typically depicts conferences and retreats as a respite from the demands of ordinary life and a chance to alleviate the loneliness of solitary writing. Thus, it’s often assumed that writing requires a kind of no-place, a sacred space removed from the people and things of ordinary life that threaten writing. As a result, writing is often thought of as in tension with ordinary life, and writing identity as necessarily distinct from other identities, such as parent, spouse, or employee.

### **Ordinary and Extraordinary: Rural Wisconsin and Writing**

The WRWA both builds on and departs from this tradition of seeing place as acting to the detriment of writers. As discussed in chapter two, the WRWA’s rural-romantic rhetoric tended to treat place as a source of inspiration for writing, and they encouraged writers to make rural places, including historical landmarks and associated culture and traditions, the content of their writing. This rhetoric attempted to recuperate the rural at a time when many were worried about the declining population in rural areas. Against this public perception of rural life as vanishing, the WRWA valorized the rural as a worthy subject for writing, and they argued that rural people were best suited to do this writing. In this way, rather than being a liability and marking writers as backwards or educationally lacking, rural knowledge and rural identity became an asset for members of the WRWA. However, the WRWA’s official rhetoric in regards to rural place also encouraged writers to see the rural as an artifact from a bygone era in need of preservation, so that, at the same time as they wrote about rural people and places, that act of writing distanced WRWA members from the daily and contemporary rural life around them. Here, the WRWA’s

encouragement for rural writers to see place as inspiration or content for writing figures rural place as inert and passive, simply awaiting human intervention.

Apart from its metaphoric significance in inspiring writers, place also had a material effect on the work of the WRWA in supporting writers. The WRWA saw rural writers as isolated both geographically and socially, removed from the state's urban and suburban centers of culture and education and unlikely to know other writers; as a result, the WRWA imagined its relationship to rural writers as a kind of outreach, and this outreach had textual, material, and bodily components. This outreach was frequently characterized in spatial terms, with the WRWA distributing knowledge and expertise from Madison to rural communities across the state. Such a model of support replicated common understandings of the rural as a space "out there" that exists only in relationship to urban and suburban spaces. This support included the leadership's frequent visits to the meetings of local clubs, the creation of University Extension courses typically taught by WRWA leadership, and the newsletter, which aimed to connect members through text. Another important element of this spatial support was the program of conferences that drew writers together for one-day or multi-day workshops, lectures, and conversations with others writers. The Green Lake Conference, the earliest and most important conference for the first decade of the WRWA's existence, was advertised as a site of fellowship and inspiration, with official rhetoric linking the beautiful, rural space with encouragement to write. The description of Green Lake as a retreat from ordinary life that would be conducive to writing echoes the common understanding of writing as requiring a separate space.

This section considers how the WRWA's official rhetoric with regard to place shaped how writers engaged with rural place. First, using the concept of ordinary space, I consider the practical elements of the WRWA's work with rural writers, which the leadership frequently

construed as a project of spatial remediation. At the same time as the organization's official rhetoric regarding the rural encouraged members to see beauty and value in the rural world around them, this rhetoric also characterized the rural as essentially lacking and in need of support from urban and suburban experts, who were implicitly depicted as more modern and educationally and technologically advanced. Second, under the framework of extraordinary space, I turn to the annual Green Lake conference. In examining the descriptions of this event written by both leaders and ordinary members, I consider how this conference articulated an understanding of rural place as inspiration for writing and of writing as distinct from the activities of ordinary life. As a whole, this section suggests that this complex and at times contradictory rhetoric encouraged rural writers to engage with rural place through their writing – but that it also frequently served to distance rural writers from ordinary rural place and people.

#### *WRWA Leadership: Rural Outreach as Spatial Remediation*

The WRWA's understanding of itself as “drawing together” writers from rural communities across the state highlights the spatial nature of the WRWA's work with rural writers, whom they imagined as isolated and in need of support from an outside organization. At its most basic, this “drawing together” happened at the local level, as the WRWA functioned primarily to encourage and facilitate the founding of local clubs. These clubs were to have as their primary purpose the sharing of writing, described in the first newsletter as an informal, collegial undertaking. Another article in that first newsletter, “Formation of Local Writing Groups,” suggests that would-be writers across the state should have no difficulty finding others interested in forming a writing groups, claiming that “in every community there are two or three interested persons who ought to get together and talk over their work.” Working from this

assumption of writing as a pervasive, if not already publicly discussed, feature of rural communities, the WRWA sought to connect these writers or aspiring writers to each other.

However, at the same time as the WRWA depicted local clubs as offering local support, this support was also mediated through the influence of outside forces. A November 1954 newsletter article titled “Do you want to write?” promoted the quality of feedback to be found at club meetings, explaining that “in each club there is usually one or two, and sometimes more, seasoned writers who have had work published, and therefore are fully qualified to give expert advice and criticism.” While the WRWA assured potential members that writers in their local community were well-positioned to provide expert writing advice, they also used publication to certify the expertise of these “seasoned writers.” Because publication most often requires approval of editors outside the immediate area, using publication as a criteria for determining members’ ability to give quality feedback also invokes the judgment of those beyond the local level. Thus, even though feedback in clubs is local, its reliability is also assured by its connection to the publishing world outside the local community.

The WRWA emphasized the support available at the local level, and from the very beginning, place was an important, if not explicitly acknowledged, factor in building these connections between writers. The second newsletter, published in February 1949, gives some additional suggestions on how to form a writing group, and these suggestions highlight the importance of space for writing groups. This advice, in an article titled “Formation of Other Local Writing Groups,” begins with encouragement for writers to take to take initiative to start groups in their own communities, urging them to “call a meeting of all interested people in your community, present the idea to them, then see what happens!” The article then quickly turns to a discussion of the best place for a meeting: “some central public place, such as the school

auditorium, town library, town hall, 4-H county offices, etc. might be the best meeting place.”

While a central location is of practical value in making meeting spaces generally accessible to potential members, these suggested meeting places also link the work of rural writing groups to civic spaces, suggesting that, rather than being simply personal, expressive, or aesthetic, the writing done by these groups has a public dimension.

The groups’ definition of their work is also informed by place. This same newsletter article suggests that writing groups be presented as “an opportunity for exchange of ideas and common growth as writers,” but quickly returns to the emphasis on place, explaining that writing groups are “most of all a place where they can bring their literary efforts for constructive criticism.” Thus, as defined by the early WRWA, place informs the work writers and writing groups do, and in-person meetings in a place chosen specifically for that purpose are much of the value of a writing group. While we most often think of writing groups in terms of text and talk, defining writing groups as *a place* highlights the significant role of space, place, and bodies for members of writing groups. In other words, *being* together influences the way groups talk about writing together.

Despite its emphasis on local connections and the support offered through local clubs, the leadership maintained a sort of supervisory role with regard to local clubs, particularly when they were first forming. An early newsletter offers the leadership’s help in beginning a group:

If any of you are interested in forming new clubs, drop us a line and we will send you a list of the people in your area who are already members of the Association and a brief note suggesting a procedure for gathering the first people to your meeting.

In addition to providing logistical help in advance of the first meeting, the leadership also offered help through in-person attendance at meetings:

When all the preliminary steps are taken, and the date has been announced for your first meeting, drop us a card and we will try to attend that first meeting to get you started (Dec 1949 newsletter, “New Clubs Formed,” 3)

This eagerness to not only help craft procedures and attend possible members, but to also attend the meeting in-person suggests that the leadership believe that their physical presence was necessary for giving credibility to the work done by local clubs. In this instance, the state-level leadership acted as an organizing force, functioning as a sort of clearinghouse to group together interested writers, and they also have a sort of surveillance authority by visiting these new clubs’ meetings in person.

In addition to the support provided between members at the local level, the WRWA also did significant work in taking its expertise out to clubs through leadership visits and instruction. Because the organization was founded at the University and led in its early years by professors of the Extension division, this meant that the WRWA replicated an existing pattern, established in part by previous Extension work, of expertise and authority flowing from Madison outward. This transmission of expertise served to connect writers to the larger organization and to the cultural capital of the university and more expert writers. These visits also served a normalizing function in allowing the primarily Madison-based leadership to monitor and manage local practices.

In fact, the WRWA advertised a formal connection to the University as a benefit of membership. One newsletter article outlines the various ways in which the WRWA’s relationship to the University could benefit members:

Joining such an organization means the individual has at his disposal the resources of the WRWA organization along with those of its sponsor, the University of Wisconsin. These stand ready to aid the beginner in getting a start, in helping him to find the writing field

suiting to his talents, and in ironing out difficulties which arise from time to time.

University professors and WRWA officials are frequent club visitors, thus insuring members of personal services when needed. The University also puts out correspondence courses which clubs may sign up for at a minimum of cost to the individual. (“Do you want to write?”)

This newsletter article, aimed at encouraging new members to sign up, portrays the WRWA as a sort of conduit to the expertise of the University, as visitors will carry the expertise of the University out to members in their hometowns across the state, and the correspondence courses provide WRWA members access to writing instruction through Extension.

Leadership’s visits to local clubs, described above, were a key feature of WRWA work throughout its early years, beginning with Edward Kamarck and Robert Gard’s “Tour of Writers’ Groups,” during which they spent nearly three weeks in November 1948 driving around the state to meet with newly-formed groups and encourage already-established groups to associate themselves with the WRWA. The “Club Notes” section of the June 1950 newsletter, for example, shows that leadership often visited new groups as they were forming, with Professor Edward Kamarck traveling to Rhinelander and WRWA staff member Paul Knoke to Platteville.

The WRWA also disseminated writing expertise through programs such as Extension courses organized specifically for members, which were typically taught by WRWA leadership, professors, or expert writers near clubs large enough to guarantee sufficient enrollment. As early as December 1949, in response to member requests for writing instruction (“some course material that would be of use to them”), the WRWA had arranged with Extension to begin three correspondence courses in the Short Story, Article Writing, and Poetry (“Correspondence Courses”). Many groups, including the Beaver Dam Writers, Door County Writers, Fox Valley

Writers, and Janesville-Beloit Area Writers, were in fact inspired to form after writers took courses.

Leadership also often taught courses for groups, such as the playwriting group that Kamarck taught for the Portage Writers' Group in the spring of 1950. Some clubs actually took on the role of literacy sponsors to non-members, as, for example, the Antigo writers sponsored an eight-week course on short story held at the Vocational School and taught by Fidelia Van Antwerp, a founding member of the WRWA ("Club Histories" 20).

In addition to transmitting expertise and guidance from Madison to the rest of the state, the WRWA also sought to connect members with each other, primarily through the newsletter, so that writing advice and suggestions flowed across the state from one club to another. The fall 1950 newsletter, for example, urges clubs to write in to report on their activity: "if your club has done anything newsworthy, let us know, we'll publish it in the NEWSLETTER. Maybe what you have done will inspire other clubs, maybe what others have done will inspire you." While this form of support was text-based, rather than bodily, here the text was used as a way to mediate distance between clubs and make connections across the state.

Though the newsletter's function, format, and publication schedule varied quite a bit across the years, its most consistent feature was the reporting on news from local chapters. The specifically geographic nature of this endeavor is reflected in the name the feature was sometimes given, "Around Wisconsin With Our Clubs," which suggests that the newsletter could take members on a sort of virtual tour around the state, akin to that completed by Kamarck and Gard. This feature, which typically reports on publication news and other member successes, positions the WRWA as a facilitator of literacy knowledge, with expertise flowing directly from members and clubs to one another. However, as publisher of the newsletter, the WRWA still

controlled the advice that was shared. Though the newsletter allowed for a horizontal sharing of information between clubs in disparate parts of the state, the leadership was still able to retain a measure of control over what was shared and how these reports showed clubs engaged in the larger work of the Wisconsin Rural Writers' Association.

In figuring writing groups as a *place* conducive to writing and to the sharing of that writing, the WRWA sought to bring writing into the daily lives of rural people. The newsletter and other means of communication with members frequently reiterated the leadership's faith in members' ability to capture rural life, traditions, and history through their writing. However, this faith in members' work was also accompanied by a level of surveillance on the part of more-expert writers and leaders of the organization, which in effect reinscribed a hierarchical relationship between the rural and the urban and between rural and urban writers.

#### *The Green Lake Conference and Rural Space as Inspiration*

Despite the leadership's constant outreach to local clubs, the WRWA was not content to have its work remain geographically scattered and its writers supported solely through text. State-wide conferences became another key component of the organization's function, providing writers the opportunity to meet each other and to network with experts in writing and publishing. These conferences represent a new dimension of the WRWA's spatial work, with members gathering from their scattered locations in one central site. These conferences, an opportunity for the organization to literally "draw together" members, served as a site for production of the WRWA's image of itself as at once literary *and* professional, rural *and* outward-reaching. Discourse around conferences highlights the rhetorical work that went into constructing and

maintaining that image, as well as the managerial work done as the state leadership worked with host clubs to plan each conference.

As discussed previously, extraordinary place as a source of inspiration for writing is an important way the relationship between writing and place is understood in the popular imagination. Discourse around the Fall Conferences, typically held at the Baptist Assembly Grounds in Green Lake, during the first decade of the WRWA's existence (1949-1960), illustrate the power of extraordinary place in WRWA rhetoric and in individual members' writing practices. The Green Lake Conferences typically included talks by WRWA leaders, University of Wisconsin professors, and notable writers and editors, as well as workshops of member writing, question and answer sessions, and opportunities for informal interaction between members and invited writers. Several traditional social events evolved, including a Friday night white elephant sale and a display of member work that had been published that year.

As the first state-wide retreat, Green Lake occupies a significant place in the WRWA's collective imagination. In histories it's spoken of fondly as a site of friendship and inspiration for the then-fledgling organization. Official statements in newsletters and promotional materials tended to portray the Fall Conference as an opportunity for inspiration and collegiality, and the physical site of the conference figured into the rhetorical and literacy work done there. Its location – at the Baptist Assembly Grounds in rural Green Lake, near Madison but removed enough to serve as a “retreat” – and its connection to other aspects of rural life, including its simultaneous hosting with the 4H Conclave, means that the Green Lake Conferences served as a site for the production of the WRWA's rural-romantic rhetoric and its image of itself as at once literary and professional, rural and outward-reaching. Member reports, on the other hand, show that attendees viewed the Conference slightly differently, with reports typically emphasizing the

conferences as an opportunity to meet and network with professional writers and editors, both as a way of honing writing skills and also as a way of achieving publication and recognition for their creative work.

Official accounts of Green Lake tend to portray the conference primarily as a source of inspiration and secondarily as an opportunity for fellowship with other writers. Many of these accounts attend to the idyllic rural setting of the conference, suggesting that this pastoral space was essential to the inspiration the conference provided to writers. This assertion of the link between rural spaces and inspiration is in line with the WRWA's rural-romantic rhetoric, which positions rural spaces, people, and folklore as a source of knowledge production and content for writing. While these accounts figure space as the primary actor in the literacy work of the conference, the people present at the conference also receive attention. On the whole, the picture that emerges from the official accounts is of an idyllic rural space that promoted writing and relationships between writers. The tendency to emphasize place, rather than people, in the official accounts, suggests that the WRWA's state-level leadership sought to characterize the organization's work at the conference as primarily facilitative; they selected a beautiful place and gathered writers there, and they downplay their own role in shaping the agenda and activities of the conference.

Newsletter accounts of the Green Lake Conferences published during the 50s depict the conference as a rural, idyllic site of fellowship and inspiration, with the actual site of the conference receiving a great deal of attention, suggesting that space is a major actor in the work of the conference as conceived by WRWA leadership. The fall 1950 newsletter report about the second conference notes that "the weather stayed perfect for three days" and goes on to make a link between this pastoral space and the writing inspiration provided to attendees, asserting that

“the spaciouly rustic grounds were beautiful at this time of year, and most conducive to the pursuit of the Muse” (“Annual Meeting of Writers” 3).

The most vivid characterization of Green Lake comes in the form of Al Nelson’s nostalgic essay, “WRWA – in the 50’s: Fall Conference at Green Lake in the 50s’s.” Nelson’s essay was published in 1973, in the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary issue of the Wisconsin Regional Writer, an occasion that found the WRWA again grappling with its identity. This issue, the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edition, also features club histories and information about the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference to be held in Fort Atkinson in conjunction with the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters. This significant anniversary seems to have caught the WRWA in a nostalgic mood, and Nelson’s essay looks back fondly at the early years of the organization. By the time Nelson writes his nostalgic reminiscences of Green Lake in the 50s, the organization has dropped “rural” from its name and replaced it with “regional,” reflecting a shift both in the state’s demographics and in the emphasis of the organization. The WRWA still strove to remain open and accessible, however, and the article about the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference on the page facing Nelson’s essay explains that “every person is invited to attend. Registration is purposely kept low so that we might attract those who might be prevented from attending by a larger registration fee” (13). At the same time as the organization was growing in numbers and becoming increasingly urban, the WRWA worked to maintain its democratic, accessible heritage, and Nelson’s essay reflects the role Green Lake played in the WRWA’s understanding of that heritage.

In Nelson’s telling, the site of the conference played a key role in the “inspiration, instruction, encouragement, and companionship” it provided attendees. For Nelson, the most salient parts of the conference were the idyllic setting and the opportunity to spend time with

fellow writers, and he suggests that these two components resulted not only in the strengthening of relationships and inspiration for attendees, but also in increased publication. Nelson's account thus reflects the importance of space, place, and embodiment for the Green Lake Conferences.

The physical setting of the Baptist Assembly Grounds figures prominently in Nelson's remembrance, as his account begins by characterizing the conference as a place distinct from everyday life. He describes the "high iron gates" around the Assembly Grounds and the "stern-faced gatekeeper who peered at each driver and his passengers" as they approach, suggesting that attendees pass into a special place that is distinct from their ordinary lives. This space is pastoral and idyllic, and the approach sets the tone for a relaxed country weekend, as Nelson's imagined writer "drove slowly down the winding black-topped road, flanked by huge oaks, slender ash and grassy spots." In addition to being removed from daily life by the distance from home and the barrier of the gates, Green Lake also exists in a special time, as Nelson suggests that the beautiful setting creates "a feeling of relaxation, as if time were temporarily suspended" and notes that he is describing "early, slower paced days." The Green Lake conference, in Nelson's account, seems to draw much of its power from its separation from ordinary life; he explains that "at a self-contained place like Green Lake, where writers ate, slept, and convened in a milieu specifically their own, there was time to reflect on one's life and direction." The Conference, then, provides the "self-contained space," removed from the demands of daily life, which is necessary for the work of writing.

At the same time as the beautiful setting of the conference promoted the literacy work of the conference, it also reinforced the WRWA's rural-romantic rhetoric and positioning of rural spaces as idyllic and distinct from ordinary life. Green Lake's location outside urban areas links it to the WRWA's rural roots and its explicit valuing of the lives and stories of rural people, as

does the choice to hold the conference alongside the 4H Conclave. Further, Green Lake's proximity to Madison made it convenient for the university staff organizing the conference and teaching workshops. The WRWA's depiction of writing as happening in a space and time apart from daily life is in accord with its tendency to characterize rural spaces as distinct from ordinary life, and the site of the conference at the Baptist Assembly Grounds supports the WRWA's preservationist rhetoric about rural spaces and rural people.

Both Nelson's essay and newsletter accounts highlight the importance of relationships built through formal and informal interactions at the conferences, suggesting that the embodied nature of the writers' conference is important in the work done by the conferences as opposed to newsletters and other text-based means of instruction and interaction. The summer 1951 newsletter describes the 3<sup>rd</sup> annual conference at Green Lake as an opportunity to meet with other writers and also to connect with experts: "Writers will be able to meet with instructors in their field and, at the same time, be able to exchange ideas with other state writers" ("Annual Writers' Meeting"). Louise Leighton's poetry column in the Fall 1951 newsletter highlights the relationships formed at Green Lake, noting that "the Green Lake Writers' Conference is over but we shall long remember and use the practical help and inspiration we gained there, nor shall we forget the friends we made, the confidences and the experiences exchanged over the breakfast table and at bedtime, the warm hospitality of the staff, and the spiritual atmosphere of the American Baptist Assembly Grounds" ("Poetry Column"). This focus on the conference as a site of inspiration is echoed in many other newsletter reports. Betty Carl Anderson, Allied Arts Editor, reports in the 1955 Autumn Newsletter that "you get enough inspiration to keep you busy writing until the next year when you can join the Writers' Family again. You really only have to

attend one conference for the bug to bite you, after that, you'll never want to miss another meeting" ("Allied Arts" 5).

While Nelson attends to landscape, he also suggests that the in-person nature of the conference is also important, and his essay provides the richest description of member interactions at Green Lake. Nelson's essay creates vignettes showing notable members and visiting writers at the conference, engaged in both formal instruction and also informally mingling among attendees. In one such vignette, Nelson depicts the leadership organizing the conference and welcoming members, with Eva John Kuhn and Fidelia Van Antwerp readying materials for the conference while Robert Gard oversees registration. In another paragraph beginning "Speakers?" Nelson lists notable presenters from the conferences, including poet August Derleth, Paul Engle of Iowa State, novelist Warren Beck, and Robert Kahn, an editor from the *Saturday Evening Post*. Professors Gard and Kamarck get another mention here and are portrayed in teacherly moments, with Gard urging writers to write "for their own creative pleasure" while Kamarck is "extolling the virtues of dramatic writing." Nelson's account alternates between these scenes of experts providing instruction and description of the beautiful setting, suggesting that in-person interaction with other writers and the idyllic rural site both play an important role in creating the atmosphere of mediation and fellowship he asserts are necessary for writing.

Although Nelson's account spends a great deal of time describing the range of experts available at the conference, including WRWA leadership, University of Wisconsin Professors, professors and editors from other institutions, and regionally notable writers, early advertisements for the Green Lake conference represent it as an opportunity to connect with the expertise of the University in particular. An issue of the *Green Lake Tattler* advertising the 1952

conference begins with the headline “Top flight U. staff members heading for Green Lake.” The article goes on to describe the university professors who will be attending the conference:

Prof Helen M. Patterson, School of Journalism, will lecture on article writing. Miss

Patterson is “tops” in her field. Profs. Robt. E. Gard, Ed. L. Kamarck, Ralph A.

McCanse, and Wakelin McNeel (Ranger Mac) of U. Extension Division, will address the conference on diverse subjects. No writer can afford to miss hearing these people!

In fact, the workshops at the conference were organized under the auspices of the University Extension. Writing to Treasurer John Lonsdorf in October 1959, Kamarck distinguishes between instructional and other aspects of the conference, explaining that “the purely instructional phases of the Conference were set up as a University of Wisconsin Extension Division Workshop.”

Kamarck explains that the reason for this is “the belief that any educational endeavor that University personnel are involved in ought to be controlled by the University.” While the conferences provided attendees, many of whom were geographically removed from the University and had no other formal tie to it, an opportunity to gain access to the instruction and resources of the University, the conferences also served as a means for the University, via Extension, to reinforce its understanding of the writing practices necessary to be a good rural writer. In other words, although the leadership’s characterization of the conference emphasized fellowship and inspiration, the conference also served an important disciplinary function, as particular clubs and members were rewarded for their work.

In addition to the describing the explicit instruction offered at the conferences, Nelson’s scenes of informal interactions between writers suggest the ways in which the fellowship provided by the conference supported writing. Nelson’s depiction of relationships between leadership and members suggests that experts were available outside of formal sessions. For

example, he describes Gard talking with attendees and encouraging them to “interview a few old-timers” and then write a book. Interactions between members also seem to have been important, and Nelson describes the “crescendo of animated talk” at the evening meal of the conference, with writers eagerly greeting each other. The talk Nelson reports is both friendly and writerly, with attendees beginning with standard greetings – “So glad to see you! My, you look well!” – and moving to more writerly concerns – “What have you been writing? Have you sold anything this year?” These personal connections seem to be one of the prominent features of the conference. Because the conferences were a place where attendees would be asked not just about their daily lives but also about their work as writers, the conferences likely provided many rural writers a rare and valuable opportunity to be seen as *writers*, rather than housewives, school teachers, or farmers, and so the embodied nature of the writers’ conference seems to have done important work in shaping members’ identities as writers, in addition to their knowledge of writing technique. Additionally, the location of the conference implicitly requires a particular performance of writerly identity, with the site of the conference at the Baptist Assembly Grounds encouraging members to identify as rural, as Christian, as teetotaling, and perhaps also as white.

While “fellowship,” friendship, and inspiration are the terms most frequently used by leadership to describe the benefits of the conference, local chapters seem to have experienced the conference primarily as an opportunity to gain access to more expert writers. As a result, it seems that while official accounts highlight the force of space and place as actants, people – in the form of fellow members, professional writers and editors, and professors – were, for individual members, the most salient actors. When the Waukesha Writers Workshop history reports on its members’ attendance at the 1952 Green Lake conference, it is precisely these experts who are mentioned: “Waukesha Writers returned from the Green Lake conference with heightened

interest and also much Know-how given by the speakers: Professors Gard, Kamarck, and Miss Helen Paterson, Also Miss Eloise Block and August Derleth.” Describing the 1956 fall conference in a letter published in the 1956 fall newsletter, Green County Writers’ Club president Edna Schroeder explains that “The five of us who attended the Conference . . . agree it was very worthwhile and so stimulating. Personally, I appreciated so much Doris Smith’s interest after I had sent her a manuscript. I think I shall be mailing another to her very soon. I think the criticism service is fine” (“Around Wisconsin With Our Clubs”). Schroeder’s letter further promotes the idea that the conference provides an opportunity for members to gain in-person contact with the prestige and expertise of leadership/other members. Another implication is that the personal relationships developed through in-person contact can make remote instruction, such as the criticism service offered by the WRWA, more effective.

In “A Member Reports on the Green Lake Conference,” June Kysilko describes her experience at the third annual Green Lake Conference in 1951. Kysilko’s account, which takes her task in reporting rather literally and describes the conference chronologically, emphasizes the people at the conference, and nearly every paragraph is devoted to another person whose presence made the conference instructive and encouraging. Kysilko emphasizes the informality of the conference, as well as the accessibility of the speakers, noting for example that David Legerman, editor of a New York publishing firm Frederick Fell, Inc., was “available for questions during several other sessions of the conference.” Kysilko’s account demonstrates the way conferences also become a means for writers to gain access to experts from beyond Wisconsin. In particular, the conferences create links between Wisconsin-based writers and New York-based publishing houses, so that conferences expand the spatial work of the WRWA beyond the boundaries of Wisconsin.

The disconnect between how the leadership expressed the value of Green Lake – as a site for fellowship and inspiration – and the more practical terms in which members understood the conference as an opportunity to network with experienced and professional writers highlights the complex role of place for the rural writers of the WRWA. Although Green Lake functioned as an extraordinary place that helped members express their identities as writers, this experience was necessarily fleeting. As members returned to their ordinary lives, they again faced the challenge of maintaining a writing practice while also performing farm chores, caring for children, attending work and school, and participating in other community activities. While the experience of Green Lake as an extraordinary place seems to have been important for many members in validating their work as writers, this experience did little to help them learn how to incorporate a writing practice into the ordinary places of daily life.

In total, the WRWA's official stance toward place inclined members to see place as either ordinary or extraordinary. While the pastoral landscapes and notable historical sites of rural Wisconsin were held up as inspiration and content for writing, it was often implied that writers would need to cordon off a writing practice from the ordinary places of everyday life. The unintentional result of this celebration of extraordinary place, then, was the suggestion that a writing life would necessarily be in conflict with daily life. I turn now to one particular chapter, The Lakeshore Writers, whose practices with respect to place offer an alternative for integrating writing into the ordinary places, including social and civic practices, of rural life.

### **The Lakeshore Writers: Rural Space as Commonplace**

Although the state leadership of the WRWA worked to create a sense of collective purpose and identity, local chapters were fairly autonomous, setting their own schedules,

procedures, and goals. While the WRWA emphasized rural place as inspiration for writing, there seems to have been a fair amount of variation in local practices related to space and place. The range of meeting places attest in part to this local variation. For example, the Hamburg group was small, meeting in a one-room schoolhouse on a “lonely crossroads in Marathon County,” while the Oconomowoc group was so large that they created subgroups for writers working in different groups, with the group meeting as a whole only rarely. Many groups took up the WRWA’s encouragement to preserve rural spaces through writing. The Ephraim club, named “It Happened in Ephraim,” formed specifically around the goal of “working toward a preservation of the rich lore of the peninsula” (“Report on the Tour of the Writers’ Groups”). Other groups and individual writers planned projects recording local history, sometimes partnering with libraries or historical societies to research and distribute their work.

Because this variety in local practice makes it difficult to generalize about the force of place for local clubs, this section focuses on the role of place for one particular club, the Lakeshore Writers, for which place seems to have been particularly important. The Lakeshore Writers’ history, “During Ten Years,” is almost obsessive in its attention to place, with the description of nearly every activity and event including its location. The history is full of descriptions of sightseeing trips, suggesting that place was richly intertwined with their work as a writing group. The Lakeshore Writers’ interest in place also extended beyond Wisconsin, with the group hosting speakers from Puerto Rico and watching slideshows presented by two members on their return from a mission trip to South America. Contrary to the popular image of the writer as solitary genius who requires silence and retreat from the world, writing for this group seems to have been a means of connecting more deeply to the life and history of the community around them. The understanding of writing and writing groups that emerges from

this group is of writing as a social and civic act; for the Lakeshore Writers, at least, being a rural writer requires community engagement and firsthand knowledge of place. This approach to writing as a necessary tool for community engagement stands in rather than stark contrast with the WRWA's official rhetoric in regard to place, which characterizes extraordinary rural places as a source of inspiration for writing but typically sees ordinary place as a distraction to be overcome.

In this section I consider how, by functioning as commonplaces, rural places served as an inventional resource for the Lakeshore Writers, providing not only inspiration and content for writing, but also becoming a realm in which the writer can think and act. The group's shared visits to notable sites, their approach to publication and performance as a means of community engagement, and their use of writing as a form of community service allowed them to develop a collective understanding of their local community. This shared knowledge of rural place, which developed over time and through frequent in-person meetings, informed the group's identity and the writerly identities of individual writers. In this way, place is integrally connected to ethos, as place knowledge, drawn from in-person experiences of place, built their ethos as rural writers whose writerly identities were vitally connected to specific counties, town, landmarks, and other sites of history, folklore, and culture.

Although commonplace, or *topos*, has often been thought of as simply a set of stock arguments from which rhetors can draw, some rhetoricians argue for an understanding of invention as generative. Such an understanding tends to emphasize the specifically spatial nature of the *topos*, so that the commonplace is not merely the list of special and common topics in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, but a space to which the rhetor can go when crafting an argument. Carolyn Miller's "The Aristotelian *Topos*: Hunting for Novelty" calls attention to the spatial metaphor of

the *topos*. According to Miller, this spatial element is original to Aristotle's formulation of the term, in which the *topos* "functions rhetorically as a conceptual place to which an arguer may mentally go to find arguments" (132). In drawing attention to the spatial dimension of *topos*, Miller follows McKeon's argument that commonplaces are "sources of novelty," or, in McKeon's words, "the places for the perception, discovery, and explanation of the unknown" (31, qtd in Miller 132). Miller also draws on Scott Consigny's assertion that *topos* "must serve both as an *instrument* with its own capacities that apply in any situation and as a *realm*, a specific place where the rhetor thinks and acts" (141). Jenny Rice sees *topoi* as serving a similarly inventional role, and her work focuses on the power of commonplaces to "generate and delimit the range of public discourse" (20). In Rice's view, *topoi* are particularly important for civic engagement because they "create public discourse by offering a site around which to gather our talk" (84). For the Lakeshore Writers, rural places became vital *topoi*, sites for the generation of creative work and the articulation of a shared writerly identity.

This understanding of *topos* as a place or imaginative realm, rather than simply a taxonomy of ready materials for arguments, is especially important for the writer-members of the WRWA, whose authority as writers drew in part from their knowledge of rural places. Because the WRWA emphasized the preservation of rural spaces and culture through writing, rural knowledge became an important trait for writers. Given the pervasive stereotyping of rural people as backwards – literally and figuratively outside the urban cultural centers – figuring rural knowledge as an asset rather than a liability for writers was an important component of the WRWA's work with rural writers.

From their founding in November, 1948, the Lakeshore Writers embraced the WRWA's directive to write about rural places and people. The group's first meeting was held at the Court

House in Manitowoc, organized by Mayme Wenzlaff, a 4-H Leader from Reedsville who had attended the founding meeting for the WRWA held at the University of Wisconsin. Several of the group's early meetings were held at the Court House in Manitowoc, a town in eastern Wisconsin on Lake Michigan, approximately 80 miles north of Milwaukee. Though a number of founding members were from nearby Two Rivers, several members also came from farther away, including Green Bay and New Franken, which were each nearly 50 miles from Manitowoc in neighboring Brown County. An early WRWA newsletter described the organization's work as "drawing together," and, with the 12 founding members traveling to Manitowoc from seven different towns in two counties, the Lakeshore Writers performed that gathering across space even in their ordinary meetings.

The WRWA's early newsletters encouraged members to create a "creative interpretation of the state and region," and the Lakeshore Writers' constitution reflects this valuing of place, particularly in the sense of place as subject. Article 2 of their constitution, a modified form of which was incorporated into the WRWA's Creed, emphasizes place in terms of local history and culture, explaining that the group's goals are

to encourage the literary interpretation of the life in this area through creative writing of plays, essays, stories, and poems; to encourage creative writing; preserve for posterity the spirit and story of this area; and to publish material written by our members.

The Lakeshore Writers seem to have taken seriously their mandate to represent "this area" through creative writing, and many of the writing projects reported involve local history, such as Miss Josephine Herian's history of the Catholic Parish in Tisch Mills from 1856 to 1956, a project that "exacted two years of research and writing," and a series of anecdotes written by

Mrs. Alvin Polster, described as a “rural elementary school teacher” about the history of the community (“During Ten Years” 8).

While members’ knowledge of place was important in providing content for writing, knowledge of local place and the histories of those places also played another, more subtle role in certifying writers as *rural* writers. In addition to meeting regularly to discuss their work, the Lakeshore Writers also undertook many visits to local sites, including a visit to a ninety year old Norwegian Lutheran Church in the town of Franklin, guided by Mrs. Orin Olsen, a member. The history also reports another visit to Keshena, explaining that

our interest in writing also called for sightseeing tours to increase our knowledge of other places, so we visited at Keshena with Mrs. Angus Lookaround as our guide. The tour led us to Rainbow Falls, Keshena Falls, Bear Trap Falls, Soman Rapids, Spirit Rock and the sawmills at Neopit (4).

For the Lakeshore Writers, then, visits to notable places function as an important kind of research for writers, and they link an interest in writing with an interest in place. However, this research is not instrumental; in neither case does the history report that any member went on to write poems or essays about the places visited. Instead, these visits deepen members’ knowledge of their community and allow members to serve as guides, thereby demonstrating the place expertise already present within the group. Mrs. Angus Lookaround’s place knowledge is particularly notable, since as a Native American writer (the history reports that she is a “well known writer of the middle west” and her stories include “Sunrise of the Menominees” and “Tales from an Indian Lodge”) she represents a perspective most often absent in the WRWA’s characterization of Wisconsin history and culture. Keshena is significant as the home of the Menominee nation, and in visiting this site under the guidance of a Menominee writer, the

Lakeshore Writers implicitly included native experience in rural place, which often is presumed to be white.

While discussion of place as inspiration often seems to posit place as inert and passive, here place has an energizing force for writers. Place, when seen and experienced in person, becomes a form of local knowledge that's valuable for writers. In turn, place takes on a kind of agency in creating rural writers, as opposed to simply serving as the subject for rural writing. Place acts on people, not through moving them to write, but through shaping their identity, being, and relationships to each other and to the broader community. For the Lakeshore Writers, at least, a good rural writer is one who has a deep knowledge of his community, and that knowledge is best gained through in-person visits to notable places.

Although publication is typically thought of as a personal endeavor, a way for individual writers to gain an audience and perhaps make money through their writing, the Lakeshore Writers history depicts publication as linked to place and community engagement. In summing up their accomplishments, Mrs. Walter Zander, the writer of the Lakeshore Writers history, notes that "we cannot boast of great publications, but we are proud of our accomplishments." Zander then goes on to list the activity of every past and present club member, a task that requires two and a half typewritten pages. In addition to Zander's care to represent the work of every member of the group (members who have published in the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* and the *Green Bay Register* receive no more attention than members whose work has not been published), the way in which her account interweaves publication, the completion of unpublished work, and public performances and readings suggests that formal publication is considered merely one means of gaining a public audience for creative work. The history reports on publication in local and state-wide newspapers, performances at WRWA conferences and Farm Bureau meetings,

and winning entries in jingle contests, giving each item equal weight. Zander's choice to not distinguish between publication in the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* and having an original song sung by a member's granddaughter at church suggests that the circulation the work is more important than the prestige of the venue. This circulation has two important consequences, as it presents writing as a tool for the recording and sharing of community history and culture, and it also allows members to be seen as writers in public spaces.

"During Ten Years" reveals that space was a key actor for the Lakeshore Writers, serving to inform what members wrote and how they defined their mission. The history is full of descriptions of sightseeing trips, meetings in civic spaces and member homes, and community service trips planned by the club, suggesting that their place was richly intertwined in their work as a writing group. Contrary to the popular image of the writer as solitary genius who requires silence and retreat from the world, writing for this group seems to have been a means of connecting more deeply to the life and history of the community around them. The understanding of writing and writing groups that emerges from this group is of writing as a social and civic act; for the Lakeshore Writers, at least, being a rural writer requires community engagement and firsthand knowledge of place.

Although the Lakeshore Writers' history is unique in its continual focus on place, the work of other groups seems to have been inflected by place in several ways. The connection between local knowledge, rural identity, and writing is further demonstrated by groups' tendency to name themselves after their location. Nearly all groups take their name from their immediate locale, so that a group's name immediately locates it in a geographical area. The few groups whose names do not immediately link them to place, such as the Penrock Writers, based in

Waupun, turn out to frequently be place-inspired. The Penrock Writers were named, their history notes, for “the nearby Rock River and a writer’s interest in the pen” (“Club Histories” 25).

Meeting spaces seem to have been an important actor for the work done by clubs, and in particular, they played an important role in shaping member relationships. The Lakeshore Writers’ history’s attention to place is constant, and every recorded meeting also notes the place where it was held. The Manitowoc Court House, for example, is listed as the location of early meetings three times on the first page alone. Describing the variety of meeting locations, the history notes that “meetings were held once a month at the homes of the members, in the court house and in the basement of the Manitowoc Savings Bank.” While meeting in spaces accessible to the public, such as the court house, was likely important in making the group welcoming to all, meetings in member homes seem to have played a special role in maintaining the friendly atmosphere of the club, something the Lakeshore Writers evidently valued. Even as the club grew in size, “we voted to have a membership of no more than seventeen so that the group could continue to meet in the members’ homes” (5). This small size, which made meeting in member homes possible, seems to have facilitated warm relationships between the Lakeshore Writers, and the history’s conclusion suggests that this friendliness was characteristic of the group, noting that after ten years of working together, “we are more tolerant, wiser, and appreciative of each other” (10).

Reports from other clubs also make connections between meeting spaces and collegiality. In their club history, the Waukesha Writers Workshop connects meeting in member homes with the social aspect of the club, explaining that “the social side of the WWW was again in evidence since Mrs. Laura Wellman entertained the group at her home” (6). The history goes on to note that “meetings continued to be held at the homes of members,” and then lists meeting dates and

locations (6). Meetings in each other's homes likely helped forge stronger bonds between members by encouraging more personal connections in addition to connections as writers.

Like the Lakeshore Writers members engaged in historical writing, some clubs took on the writing of local history as a collective project. The Indianhead Area Writers interviewed early settlers for the Washburn County Historical Society ("Club Histories" 30). The 22 members of the Washington Writers, a group of Senior Citizens from the Washington Park Senior Center in Milwaukee, are described as "enthusiastic historians." Their ongoing project is the "Washington Writers Patchwork," which they describe as "a booklet of articles by members relating their experiences and encounters in life in and around Wisconsin" ("Club Histories" 28). The club reports that they plan to present their booklet to the committee in Washington DC working on a bicentennial celebration. For these groups, place seems to have not only served as content for writing; rather, through the WRWA's encouragement to write about rural places, knowledge of rural places seems to have functioned to authorize rural people in writing about places and sharing that writing with an audience beyond their immediate friends and family, or even their writing group. This focus on writing as place also had the effect of making writing something that could be valuable for local audiences, who might share an interest in local history, and national audiences, who might be interested in learning the particular history of Wisconsin. In fact, the WRWA encouraged members to think of Wisconsin culture and history as special, so that even people outside of Wisconsin could be benefited by learning about "Wisconsin's heritage and its special place in world culture" (H. Smith, "Wisconsin Regional Writers Association, 1948-1973," 3).

This connection between writing and the writer's community was a major theme for many clubs as they used writing in the context of community service projects. Though it's one of

the least obvious connections between writing groups and place, this impulse to use writing as a way to connect with other community groups is the most widely seen across local chapters. The Wausau Writers history reports that “members are active in the Wausau Festival of Arts, and many are asked to speak for civic organizations and schools” (“Club Histories” 28). Several clubs, including the Beaver Dam Writers and the Door County Writers, worked with their local libraries. The Door County Writers had a particularly strong link to their library:

The club donated to and did publicity for a drive for a new library, judged essays for a student contest on the need for a new library, and also judged a contest on litterbugging. Books are presented to the library in the name of members who have died (“Club Histories” 21).

Many groups sponsored or judged writing contests, particularly for young people. The Rhinelander Rustic Writers “persuaded the mayor to proclaim the third week in November as creative writing week” (“Club Histories” 30).

Several groups also began hosting writing groups in a variety of locations in their community. The Lakeshore Writers presented their writing on several occasions to patients at Maple Creek Sanatorium and the guests of the Shady Lane Home. The Fond du Lac Writers Workshop “organized a Writers Club at Waupun and started writing classes at the Senior Center and at Rosalind Apartments, and judged a contest held there, as well as at the institutions” (“Club Histories” 21). In addition to this work of writing and community service, some groups even included community engagement as an explicit part of their aim. Shawano Area Writers works “for the betterment of the community in publicity” (“Club Histories” 26). “They started a newsletter, ‘See-Sow Slivers,’ in 1968, have a radio program sponsored by the library, contribute books to the library, cooperate with work and publicity for Shawano Menominee Arts Fair and

are currently working with the Shawano Centennial Committee on 1974 plans” (“Club Histories” 26). St. Croix Valley Writers lists, alongside the promotion of journalistic and literary writing, the goal of being “mindful of community welfare” (“Club Histories” 26).

This use of writing as a means of community engagement is particularly notable for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that in addition to taking up the literacy practices promoted by the leadership of the WRWA, such as sharing drafts, revising based on feedback, and submitting work for publication, these writers were also drawing on rural traditions and culture. While the community work of these writing groups bears a resemblance to the traditions of the civic club or women’s clubs, particularly as described by Anne Ruggles Gere’s *Intimate Practices*, it also bears a striking similarity to the rural tradition of “neighborliness.” As studied by Jane Greer, this neighborliness, an important trait of rural culture, is “an informal but important alternative form of civic engagement” (103). As a result, these groups created uniquely rural literacy practices. Second, this integration of writing and community engagement suggests one strategy for addressing a persistent problem faced by extracurricular writers: how to incorporate an ongoing writing practice into a daily life already full of other obligations. Many extracurricular writers discuss writing and ordinary life as in tension with each other, but the work of the Lakeshore Writers and other groups reveals that place can be a powerful tool for weaving writing and life together. Rather than experiencing a conflict between writing and ordinary life or feeling like those identities needed to be performed separately in distinct places, these writers managed to incorporate the two seamlessly, bringing their writing lives and writing practices to bear in community spaces.

### **Conclusion: Extracurricular Writing and Movement through Civic Place**

In examining the multiple ways that place and space inflected the work of the rural writers of the WRWA, this chapter has argued that, while ordinary place is often perceived as in tension with writing practices, the work of these writers demonstrates that a writing practice can be effectively integrated with daily life and community activities. In fact, for the Lakeshore Writers, much of their identities and meaning as writers seems to arise from how thoroughly their writing linked them to their communities. The Lakeshore Writers provide a compelling case of extracurricular writing made possible through rich connections to public and civic places. Moreover, the work of the Lakeshore Writers highlights the public and civic dimensions of creative writing; rather than being simply a personal act, the work of the Lakeshore Writers brought them into contact with a variety of people in their communities, including students and the elderly.

A further example of how writing drives engagement with place is found in a project Gard and Kamarck worked on along with several other faculty members. This group, who called themselves the Kingery Committee, worked with Ken Kingery, a veteran paralyzed after a polio attack, in developing a special creative writing course that eventually led to Kingery publishing a memoir with a New York publishing house. A press release describing Kingery's success notes that the course not only encouraged Kingery's writing efforts, but also influenced his relationship with his community, noting that "as his world expanded beyond the confines of his bed, so did Kingery's interest in the community around" ("Kingery Committee" 2). As a result of this renewed interest in the community, Kingery ran for and was elected to his local school board, and he also joined a mayor's community council aimed at establishing a youth recreational program. For Kingery, similar to the Lakeshore Writers, the practice of writing is necessarily expansive, moving the writer out into the world.

This analysis of WRWA members' use of space as an integral component of writing practice has highlighted how space and place - as both metaphor and material - are entangled with the act of writing. Place continues to be important to writers, particularly as evolving technologies influence how we engage with the world around us. Discussing the role of technology in the relationship between writing and place, Reynolds argues, "particularly when revolutionary advances in technology have changed fundamentally the ways we compose as well as how we experience space, it becomes important to attend to the concrete, the material, and the geographic" (4).

More broadly, examining the force of place for writers and writing groups helps illuminate both the material conditions that make writing possible and also reveal the ideological work inherent in rhetorical constructions of region. Building on this examination of material conditions that support writing, the next chapter examines the circulation of writing. While this chapter has considered how writing grows from and is supported by rural place, the next chapter considers how that writing moves, and in particular how that movement matters for writing and writers.

**Interchapter: Writing Wisconsin History**

Louise Leighton, "From Radisson's Journal, 1658," Winter 1951 newsletter

Prof. Jonathan Curvin, "Mock Trial (True Account)," Winter 1951 newsletter

William E. Morton, "Our Earliest Settlers," Spring 1957 newsletter

Anne C. Rose, "The Beef River," Summer 1957 newsletter

Hope Cross, "Native Customs," Winter 1957 newsletter

## Chapter Four: Systems of Circulation and Technologies of Communication

The WRWA envisioned a rural Wisconsin teeming with writing. It imagined this writing emerging from the rural landscape, and it sought out writers among those “tilling the state’s acres or ruling its farm kitchens” (“Who is There to Speak?”). In contrast with common depictions of rural places as a-literate cultural backwaters, the leaders and members of the WRWA frequently characterized the rural as rich with talent that needed only to be drawn out, encouraged, and refined. An early newsletter, reporting on Professors Gard and Kamarck’s visit to newly-formed groups across the state, conveys this assumption of writing as pervasive in rural Wisconsin, as Kamarck asserts that these new groups “represent but a very small percentage of the writers in the State who are interested in forming groups in their own communities” (“Formation of Other Local Writing Groups”). Response to the organization’s contest in even its earliest years seems to prove Kamarck right. A report in the June 1950 newsletter about the results of that year’s contest, which garnered over a thousand entries, argues that there is “a vast amount of writing going on in the farm kitchens and parlors of Wisconsin” (“Contest Winners”).

However, the WRWA was not content to have rural people simply *writing*; it was central to their mission that members share their writing, both with other writers and with non-writers. The WRWA sought to circulate member writing across the state – to move it from those farm kitchens and parlors into public places such as meetings of local clubs in schoolhouses and member homes, newspapers, farm journals, and radio airwaves, and the stages at 4-H and Farm Bureau meetings. Because they believed that circulation was an essential part of the writing process, the WRWA quickly took on circulation of member writing as a central part of its mission, creating opportunities for members to circulate their writing in both draft and final form. The October 1949 newsletter, just one year after the WRWA first announced its existence

to rural writers, explained that “we plan to expand the original objectives,” with a new emphasis on “providing a publication outlet, so that rural writers may find as widespread an expression as possible” (“The Year Ahead”).

That word – *outlet* – comes up with some frequency in WRWA discussions about member writing and publication. These discussions suggest a view of writing as electric, a force that momentarily possesses the writer, who, like a lightning rod, receives its charge, before it again breaks loose of the writer’s body and sets back out into the world. Like electricity, writing cannot be inert, is not easily contained, but must circulate. In this view, writing has an agentic force that precedes both the writer and the text itself. Given writing’s vital force, the leadership of the WRWA made finding outlets for member writing an essential part of its mission. In fact, one of the major reasons why the WRWA grew so quickly was its ability to provide members with multiple ways to gain readers for their writing. Through the annual contest, the publication of member writing in newsletters and in WRWA periodicals such as *Pen & Plow*, Round Robin correspondence clubs, and other programs, the WRWA provided writers multiple outlets for their writing.

Leaders used the rapid growth of the organization as evidence of the pervasiveness of writing in rural areas; this growth also serves as proof of the widespread hunger for readers of that writing. In turn, the movement of members’ short stories, plays, poems, and articles from private to public spaces, including libraries, court houses, doctors’ offices, drugstores, and meetings of 4-H, Farmers’ Bureau, and Homemakers’ Clubs, suggests the potential for this writing to do public and civic work. Although these genres are often thought of, under the rubric of creative writing, as merely personal or expressive, their circulation highlights the public consequences of this formerly private writing.

This chapter examines the systems of circulation that facilitated the movement of member writing through local communities, across the state, and beyond. The primary systems of circulation were the postal service and the radio, although the WRWA continued to make use of new technologies as they evolved, such as the University Extension's Educational Teleconference Network and tape recordings of conferences to distribute literacy instruction to remote audiences.<sup>14</sup> My study of the systems of circulation used by the WRWA and its members engages the following questions: What happens to writing when it circulates? How does "airing" one's writing change the material nature of writing? What are the consequences of writing's circulation for the writer? How do writers take up systems of circulation, and how does their engagement with these systems cause them to evolve? How do systems of circulation act on writers and writing?

Through this examination of the circulation of member writing, this chapter makes two closely related arguments. First, I argue that circulation matters for writers and writing and should be viewed as a key component of the writing process, rather than something that happens after writing is complete. Second, I argue that the systems we use for circulation also matter, and we should consider how these systems and technologies act on writing and writers. While the WRWA made use of conventional means of circulation for creative writing, including publication in literary magazines, it also supported members' use of less traditional forms of

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<sup>14</sup> This system of Teaching by Telephone demonstrates University Extension's eagerness to make use of evolving technology to reach Wisconsin's rural residents, as well as the WRWA's quick uptake of these technologies in its own programming. Launched in 1965 by UW-Extension's Instructional Communication System, the Educational Teleconference Network connected 200 sites across Wisconsin with educational speakers around the world. In 1969, this service was expanded to include freeze-frame video as part of continuing education and credit classes at 26 sites ("University of Wisconsin Extension"). The 1973 Autumn Regional Writer reports that Al P. Nelson was using the ETN to offer Extension correspondence courses in writing; these programs were designed to "reach aspiring writers who may not have access to other writing classes" ("Pen Pointers").

circulation, including readings over the radio and performances with community organizations and civic clubs. While conventional literary circulation typically requires a submissions process and garners prestige from editorial approval, these alternate forms of circulation increased rural writers' ability to share their work widely and with audiences who would likely not read more narrowly literary publications. Moreover, the WRWA endorsed forms of circulation that did not entail editorial approval, such as self-published anthologies created by local chapters. Because literary publication is predicated on access to specialized forms of knowledge about the submissions process and literary markets, these alternate forms of circulation dramatically increased opportunities for rural people to share their writing.

This analysis attends in particular to the historical, material, and ideological dimensions of the systems of circulation used by WRWA members. The development of rural free delivery, second class mail, and state-sponsored rural radio were all supported by rural reform movements that simultaneously idealized a nostalgic view of rural life while also viewing rural places as backwards and in need of assistance from outside experts and modern technologies. Discussions about the spread of the postal system, and later, the radio, were rooted in ideas of the rural as deficient, and these technologies, which proponents asserted would bring modern culture and ways of thinking into rural spaces, were thought capable of remedying this rural backwardness. These systems were also shaped by material limitations and technological advances, such as improved radio broadcasting and advances in printing and audio recording. As a result, this study calls for more attention to the material forces that support the circulation of writing.

Metaphors of circulation and movement have often been used by scholars in literacy studies to describe the effects of literacy, particularly on those who pursue literacy as a means for economic mobility or whose opportunities are circumscribed by limited literacy. Deborah

Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives* defines literacy as a resource that circulates and proposes the concept of sponsorship as one way to track the consequences of that circulation. Subsequent studies have attended to the material dimensions of literacy's circulation. Material approaches to literacy studies have examined how literacy constrains movement (Vieira, "American by Paper"), as well as the environmental effects of mass literacy (Mortensen). In "On the Social Consequences of Literacy," Vieira characterizes literacy as a force that moves people and restrains their movement. For Vieira, literacy is "a navigational technology that opens up some paths and closes off others, that orients and disorients, that routes and often reroutes" (27). Robert Yagelski's response to Vieira's article argues that, in addition to the social consequences Vieira details, literacy (and more specifically writing) also has ontological consequences because "writing is wrapped up in how we understand ourselves as beings in the world, and the act of writing has the potential to shape our sense of who we are and how we relate to the world around us" (58). In examining the material and social systems that made it possible for rural people to think of establish a writing practice and, perhaps even more crucially, to think of themselves as writers, my study of extracurricular literacies engages with this call. Circulation is particularly relevant here, as I consider the ways in which circulation matters for individual writers, for communities of writers, and for the broader communities of which they are a part.

Despite increasing attention to the material consequences of literacy, the material systems that support literacy's circulation have been less frequently examined. These systems – which include the postal service, the radio, and the telephone, all used extensively by the WRWA, as well as, increasingly, the internet and new media, which move writing across a variety of devices – are particularly worthy of study because, as Christina Haas has asserted, their very ubiquity can make them invisible to us. Regardless of this conditioned invisibility, these systems matter.

Rather than being simply neutral transmitters of writing, these systems have histories and ideological underpinnings, and they carry traces of those histories and ideologies with them. Examining the impact of circulation on writers and writing and attending to how this impact is shaped by material, ideological, and historical dimensions of the systems that facilitate circulation helps us to see the material dimensions of literacy.

This chapter begins by examining how circulation matters for writers and writing. I consider the impact of circulation on individual writers and the connection between circulation and the broader mission of the WRWA. I then detail the particular mechanisms through which the WRWA circulated member writing, which include meetings of local clubs, the newsletter, anthologies of member writing, performances of member writing over the radio and at local theaters, Round Robin correspondence clubs, and others. These mechanisms served both pedagogical and rhetorical functions, delivering explicit literacy instruction and also implicitly cultivating a shared sense of the habits of reading, writing, and sharing that good rural writers should practice. Finally, I examine the histories, ideologies, and material dimensions of the systems of circulation themselves, arguing that these systems acted on member writing practices. As a whole, this chapter points to the entanglement of written language, the textual means of its transmission, and the systems and material and cultural forces that make this circulation possible.

### **How Circulation Matters for Writers and Writing**

Circulation is important for both writers and writing. Circulation helps make writers visible *as* writers, something that is especially important for writers in the extracurriculum, such as the rural writers of the WRWA, who because of pervasive stereotyping about rural people and assumptions about writing being an essentially urban pursuit, likely had particular difficulty

thinking of themselves as writers. Circulation seems also to have been especially important for the women writers of the WRWA, as the public sharing of their writing helped them take their writing work seriously. However, paralleling Nan Johnson's work on the limited publics of the parlor rhetorics in which many 19<sup>th</sup> century women were trained, gender also played a role in whose writing circulated and where. Although women were incredibly active in the work of the WRWA, organizing meetings of writing groups and hosting conferences and celebrations, by and large, their writing circulated in more limited venues, such as WRWA periodicals. In contrast, male members tend to emphasize publication in paying markets with wider circulations.

Because circulation changes the material nature of writing and the writer's relationship to it, circulation also matters for writing itself. In order to circulate, writing must be prepared, whether that means making a clean copy on a typewriter, mimeographing the pages for a local literary magazine, or printing a computer-drafted copy. Many newsletter columns described the correct preparation of manuscripts for submission to an editor, often accompanied by columnists' complaints about members' incorrectly formatted manuscripts. These discussions of formatting were often couched in the language of middlebrow respectability. For example, the 1957 spring newsletter included a spirited discussion of the importance of sufficient margins, with WRWA President Neita Friend relaying a complaint from Doris Smith of the organization's manuscript criticism service: "at the top the author's name, title, and the beginning of the story were so close you'd need a crochet hook to separate them. And on one manuscript the pages weren't even numbered!" ("Fumes from the Cauldron"). Smith worried about the impact of such inattention to formatting for writers seeking publication, exclaiming "What if a writer would send such things to an editor!" Friend adds her own concerns, also specifically connected to formatting on the typewriter: "I can add two more gripes – worn out typewriter ribbons which leave only a faint

outline of the letters, and smeary carbon copies. Carbon copies there should be always, of course, but left at home and never sent out to complete with clean, correctly groomed opponents” (“Fumes from the Cauldron”). This linking of typographical convention with hygiene and morality aligns with John Trimbur’s research on typography and materiality. Trimbur argues that manuscript conventions represent “the story of the transparent text, where the neatness and clarity of standardized type on the printed page seek to efface the visuality of writing and bring the teacher-reader in direct and unmediated touch with the student’s mind” (“Delivering” 197). Similarly, guidelines issued to members in the newsletters also sought to remove any markers of the writer’s identity, particularly his/her novice status and likely his/her identity as rural. This standard presentation of writing removes all traces of the body from the writing, so that the text becomes an object separate from the writer. This preparation also transforms the writer’s relationship to his or her writing: what started as interior to the writer becomes, as Helen R. Stieve’s letter puts it, “material” capable of being “polished” (“Report of Mrs. Helen R. Stieve”).

At the same time as circulation was important for individual members, circulation was also essential to the mission of the WRWA as a whole. Because the WRWA saw its members as engaged in a collective project of writing rural Wisconsin, it understood its members’ writing as necessarily public-facing. Although the genres encouraged by the WRWA, which included short stories, poems, and plays, are often portrayed as primarily personal or expressive, the WRWA believed this writing had a public purpose, as its members’ work served to preserve and celebrate a romantic vision of rural Wisconsin. As a result, circulation also has broader consequences for how we think of writing. While “creative writing” – poems, short stories, and plays, which were the most common genres in which members wrote – is often thought of as private, personal, or merely expressive, the movement of this writing into public places help us to see it as performing

a public and even civic function. Members wrote to record history, to reflect on the lives of those around them, to express a unique perspective – and then they moved that writing into places we don't normally associate with creative writing – meetings of farmers, doctor's offices, drug stores, nursing homes, and so on.

Wilhelmina Guerink's description of her own evolution as a writer through her membership in the WRWA nicely encapsulates the many ways circulation matters for individual writers, for communities of writers, and for writing itself. Guerink's article, "What the Wisconsin Rural Writers Association Can Mean to a Farm Woman," describes her evolution as a writer and a member of the WRWA. Guerink explains that her hobby had long been "thinking and letter writing," and once she finally felt that she had "real convictions thoughtfully arrived at," she struggled with finding a way to share them (14). Upon finding the WRWA, Guerink explains that she realized "that the state was full of folk like me," and she goes on to describe her membership so far as "five of the happiest years of my life" (14). Guerink's article suggests that WRWA membership has been valuable for her in several respects. She has made connections with other writers, both through the Green Lake conference and through "the media of manuscripts" and these relationships have helped combat her feeling of being "an oddity" for being interested in writing (14). Beyond these relationships, however, the opportunity to share her writing has changed her relationship to it; while she initially describes her hobby as "thinking and letter writing," she quickly moves to a birth metaphor, explaining that "my mind had conceived and was now ready to give birth to a whole flock of mental offspring" and wondering "where was there a compassionate pair of arms holding a receiving blanket to wrap these fledglings of mine?" (14). Much like Stieve's description of her writing as "material," this metaphor suggests that Guerink now views her writing as external, a product that can circulate

without her. Guerink also highlights the public dimensions of writing done by rural women, arguing that

by recording the fruits of our daily reflections during years of glad and willing service to our families and our communities, where we have felt and experienced the absolute trustworthiness of our Creator and His creatures, (even man!) – we might manage, to strike a responsive chord in the war-weary hearts of millions like us everywhere. (15)

Thus, for Guerink, writing – particularly when it moves and finds readers – is both personally and publicly valuable.

As the above discussion demonstrates, I use circulation as a broad term to encompass the practice of sharing writing in both draft and final form. Although there are obvious difference in the goals and results of sharing work in these different stages, I incorporate them in the same analysis for several reasons. First, I am guided by members’ own discussions of the sharing of writing, particularly the ease with which they move between discussions of publication and other methods of attaining readers for their writing, such as a manuscript criticism bureau and the Round Robin correspondence clubs. Although success in publication was celebrated, publication was not viewed as an unmitigated good, nor as the sole aim of the writer. In fact, the process of submitting work for publication was encouraged, regardless of the eventual result. For example, an article on writing and submissions in the 1955 summer newsletter describe the Manawa Club’s use of “‘Acceptance’ and ‘Rejection’ jackpots” which allowed members who had proof of either to draw a prize from the relevant jackpot. The article describes the jackpots as “one of those little things which help to keep writers writing,” suggesting that submission itself, regardless of the eventual result, stimulates further writing (“On the Bulletin Board”). Thus, as

practiced by the WRWA, the pursuit of publication was continuous with the writing process, rather than a task to be completed with a final draft.

This view of circulation as integral to the writing process is supported as well by scholarship in composition and rhetoric, particularly John Trimbur's work on circulation and delivery. Trimbur defines circulation, using a Marxist framework, as "the cycle that links the production, distribution, exchange, and consumption of writing" ("Composition" 190). For Trimbur, circulation is not merely technical, but is rather "ethical and political - a democratic aspiration to devise delivery systems that circulate ideas, information, opinions, and knowledge, and thereby expand the public forums in which people can deliberate on the issues of the day" ("Composition" 190). Attending to the material and ideological dimensions of systems of circulation helps reveal the extent to which various means of circulation support or circumscribe the "democratic aspiration" to access Trimbur articulates as a goal.

Research in print culture also suggests that circulation be viewed as part of the writing process, rather than a step taken only when writing is complete. While we now think of publication as serving a gatekeeping function, whereby editors approve the distribution of writing deemed to meet certain standards, some studies suggest that the boundary between published and unpublished work has not always been as firm as it is now. Margaret J. M. Ezell's *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print* argues that while books remained expensive and hard to publish even after the advent of the printing press, creating rather high barriers to publication for many writers, manuscript culture persisted through the eighteenth century, with many writers of modest backgrounds as well as members of the nobility and gentry circulating writing in manuscript form among friends and associates. This practice of "social authorship" was considered "an older and perfectly legitimate form of literary circulation" (Hudson 86). Certain

practices of circulating writing common among WRWA members, such as reading at club holiday parties and local clubs' creation of mimeographed literary magazines, bear significant resemblances to the social authorship described by Ezell, suggesting that we see this circulation not as an inferior form of publication, but as a complementary practice of social authorship. These practices, which reflect the blurry boundary between sharing of writing among friends and a more formal understanding of publication, further support the use of the term systems of circulation to analyze the means by which members gained readers for their writing in both draft and final form. Further, Ezell's description of the role of social authorship in lowering barriers to publication aligns with Trimbur's understanding of circulation as a matter of democratic access. In other words, for both the rural writers of the WRWA and the writers Ezell examines, these informal means for circulating writing provided writers of lesser means and little access to formal technologies of publication and systems of distribution a means of gaining readers for their work.

In addition to the importance of circulation for individual writers, circulation also merits attention because it has far-reaching effects that are distinct from the content of the texts transmitted. Research in print culture, particularly that concerning the advent of the printing press, points to a whole host of social, cultural, and economic effects resulting from the increased circulation of printed material. Elizabeth Eisenstein's landmark study credits the printing press with bringing about a number of social, cultural, and economic changes, many of which operated separately from the practices of reading and writing. The development of the printing press supported the circulation of an increased number and variety of texts. In contrast with scribal copies, which relied on the intensive labor of a small number of skilled workers to create a limited number of copies, the printing press could reproduce quickly a larger number of

standardized copies of texts. Even before the development of print, Eisenstein explains, the introduction of paper increased both the volume and variety of writing, as “cheaper writing material encouraged the recording of more sermons, orations, adages, and poems. It contributed greatly to more voluminous correspondence and to the keeping of more diaries, memoirs, copybooks, and notebooks” (Eisenstein 121-123). Printing drove increased cross-cultural exchange as skilled workers from a variety of backgrounds came into contact in print shops.

Increased circulation also altered scholars’ relationship to place because the scholar no longer needed to wander in search of a limited number of scribal editions of texts, but could remain in one place and read the more widely available and readily reproduced printed copies of books. Once they could read a wider variety of texts, scholars were more easily made aware of conflicting accounts and ideas between texts, and as a result, “once old texts came together within the same study, diverse systems of ideas and special disciplines could be combined” (Eisenstein 43). In this way, increased circulation of printed material advanced scholarship and drove further innovations.

Beyond its impact on the specialized work of scholars, increased availability of printed texts also drove broader social change because it encouraged silent, rather than oral, reading and helped support “the rise of the reading public,” which, in contrast with a hearing public, “was not only more dispersed; it was also more atomistic and individualistic” (Eisenstein 94). Many of the early printed books were the same as those previously circulating in manuscript copy, so it is the increased dissemination of texts, rather than the content of the texts themselves, that supports this essential social change from a collective hearing public to an individualistic reading public. Eisenstein also suggests that the printing press had an important impact on the sense of self, as, in contrast with scribal culture and oral reading, printing constitutes a form of “silent publicity” that

she argues has been crucial to the shaping of “consciousness of self during the past five centuries” (Eisenstein 129). In Eisenstein’s assessment, the printing press is itself an agent of change, and her study reveals the myriad social, cultural, and economic effects of the circulation of printed material.

Recent scholarship presents some challenges to Eisenstein’s work, particularly her privileging of the book itself as the central object of study for print culture. These studies suggest that the book is entangled with and made possible by a whole host of “social, political, intellectual, and institutional developments” occurring alongside the development of the printing press (Hudson 85). Against Eisenstein’s characterization of the printing press as a primary agent of change, Adrian Johns argues that “the printed book actually sits at the center of a sprawling web of social and economic relations” (Hudson 85). Other scholars have posited different entities as the central agent of change. M. T. Clanchy argues that the impact of circulation precedes even the development of the printing press, as the record-keeping enforced by the English government beginning with the Domesday Book commissioned by William the Conqueror spurred the development of a “literate mentality”. Although scholarship has tended to focus on the invention of printing, Clanchy asserts that “printing succeeded because a literate public already existed” (1). Trimbur and Press argue that the page is itself an actor, “active and alive, with its own invisible understructures and semiotic potentialities” (95).

Despite difference of interpretation in terms of the centrality of the printing press and the book, these studies concur in seeing the creation and circulation of texts as having an important influence apart from the information contained in those texts. Similar to Eisenstein’s characterization of printing shops as facilitating cross-cultural communication, Johns’s book points also to the human nature of any technological development, as he describes how “the

complex and fractious culture of printed books took shape through intense effort and negotiation among many parties including authors, booksellers, stationers, learned societies, bankers, and consumers” (Hudson 85). This scholarship supports my broader argument that systems of circulation arise through the collaboration of a range of human and nonhuman actors, all working from different motivations. Further, whether the printing press, the printed book, the page, or state-enforced record-keeping is the central agent of change, this scholarship finds consensus in his assessment of the ability of circulation itself to facilitate social, cultural, and economic changes.

Studies of educational history have also examined the impact of the circulation of texts. This scholarship tends to focus on how the increased availability of printed materials contributed to the creation of a “reading public.” Carl F. Kaestle’s *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading Since 1880* finds that “there has been a tremendous expansion in the availability, purchase, and use of printed materials, and they have become increasingly standardized, exposing more and more people to common syndicated newspaper features, popular fiction, and mass-circulation magazines” (Kaestle et al, “Preface” xix). Other studies in this volume examine how the purchase and reading of newspapers, magazines, and books contributed to the creation of distinct reading publics (Stedman, Tinsley, and Kaestle). Circulation of reading material, particularly syndication of newspaper materials and magazines like the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Ladies’ Home Journal*, helped to create a common culture (Damon-Moore and Kaestle); however, at the same time, reading levels as a result of differences in educational attainment contributed to the stratification of this reading public (Trollinger and Kaestle). These studies also suggest that syndication itself was an important force in the creation of a reading public, as it made the same content available to readers of small papers in rural areas as to urban readers of

major papers like *The New York Times*. Syndication may also have mediated somewhat the stratification of the reading public described by Trollinger and Kaestle, as writers of local papers adapted syndicated content, simplifying their writing to make stories accessible to their readers.

Circulation has been a powerful force in shaping reading and writing practices. Scholars in history of the book and print culture as well as educational history have attributed a range of social, economic, and cultural effects to the increased circulation of printed material. This scholarship, which treats text as material rather than simply cerebral, provide a helpful lens for literacy studies's increasing interest in materiality.

### **The WRWA and the Circulation of Rural Writing**

The WRWA connected members with multiple opportunities for circulation of their writing. Initially, the WRWA's primary task was assisting with the establishment of local clubs, which offered writers the chance to share their work with other writers. The WRWA saw writing as an inherently solitary act, and they promoted meetings of local clubs as an opportunity to alleviate that isolation through sharing writing, ideas, and advice with other writers. The WRWA leadership supported local clubs in recruiting members, establishing guidelines for sharing of work at meetings, and responding to the evolving needs of their membership. Round Robin correspondence clubs, established in response to member request, used the postal system to connect writers who were unable to attend meetings in person, either because of illness or infirmity, or because they were not near any local club.

Beyond these local systems of circulation, the WRWA also created opportunities for members to gain a wider readership for their writing through publication in the newsletter, the magazine *Creative Wisconsin*, and in periodicals such as *Pen & Plow* and *Rural Wisconsin in*

*Prose and Verse*. It further supported members in achieving publication in outside venues, providing information about these markets through a “Market Possibilities” column in the newsletter and publishing genre columns in the newsletters which typically focused on delivering skills and knowledge necessary for writing for publication. The WRWA also encouraged performance of member work, both on the radio and at local theaters and at meetings of clubs like 4-H and the Farm Bureau. Even the annual contest served to support circulation of member writing; at the same time as winning entries were published in the newsletter and in *Pen & Plow*, the names of a large number of writers winning honorable mentions were also published, apparently with the intention of encouraging the efforts of even less-skilled writers. Additionally, announcement of winners was often used as an opportunity to comment generally on the quality of writing being done by Wisconsin rural writers. A recurring theme in WRWA communication was that sharing writing, whether with other writers at a local club or a WRWA-sponsored Extension correspondence course or another venue or by submitting work for possible publication, was simply part of the work of a Wisconsin rural writer.

Rural people enthusiastically took up these opportunities for writing and for circulation of their writing. By 1949, just one year after the founding of the WRWA, membership had already reached 1,000, with writers’ clubs organized in eight counties. The writing contests received an overwhelming response, with hundreds of entries in the first year alone, which increased to over 1,000 entries by the second annual contest in 1950<sup>15</sup>. Individual members’ responses to the

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<sup>15</sup> It seems that for some writers, the contest provided an opportunity to share writing they’d been doing but not circulating, often times for years. The 1951 contest included a rule change so that each member was allowed to submit only once in each category, which was resulted in many fewer overall entries. The Spring 1952 report of contest winners notes that this rule apparently “somewhat deterred some of our more prolific writers who in the past had sent us their lifetime work as an entry” (“Contest Winners”). This outpouring of writing aligns with the leadership’s articulation of Wisconsin as home to rural people eagerly writing and awaiting an opportunity to share that writing.

organization also reveal the eagerness on the part of rural writers to gain readers for their work. This desire for readers and feedback was widespread enough that John Cappon addressed it in a 1951 short story column. This column began with Cappon quoting a letter written to him by one Mrs. Lida porter of Oconto, who had written to him because “she writes stories and verse, and wants to know where she can get criticisms” (6). Cappon sympathizes with this desire for “criticisms,” saying “the problem was my own for years” and further reflecting on the difficulty of finding readers who will offer appropriately critical readings:

It is not hard to find people who will look at a piece of writing and say: “How nice!” And there are superior people who can offer only cool water. And some, perhaps jealous, who can sneer, but mostly – people are embarrassed. The humble, being genuinely humble, don’t know about judging. The people who, we think, ought to be able, don’t want to get out on a limb. (6)

Cappon offers the support of a local writing club as an answer to this problem, asserting that the members of his local club, the Script Reactors, have given him worthwhile criticism. These conversations suggest that one major benefit of membership in the WRWA was the opportunity to share writing and receive feedback both positive and critical.

This section begins by discussing the role of the newsletter in both circulating member writing and in encouraging circulation beyond the WRWA and its members. I then turn to an examination of the means by which members gained a broader audience for their work, including publication in periodicals published by the WRWA and distributed in partnership with the University, and publication beyond the WRWA. I consider as well how, as members took up systems of circulation created by the leadership of the WRWA, they also changed those systems;

rather than passively taking up systems wholesale, they made requests that caused those systems to evolve, and they also folded those systems in with pre-existing aspects of rural culture.

### *The Newsletter as a System of Circulation*

The newsletter was one major means by which the WRWA circulated member writing. The newsletter, first published in October 1948, was the organization's earliest recruitment tool for members and also an important medium for the creation of a cohesive identity among members. The newsletter is an especially rich site of study for several reasons. Because it was published fairly consistently throughout the club's early years, it serves as a record of the organization's evolution in terms of its stated mission, its relationship to the university, and its attitudes towards issues like publication and emerging genres, such as the article. Its inclusion of members voices and writing through genre columns and features that published brief member writing, demonstrate the WRWA's intentional diffusion of authority, as writers from novice to professional were able to sponsor the efforts of other, distant member-writers. The newsletter is particularly notable as a system of circulation because its communication was not unidirectional, moving solely from leadership to members; rather, because it frequently included reports from clubs and published member writing, it became polyvocal and multidirectional, reflecting not only the voice and perspective of a few professors in Madison, but eventually sharing the voices of rural writers across the state.

As a whole, the newsletter characterized writing primarily as a matter of temperament, rather than innate knowledge or skill, and the genre columns were mostly in accord with this view. The first newsletter began by explaining that the organization was intended for "everyone who has something to say" about the rural Wisconsin landscape or culture. The WRWA's

constant encouragement to write about rural places, people, and traditions further supported rural people in taking on the mantle of writer; not only did they not need a specialized education to begin writing, they already had, as rural people, the required temperament, high degree of attunement to their environment, and rural knowledge necessary as content for writing. With rural people already presumed to possess this writerly temperament and rural knowledge, the newsletter primarily provided instruction in the technical aspects of writing, including craft lessons and information about matters such as the correct format for submitting manuscripts to magazines. The newsletters also pointed members toward additional helpful resources, including books on craft and pamphlets on local history to serve as source material for those desiring to write local histories.

The newsletter served rhetorical and pedagogical functions, building members' identities as rural writers, directing them to additional resources to continue their writing development, and supporting the in accessing systems of circulation for both feedback on drafts and publication of finished work. In addition to serving as one means by which member writing circulated, the newsletter also insisted on the value of circulation more broadly, continually suggesting a good rural writer is one who asks for feedback on his/her writing, revises accordingly, and then seeks publication in appropriate venues. Because it shaped both member literacy practices and also how members imagined the work of rural writers, the newsletter was a key actor in the literate work of WRWA members; however, rural writers did not take up this sponsorship whole cloth, but instead folded in aspects of rural culture and tradition.

The newsletter's habit of publishing member writing was the most obvious means by which the newsletter facilitated circulation of member writing. Member writing had a vital presence in the newsletter from the organization's early years, beginning with the December

1949 newsletter's announcement of a "policy of printing a small creative work with each issue of the Newsletter" ("The First Snow"). Members seem to have valued this recognition of their work, and this recognition was significant enough to merit mention in several club histories. For example, the history of the Lakeshore Writers recounts how "Mrs. Ben Crane put the Lakeshore Writers in the limelight when her poem 'Gone' appeared on the 'Spot for Inspiration'" ("During Ten Years"). Additionally, members who were publishing elsewhere, or who were prominent within the organization still published their work in the newsletter, further supporting the idea that newsletter publication was perceived as a genuine accomplishment. This suggests that this small act of publishing member writing alongside letters from the leadership and news about clubs across the state was sufficient to encourage further writing. Member writing gained an even more vibrant presence in the newsletter with a feature titled "Just a Word, Fidelia" (named for Fidelia Van Antwerp, a much-loved early leader of the organization) that began in May 1954. This feature entailed publication of submissions of 25 words or fewer, including anecdotes, observations, and brief scenes. Because they were so brief and publication was non-competitive (the newsletter explained that the feature "will print as many of them as space permits"), this became an opportunity for many members to see their name and writing in print. Creative Wisconsin's regular, "the spot of inspiration," which was to be "something vigorous and beautiful," also allowed members to publish brief pieces of writing.

In addition to publishing member writing, the newsletter also celebrated member success in publication and wrote approvingly of club practices connected to circulation and publication. Reports from local clubs, sometimes called "Around Wisconsin With Our Clubs," a name that invoked the club visits carried out by Kamarck, Gard, and other leaders, were the most consistent and longstanding feature of the newsletter, and these reports most often focused on member

success in publication. The newsletter also occasionally included longer features on notable programs performances by clubs and individual members. A December 1949 article, “Produce Your Play at Home,” encouraged writers to work with “local clubs who do little plays,” such as 4-H, to get their plays produced. The same newsletter also wrote approvingly of the Hamburg club, who, under the leadership of Evelyn Brown, worked jointly to write a play for production by their county’s 4-H group. The newsletter comments that “this seems like a most worthwhile project in community cooperation, and it has the added advantage of providing an outlet for writers’ efforts” (“Produce”). Such articles had the effect of both promoting the success of clubs and individual members in gaining broader audiences for their work, and also, crucially, of encouraging other members in pursuing publication and performance.

#### *The Newsletter as a Vehicle for Literacy Instruction*

In addition to providing general encouragement for writers to submit work for publication, the newsletter also delivered targeted literacy instruction and technical information designed to help members navigate the world of publishing. A periodic “Market Possibilities” column listed “possible markets” for member writing. This column was also an opportunity for the WRWA to implicitly reinforce its rural-romantic rhetoric, as it served to encourage members to publish in what the leadership considered appropriate venues for rural writing for example, the December 1949 “Market Possibilities” column described “several of the better farm markets,” including “Country Gentlemen” and the “Farm Home Desirable.”

Genre columns were another popular feature of the newsletter, and columns devoted to writing advice and instruction for specific genres eventually grew to include poetry, short story, article, and drama. These columns performed the kind of literacy practices the leadership

supported, pairing instruction in reading habits with instruction in technical skills, assignments for further writing, and encouragement to submit work produced through assignments. Genre columns also frequently shared member writing produced in response to these assignments. Thus, these columns encouraged circulation of member writing, as members were urged to send responses to assignments to columns' writers and also to submit work for publication in outside venues, and they also, by commenting on and even printing member work, became themselves a system of circulation for member writing.

Genre columns in newsletters provided both literacy instruction, as in Alice Kelly's column asserting that "a good main character is one who knows what he wants and goes after it," and practical advice for pursuing publication, such as how to learn about the target audience for magazines publishing juvenile literature ("Short Story Column"). In general, the columns provided a range of advice from literary to financial and publication-related, likely as a result of awareness that rural writers likely didn't have access to the specialized knowledge necessary for negotiating the various aspects of life as a writer, from writing "meaty openings" to short stories to parsing a contract sent by an editor that includes terms like "first North American serial rights." In general, the advice of the genre columns was geared toward producing more "saleable" writing or more effectively navigating the literary marketplace. To support this goal, writers of the genre columns represented themselves as both fellow writers and readers, thereby demonstrating a whole host of literacy practices and attitudes toward reading and writing that they believed members must take on in order to be personally and professionally successful. Kelly's Fall 1952 short story column, titled "Story Progression," described the process of sending out a story and having it rejected, a process she describes in terms of keeping the story "in circulation." Kelly's story suggests that writers see in editors' rejections the possibility that

“there is something extremely vital lacking in the story” and to use rejection as an impetus toward further revision (“Story Progression”). In this view, editors are not simply gatekeepers between writers and the publication they desire, but they are also readers whose reaction serves a useful role in refining the writer’s work.

Other columns describe the reading practices necessary for development as a writer. Helen C. Smith’s spring 1952 article column urges article writers that they should “make every effort to read and examine the best current magazines in which the articles appear” because such reading can be useful research material for interesting topics and can also provide “clues and hints” about the kind of writing published by different journals. Thus, according to Smith, careful reading can provide access both to content for writing and also to genre knowledge necessary for success in publishing.<sup>16</sup>

Although the tone of these articles is at times harsh (Mary Zimmerman’s drama column in the spring 1952 newsletter begins with chiding: “From the contest entries that have been coming in, there seems to be a consensus of opinion that a one-act play is a narration in dialogue. This is exactly what it is not” (“Drama Column” 20)), even these criticisms seem intended to spur members to further writing. After opening her drama column with a fairly broad condemnation of member writing, Zimmerman turns immediately to instruction, so that members may improve, and the majority of the column is devoted to a lesson about drama drawn from two different texts, Percival Wilde’s *The Craftsmanship of the One Act Play* and Kenneth

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<sup>16</sup> The reading practices Smith describes, in which writers read as a means of improving their own writing, are now frequently referred to in creative writing pedagogy as “reading like a writer.” Paul Dawson defines “reading as a writer” as “reading with the aim of discovering ways to improve one’s own writing,” and he argues that the development of this skill is characteristic of creative writing pedagogy (91). Patrick Bizzaro argues that creative writers possess several skills that should be of interest to scholars in writing studies, and counts critical reading among those skills.

Macgowan's *A Primer of Playwriting*. She presents technical terms, including exposition, preparation, and complication, then breaks those terms down using intentionally simple language, explaining that "For my own purpose I have a simply measuring rod that uses no fancy words like conflict, suspense, complication, etc., but that mean exactly the same thing to me. I pass it on to you for what you can get out of it, if you prefer a homelier rule" ("Drama Column" 21). Zimmerman's explanation of dramatic structure, making use of folksy language presumably intended to appeal to her audience of rural writers, begins with "a character in the frying pan" who then has the choice to "burn to a crisp or get out of the fire" ("Drama Column" 21). Following this description of conflict, climax, and conclusion, Zimmerman then suggests several readings that will be helpful for aspiring writers. On the whole, the writers of the genre columns perform the persona of harsh schoolmarm, criticizing member writing and insisting they do better, but also praising their improvement and suggesting resources for further learning. For the rural writers of the WRWA, this kind of literacy instruction via text, accompanied by the opportunity to receive feedback on their work and the potential for publication in the newsletter, seems to have been an essential form of writing support. This support is similar in many ways to Alexandria Peary's research on what she calls "textrooms," or writing instruction that happens through print. Her work helpfully identifies the ideological aims of this extracurricular literacy instruction; the writing training offered in *Godey's Lady's Book*, for example, is not merely to aid in individual self-expression, "not to help individuals achieve literary fame" but was instead "tied to republican ideology and to nation-building" (51). Similarly, the literacy instruction offered by the WRWA newsletter was underwritten by particular, though often unstated, ideas about the appropriate content, tone, and means of circulation for rural writing. As Chapter Two

discusses in more detail, the literacy work of the WRWA was also deeply rhetorical, reflecting a nostalgic and often a-historical view of the rural.

A particularly interesting and nuanced combination of writing support and circulation of writing is present in a series of four poetry lessons written by Louise Leighton and published between fall 1951 and winter 1952. These lessons, first announced in the June 1950 newsletter, moved incrementally through craft elements of poetry, beginning with the couplet, moving to the quatrain, then the sonnet, and concluding with a lesson on sound. Leighton apparently intended these lessons to be valuable to a wide audience, and a parenthetical note under the heading for the first lesson explained that “This is designed to be simple enough for a beginner, but offering possibilities for good practice work to the more experienced poet as well” (“Poetry Column” 11). Each lesson typically included a prefatory note giving general comments about poetry or members’ efforts in response to a previous lesson. This note was followed by a definition of new terms, sample lines accompanied by Leighton’s reading of those lines, an assignment for the apprentice-poet to try out the new craft element, and encouragement to send their efforts in to Leighton for evaluation. Because this encouragement to send writing to her is included in every lesson (and is a common theme throughout the newsletters more broadly), the clear message to writers is that sending drafts for criticism is an essential part of being a writer. Subsequent lessons then reported on the writing sent in by members, with Leighton commenting on general strengths and areas for improvement. In this way, Leighton was able to very nearly recreate the classroom environment through a cycle of literacy instruction and feedback through text, with circulation of instruction, drafts, and feedback supported by the postal system.

In addition to conveying technical information (the “couplet form,” the subject of the first lesson, is defined as “the poem with two-line stanzas” which “must match in length and rhyme”

(Fall 1951 “Poetry Column” 12), Leighton also discussed more general matters, including “the qualities of a good poem” (ideal traits include “worthwhile thought or idea, emotional impulse or feeling; imagery; rhythmic pattern” and so on) and the knowledge and temperament required of the poet (Fall 1951 “Poetry Column” 11). The last is a rather overwhelming list evoking a range of qualities that would be familiar to Quintilian or Aristotle, including the following:

He who would create poetry should have an appreciation of music, its rhythms and harmonies; he must recognize beauty with a particular apperception of color, shades, lines, texture, form, taste, fragrances; he must also have a sense of justice and proportion, lest sentiment become sentimentality and drama, melodrama; to this he must add a knowledge of technique a facility acquired by practice, a foundation of grammar, rhetoric, and an extensive vocabulary. To mirror life today, he must use the language of today, he must read the literature of today, and he must know about the social problems of today. (“Poetry Column” 11-12)

Thus, in Leighton’s terms, being a poet entails not only mastery of technical skills such as rhythm and meter which can be taught in her poetry lessons, but also involves developing an additional set of aptitudes, interest, and habits, many of which, such as the imperative to “recognize beauty” or “have a sense of justice and proportion,” cannot be explicitly taught.

This use of the newsletter to deliver literacy instruction also drew in part on rural people’s well-established habit of using correspondence courses for both vocational and personal reasons<sup>17</sup>; because of the communal nature of the feedback Leighton provided, the newsletter

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<sup>17</sup> A 1906 study found that “some 35,000 people residing in Wisconsin were enrolled in private correspondence schools, and that approximately \$800,000 was paid out annually for this instruction” (Curti and Carstensen 556). As a result of this study, the University dramatically increased the number and variety of correspondence courses it offered.

added an additional dimension as student-members were able to not only receive feedback on their own work but also learn about others' work. Although Leighton seems to have originally intended to respond individually to all writers (the first lesson offers that "if you wish to try the assignment and need criticism on your efforts, you may send in a poem or two" and reminds readers to include stamped, self-addressed envelope for reply, suggesting that they should expect to hear back in writing about their work), the volume of mail seems to have quickly overwhelmed her. Instead, her third poetry lesson offers some general observations about the couplets received in response to the first lesson, which she says indicated "1) a need for technical study, 2) a tendency to preach, but 3) a willingness to correct errors and re-write. This last was very gratifying" ("Poetry Column" Spring 1952). These kinds of comments seem designed to both point out common faults and also to encourage further efforts. It's not clear if Leighton's observation that members are willing to correct and re-write is based on repeated correspondence with writers sending multiple drafts or on comments mailed to her alongside reader drafts, but her emphasis on this draft is in line with the organization's general attitude towards writing as the product of hard work and revision, rather than inherent talent.

Leighton's choice to make general comments about reader work also supports the newsletter's overall purpose in developing a sense of collective identity and shared mission among writer-members who were scattered across the state. Members and leadership both frequently describe writing as lonely, isolating work, and the sharing of member writing in response to a common assignment may have served an important role in helping rural writers feel connected to other writers. The large number of poems sent to Leighton as a result of these columns (her third poetry lesson begins by describing how much mail she's received from members, and Leighton exclaims that "I am glad that I have twelve drawers and eleven

cupboards in my kitchen and that I do not need them all for dishes and groceries!” suggests that members were, in fact, hungry for feedback and more generally for readers of their work (“Poetry Column” Spring 1952). The poetry lessons ultimately offered member multiple opportunities for circulation of their work. As an incentive for sending work produced in response to the assignments, Leighton offers the prize of a book for the best sonnet and offers also to include the poem on a radio show if it is received before January.

Through their constant encouragement to share writing, both in draft and final form, genre columns demonstrate the WRWA’s commitment to circulation. These genre columns were aimed primarily at invention, providing aspiring writers with specific skills and suggested topics to spur the creation of writing. They also inclined toward rather didactic instruction, as genre columnists seemed to view each genre as a fixed form governed by rules. The genre columns, on the whole, aimed to teach writers rules for meeting these generic expectations. Finally, the genre columns conveyed encouragement, literacy instruction, and technical knowledge to make the circulation of member writing possible.

*Additional Means of Circulation: Anthologies, Round Robins, Correspondence Courses, Rural Radio*

The systems discussed thus far created a limited kind of publicity for member writing. Within the structure of the local club, for example, members were able to find sympathetic support for their efforts and criticism to help them continue to improve. By connecting members who lived in scattered communities across the state, the newsletter served as a tool for mediating distance and creating a shared sense of identity among the state’s rural writers. However, many writers still desired a broader, more fully public audience for their writing, and the WRWA as a

whole wanted member writing to achieve a broad readership. As a result, the WRWA created publication opportunities and connected members to resources in outside venues.

The WRWA's first anthologies were published under the auspices of the university. The first *Pen & Plow* was "arranged by the Wisconsin Idea Theater in cooperation with the College of Agriculture." The WRWA's second anthology, *Rural Wisconsin in Prose and Verse*, was a product of "the cooperative efforts of the College of Agriculture and the University Extension Division" and the second issue of *Pen & Plow* was "sponsored by the Wisconsin Idea Theater and the University of Wisconsin Extension Division." The cover artwork for the second *Pen & Plow*, a farm landscape by artist in residence Aaron Bohrod, demonstrates further coordination between the WRWA and the university.

In addition to providing the material means for circulation of member work in these anthologies, the University also generated publicity for the anthologies through the issuing of press releases which were then picked up by local papers throughout the state. The press release, issued by the University of Wisconsin News Service, served multiple purposes, not only announcing the publication of *Pen & Plow* and describing the writing, but also aiming to shape readers' understanding of the WRWA's mission with respect to rural life. The success of these press releases in garnering attention for the anthologies can be seen in newspaper articles announcing the publication of the first issue of *Pen & Plow* in 1949 and the second issue in 1952. The 1949 press release begins with a sentence celebrating the creative work done by the state's rural people: "Many of the strong fingers that milk a cow or feed a hungry harvest crew are guiding pens toward satisfying creative expression in Wisconsin." This exact phrase was picked up by papers across the state, including the *Waupaca Post*, the *Oconto County Reporter*, and the *La Crosse Tribune & Leader-Press*, with several of the papers tailoring the message to

encourage local readers to join the work of the WRWA. An article from the *Superior Telegram*, for example, concludes by urging that “Upper Wisconsin should contribute its share of talent to this laudable rural enterprise.” The WRWA mobilized the resources of the university in promoting both the work of its members and its particular rhetorical crafting of region.

Both press releases make use of the rural-romantic rhetoric that was the organization’s hallmark. For example, the second press release begins by invoking the “harvest,” comparing the writing done by members to agricultural work, explaining that “the harvest from Wisconsin farms isn’t always corn and cows . . .” At the same time as the press releases portrayed the mission and the members of the WRWA as rural, humble, and earthy, it also aligned its members’ writing to highbrow culture, and the excerpts of member writing included in press releases and picked up by newspapers were prefaced by writing that cast it in terms of English literary tradition. In 1949, Mary Zimmerman’s “Country Graveyard” was described as sharing “the same mood which produced the immortal Thomas Gray’s ‘Elegy,’ the same fine understanding of the leveling consequences of death,” and in 1952, a sonnet sequence written by Anne C. Rose is characterized as being “in the English tradition of a Wordsworth.” Again, these phrases were picked up verbatim by multiple newspapers, demonstrating the success of the press releases in achieving circulation of member writing and promoting the mission of the WRWA. This success seems due at least in part to their being underwritten by the force and cultural capital of the University, as it seems unlikely that a press release issued by an independent fledgling organization of rural writers would have garnered as much attention. These press releases and the newspaper articles they generated reveal the work of the WRWA leadership in not only gaining readers for their anthologies, but also in further promoting their image of Wisconsin as home to widespread rural talent in creative writing. The 1949 press release, for

example, characterizes rural Wisconsin as already engaged in creative work, claiming that the WRWA serves to support “the wide interest in writing which could be found along any country lane or byway.”

In addition to the opportunities for state-wide publication provided by WRWA periodicals like the newsletter, *Pen & Plow*, and *Creative Wisconsin*, several local clubs also created their own publications. The Lakeshore Writers were the first to create their own magazine, publishing the first issue of *The Lakeshore Writer* in June 1949, less than a year after the founding of the WRWA. Although they did not provide material support for these efforts, leadership did encourage this form of self-publication. In September 1949 the Lakeshore Writers were given an award at the first annual Green Lake Conference for “being so well organized and the only group at that time to publish its own magazine” (“During Ten Years”). In addition, an October 1949 newsletter article celebrated their work, which was highlighted again in the December 1949 newsletter article that referenced *The Lakeshore Writer* and suggested that “groups might well consider also putting out a small mimeographed magazine that could be circulated in their immediate communities” (“Report from the Phillips’ Writers”). These two ways of rewarding the work of the Lakeshore Writers seem intended to encourage other groups in creating their own magazines, and other clubs followed suit. Lacking access to the University’s press and systems of distribution some of these clubs were quite creative in their efforts in producing their own publications. Although the Lakeshore Writers had access to a mimeograph machine – perhaps using the resources of the church where one of its members was a pastor – other clubs were without even that printing resource. Rather than making copies of one central document, the Evansville Club and the Sauk County Rural Writers both assigned members to create sufficient typewritten copies of their own work, so that each one “type his

own page, or pages and pool the for Club Bulletins.” Although it was unable to lend material support to these endeavors, the WRWA encouraged other clubs to take up these practices of self-publication and local circulation through publicizing them in the newsletter.

However, it’s also worth noting that publication was not positioned as an unmitigated good, or as a necessarily worthwhile end in itself. The WRWA worried about the possible negatives of publication, particularly the possibility of money acting as a detriment to the artistic and sociological impulses intended to spur member writing. The relationship between money, writing, and publication as apparently a central topic at the second Green Lake Conference, and the fall 1950 newsletter reports on “the discussion which raged continuously on the subject of ‘writing for money versus writing for art’” (“Annual Meeting of Writers”). Gard seems to have particularly concerned about this issue, as, according to Kamarck, he argued that “writers who are blinded too much by the dollar sign have a ‘hex’ on them, and generally do not develop a significant talent” (“Annual Meeting of Writers”). Kamarck echoed Gard’s claims, arguing that “the prime perspective should be writing well – honestly and sincerely of the things one knows best. After that worry about selling” (“Annual Meeting of Writers”). This concern about the potential for the lure of publication to distract writers from developing their talent was also discussed at an early Advisory Board meeting, at which Edna Meudt argued that there were “too many people writing for money.” This ongoing debate about money and writing seems connected to the WRWA’s interest in cultivating a middlebrow sensibility in its members and encouraging them to prioritize the satisfaction of writing for art and expression over financial reward. In general, the WRWA favored local network of circulation, encouraging members to publish in their local papers and in farm journals. Though some members did publish books with New York presses or otherwise achieve a national audience for their writing, these publications

were not held up as a superior accomplishment, and guidance given about publication in newsletters showed a decided emphasis on local and regional sites of publication, particularly those with rural audiences.

The WRWA also encouraged clubs to make use of the radio as a way of circulating their writing. The Wisconsin Idea Theater hosted “Creative Wisconsin,” a series of weekly radio shows broadcast over WHA, the university radio station, beginning in early 1951. The first program featured the WRWA, with Fidelia Van Antwerp and Wilhelmina Guerink representing the organization. The WRWA also encouraged local clubs to make use of local systems of circulation, and a summer 1951 newsletter notes approvingly that “the Wausau club strives for greater outlet for their members’ work, and has enlisted the aid and interest of the local newspaper and radio station which increasingly provide opportunities for their talents.” Club reports in subsequent newsletters often mention clubs’ use of local radio stations to broadcast member writing. The encouragement to work with local community group suggests that the WRWA saw publication and performance as a way for writers to participate in a local cultural network, further reinforcing the idea that good rural writers seek out audiences for their work.

Besides encouraging members to publish and perform their work, the WRWA also encouraged clubs to pursue publicity about their clubs’ activities through their local newspapers. As a further incentive for pursuing publicity, the 1956 winter newsletter announced that the contest for the 1957 Green Lake Conference would be a publicity chart. The newsletter instructed clubs to “clip every mention of your club in the papers even announcements of regular meetings, and mount them attractively on a chart or poster.” Although these directions assume clubs have already been hard at work publicizing their work, the article suggests that even clubs that haven’t been working on publicity so far can get started: “If your Club hasn’t been getting

any publicity, get busy and see that it does.” What’s notable about the newsletter’s attention to circulation, and to publication in particular, is not just its celebration of member success, but the attendant suggestion that sharing writing – both with other writers at the meetings of local clubs, and with non-writers through publication and performance – is central to the work of the rural writer.

At the same time as the WRWA created systems of circulation and encouraged clubs to connect with local systems of circulation, members’ engagement with those systems caused them to evolve, and in some instances members’ requests created new systems entirely. While the newsletters served an important function in connecting the membership as a whole, the WRWA also used the postal system to connect smaller subsets of members. The Round Robin correspondence clubs and correspondence courses arranged through University Extension were particularly notable resources for members, particularly those who had difficulty accessing the support provided by in-person meetings, whether that was because they lived at a remove from other members, or because they wanted genre-specific instruction not available through their club.

The December 1949 newsletter includes the first mention of what came to be known as the Round Robins, when it published the request of one member, Clarice Moon of Delavan, for a correspondence club for “all the ‘lone wolf’ writers scattered all over the state and not belonging to any writers’ club” (“Manuscript Exchange”). According to the procedure outlined by Moon, each member would submit a manuscript to another member via mail, who would comment and then send it on the next member, until each manuscript had received feedback from every member. This procedure, something like a virtual teacherless classroom, allowed Round Robin

members to reproduce the benefits of a writing group through text, with circulation supported by the postal system.

Though it took several years for the program to get organized, Round Robins were eventually popular; the spring 1955 newsletter announced the opportunity to join a Round Robin group and by fall 1956 seven clubs had organized with a total of forty two members. Periodic reports on the clubs in the newsletter, titled “Round Robin Roundups,” described the assignments created by clubs and their members’ successes in publishing. The Round Robins allowed the organization to extend its reach further across the state, particularly to members who could not make use of the local group structure. Though it aimed originally to appeal in particular to “elderly persons, shut-ins, and persons living in areas which do not have county clubs,” members also organized clubs focused on specific genres, as one club focused on articles and playwriting and another, chaired by Ruth Morehouse, who had assisted Louise Leighton in the newsletter poetry lessons, focused specifically on “the mechanics of poetry.”

In addition to feedback provided by peers through local clubs and Round Robins, the WRWA also connected members to writing instruction through correspondence courses offered by University Extension. Extension had long been willing to offer instruction in nearly any area that attracted interest (Curti and Carstensen 573). Beginning as early as December 1949, correspondence courses in the short story, article writing, and poetry were made available to members. These courses, which cost on average \$15 and consisted of 16 assignments, were apparently created in response to member demand, as the newsletter explains that “after so many inquiries from members as to where they could find some course material that would be of use to them, we made arrangements with the Extension Division for three writers’ courses” (“Correspondence Courses”). These correspondence courses, which continued to be offered for

some time and were eventually supplemented by Teaching by Telephone, were then used as a recruitment tool, as the University instruction available to members through correspondence courses was promoted as a benefit of membership. The WRWA continued to evolve its approach to circulation as new technologies became available. The January 1954 *Creative Wisconsin* noted that Edwin Emmons of Rhinelander had taped many of the speeches from the two previous Green Lake Conferences, and clubs could rent recorded tapes for \$2 plus postage. This technology allowed the organization to further extend its reach, and the article explained that “this is your opportunity to bring convention highlights to members who did not attend” (32).

These technologies and systems of circulation were crucial elements of the WRWA’s support of rural writers. The postal system, and second class mail and rural free delivery in particular, supported circulation of the WRWA, which I have argued served as a vital tool for not only distributing information but also providing literacy instruction, creating a shared sense of identity as rural writers among members, and reinforcing approved literacy practices. The newsletter, and later *Creative Wisconsin*, were both circulated using a second class mail permit and the support of the university in publishing and distribution. The university’s support here illustrates one of the frequently unseen ways that institutional affiliation matters – in immediately practical and material ways – both for organizations that support literacy and for the writers they seek to engage. The significance of the university’s support for mailing became apparent when, in 1955, the WRWA itself took over distribution of *Creative Wisconsin*, a process that was sufficiently complex and memorable to be recalled two years later in a four page article in the newsletter. In this article, *Creative Wisconsin* business manager Beulah Klein describes the many logistical details of publication, such as coordinating a mailing list, sending out reminders for subscriptions about to expire, and sending reminders about dues. Klein goes

into particular detail when describing the process of sending the magazine under the second class mailing permit, a process which required “a trip to the post office to learn about postal regulations” (“Our First Issue – 1955” 6). The mailing of *Creative Wisconsin* put Klein in touch with the material nature of literacy, and she described the process with visceral detail: “we proceeded with the stuffing, sorting, zoning, OOSing, inverting, exposing, bundling and tying. The bags were filled to overflowing – the draw strings could not be drawn; the MS’s had to be placed in cartons” (“Our First Issue – 1955” 7). Attending to the mechanisms of circulation, such as the newsletter, as not just text but material highlights how these systems support the circulation of literacy – particularly whose understanding of literacy is forwarded, by whom, and to what end.

Second class mail, rural free delivery, and the radio, which were hailed as modernizing or urbanizing influences on rural people, impacted rural literacy practices by facilitating the circulation of printed material and allowing rural people to publicly assume the identity of writer. Systems such as these, which transmit a wide swath of material, can seem like neutral conduits for the dispersal of information. However, the history of these systems reveals that they are in fact ideological in their origins, grounded in notions of rural lack and the assumption that technologies can remediate this deficit. Although discourse around these systems conceptualized them as a way of modernizing a backwards rural culture, these technologies did not simply act on passive rural communities. Instead, as Ronald Kline’s *Consumers in the Country* argues, rural people selectively adopted, contested, and rejected new technologies, interweaving them with existing rural ways of life. The section that follows examines more closely the histories, ideologies, and material dimensions of these systems of circulation as a way of understanding

more thoroughly how these systems and technologies acted on rural writers, as well as how rural writers responded to these new technologies and systems.

### **How Circulation Acts on Writers and Writing**

This section examines the material, historical, and ideological dimensions of the systems used to circulate member writing, arguing that these systems are not neutral but in fact played a powerful role in shaping literacy practices and how ordinary people in rural Wisconsin came to think of themselves as writers. The postal service was an important system of circulation for facilitating the sharing of member writing. Because the Association imagined itself as creating a collective written portrait of rural Wisconsin, it was essential that it extend its reach across the state, and the postal service was a key tool in connecting members who were geographically removed from each other. Further, as was the case with the Round Robins, the postal service allowed the Association to extend literacy instruction and support to members in small rural communities. Correspondence courses had long been popular in rural Wisconsin, and many members seem to have folded this practice of literacy instruction and circulation of writing in with their existing use of the postal service. As a system of circulation, the postal service acted on member writing, as periodicals both recruited members into writing and also shaped what and how they wrote.

Two changes to the postal system, second class mail and rural free delivery, dramatically increased the volume and variety of printed material circulating in rural areas by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Second class mail, created by the Act of March 3, 1863, allowed for the inexpensive distribution of periodicals published at regular intervals (*The United States Postal*

*Service 11*)<sup>18</sup>. Second class mail resulted in an explosion in publications, including new magazines, advertising periodicals, and paperbacks, which could qualify for the second class rate when bound in paper and published serially (Fuller, “Populists” 4).<sup>19</sup> Many publishers took advantage of the law’s allowance of the distribution of “sample copies” at the same reduced rate as a means of boosting their circulation in an effort to appeal to advertisers (Fuller, “Populists” 2-3). The impact of second class mail on the volume of material circulating can be measured in pounds, which between 1889 and 1896 grew from 190,000,000 to over 350,000,000 pounds (Fuller, “Populists” 9). As a result, many rural families would have suddenly found themselves the recipients of a flurry of texts, including new newspapers, magazines, advertising periodicals, which often included sections tailored to the interests of each member of the family. Paperback books were also sent via second class mail, so that “cheap paperback books, many of them reprints of the world’s best literature, found their way into homes where no great books except the Bible had even been before” (Fuller, “Populists” 5).<sup>20</sup>

The advent of rural free delivery further extended the reach of printed materials into rural homes. Prior to rural free delivery, which began experimentally in 1896 and became a permanent service in 1902, rural residents had to travel to the Post Office to pick up their mail (“The United States Postal System” 22). Rural free delivery, which created mail routes directly to rural homes,

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<sup>18</sup> Fuller provides an example to demonstrate how dramatically second class mail reduced mailing costs. The Populist paperback *Coin’s Financial School* would have cost between 3 and 4 cents a copy to mail at the regular book rate, but second class mail reduced that rate to 1 cent a pound. This reduction in shipping costs allowed publishers to deeply discount their publications. (Fuller, “Populists”)

<sup>19</sup> Although changes in the postal system drove dramatic changes in rural areas, this era also saw a massive increase in the volume of communications more generally, in both rural and urban areas. From 1870-1900, what Bledstein calls the “communications revolution” saw newspaper circulation multiply 7 times, the number of post offices triple, the miles of telegraph wire increase nine-fold, and a seven-fold increase in the volume of telegraph messages. Further, the number of new books and editions tripled between 1880 and 1900 (Bledstein 47).

<sup>20</sup> Of course, not all of the paperbacks in circulation would have been regarded as literature on par with the Bible; publishers also took advantage of cheap mailing to distribute more salacious titles, such *Why Men Like Married Women* and *A Woman With a Record* (Fuller, “Populists” 4).

was supported by a variety of stakeholders, including farmers, newspaper editors, and business people. Farmers' organizations were essential to the establishment and success of rural free delivery, and the National Grange, National Farmers' Congress, and State Farmers' Alliance all backed the development of the program ("The United States Postal System" 22). Newspaper editors and owners were also early advocates of rural free delivery because it would mean the opportunity to increase their circulation (Fuller, *RFD* 21). By 1902, families in even the most remote parts of the country had mail delivered directly to their homes. Much of this mail included farm journals, periodicals that included information on agricultural matters, as well as "sections devoted to children, household matters, and local social issues" (Brazeau 401). These farm journals were among the major beneficiaries of rural free delivery, which had "opened a huge new market to the agricultural press" (Socolofsky 34). Between 1900 and 1920, the circulation of these farm journals increased from seven million to over seventeen million (Fry 35).

The mere presence of printed material in rural homes is obviously insufficient evidence of changes in rural literacy practices; there is also evidence that rural people were eager consumers of the new texts available to them. Rural people's engagement with farm journals in particular is demonstrated by a 1913 survey from the USDA, which showed that "many more farmers received farm newspapers than received government agricultural bulletins, attended farmers' institutes, or made use of a government demonstration agent" (Fry 35). Further, farmers reported farm newspapers as most helpful for their work more than twice as often as all other sources combined (Fry 35).

While the most obvious impact of second class mail and rural free delivery was the availability of new reading material, these innovations in the postal system impacted rural

literacy practices more broadly. Farm journals in particular recruited rural people into writing. They provided a space for farmers to respond to proposed reforms to rural life, such as those suggested by Country Lifers, so that farm newspapers became “forums where those reforms were debated” (Fry 40). Alicia Brazeau’s recent *College English* article, “Talking Over the Fence: Writing in Turn-of-the-Century Farm Journals,” examines the writing pedagogies enacted by the farm journals, which “published numerous articles teaching readers to compose articles by outlining a disciplinary definition of writing that valued content over style, brevity over length, and fact-based discourse designed to educate readers” (397). As a result, Brazeau argues, these journals not only taught the skills of agricultural writing, but they also encouraged readers to assume the identity of writer. Farm journals’ sponsorship of rural writing had a lasting impact in rural areas. Brazeau characterizes these farm journals as “primary fixtures in the literate lives of rural Americans,” arguing that they constitute a meaningful part of composition’s extracurriculum (397). Specifically relevant to my study, many of the periodicals that published the work written by WRWA members, including the *Furrow* and *Hoard’s Dairyman*, benefitted from the development of second class mail and rural free delivery.

Although second class mail and rural free delivery facilitated a huge uptick in the circulation of printed material in rural areas, they were not ideologically neutral systems, but were rather underwritten by Progressive Era ideologies that placed faith in experts and viewed rural people as in need of outside expertise. Discussions about the spread of the postal system and, later, the radio were often rooted in ideas of the rural as deficient, and these technologies, which proponents asserted would bring modern culture and ways of thinking into rural spaces, were thought capable of remedying this rural backwardness. The logic of second class mail, for example, was rooted in an understanding of the Post Office as an instrument of democratic

enlightenment. Periodicals eligible for second class mail were to be “material of public character or ‘devoted to literature, the sciences, arts, or some special industry’,” and the Post Office’s distribution of such material was linked to its mission to “diffuse knowledge among the people as cheaply as possible” (Fuller, “Populists” 2). In fact, the circulation of these materials was positioned as an aid to democracy itself, as “the success of the democratic experiment, it was argued, depended on an enlightened people” (Fuller, “Populists” 2). This same argument – the linking of the circulation of knowledge with effective democracy – would be made years later by the WRWA, whose Creed claimed that “the democratic process of government is safest in the hands of a cultured, enlightened people.”

Rural free delivery in particular was linked to the same concerns about rural decline that motivated the founding of Roosevelt’s Country Life Commission in 1912. These reformers were especially worried that young people would be lured away from the farm by the convenience and entertainment available in cities and towns. Postmaster John Wanamaker (1889-1893) argued that rural free delivery would connect rural areas with information provided by newspapers and help alleviate the isolation of rural life. Proposing the development of rural free delivery in 1891, Wanamaker linked political unrest among farmers to this isolation, writing, “I think the growth of the Farmers’ Alliance and the other farmers’ movements in the past few years has been due to this hunger for something social” (*The United States Postal Service* 22). However, rural free delivery was not a purely social project for Wanamaker, who also saw rural free delivery as an opportunity for businesses to expand their markets into rural areas.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ironically, as Wayne Fuller’s “The Populists and the Post Office” argues, this expansion of consumer goods availability in rural areas helped fuel the Populist movement, as rural people were made aware of inequity through advertisements for the many goods they could not afford.

Much as second class mail and rural free delivery brought an increasing volume and variety of print material into rural homes, the expansion of radio broadcasting, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s, provided rural families with new sources of news and entertainment. The expansion of radio stations into rural areas and the creation of radio programming designed specifically to appeal to rural listeners was supported by the USDA, which organized a special Radio Division, and the Federal Radio Commission (Craig 6, Kline 114). In the 1920s, this Radio Division “supplied stations with free radio scripts on a variety of agricultural and home economics topics,” and the program continued to expand, so that by 1930, 214 stations carried USDA-supplied programs (Craig 6). Radio adoption increased throughout the 30s as radios became less expensive and radio technology improved, “resulting in improved signals and more and better programs” (Craig 2). In Wisconsin, state-wide radio coverage was finally achieved in January 1933, after WHA, the University's station and WLBL, located in Stevens Point and operated by the State Department of Agriculture and Markets, were merged (Cronon and Jenkins 823).

Rural families were particularly rapid adopters of the radio, even during the Depression, and by 1940 the majority of rural homes had radios (70 percent nationally, and outside the South, this number was 84 percent) (Craig 4). Rural families considered radio as a necessity because it provided up to the minute news, as well as entertainment, and, unlike automobiles and telephones, which created an expense even after their purchase, the radio was seen as providing free entertainment. As a result, rural people took up the radio more quickly than other technologies, and by 1940, “more farm homes owned radios than had telephones, automobiles, or electricity” (Craig 2). Radio manufacturers catered to rural families by producing “farm radios,” which could be run on batteries, so that even families who did not have electricity could

benefit from the radio. Rural communities often placed public radio receivers in public places such as schools and town halls, and this practice of communal listening allowed rural people who did not own radios to gain access to radio programming.

The expansion of radio broadcasting and the development of programs designed to appeal to rural people was underwritten by many of the same assumptions about rural places as backwards and isolated that motivated proponents of rural free delivery and Country Life reformers.<sup>22</sup> Many reformers saw the solution to perceived rural decline in new technologies, which they argued could drive “rural modernization – a transformation of rural life into something more nearly like that enjoyed by the growing urban and suburban middle class” (Craig 2). The Country Life Commission asserted that new communication, transportation, and household technologies were essential for improving rural life (Kline 13). As a result of the Country Life Movement and the USDA Cooperative Extension (founded with the Smith-Lever Act in 1912), by 1920, farm families “faced an extensive mediating network of public and private agencies committed to the goal of industrializing agriculture and urbanizing rural life” (Kline 15-16). Because they believed these technologies could bring urban conveniences to rural places, thereby preventing rural out-migration, these reformers were invested in creating systems that circulated modern ideas and knowledge while fixing rural people in rural places.

Historians differ in how they portray rural people’s engagements with that urbanizing network. While historians including Craig and Wik tend to portray rural people as rather passively receiving the modernizing influence of technologies like the radio, Ronald Kline’s *Consumers in the Country* argues against this technological determinism. Rather than seeing

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<sup>22</sup> Some historians have carried on those assumptions of rural deficit. Wik, for example, lauds radio for its ability to alleviate the isolation of rural life. Craig in particular engages conceptions of rural backwardness, defining rural isolation as distance not only from other rural people, but from the “outside world,” suggesting a view of rural places as existing only in relationship to urban and suburban areas.

these technologies as a monolithic driver of social change, Kline examines the ways in which rural people contested, rejected, and selectively adopted new technologies. At the same time as farm families adopted many of the consumer patterns and cultural traits of middle-class, urban consumer culture, Kline argues that “farm people resisted, modified, and selectively used these technologies to create new rural cultures, new forms of rural modernity – many of which were individual modernities” (8). Following Kline, I argue that at the same time as the rural writers of the WRWA made eager use of systems of circulation for sharing writing, they were not merely the passive recipients of new technologies and literacy practices, but were rather actors whose adoption of these systems of circulation changed the literacy practices advocated by the WRWA.

### **Conclusion: The Consequences of Circulation**

As a result of the WRWA’s efforts at circulating member writing, a large number of rural writers, many of whom had previously thought of writing as something odd to be hidden away, saw their work in published. This publication encouraged rural people to take on the identity of writer and also advanced the WRWA’s mission of defining rural Wisconsin as inherently rich with creative expression.

An important effect of this circulation was its positioning of writing in public places. A November 1954 newsletter article, “Let’s Get More Readers,” which demonstrates the WRWA’s efforts to enlist members as agents of circulation, argues for the publicity of writing. This article gives several suggestions for how members can help increase the readership of *Creative Wisconsin*, including sharing used copies of the magazine with friends or donating them to the library, suggesting that their doctor and dentist buy a subscription for the waiting room, and suggesting that local newsstands order copies of the magazine for sale to customers. According

to the article, increasing circulation in this way will “add up to a larger and better Creative Wisconsin, a stronger state association, and best of all additional creative expression for numerous additional people in the state.” Thus, circulation is a powerful force both for individual writers and for the state as a whole.

Though members’ interest in publication and circulation seems to have been motivated at least partially by a desire for the recognition and money to be gained in this way, my research also suggests that circulation has the power to transform both individual texts and literacy practices more broadly. The sense of writing as a public good cultivated by the WRWA’s emphasis on circulation supports a social-constructivist view of writing. Candice Spigelman’s work on writing groups echoes this finding, as the extracurricular group she studied embraced a view of composition as socially constructed and necessarily intertextual (27). Through sharing their work and receiving feedback, members were implicitly taught that writing was meant to be public and that they could learn more about the effect of a piece of writing by getting reactions from an audience made up of other writers.

This chapter has examined how circulation matters for writers and writing and has discussed the ways that the WRWA facilitated circulation of writing through rural Wisconsin. The following chapter turns to that rural landscape, examining more closely how place informs rural writers’ writerly identities.

**Interchapter: On Writing**

Wilhelmina Guerink, "Why Write?" 1951 Fall newsletter

Dorothy M. Mead, "Biographical Sketch," 1954 November newsletter

brief writings (often untitled) from the Just a Word, Fidelia feature:

Norman Sainty, 1954 November newsletter

Hilda W. Defendorf, "Epitaph for Editors," 1954 November newsletter

Edna Schroeder, 1955 Spring newsletter

Nellie Burch Tennant, 1955 Spring newsletter

Eva L. Decker, "Words," 1955 Spring newsletter

Andy Anderson, "Rejected," 1955 Summer newsletter

G. Edward Lind, "World's Greatest Hobby," 1956 Winter newsletter

Marion T. Text, "Limerick," 1957 Autumn newsletter

Mary I. Doheny, "Go 'way," 1958 Summer newsletter

### **Conclusion: Writing Wisconsin Today**

“Writers are ordinary people, yet there is something wonderful that sets a Wisconsin regional writer apart.”

--Helen C. Smith, “Robert E. Gard and the Wisconsin Regional Writers,” April 1970

Today, more than sixty-five years after the founding of the WRWA, extracurricular writing is a vital and vibrant part of our culture, with *writing* increasingly as important a part of literacy as reading. In fact, Deborah Brandt argues that “for perhaps the first time in the history of mass literacy, writing seems to be eclipsing reading as the literate experience of consequence” (*The Rise of Writing* 3). While much of this writing is required by school or work, another large portion of it is extracurricular – writing that people choose to do, whether for enjoyment, leisure, or communication.

There’s strong evidence that many of these extracurricular writers are working at their craft. Online writing communities, retreats and workshops, low-residency and conventional MFA programs are all growing hugely in popularity. For example, attendance at AWP, the Association of Writers and Writing Programs Convention, is enormous – more than 12,000 each year. In contrast, the Modern Language Association Annual Convention saw a bit more than 7,000 attendees in 2014 and 2013. Further, many of the attendees at AWP are there on their own, without the financial support of institutions or the incentive of job interviews, as is often the case at conventions like MLA. While a portion of those 12,000 attendees at AWP include professional writers and writers employed by universities, an even larger proportion of that 12,000 is people who are truly in the extracurriculum, who write for reasons of their own, and who attend that

conference for the opportunity to learn about writing at panels, to hear poets and novelists at readings, and to simply *be* with other writers.

This conclusion examines the current state of extracurricular literacy instruction and writing communities. I consider both the specific legacy of the WRWA for rural and regional writing in Wisconsin as well as national trends in extracurricular literacies. This consideration of the WRWA's lasting impact and the use of writing as a tool for shaping Wisconsin and Midwestern identity allows me to engage longtime WRWA member Helen C. Smith's assertion, quoted above, that there is something particularly special about Wisconsin regional writing. My research also shows that places, systems, and objects remain a powerful force in writing practices. Even as the internet is increasingly a medium of literacy instruction and circulation of writing, extracurricular writing continues to be an embodied and material practice.

This conclusion begins by discussing some of the changes in the WRWA beyond the years of this dissertation's primary focus. I then describe the state of the current iteration of the WRWA, the Wisconsin Writers' Association, as well as a few key organizations engaged in extracurricular literacy in Wisconsin and in the Midwest more broadly. I close by considering the implications of this research, including a few ways instructors can bring the lessons of extracurricular literacies into the writing classroom. Though, as Anne Ruggles Gere's work on the extracurriculum cautions us, we cannot simply map extracurricular writing practices onto the work of the curriculum, I believe that, because extracurricular writing is so omnipresent and crucial to many students, teachers of writing ignore it at their peril.

### **Rural to Regional: The Evolution of the WRWA**

In April 1956, at the first statewide spring conference in Hartland, the members of the WRWA voted to change the organization's name so that the R in WRWA would now stand for regional, rather than rural. This change, which had been in the works for some time, was widely discussed at advisory board meetings, the 1955 Green Lake conference, and among local chapters. Although, as chapter two discusses in some detail, the significance of the term rural had been up for debate for some time, the conversation seems to have come to a head in January 1955, when, at a meeting of the advisory board, Professor Kamarck suggested changing the guidelines for the contest so that "we not mention membership in the organization, not mention that material must be of a regional nature." Professor Gard cast the lone dissenting vote, arguing "that we should make a strong statement regarding stories laid in a Mid-Western scene, since that scene-laying was the original purpose of the Wisconsin Rural Writers, among others." Eliminating the required emphasis on the rural marked a significant change for the WRWA; the first annual contest had stipulated that entries must be written by Wisconsin residents and "must be based on Wisconsin rural themes, but may be either contemporary or historical in setting" ("Contest Rules"). This requirement to focus on the rural had provided the organization much of its early momentum and had assisted the WRWA in appealing to rural people across the state who may have otherwise felt that an organization based in at the University in Madison might not be interested in their point of view.

Several different reasons were given for the change from rural to regional. The Autumn 1955 newsletter attributes the change to a desire to appeal to the increasingly urban membership of the organization, calling regional a more "inclusive" term than rural ("Our Hosts Should be Happy" 3). The Waukesha Writers' Workshop history links the change from rural to regional to a broad demographic shift in the state as a whole:

By September the question of the correct application of the word Rural in WRWA was coming out frequently. Writers were troubled about it. Were people who lived in Waukesha, Oconomowoc, Brookfield rural? Were their writings based on rural ideas? The fact had to be faced – southeastern Wisconsin was no longer rural; it was industrial, if not urban” (Baker 10).

It’s likely that in Waukesha, which is, along with the other two towns named, a suburb of Milwaukee, this change from rural to industrial or urban was felt more keenly than in other parts of the state. In any case, within ten years of its founding, the WRWA had shed its rural focus, choosing instead to highlight a broader sense of Wisconsin identity as simultaneously urban, rural, and suburban.

Even as the WRWA moved away from its specifically rural roots, the organization retained its commitment to creating a written record of Wisconsin life. Member writing published in the newsletter continued in much the same folksy vein, focusing on small town life and pastoral landscapes. And the organization continued to present itself as representing the history and culture of Wisconsin. Neita Friend’s efforts to gain publicity for the WRWA, reported in the 1957 Autumn newsletter, reflect this continuing emphasis on rural Wisconsin. Friend sent a copy of *Creative Wisconsin* to the writer of the *Wisconsin State Journal’s* “Jaunts with Jamie” column along with a letter articulating its virtues. Friend defines the mission of the WRWA and, by extension, *Creative Wisconsin*, in terms that link member writing to a vision of Wisconsin itself. Friend’s letter, reprinted in part in the July 7, 1957 “Jaunts with Jamie” column asserts that “all of us believe there isn’t a statewide movement with a publication like this anywhere in the country” (“Around Wisconsin with our Clubs” 7). The columnist is in accord with Friend’s characterization of *Creative Wisconsin*, and he notes that “Mrs. Friend’s pride in

*Creative Wisconsin* is understandable. The editors and contributors, in their twofold purpose, do a superb job of inspiring writers and in underscoring the people, charms and traditions of the Badger state” (“Around Wisconsin with our Clubs” 7). Thus, according to Friend and the “Jaunts with Jamie” column, even as the WRWA moving away from an explicitly rural approach to writing, the organization remained concerned with capturing the spirit and history of Wisconsin.

At the same time as the organization’s rural-romantic rhetoric frequently looked to Wisconsin’s history with a sense of nostalgia, its leaders also attempted to link rural writers with modernity and technological advances. In an address to members in the opening pages of the 1958 fall newsletter, Friend argued that “today we must consider new concepts, split atoms and outer space, go along with the tide of progress, especially in creative writing” (“Fumes from the Cauldron” 6). Friend went on to link this “tide of progress” with *Creative Wisconsin* and the need for WRWA members’ writing to achieve a broad and even national readership: “We want material in *Creative Wisconsin* so good that it achieves prestige as a unique literary movement in Wisconsin, and that our authors may be qualified to join the professional writers in national publications” (“Fumes from the Cauldron” 6). Helen C. Smith’s history of the WRWA, published in the program for the organization’s 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference, similarly took up the language of progress and technological advance to argue for the importance of members’ efforts in recording Wisconsin history:

in the past decade, boundaries of space and time have been erased. The past has fused with the present and in time, will weld with the future. It is imperative then, that regional writers of vision continue to create a permanent record of the widening horizon. Only in this manner will people of the world have knowledge, hundreds of years from now, of what is Wisconsin’s heritage and its special place in world culture (3).

It seems that, in the face of rapid cultural and technological change, at least some leaders of the WRWA felt even more keenly the need for (as the earliest newsletters articulated the WRWA's mission) "a creative interpretation of the state and region."

However, there are also signs that the organization began to decline in both total membership and enthusiasm during this time. In a speech to the WRWA in 1960, shortly after he returned from a year in Finland, Gard comments on this purported decline. The central purpose of this speech is to describe the urgency of the WRWA's work in encouraging ordinary people to pursue writing; however, Gard also uses this as an occasion to comment on the state he finds the organization in on his return: "I have been a bit hurt, on my return, by intimations here and there, that WRWA wasn't what it used to be, or that some of the old gang has dropped off" (Gard, "Need for the Arts" 4).

The current iteration of the Wisconsin Rural Writers' Association, now known simply as the Wisconsin Writers' Association, continues many of the traditions of the WRWA. The WWA's outreach strategy bears similarities to the WRWA's, emphasizing both local, in-person meetings of writing groups and official WWA instruction and encouragement, now delivered both online and in-person through conferences, workshops, and other programs. To this end, the WWA's homepage currently lists three upcoming events, a novel in progress bookcamp; a WWA author showcase, part of the Lakefly Conference; and the Milwaukee Writing Workshop. The WWA hosts a spring and fall conference, whose location rotates around the state. The Round Robin program, advertised in the newsletter as an opportunity to "study creative writing from your home" continues, with five groups organized by genre available to members. The names of early WRWA members can still be found in the work of the WWA; for example, the annual contests now include a category for articles, the Al P. Nelson Feature Writing Contest,

named for the WRWA leader and instructor of several Extension writing courses created for WRWA members. The WWA is interested in placing itself in a lineage of Wisconsin writers that extends from Robert Gard to contemporary Wisconsin-based writers such as Lorrie Moore, Ronald Wallace, and Jerry Apps, and *Creative Wisconsin's* Wisconsin Writers Legacy Project attempts to engage members in drafting bibliographies of approved Wisconsin writers.

Though the organization now claims to be neither rural nor regional, the member writing published in newsletters and recognized by the annual contests retains traces of the WRWA's rural-romantic rhetoric. The most recent winners of the Florence Lindeman contest were "Oh Chicken Feathers," an essay about a grandfather unwilling to let his granddaughter collect eggs from their chicken coop, and "Whacked," an essay about a woman's attempts to rid her lawn of dandelions and other weeds. The current newsletter encourages members to send in work, explaining that "we're interested in articles, especially, but not only, about the history of literature in Wisconsin." Further, the WWA still makes implicit claims to represent Wisconsin through member writing. The newsletter and *Creative Wisconsin* both bear the current logo for the organization, an image of the state of Wisconsin with a pen placed over it, and both periodicals describe themselves as "Wisconsin's Writing Home." It also seems likely that, although the WWA is no longer officially rural, its membership is actually even more strongly rooted in rural Wisconsin than in the early days of the WRWA. The leadership is dispersed across the state, with only one leader, the Contest Work Group Committee Coordinator, residing in Madison. This geographic dispersion marks quite a dramatic shift from the WRWA's earliest days, when the leaders, the organization's office, and the printing of periodicals were all housed at the University in Madison.

The WWA retains also the inclusive and welcoming spirit that was so central to the WRWA. Describing the various programs of the WWA, newsletter editor J.R. Turner claims that “we’re one of the most inclusive organizations I know of and this means any Wisconsin author, published by any means, is welcome to share in celebrating sixty-three years of promoting the written word” (“Editor’s Corner” 3). While members’ use of the online forums to make connections and share advice about publication demonstrates that this technology makes writing instruction and encouragement accessible for some, the WWA is also aware that simply placing resources online is insufficient for many writers, particularly those who are older, lack experience with technology, or live in rural areas that are underserved by internet providers. In a recent “Editor’s Corner” column, current *Creative Wisconsin* editor Lisa Lickel encourages members to send their writing in for publication, and she closes by noting that members unable to send material electronically may instead “send it for consideration and retyping” to her home address in Kewaskum. By providing multiple options for engagement and encouraging writers of all levels of experience, the WWA continues the commitment of the original WRWA to making writing accessible for all Wisconsin writers, regardless of education, experience, or access to technology.

While the WRWA expressed ambivalence about the value of publication, seeing it as a necessary step in circulating member representations about Wisconsin life and culture but also as potentially detrimental to members’ artistic efforts, the WWA has adopted a more straightforward and pragmatic approach with respect to publishing. Two of the benefits listed on the membership page are advice and networking, and both of these benefits are linked to publication. Advice is defined as “access to high-quality advice regarding publication option, and promotion and marketing of books [sic]” and also includes “eligibility to submit proposals for

publication by the WWA press, WWA's own publishing effort." Networking is advertised as a means of helping members connect to other writers, presumably with an eye towards learning about publication: "a network to other aspiring and professional writers throughout the state willing to share their writing experiences." Its leaders typically highlight their publication and editorial experience as a means of building credibility.

Indeed, as a whole, the WWA inclines toward genre fiction, occasionally defining itself explicitly as non-literary. An article from the Summer 2011 newsletter, "On the Importance of Being Earnestly Literary" articulates this literary/non-literary divide. In this article, Birney Dibble begins by giving his writerly credentials: a couple dozen articles in sports magazines, a half dozen articles short stories, a dozen how-to articles, and four novels, all "sold" to various outlets, a word that seems, for Dibble, to certify him as a serious and experienced writer. He reports, however, that when he attended a writers' conference at Berkeley he perceived a "pervasive, distinct condescension to the few of us who were not interested in – and presumably not capable of – writing for the literary magazines" (1). Dibble comments with some surprise on these writers' disinterest in selling their writing: "many people – young and old alike – didn't seem to be motivated toward publishing. They just wanted to write what they wanted to write, regardless of publish-ability" (1). The WWA's focus on genre fiction and small publishing houses likely serves several purposes, including making writing accessible for those whom a more literary focus might alienate, engaging people for whom "selling" their writing is a prime goal, and creating a niche for the organization.

Despite its varied programming and efforts at reaching out to interested writers, the current WWA has a much smaller membership than in even the earliest years of the WRWA. As of January 2009, the WWA had fewer than 460 members, compared with the 1000 members

attracted within the first year of the WRWA founding. As a result, “increase membership” was one of four major goals identified by the 2010 Comprehensive Plan. The Comprehensive Plan also addressed the need to increase member engagement in programming, with the three first objectives to reach by September 2010 including an increase in membership, an increase in attendance at conferences to at least 150 paid attendees, and increased participation in WWA contests. Despite the goals outlined in the Comprehensive Plan, disengagement with central programs has continued to be a problem. In a Spring 2011 newsletter column, WWA President LaMoine MacLaughlin observed that “it has been impossible for anyone not to notice that over the past two years WRWA member participation in conferences and contests has declined.” He went on to quantify this declining participation, explaining that “this past spring member participation in both the spring conference and in WRWA contests involved only 10% of our membership.” The WWA has had even more difficulty finding members to fill all of its leadership positions. The 2011 Summer newsletter listed six vacant board seats and three vacant spots for regional representatives, vacancies for the positions of youth member services coordinator and poet laureate representative, and indicated an urgent need for an online forum moderator/administrator and an advertising manager.

Even though the current WWA has declined dramatically in size and significance, the influence of the original Wisconsin Rural Writers’ Association can still be felt across the state of Wisconsin. Names of important WRWA members are still a part of Wisconsin writing, as is the case with the Edna Meudt Poetry Book Award, named for a prominent member of the early WRWA and given by the Council for Wisconsin Writers each year to a Wisconsin poet. In recent years, this prize has frequently been given to writers associated the creative writing program at

the University of Wisconsin-Madison, with professor Amaud Jamaul Johnson and program coordinator Sean Bishop winning the prize in the last two years.

The WRWA is connected to many of the important institutions and organizations that support extracurricular writing in Wisconsin, including the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets and the School of the Arts at Rhineland. The Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets (WFOp), founded in 1950, counts as its charter members important leaders of the WRWA including Edna Meudt, Edward Kamarck, and Fidelia Van Antwerp, and for a long time there was significant overlap in membership between the two organizations, with the WRWA newsletter frequently reporting on meetings of the WFOp. The Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets continues to offer members “poetic camaraderie,” a quarterly newsletter, two annual conferences, poetry contests and awards, and other events. They also publish an annual Wisconsin Poets’ Calendar and sponsor educational activities throughout the state. Although the WWA has declined significantly from the heyday of the WRWA, the WFOp remains an important force for Wisconsin poets, and its membership truly encompasses the geographic span of the state.

The WFOp defines itself in terms of both poetry and advocacy for poetry, explaining that it is “an organization of people who are interested in poetry, who write poetry, and/or who are willing to make Wisconsin poetry-conscious and conscious of its own poets; the organization is formed exclusively for literary and scientific purposes” (“About,” “Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets”). The events page lists a wide range of activities organized by region, so that wherever WFOp members live, they can find readings, writing groups, and workshops nearby. The WFOp also runs a number of poetry contests, including a student contest, and contests open to WFOp members and to the general public. Judges are generally nationally prominent poets, and recent judges include Nick Lantz, a professor at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas and

author of three books of poetry; Jennifer Boyden, author of two books of poetry; and Nick Demske, whose book was published as part of Fence's Modern Poets Series. However, all of these judges also have ties to Wisconsin, suggesting that both national publication records and local knowledge are necessary to qualify poets to judge the work of WFoP members.

The WFoP's articulation of its mission bears a strong resemblance to the WRWA's. The first bullet of its mission statement echoes the WRWA Creed's linking of writing, democracy, and enlightenment, noting that a major purpose of the WFoP is "to secure fuller recognition of poetry as one of the important forces making for a higher civilization and to create a finer appreciation of poetry by the public at large" ("About," "Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets"). According to this mission statement, then, the WFoP shares the WRWA's understanding of writing as necessarily outward-reaching, an art that should circulate through public spaces.

Similar to the current WWA's efforts to create a lineage for itself through connections to earlier notable writers, the WFoP's website includes a "Foreshadows" page listing two poets, August Derleth and Lorine Niedecker, as "earlier Wisconsin Poets who still inspire us today" ("Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets"). These two are a bit of an odd pair, however, and reflect the tension between the organization's desire to foster regional connections and to legitimize its work through ties to national presses and nationally famous poets. August Derleth, mentioned earlier in this dissertation, was a prolific writer, critic, and teacher of writing. Through his weekly column in Madison's *Capital Times*, his teaching at the Rhinelander School of the Arts, and other activities, he became a significant figure in Wisconsin regional writing. In contrast, Niedecker, who lived most of her life in the small town of Fort Atkinson, was a bit reclusive and, though, she published four books, took pains to not be known as a writer by those in her community. However, though Niedecker's writing was not widely known in her lifetime, she

was connected to Objectivist New Poets like Louis Zukofsky and has recently been the object of renewed critical interest. While Niedecker's work has been, through scholarly inquiry, certified as literary and has begun to enter the canon of American poetry, Derleth remains a specifically regional figure. Though WFoP claims both writers as predecessors, these striking differences between their literary engagement during their lifetimes and their differing treatments by the literary establishment suggests that claiming regional identity too explicitly can prevent writers from being seen as truly literary.

The School of the Arts at Rhinelander, founded in 1964 by WRWA founder Robert Gard, and continuing today in partnership with the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Continuing Studies program, has maintained the WRWA's mission of providing creative writing instruction to rural Wisconsin residents; the School's history notes that "farmers and community members from Northern Wisconsin were encouraged to share their stories" ("School of the Arts at Rhinelander"). The School, housed in Wisconsin's North Woods, initially focused exclusively on writing, beginning with fifty students and six instructors, but has since come to include the visual arts and culinary arts. In 1967, Gard wrote and received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, the first ever awarded to rural sites, for arts funding in five rural communities. The School of the Arts was a key beneficiary of the grant. Over time, the School has continued to be supported by a partnership between the Rhinelander School District, the City of Rhinelander, the Northern Arts Council, the Rhinelander Chamber of Commerce, and other community leaders and organizations. Gard described the mission of the school in terms that evoke the rural-romantic rhetoric of the WRWA, emphasizing in particular the role of the arts in the daily life of ordinary people: "The School has been a place for students of all ages and backgrounds to exchange ideas, dream dreams, learn new ways to express themselves, and further the whole idea

that art (written, painted and otherwise) is, indeed, a necessity in a happy, everyday life” (“School of the Arts at Rhinelander”). Today, the School articulates its mission using similar language and also linking its work specifically to the University of Wisconsin’s longstanding mandate for community outreach. The School’s website explains that its work is based on “the importance of a supportive environment to help people grow as artists, the power of every individual to express themselves through one or more forms of the arts, and the Wisconsin Idea of bringing the resources of the university to the citizens of the state” (“School of the Arts at Rhinelander”).

While the articulation of a shared vision and record of rural Wisconsin is no longer explicitly central to the work of these organizations, they continue the legacy of the WRWA in several other ways. Like the WRWA’s Green Lake Conference, the School of the Arts at Rhinelander provides a site for ordinary people to identify as writers; its location in northern Wisconsin allows participants to carve out a kind of extraordinary space to support their writing practice. The Fellowship of Poets maintains the WRWA’s focus on circulation of member writing, as well as its insistence that all who are interested can learn to write. Perhaps most importantly, through their ongoing connection with the university and their location in a variety of public and civic spaces including libraries and schools, they continue to define writing as a public good that should circulate in public spaces.

### **Other Sites of Extracurricular Literacy Instruction**

In addition to these programs with formal or historical connections to the WRWA, Wisconsin is also currently home to a rich array of other programs providing extracurricular literacy instruction. This section discusses two different programs, the Madison Writers’ Studio

and the Bubbler, which represent some of the range of opportunities available to extracurricular writers in Madison in particular. Both programs present themselves as an opportunity for aspiring writers to gain access to high-quality writing instruction and a community of engaged writers outside of a formal university program such as an MFA. Though the programs are housed in different spaces, with Madison Writers' Studio classes meeting in instructors' homes and Bubbler classes taking place in public libraries, both programs also emphasize the site of the instruction as an important asset, suggesting that the physical location of the classes assists in building intimacy between writers. Although both programs depart from the WRWA's emphasis on the Midwest as an important identity and source of inspiration for writers, their focus on remaining accessible to ordinary people who aspire to write and their assertion that the site of literacy instruction matters for writers mark important commonalities with the core principles underlying the WRWA's outreach to rural writers.

Moreover, both programs present themselves as being rooted in the pervasive desire on the part of ordinary people to write, which is a constant theme in the WRWA's archives. The Bubbler, which provides a wide range of arts programming in addition to creative writing workshops, seems predicated on this desire to create. Its creative writing description page emphasizes its openness to writers at a range of skill and experience levels, noting that "wherever you are in your writing process, we hope that you will find connection at this year's series of creative writing workshops here at the Bubbler" ("Creative Writing Workshops"). An early *Wisconsin State Journal* article reporting on the founding of the Madison Writers' Studio suggests that this pervasive desire to write provided the exigency for the Studio. "When Madison author Susanna Daniel speaks to book clubs, inevitably, she says, 'Someone pulls me aside and tells me they want to write a novel'" (Kolker, "Authors create"). From that

desire – which seems here to be nearly illicit – Daniel and Michelle Wildgen, another Madison-based novelist, founded the Madison Writers’ Studio.

The Madison Writers’ Studio defines itself as a rigorous writing program of a caliber similar to an MFA program. An article describing the studio’s first courses says those courses are designed for “committed, serious writers who have the motivation to work but need the guidance and encouragement of a supportive and experienced teacher to get from brilliant idea to finished product” (Bedford). In essence, a great deal of motivation is assumed on the part of the student, and the Writers’ Studio aims to provide the encouragement and, to some extent, the writing instruction necessary to translate the desire to write into a finished product. In contrast with university programs, the Writers’ Studio defines itself as more broadly accessible, since students do not need to make the commitment, financial or otherwise, to a full-time graduate program. Early coverage of the Writers’ Studio makes this comparison explicit, positioning the program as an alternative to formal university programs, noting that “while we’re fortunate to have a world-class university in Madison with a stellar creative writing faculty, not everyone can afford the time or tuition involved in sustained program dedicated to an avocation that’s unlikely to make anyone’s fortune” (Bedford). Further, the Writers’ Studio, which maintains class sizes between six and eight, offers “a degree of access and personal attention that can be hard to find in an academic setting” (Bedford).

Coverage of the Writers’ Studio emphasizes the collegiality and intimacy afforded by the workshops, suggesting in places that this intimacy is supported by the workshops’ being held in instructors’ homes. In one instance, Wildgen and Daniel compare the courses they offer to their own writing group, noting that “they workshopped their most recent novels at the kitchen tables of friends and colleagues” (Kolker, “Authors create”). Implicitly, then, the Writers’ Studio

promises its students the same experience. While Wildgen and Daniel joined their writing group through personal connections and a record of publication, the Writers' Studio suggests that their writers can get access to the same experience simply through paying for Writers' Studio courses. Though the cost is substantial – typically \$520 for an eight-week course and \$1795 for the memoir in a year and novel in a year courses, which meet once a month all year long and also include significant one-on-one feedback from instructors – Wildgen and Daniel justify the cost by describing it as an investment. Wildgen compares the cost of a course to membership in her CSA, explaining that “I belong to a CSA, and the check feels pretty big when I write it, but it ends up being a very reasonable deal” (Bedford). Daniel goes on to note that the Studio will provide more than just instruction and feedback but will instead offer “a membership in a community” (Bedford). While the Writers' Studio's explicit focus is on the writing process itself, the Novel in a Year class ended with a public reading at Mystery to Me bookstore, a popular site for readings in Madison, suggesting that public circulation of writing remains important. Moreover, future publication is used as one bar for the course's success, with Daniel noting that “I have no doubt that I will see at least a handful of these novels on bookstore shelves” (Kolker, “Writers' Studio graduates”).

Though the Bubbler, the arts program of the Madison Public Library system, also offers writing workshops, their approach is less intensive. Further, the workshops, which are free, supported by grants from a variety of sources, including the Institute of Museum and Library Services, as well as the Ira and Ineva Reilly Baldwin Wisconsin Idea Endowment and Morgridge Center for Public Service, which are both connected to the University of Wisconsin, contributes to the library system's mission of public engagement. The Bubbler's connection to the University is also demonstrated by the group of people who joined together to write a National

Leadership Grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Of the four applicants listed on the grant proposal, two, Trent Miller and Jesse Vieau, are employees of the public library system, while the other two are professors at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. One, Erica Halverson, is a professor in Curriculum and Instruction within the School of Education, and the other, Rebekah Willett, is a professor in the School of Library and Information Studies. Like the Madison Writers' Studio and the WRWA decades earlier, the Bubbler benefits in material and practical ways from its relationship with the University.

The Bubbler offers "hands-on pop-up workshops" that connect participants to "a variety of local experts who share their talents and physical resources." The Bubbler's approach is distinguished by its emphasis on "learning through making," and their program encompasses animation, screen printing, music, dance, painting, and creative writing. This programming consists of both one-time and multi-day workshops, as well as special events and performances.

For creative writing specifically, the Bubbler explains that each course presents "a specific aspect of craft or the writing life," and these courses actually mirror many of the values of the WRWA, including the circulation of writing, the movement of writers through space, and the importance of community to writing. Current workshops include a four-week series on nature writing in urban areas, which includes a trip to write in Madison's Capitol Square, and a four-week workshop on sharing writing, titled "I wrote this poem now what do I do with it." Sarah Busse and Wendy Vardaman, Madison's current poet laureates and the instructors of the course, describe it as "a four week class in how to share poems with other people." Interestingly, the emphasis is truly on sharing, in a variety of ways, which includes online and print media but also less formal options like printing on magnets and clothing, self-publishing a chapbook, and sharing through visual and audio formats. Though Busse and Vardaman, as the former editors of

*Verse Wisconsin* and the current editors of Cowfeather Press, a self-described “kitchen press” that aims to publish poetry representing “the diversity of the upper Midwest,” have a good deal of publishing experience, this workshop reflects the value they place on sharing writing, regardless of the prestige garnered through formal publication. In this, it aligns to the WRWA’s value on circulating member writing.

Although *The Bubbler* and the Madison Writers’ Studio are both housed in Madison, there are many other programs supporting extracurricular writing around the state. UW-Madison’s Continuing Studies Writing program offers an array of in-person writing courses, online writing courses, and retreats, including Write by the Lake and the Writers’ Institute, which bring writers from around the region to Madison. Each April, to celebrate National Poetry Month, UW-Milwaukee’s Eat Local Read Local program distributes printed poems to diners at restaurants in Madison and Milwaukee. This initiative engages the WRWA’s tradition of circulating writing in public spaces, and Eat Local Read Local says it aims to “connect with more of the community through poetry, hopefully reaching some readers we otherwise wouldn’t.” In Appleton, The Mill offers a community-run series of writing workshops and classes. Appleton also launched a sidewalk poetry program in 2014. A sidewalk poetry committee will publish five poems a year written by Appleton residents, and the work will be stamped on sidewalks adjacent to city property. The city’s aldermen cited both artistic and civic benefits of the program, with Alderman Joe Martin saying it would “foster more art in Appleton” and Alderman Greg Dannecker seeing it as a way to encourage people to “spur more physical activity” as they walked and biked through the city reading the sidewalk poems (Penzstadler). The first five poems were selected from nearly 100 submissions, and the poets include two students and three adult city residents (“Appleton winning sidewalk poems”). UW-

Baraboo/Sauk City hosts the Summerset Festival of the Arts each year, which includes writing workshops and readings alongside musical performances, screenings of documentaries, and vendors selling hamburgers, brats, and veggie burgers.

As a whole, these programs affirm the WRWA's original assertions that Wisconsin is home to many aspiring and practicing writers. This Wisconsin writing is a rich and varied terrain, with writers in the Madison Writers' Studio's Novel in a Year course drafting up to 500 pages in one year and aiming for publication with New York presses, while other writers explicitly reject these literary aims and instead validate their work through a record of publication in local newspapers and magazines. Some turn to writing to record family history or for self-expression, while others publish widely, traveling across the region to read and (hopefully) sell books at bookstores, libraries, and literary festivals. Despite a wide variation in practice among these writers and organizations, however, this research into contemporary extracurricular literacies further supports the materialist approach of my archival work. Even as the internet makes writing instruction and encouragement available to members who are geographically quite distant from each other, I find that place and space play a vital role in the work of writers, who meet in libraries, instructors' homes, scenic spots by Madison's Lake Mendota, and other sites around the state. Though the rhetoric and register have, in most cases, changed, with comparatively few writers identifying explicitly as either Wisconsin or rural, the culture, history, and landscape of the Midwest continue to be an energizing force for the region's many writers.

### **Writing the Midwest**

Beyond the boundaries of Wisconsin, there's also been an interest in recent years in defining the Midwest as home to a vibrant literary community. Minneapolis is home to the Loft

Literary Center, whose community workshops and studio space for writers was part of the inspiration for the Madison Writers' Studio. Graywolf Press and Milkweed Editions, two major independent presses, are also based in Minneapolis. Since 2011, Milkweed has also run the annual Lindquist & Vennum prize for a book of poetry, for which only writers residing in the Upper Midwest are eligible. The New American Press has begun publishing anthologies of Midwestern writing, aiming to "support and spotlight the flourishing crop of Midwestern writers who consistently produce work that is engaging, finely crafted, and strong in voice" ("New American Press"). The region is also home to many independent book stores that regularly host readings, including Women and Children First in Chicago and Arcadia Books in Spring Green, Wisconsin. There are also several notable book festivals, including the Wisconsin Book Festival, the Twin Cities Book Festival, Splattered Ink Press's "Quit Whining Start Writing" festival in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and the relatively new Middle West Literary Festival in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Although these programs are all housed in the Midwest, they vary in the degree to which they make Midwestern identity a central part of their work. While the New American Press anthology series seeks "to explode the generally accepted notions of what the Midwest is and what Midwestern writing is, while honoring its rich and long-standing traditions," neither Graywolf nor Milkweed highlight their Midwestern location as part of their identity as presses ("New American Press"). Two particularly interesting programs, the literary magazine *Midwestern Gothic* and the literary festival Voices from the Middle West, which the founders of *Midwestern Gothic* helped create, also engage this project of simultaneously clarifying and challenging definitions of the Midwest and Midwestern writing. Although *Midwestern Gothic* is fairly generous in its definition of Midwestern writers, as contributors are required only to have

lived in the Midwest for a time, its vision of Midwestern writing is a bit more specific. The magazine aims to “collect the very best in Midwestern writing in a way that has never been done before, cataloging the oeuvre of an often-overlooked region of the United States ripe with its own mythologies and tall tales” (“About Midwestern Gothic”).

The Voices of the Middle West literary celebration, an event presented by *Midwestern Gothic* in connection with the University of Michigan's Residential College, shares *Midwestern Gothic's* interest in articulating a more diverse vision of the Midwest and Midwestern writing. The event includes students and faculty from the University of Michigan, as well as magazines and presses from all over the Midwest. The festival continues the WRWA's emphasis on being inclusive and welcoming, a mission supported in part by the absence of a registration fee for the conference. The organizers describe the event as “a celebration of the Midwest voice,” explaining that their aim is “to create an ideal environment for any and all to come and take an active part, to discover and discuss how rich our literary tradition is” (“Voices Lit Fest”). The festival included a keynote reading by Stuart Dybek, a prolific fiction writer and poet who grew up in the Midwest and currently teaches at Northwestern University, several panels on topics of interest to Midwestern writers, such as the Midwestern landscape in literature and fables and myth in Midwestern storytelling. The festival also provided opportunities for writers to learn about publishing through a panel centered on the role of gender in publishing and to share their work at an Open Mic.

As a magazine, *Midwestern Gothic* is engaged in creating a textual record of the Midwest, a project that actually bears similarities to the WRWA's mission of creating a “shared interpretation of State and Region.” In addition to this creative work, the magazine's interview series always asks contributors about their own understanding of Midwestern identity and

writing. Every Contributor's Spotlight including the following question: Why do you believe there has never really been a regionalist push for Midwestern writing in the past like there has with the South or even the West Coast? The responses to this question demonstrate the wide range of understandings of the Midwest, as two examples will show. One white female writer, Alisha Erin Hillam, describes a very typical understanding of the Midwest. Hillam portrays the Midwest in language that would be very familiar to any mid-century member of the WRWA, explaining that, in her view, "the Midwest is saturated with down-home-ness, a constancy of farm fields and labor, friendliness, and a sense of comfortable existence" (Hillam). In contrast, Marlin M. Jenkins, a black writer from Detroit, articulates a very different vision of the Midwest. Describing how the Midwest has influenced his writing, Jenkins refers specifically to the ethnic diversity of Michigan's communities, including the Arab population in Dearborn and his hometown of Detroit. So for Jenkins, the Midwest that enters his writing isn't the idyllic rural space so often conjured by the WRWA and the WWA, but is rather a site of "urban culture and/or struggle" (Jenkins). Commenting specifically on the disconnect between pervasive and perhaps stereotypical depictions of the Midwest as rural heartland, Jenkins says that "geographic and aesthetic representations in the Midwest get messy, like those terrible Pure Michigan ads where Tim Allen is talking about lighthouses and dunes and skiing and I feel much more isolated than proud as a result because the category has little to do with the Michigan I know and love" (Jenkins). Much as the WRWA's rural-romantic rhetoric supported some visions of rural Wisconsin while implicitly suppressing others, contemporary understandings of the Midwest continue to act both on the writing of those who reside in the region and on how these writers understand themselves in relationship to the places around them.

## **Directions for Future Research**

Although this dissertation is the product of many years of reading and research, including countless hours spent considering the daily lives and writing lives of the rural writers that people the WRWA archives, there are still several directions for future research I have not yet fully explored. Two major strands that I plan to engage in the future are the relationship between literacy and technology and the role of gender in rural literacies. Rural literacies scholarship tends not to engage technology. With the exception of Kathryn Hibbert's "Reconfiguring the Communications Landscape," which examines the potential for online pedagogies and theories of multiliteracies to improve rural education, scholarship in rural literacies generally emphasizes discourse around the rural, trends in rural education, and the material realities of rural life. While rural literacies' focus on the material has greatly informed my own theoretical approach in this dissertation, I also see technologies as key underexplored actors in rural literate practice. In particular, for the time period and writers I study, technologies of communication and transportation such as the car, rural radio, improved rural roads, and telephones, were very much present as recent changes. These technologies appear intermittently in WRWA member writing and more frequently in member discussions of writing practices. While rural historians have studied these technologies in great detail, rural literacies has not yet turned its focus to the relationship between technology and literate practice.

Technology may also prove a useful lens for an exploration of another important theme that has emerged in my research, that of gender. When I originally drafted my proposal and began working on individual chapters, I chose to be guided by the topics members identified as important, and this led to my examination of how the WRWA understood the rural and rural writers, how WRWA leadership and individual chapters articulated a relationship between rural

place and writing, and how the circulation of member writing impacted writing practices. However, throughout my research, gender has appeared at every turn as a crucial – though almost never explicitly stated – factor in members’ writing, include their ability to maintain a writing life. As discussed in Chapter Two, the WRWA worked to align writing with conservative gender ideologies, suggesting that women could be both good writers and good wives and mothers, but the reality of these often-conflicting demands was more complex. In future research, I plan to make gender a more explicit focus. In particular, technology may prove a route into thinking about gender, and I am interested in exploring the role gender plays in how members represent technology in their writing. While many technologies, such as the car or the tractor, are often implicitly coded male, the female members of the WRWA often included these male-coded technologies in their renderings of rural life, and they frequently imbued them with a nostalgic tone. A more deliberate focus on gender as an actor in the writing lives of these rural writers will help develop a richer response to my inquiry into the material, cultural, and social conditions that make writing possible.

There are a few clear, practical lessons that arise from this research. First, my study of historical and current extracurricular literacies in Wisconsin and the Midwest has shown me that the extracurriculum is a key site of literacy learning. Kim Donehower’s “Why Not at School?” affirms this finding, noting that she and other researchers have frequently observed, when observing what she calls “hyperliterate,” “people who read and/or write extensively as adults, when those activities are not required by a job or pursuit of a formal educational degree,” that these individuals rarely give school any credit for shaping what has proven to be a “lifelong avocational literacy” (35). Instead, this passionate pursuit of literacy has taken place in the extracurriculum, and the rural people Donehower studies participate in book clubs, religious

study groups that including reading and writing, local history writing groups, and other avocational activities that require literacy. In my own teaching, I have often marked the difference in affect and engagement between the writing I assign and the reading and writing students do outside the classroom of their own accord. While instructors cannot import either the energy or the content of these extracurricular literacies into the classroom, instructors should be interested in their students' extracurricular writing, and many courses would likely benefit from deliberately inquiring into students' extracurricular writing and the relationship between schooled and unschooled literacies. Additionally, the vitality of extracurricular writing forms a strong argument for the value of institutional support for extracurricular writing through the allocation of human and material resources to programs like literary magazines, clubs that include literacy, and programs like Wisconsin's campus-wide Go Big Read.

Finally, this study of extracurricular literacies has informed my understanding of how writing matters, particularly to ordinary people with no institutional requirement or support for their work. Time and time again, the writers in this study remark on the significance of finding sympathetic readers and fellow writers, as in the case of Helen Stieve, who writes that her membership in the WRWA has "given me an emotional outlet to supplement the monotonous routine of housework and has thus made me a more interesting and certainly more contented person" ("Report of Mrs. Helen R. Stieve"). For the rural writers of the WRWA, and for many other extracurricular writers, their writing practices shape their relationship to the people around them, to their own history and culture, and to their sense of self. Moreover, as this writing moves through public spaces, it can transform how communities understand themselves. These writers' stories form a powerful testimony that even writing that arises from personal experience can have far-reaching public consequences.



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