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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with the history of the attempt of progressive-era students at Bryn Mawr College to explore their interest in social-reform work through the writing that they did in required composition courses. In particular, the paper focuses on how these women attempted to fashion a public voice for themselves that could articulate their vision for bettering the world, and at the same time, please their immediate audience--the instructors charged with their formal training in rhetoric and composition. In some ways the documents examined speak to the difficulty and awkwardness of that task when the stated mission of the college begrudgingly tolerated but did not embrace preparation for public service. And, the paper continues, neither did the stated purpose of writing courses stray very far from the officially sanctioned ideas about the goals of the Bryn Mawr women's education--and yet, composition instructors allowed students to write about their ideas for bringing about change in society, thus offering many college women what was perhaps their first opportunity to craft a public voice as social reformers. (Contains 20 references and 4 notes.) (NKA)

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"In the thick of the fight":
Service and Learning in Progressive Era Composition

"Follow not too slavishly the traditional paths of learning."
Jane Addams—
from a speech to Bryn Mawr College students in 1912

In her autobiography, Hilda Smith disclosed a rather unforgiving critique of her courses in Rhetoric and Composition at Bryn Mawr College from 1907-08:

> Enjoying the work in English at school, and often commended for my papers, in college I had become thoroughly discouraged with my efforts. According to my instructor, I could not seem to attain maturity of ideas, and failed only too often in those elementary principles pounded into us at every meeting of the rhetoric class. "Unity, Clearness and Coherence"(28).

It seemed to Smith that her writing instructors had been more concerned that she live up to pre-established and inflexible standards than with what she had to say. Her ideas did not carry weight because they "could not seem to attain maturity," at least not the kind of maturity narrowly defined as a discursive display of the "elementary principles pounded into us."

Smith's critique of her courses in English composition is powerful and informative because, as she wrote it in 1978, at the age of 90, she was no longer the insecure college girl vulnerable to the preferences of an English professor. She had become an activist for social change known especially for her pioneering efforts in the worker's education movement. After receiving an M.A. in ethics and psychology, and then a degree in social work from the New York School of Philanthropy, Smith started a community center at Bryn Mawr, served as acting Dean for the college, and directed the Summer School for Women Workers, a program that helped poor women improve their literacy skills.[1] Perhaps more significantly, Smith cultivated a long career as a social reformer who successfully garnered public funds to enact her vision. In 1933, for example, she asked the Roosevelt administration to extend workers' education programs. For her effort, she received an appointment with the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, where she trained 2,000 unemployed teachers to conduct a massive workers' education program. She later organized camps to introduce unemployed women to home economics, health education, and sports. Thus, as Smith reflected on her inability to impress her English instructors with her potential for vision and action, she must have done so less with regret than with a sense of irony. She had become a writer and woman with a public voice not, primarily, by studying the principles of clear, coherent writing, but by advocating causes in which she believed.

[1] For more information on the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers, and the role that writing instruction played in the school, see Karyn Hollis' article, "Liberating Voices: Autobiographical Writing at Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers, 1921-1938." CCC 44 (1994) 29-57.

In this history I am concerned with the attempt of progressive-era students at Bryn Mawr to explore their interest in social-reform work through the writing that they did in required composition courses. In particular, I am interested in how these women attempted to fashion a public voice for themselves that could articulate their vision for bettering the world, and at the same time, please their immediate audience-- the instructors charged with their formal training in rhetoric and composition. In some ways, the documents that I examined speak to the difficulty and awkwardness of that task when the stated mission of the college begrudgingly tolerated but did not embrace preparation for public service.[2] Neither did the stated purpose of writing courses stray very far from the officially sanctioned ideas about the goals of the Bryn Mawr woman's education. And yet, composition instructors allowed students to write about their ideas for bringing about change in society, thus offering many college women what was perhaps their first opportunity to craft a public voice as social reformers.

M. Carey Thomas and the Bryn Mawr Tradition

Explaining the tension between social-reform work and the academy, Vicki Ricks notes that college women who gained a public voice through service to the community "threatened male students, faculty, administrators, and trustees who questioned women's entry onto the public scene"(66). She cites the example of Vassar President James Taylor,

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[2] These documents included course catalogs, course descriptions published by the Essay department, student and alumni magazines, the student newspaper, private letters, scrapbooks, memorabilia, campus speeches, and a file of over 100 essays written by a

whose reason for not allowing Jane Addams to speak at the college was that "the mission of Vassar College was not to reform society but to educate women"(Ricks 72). While there were those among Bryn Mawr's trustees who feared women's involvement in social work because they feared their power and influence outside a traditional sphere, the values of the institution itself made the integration of academic and social work difficult. While Bryn Mawr students wanted to examine social problems, M. Carey Thomas clung to a more conservative definition of legitimate academic pursuits that was probably grounded in her own experience as one of the first American women to achieve a Ph.D. In her view, women should continue in the paths of their forebears, proving to the world that they could do the difficult intellectual work once thought suitable only for men.[3]

In various public addresses and in frequent "chapel talks" to students, President Thomas defined the values of the academy and its expectations for students and professors. Her initial goal had been to prove women equal to men by showing that they could complete a college curriculum like that offered at the best men's colleges and universities. But after the success of that first generation, Thomas turned more of her attention to the troubling fact that so few women were making their mark on the world as important scholars, writers and "original thinkers." While she continued to assert women's intellectual abilities, she broke new ground by explaining that women were still held back by distractions and disadvantages that men did not face, such as child care, family and

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single student during three semesters of required English, with comments from three different writing teachers.

[3] Bryn Mawr and Vassar defined their missions to contrast that of earlier female seminaries like Mt. Holyoke, which attempted to blend preparation for missionary work and teaching with study of the classics. See Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz. Alma Mater: Design and Experience in The Women's Colleges from their Nineteenth Century Beginnings to the 1930s.

social obligations, and a lack of prestigious rewards for which to compete (Horowitz 394-395). The goal of Bryn Mawr in the early twentieth century would be to alleviate such distractions so that women's genius could shine. An all-women's institution would provide the perfect cloister.

From Thomas' perspective, one of the most threatening distractions on Bryn Mawr's campus at this time was women's intense interest in social-reform work. In a chapel talk to graduate students in 1916, she made it clear that women of genius did not involve themselves in social work. There were two classes of students and teachers, she asserted. To one class belong the "geniuses" with "a gift for research and independent scholarly work" and who therefore "ought not to concern themselves with public affairs." In fact, such women ought not to even prepare their own breakfast: "think of a Newton or an Edison taking time to cook his own breakfast," she joked ("Opening of the College").

Recognizing that not all women aspired to produce works of scholarly genius, and that some women may indeed place a higher value on teaching and participating in "public affairs," Thomas mentioned a possible place for study of social reform within the academy. Her accommodation, however, carried with it an explicit warning. A professor could improve her teaching and her connection to students if she would "inform herself of the great social and economic changes and the great reform movements that we are living through," but to do so would brand her a non-genius, second-class, "teaching" academic. Furthermore, Thomas cautioned that "the boards of trustees will not like it," that "a teacher or professor with such a satisfactory collection of enemies is not very much in demand," and finally, that "reform work takes so much time that you cannot do it and still

be a good professor." (The News, column 3, 13 December: 2,5). Clearly, then, the values of the academy, with its emphasis on proving women's genius to the world, conflicted with those of students and professors who believed that attention to social problems could and should be integrated with academic work.

Students who felt discontent with the traditional goals and values of academics and sought ways to integrate their college studies with their interest in social reform. "The Romantic Age of the college woman is past," wrote the editor of the college magazine The Lantern in 1902. "Her pathway is no longer beset by the dragons of hostility, satire, disbelief"(7). A 1908 editor proposed that the question now was not "Can a woman go through college," but "Is it worth while that she should?"(4). To answer this question, the editor suggested that students search for meaning outside the goals of the traditional curriculum. If Bryn Mawr students found it difficult to see the world, "it is not the narrowness of our horizon" that was the problem "but the narrowness of our gaze . . . twentieth-century labour struggles, socialism, woman suffrage,--all these things have in reality no sharper edge of immediate significance than the wars of the Middle Ages." Instead of exclusively studying such scholarly subjects, the editor advised her classmates to see "these four years as a means, not an end"(4).

An angry 1917 editorial in The College News singled out required courses in composition as particularly unresponsive to students' needs:

> A part of the College course not down in the Calendar but as unavoidably undergone by college students as Required English is the period of intense disgust with a liberal education in general and a college education in particular. . . . One asks, with the same bitterness with which one faced an English Reader over a

> Freshman critical paper, 'What good is it all going to do me anyway?' . . . One quotes one's favorite professor impressively: 'Bryn Mawr is a direct training for refined leisure,' and finds, if one looks for a job, that he is right.'

These editorials illustrate the frustration that many progressive-era college women felt over not having a strong sense of how their education fitted them for a meaningful life. Many Bryn Mawr graduates did not need to earn wages, but this fact made it perhaps even more difficult to figure out how to make their lives productive. As graduate Mary Worthington put it in a 1909 editorial for the alumni magazine, "The right to work calls these women even more strongly than those that earn, for they have the surplus of life's favors to spend for the benefit of others"(86).

Required Composition and Rhetoric at Bryn Mawr

In some ways, Bryn Mawr's required courses in Composition and Rhetoric, housed in an Essay department that was separate from the larger, more prestigious English department, deserved reprimands for being too concerned with "clean dry principles." According to Professor Katherine Lord, the Director of Required English who described the course work in 1907, students read books and performed drills on writing clear, correct prose. The instructor's response to student work focused on pulling the paper "to pieces, usually, criticising it for lack of unity, sequence and mass, both in the general conception and in the expression of each sentence."

And yet, Lord claimed that English Composition would awaken the kind of perceptive abilities that sounded much like those Jane Addams claimed were necessary for

success in social reform work. When students entered Bryn Mawr, not only were they "muddle-headed and unable to see things in wholes," claimed Lord. Furthermore, they were "blind to the interest in what is about them, either in the world of thought or in the concrete world"(5). To sharpen their vision, students wrote short themes on "actual, present conditions and surroundings" as well as critical papers on literary topics, in which they attempted to apply rhetorical principles. Being shown where her own writing lacked clarity would clear the student's mind. Writing frequent themes about what she observed would awaken her sensibilities.

Harvard had pioneered the use of the daily theme to develop students' powers of observation, but Lord emphasized that Bryn Mawr's curriculum differed from Harvard's. "In making the Freshmen feel that fact as fact is not so interesting as personal sense of fact, we go to work by awakening in each one the consciousness of her own sense of fact, the consciousness that is, of her own personality"(10). A theme that expressed the writer's personality would be one that contained "no false pathos, but quick and natural feeling"(11). Furthermore, by studying the literary style of great authors, the student learned to broaden her conception of the moral and the aesthetic.[4]

A comparison between the list of suggested topics in a manual for English A at Harvard, dated 1914-1915, and a list of topics addressed by Margery Scattergood, a freshman at Bryn Mawr during 1913-1914, does reveal some striking differences. At

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[4] The idea that one's personality should come forth in a piece of writing was common in many composition textbooks at turn of century, such as Charles S. Baldwin's A College Manual of Rhetoric (1902). Lord's discussion of style as personality echoes Baldwin's. Style, according to Baldwin, was not only an expression of one's true personality but a way of measuring one's aesthetic and moral sensibility. (For a discussion of the effects of Baldwin's rhetoric on women writers, see Joanne Wagner, "Intelligent Members or Restless Disturbers": Women's

Harvard, program administrators asked students to limit their writing to expositions on practical matters, such as "How to Change a Quick Detachable Automobile Tire," "How a Submarine is Handled," or "How An Insurance Office is Managed." In contrast, Scattergood's freshman writing sounds much loftier, often reflecting on the purpose of an education, the beauty and significance of the college campus, and the meanings of classic literary texts. Two essays from her first year also investigate effective methods for helping the poor, a topic she addressed more frequently in her third semester of writing instruction.

Though Scattergood had opportunities to write about her interest in social reform, the goals of Bryn Mawr's writing program were nonetheless aligned with the official goals of the college, with its focus on developing women's scholarly genius. The 1913 Bryn Mawr College Calendar specified that while students in first-year Composition and Rhetoric would write short papers on topics chosen from personal experience, they would draw longer papers "from the lectures on the history of the English language and literature and from assigned reading"(103). Reflecting this emphasis on literary study, the number of literary topics addressed by Scattergood in her first course (15) far outweighed the number of topics devoted to campus life (6), nature (4), or social reform (2). Only in her third semester did Scattergood write the majority of her essays about social reform issues, the pursuit which took up much of her time outside of class.

Margery Scattergood, a Budding Social Reformer at Bryn Mawr

Rhetorical Styles 1880-1920," in Reclaiming Rhetorica: Women in the

A file of over 100 daily themes and essays that Margery Scattergood wrote between 1913 and 1915 for her required writing courses provide a rare insight into the complex rhetorical tasks that a progressive-era student faced when her values and educational goals differed from those of the academy. A biography compiled by the Bryn Mawr Archives notes that like Hilda Smith, who was roughly her contemporary, Scattergood was a member of the Christian Association for all four years of her college tenure, and president during her senior year. Their membership in the club would have been typical: between 1915-1918, participation ranged between 87% and 90% of the student body (College News 4).

Membership in the association was extensive in part because of the club's involvement in just about every kind of social work imaginable through twenty different committees. To name just a few, the college settlement committee taught classes in recreation, sewing, and child care at the nearby Light House Settlement; the Maids committee taught similar classes to the college custodial staff; the junk committee collected toys for poor children and books for soldiers in war camps; the Bates House committee raised funds and provided services for a summer camp for poor children; and the library committee formed a library for members of the custodial staff who were taking classes.

Since most students came to Bryn Mawr from protestant backgrounds, the Christian Association may have also been a comfortable way to continue the exercise of their beliefs. The organization reminded its members frequently in reports, lectures, and bible-study meetings of a higher purpose for their activities.

Rhetorical Tradition).

A conference in March of 1916 also emphasized the important connection between social work and Christian beliefs. The conference focused on "the rewards and results of active Christianity, Christianity in its relation to social problems, and the definite purpose of Christianity."

Scattergood looked for ways to integrate and harmonize her Christian beliefs and her enthusiasm for social work with the kind of college education that Bryn Mawr held before her. In many ways, her composition courses provided a place for her to attempt this harmony, though a real tension existed between her attempts to establish herself as a serious college student and an inspired social reformer.

In several essays written during her required course work in English Composition, Scattergood positions herself as a serious student who understands the purpose of her college education, even while she negotiates that purpose with her instructors. In an early essay written for Beatrice Daw, titled "Scholars at Bryn Mawr," she defines the ideal scholar as "a man who devotes his time to studying in order to accomplish some end through his learning, either to impart knowledge to others or to solve the problems of his day." Then she divides students into two groups: those "who take a real interest in the subjects they are studying," and the majority who "study merely to 'get through' the examinations and pass on to a higher class. Scattergood's instructor, Beatrice Daw, directed most of her comments toward the structure and organization of the paper, asking Scattergood to eliminate what she feels is unnecessary repetition. But she also expresses tacit approval of Scattergood's definition of a good scholar, noting that "pt. [point] and general method good."

In another essay, Scattergood proposes that educated women might make their mark on society with the vote, an idea that seems to challenge the notion that college is about proving one's genius. After noting women's historically inferior status to men, she argues that woman has recently "proved herself man's equal in intellectual ability" and should now attempt to "take her proper place in business, politics, and all social activities." Dreaming of the possibilities that the vote will open up for women, she reflects on the achievement and influence of Jane Addams: "For experience has shown us what a few women, like Jane Addams, who rose above the general distrust of woman's ability, have been able to do for the betterment of society." In the margins of her essay, the instructor, Professor Ida Langdon, challenges Scattergood's notion that women have made the intellectual strides necessary to ensure their status:

> Has she? [proven her intellectual ability] I should say she has not yet had the chance. Where are our great women poets and scholars and scientists, for example. She has certainly proved herself fit intellectually.

In reminding Scattergood that there are no recognized great women scholars or scientists, Langdon does more than open her eyes to an abiding gap in women's status. She reminds Scattergood of her real purpose while at Bryn Mawr--working to prove herself a worthy female scholar. At the very least, she must show her appreciation for the kind of intellectual work that the academy values.

Scattergood fills several of her themes with descriptions of becoming "awake" and "alive" to various stimuli. Such descriptions help her to represent her intellectual

development and thus to show her instructor that she is a serious student. "My First Theme Read in Class," for example, begins with her taking a "seat in Daily Theme class dreading the struggle to keep awake" after having "not slept at all the night before." When the instructor begins to read her theme, however, she is "startled out of [her] stupor," and portrays herself as "keenly alert" for the rest of the theme. Similarly, another contemporary student, Margaret Haskell, stressed her mental vigilance in a letter to President Thomas supporting the retention of a writing instructor:

> If one has to find the subject for a theme every day, he does not drowse through it; one is constantly alert towards any possible material to enlarge the field in which one can find subjects; one is continually driven to broaden one's point of view, to be intelligent about new things. The daily themes course I took in my sophomore year gave me a desire for intellectual alertness, for the ability to get at the meat of my daily contacts, that doubled my interest in every other course and made me want to clear up my brain as nothing ever did.

Haskell and Scattergood both hope to convince their reader that they have accomplished the kind of intellectual development that Bryn Mawr demanded: "clearing up" the muddle-headed brain and becoming "intellectually alert." Narrative accounts of coming alive and awake to the world most likely proved an effective rhetorical tool for accomplishing this end. But to what, exactly, were they coming alive and awake?

The titles of many of Scattergood's essays betray that students could claim an awakened state without ever setting foot off campus. "Trees" describes the beauty of trees on campus; "Beauty in a College Campus" praises the inspiring atmosphere of Bryn Mawr's buildings and grounds; "Moonlight" describes the glow of the moonlight on "the archway," a symbol of the college's philosophical and architectural links to prestigious European universities. Scattergood's essays on literary subjects likewise argue for the validity of her conclusions by claiming an awakened state. In "Books Worth Reading," she claims that poetry is worthwhile "if it awakens noble feelings." In "The Early English Poems," she enthusiastically displays her own appreciation of the "deep feeling" of these poems that "arouse" and "carry away" the reader.

Yet Scattergood was not content to write all of her daily themes about her immediate surroundings, nor did she exclusively represent herself as a serious scholar with no interests outside her studies. In "Bertha Langer," for example, Scattergood casts herself as a caseworker sent by a "society" to call on Bertha, a single mother "outcast, degraded before the world." She inserts herself into the narrative as a sympathetic listener to Bertha's story who longs to make a helpful suggestion, such as the idea that "perhaps she would find comfort and joy in caring for her baby." Yet when she hears that Bertha has given her baby to strangers, from whom she failed even to get a recommendation, Scattergood is too shocked to say anything. Her loss for words, and her inability to comprehend Bertha's desperate situation, betray her naiveté and ineffectiveness as a caseworker. And yet, the essay marks an important development in her ethos as a social reformer. Her "wakefullness" here stands in stark contrast to that implied in her

descriptions of the beautiful campus. This time, she is awake to real human suffering and to her meager resources for alleviating that suffering.

As Scattergood sought to garner authority for herself as a social worker, she had two obstacles to overcome. First, she had to argue persuasively for the social worker's expertise at a time when many forms of work were becoming increasingly professionalized. Part of that expertise lay in the social worker's greater sensitivity and awareness of the conditions of the poor, qualities that Scattergood had become accustomed to discussing and to developing in herself through her work in English composition. In an essay where she argues for "the efficiency" of the settlement worker, her terms sound remarkably similar to the language of theme-writing pedagogy:

> The settlement workers hold educational classes and entertainments for the people, organize clubs and unions among them, and are wide awake and alert in investigating the living conditions in their district and careful in their study of how to improve them.

Scattergood's creative blending of authoritative postures from the academy and from social work appears again in her argument for the greater efficiency of the settlement worker over the individual nurse, doctor or teacher who might perform some of the same duties. The crux of the settlement workers' advantage is that

> they can devote their whole time and attention to the study of the conditions they find about them; they can observe investigate and study the

> problems far more efficiently than anyone who does not devote his whole attention to this work. They have far more opportunity to discuss the work with others who have become expert in improving slum conditions and of making a scientific research of the most efficient methods of helping the poor, simply because they can work whole heartedly and with individual interest for this end.

Here, Scattergood suggests that the ideal settlement worker combines her ability to devote whole-hearted, careful attention to the poor with her ability to make contacts in the academic world, those experts in "scientific research." To that "most fundamental of all remedies--personal friendship," the settlement worker adds "the benefits of a college education," by which she means the benefits of *her* education.

In Scattergood's argument, then, the settlement worker mediates between the poor and those who conduct scientific study of the poor. Resting one's authority on this kind of in-between position, however, became increasingly difficult when colleges like Bryn Mawr began to form departments and schools of social work. The desire for academic success and prestige pressured professors in those new departments to focus on gathering and analyzing statistics, rather than personal experience, to discover social problems. Furthermore, their reform efforts centered around legislation and social policy, rather than hands-on aid and interaction with members of a community. In fact, they saw social workers as misguided and naive. They looked down on the methods of the settlement worker, considering themselves more closely akin to sociologists and psychologists (Muncy 72-81).

For students who wished to prepare for careers in social reform, this new, more academic definition of social work once again challenged their values and their reasons for wanting to do this kind of work. Scattergood's final senior research paper, "Building a New State," is both a testament to her frustrations with the academic definition of social work and her final attempt to harmonize her own values with those of her college. "All this year," begins her essay, "I have been studying movements for social reform," have "read books and heard lectures about city planning schemes, systems of industrial education, societies for organizing charity, and a score of other machines for making over society," but have "found the study strangely unsatisfying." As an undergraduate, Scattergood could not take courses in the new graduate school of social work, but she did chose a major--economics--that laid the groundwork for advanced study. Yet the purely academic and "mechanistic" study did not please her.

What America needs, postulates Scattergood, is "something to help them find better ideals." Her plan for raising the "moral tone" of the nation, outlined in the rest of the seven-page paper, identifies "strands of formative influence," such as the study of language and literature, that would lead to real change in people's lives. To make this character-forming study easier, she would make available cheap editions of good literature and teach more composition in schools. For the inspiration of these suggestions, she credits H. G. Wells, who "unlike most of the writers on social reform . . . believes that men have souls." For Scattergood, academic study must be linked to spiritual growth in order for change to occur. After college, Scattergood seemed to find this link: she spent the bulk of her professional life as a researcher and writer for the American Federation of Labor, developing information for the wage negotiation of trade unions.

This institutional myopia must have been particularly frustrating for Hilda Smith at a moment when she was discovering so many important things for women to say and so many new opportunities to say them. The passage in her autobiography that immediately follows her disappointment with her composition instruction recounts her joyous discovery of the field of social work while a student:

> . . . I was poking around in the basement of the library stacks to find something to read.
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> There were twenty volumes of Charities and the Commons. . . A new world opened before me. Here were matters of which I had often heard: homes for neglected children, prisons, plans for garden cities, the care of immigrant girls. Never before had I realized that there were people who were systematically studying such questions, taking action on them . . . I longed to be through college and one with these daring souls, who were out in the thick of the fight against poverty, disease and ignorance. I knew well I had much to learn before venturing to offer help in the fray. (29)

Like many women who completed their college education during the Progressive era, Smith realized that social-reform work provided her with a purpose for all of that learning and a public arena in which to exercise it. Her most difficult task as a student--and perhaps one that she never conquered--may have been to learn how to write in a way that would be valued by both the academy and by the clients, legislators, bureaucrats, and

volunteers and who formed the public arena of social work. She had to figure out how to use her college education to prepare her to work in "the thick of the fight."

By the turn of the century, women no longer went to college to develop and prove their intellectual capabilities through rigorous study of the classics, as M. Carey Thomas herself had done when she attended Cornell University in the 1880s. Instead, they expected higher education to engage them in solving the complex problems of poverty, ignorance, disease, and oppressive labor conditions. They wanted their rhetorical training to equip them with the skills needed to educate the public about important social problems and solutions. As they watched their mentors in the secular world carve out professional dominions for themselves in social work, nursing, and government, students like Scattergood and Smith may have treated their college compositions as a public forum for exploring the experiential and subjective forms of knowing that could some day help them to engage in social activism.

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