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Rhetorical Recipes: Women's Literacies In and Out of the Kitchen

Jamie White-Farnham

Drawing on interview data regarding literacy practices done in tandem with housework, this article presents an array of recipe uses among retirement-age women. Given their backgrounds as professionals who came of age during second-wave feminism, the women see little value in “domestic” practices such as cooking literacies (Barton & Hamilton). However, the women’s uses of recipes for a variety of rhetorical purposes, in and out of the kitchen, are valuable material and social reflections of the women’s success in acquiring traditional literacies in school and at work.

“Resources? For cleaning?! That’s the last thing I think of!” When my research participant Sandra scoffed at the possibility that literacy and housework could intersect, she exemplified the general response of each of my six research participants to my questions about the literacy practices they use in housework: a somewhat protective attitude towards literacy, as if its use to facilitate mundane chores might debase it. Sandra’s reaction is but a single example of the decisive and dichotomous opinions shared in my recent interview study of women of retirement age regarding the relationship between housework and literacy: “I’m a terrible housekeeper. If you had asked me about career, I could have helped you.”

Sandra, like Emme, Edna, Donna, Anna, and Dee¹, is a member of the Red Hat Society (RHS), a national social club for women over age fifty, which describes itself as a way for women to “let go of burdensome responsibilities for a little while” (Red Hat Society). The growth of the group since its inception in 1997 is impressive; reportedly, its membership has exceeded one million women worldwide. According to Sue Ellen Cooper, the California woman who founded Red Hat Society, the group’s primary appeal “is our determination to find the joy in life, to grasp the fun there is to be had at this age—fifty and beyond” (8). Cooper describes the recruitment base of RHS as former “wives, mothers, and, often, career women [who] have survived the busiest, most hectic years,” and the official website promotes the social activity of the group as “an opportunity for those who have shouldered various responsibilities at home and in the

community their whole lives, to say goodbye to burdensome responsibilities and obligations for a little while” (Cooper 8; Red Hat Society).

There have been an untold number of press accounts of the group as it has attracted attention in each new community where chapters have formed. The archives of the *The Providence Journal* have chronicled RHS's growth in Rhode Island since chapters began cropping up in the state between 2002 and 2003. A profile of a South County chapter emphasizes its new members' enthusiasm to become part of the national trend, “in search of a silly state of mind” (Fleming C3). Among the reasons they participate in the group, the Rhody Red Hatters count making new friends, taking trips, participating in cultural events, and generally breaking up the monotony of daily routines and feelings of isolation a person can experience at and after retirement age.

In addition to this notoriety, the group has also drawn critique. A 2008 editorial comment by Paula Span in *The New York Times* denigrates the role that the hats, as a piece of the organization's savvy merchandising tie-ins, play in the RHS's claim on fun. Span writes: “I think I'll do my socializing bare-headed. When I'm old, I'll probably wear mostly black, the way I do now. And I'll call the group I have dinner with ‘my friends’” (9). Span's position hints at a problem more significant than style, however. Like many social clubs of which the purpose is leisure, RHS requires of its members expendable income and time; it therefore suffers from a correlative lack of diversity in the classes and races of its members. Though RHS publicity documents use the phrase “all walks of life” to describe its members, there is little evidence of a wide scope of participation by women who are other than white and middle-class in my research experience (Red Hat Society). Other accounts of the organization, including leisure studies research by Careen M. Yarnal et al, describe a similar lack of difference among the women in their survey samples (152). My study, open to all eighty members of RHS in Rhode Island, attracted only white, middle-class participants. This perhaps reflects the state's overall demographics: 88.5% white with an 11% poverty rate (United States Census Bureau).

And, while the group's several corporate sponsorship and licensing agreements have come under some critique, they are also a reflection of the RHS's growth and influence (Span 9). In its manual of sorts, *Fun and Friendship After Fifty*, RHS founder Cooper explains the reason such a group is warranted in the US, particularly for aging women: “middle-aged women have gotten used to going unnoticed, to being invisible” (9). Sandra and the other participants' reasons for belonging to RHS resound with this claim; they joined RHS as an “antidote” to the conditions of living as retired, aging women, which include loneliness, complacency, and—above all—mundanity.

In combating complacency, these women live anything but mundane lives. Data drawn from my interviews with them reveal that literacy

permeates their activities from everyday writing and reading in the kitchen to formal literacy endeavors such as taking college courses and teaching enrichment classes in community centers. The women are very proud of the latter undertakings since they value literacy greatly in its traditional forms, especially writing and reading for educational and professional purposes. At the same time, the women see little value in the everyday literacy practices they undertake. Specifically, *literacies* such as the processes and practices of cooking are held in lower esteem than more visible and text-based *Literacy* comprised of, for these women, personal and public writing projects. In taking up a variety of recipe uses in my participants' literacy experiences both in and out of the kitchen, this article addresses a debate resulting from the “social turn” in literacy studies, which shifted traditional notions of literacy from a text-based, formally-taught set of skills learned during one's childhood and useful in institutional settings to an extratextual set of sociocognitive practices acquired throughout a person's life useful in a variety of contexts (see Deborah Brandt, David Barton & Mary Hamilton, and Deborah Williams Minter et al, among others). While these characteristics of literacy are generally agreed upon, a divide exists among social practice literacy theorists regarding the potential for social power that literacy affords its users. Some (Paulo Freire, Morris Young, and Jacqueline Jones Royster, for instance) ascribe literacy the power to overcome oppression, inferior status, and unjust conditions. Others (Sylvia Scribner, as well as Brandt & Katie Clinton) are highly cautious in ascribing literacy such power, given that access to literacy is usually in the hands of the powerful, whether or not users know it.

This debate frames my participants' experiences in acquiring professional literacies, which helped them resist the conventional domestic roles and responsibilities they faced as young women in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As professionals who came of age during second-wave feminism, the participants in this study struggled to pursue and achieve their educations and professions. Sandra is a retired English and ESL teacher with a master's degree in Education. The contexts in which she and the other women acquired their formal literacies necessitated pitting their home lives, which included homemaking and childrearing, against their personal and professional goals. An attendant result of their experiences is the women's simultaneous undervaluing of everyday literacies and especially those useful in housework. As this article will describe further, the cooking practices of two women in particular—though rife with the type of decision-making, material, and sociopolitical effects that characterize social practice literacy—are downplayed, unrecognizable even to the women themselves. Sandra's sound bites offer one reason why. In describing patterns surrounding the women's uses both in and out of the kitchen of a traditionally “domestic” text, the recipe, this article

demonstrates how the women both align themselves with professional, community, and personal pursuits and simultaneously denigrate the idea of intentional, motivated participation in housework.

Playing It By Ear: Donna and Edna

Rather than referring to recipes in cookbooks or on websites, Donna and Edna each compose original recipes. However, in describing their cooking practices, Donna and Edna actually have nothing—no artifacts, that is—to share. Rather than relying on websites, cookbooks, or recipe cards, they compose *in situ*, or work from ingredients on hand to address the demands they face in their immediate, rhetorical situations. In this way, the women's practices are comprised of basic rhetorical principles: they must consider their audience (children? adults? how many?), purpose (to nourish? to impress?), genre (simple lunch? Sunday dinner? party?), and material conditions (various ingredients and tools, money, and time). All of these elements vary, of course, according to the woman and the situation.

Donna, a semi-retired nurse who has four adult children, says she uses “no writing, no recipe cards,” but instead engages in “instinctive cooking” of fresh foods, eschewing canned fruit, vegetables, and beans. Calling her cast iron griddle her “second hand,” she goes into detail about the preparation of potatoes: “I do them boiled and sliced and fried until they're crispy and then added to beans—from scratch.” Donna calls this meal good for “clean energy, a perfect balance.” Partially in response to the material conditions in which she cooked while living overseas, where varieties of packaged and canned foods popular in the US were unavailable, Donna also counts among her motivations to use fresh ingredients her daughter's sensitivities to preservatives in processed, packaged foods. Importantly, Donna describes the values that underscore her interest in fresh foods and home cooking: health and nutrition. As a nursing professional and a mother who believes in a child-centered parenting style, she says, “I think I cook with respect to the kids.”

Similarly creative, Edna's cooking faces stricter material impositions, including a tight budget and accommodating three “big eaters,” her husband and two sons (when they were teenagers). Edna also works only with a limited number of traditional ingredients appropriate within her knowledge of Italian cooking, listing onions, garlic, and homemade breadcrumbs as the base of most recipes. She is proud of keeping these ingredients on hand all the time, storing lentils and breadcrumbs in re-purposed glass jars in the pantry. Although these material conditions are inflexible, Edna describes her everyday cooking for her family of five as very flexible, emphasizing that: “I play it by ear. I don't worry about recipes because everything calls for garlic and onions.” She credits her mother-in-law with “giving” her lots of recipes,

but when I ask if I can see them, she says that “they show you or tell you, they don't write them down...not a recipe, something you wrote down, but a pinch of this or that...” To Edna, recipes are things one might “worry” about, adding complication to something that comes naturally to her.

Discussing Donna's and Edna's recipe production in rhetorical terms runs counter to the ways in which the women themselves describe and perceive these practices. Between Donna's “instinctive” cooking and Edna's “pinch of this or that,” the women reflect their confidence in the kitchen, though they also resist generally accepted social theories of literacy as a powerful “social practice” or “set of practices” (Barton and Hamilton 6; Minter, Gere, and Keller-Cohen 671), which is neither solely text-based nor tethered to traditional literate institutions such as school, work, or church (see also Brandt, Hogg, Royster, Rumsey, Sohn, and Young, among others). The work of Barton and Hamilton on “cooking literacies” in particular highlights the decision-making of their participant Rita to exemplify the “tangible, observable” aspects of social practice literacy, whether or not the writing or reading of texts is involved:

Rita does not always go through the same set of activities in making the pie [from a well-used recipe]. Sometimes she makes double the amount described in the recipe if more people will be eating it [...] Rita does not always follow recipes exactly, but will add herbs and spices to taste; sometimes she makes up recipes; at one point she describes making a vegetable and pasta dish similar to one she had as a take-away meal. (8)

Barton and Hamilton's description of Rita is echoed in Donna's and Edna's practices, also notable for their extra textual, though rhetorical natures: the production of a meal rendered from material work with ingredients, amounts, and tools alongside flexibility in the wake of changing rhetorical elements such as purpose, audience, and available means.

Donna and Edna's practices also exemplify what Barton and Hamilton call the “interpretive” aspect of literacy, or the “attitudes, values, and other social meanings which lie behind these activities” (151). On one hand, Edna's motivations for her cooking literacies are ingrained through her cultural affiliation as an Italian-American and her experience in poverty as a child. Edna's mother was widowed during the Depression after her and her husband's grocery store went under. Edna was ten, and until she began work at a wire factory after her high school graduation, she, her mother, and three siblings at home lived on Social Security and an elder brother's army wages. Edna and I discovered several similarities between her and my grandmother Helen, who sponsored my affinity for housework and whose practices inspired this project, in that they hail from the same culture and generation,

each of them Rhode Island-raised daughters of Italian immigrants who themselves raised children in the 1950s and 1960s. Edna describes making “a triple batch of red sauce using five pounds of hamburger and three pounds of sausage on Sundays.” This Italian cooking shorthand—“red sauce” and “hamburger”—along with the very large quantities match the ways my grandmother both cooked and talked about cooking. Here, literacy is a tool to uphold traditions, her aims being the maintenance of practices, materials, and key cultural values of her New England Italian-American family.

On the other hand, Donna has rejected her family’s ways of cooking and available printed recipes based on her values of health and wellness gleaned from her professional knowledge. Donna pursued a nursing career in the midst of raising four children, and today she continues her education at the state college, along with staying current with the nursing literature of the day. Having resisted the expectations and scorn of her and her husband’s family to pursue her career, Donna imbued her housekeeping practices with her professional values of health and wellness. By doing so, she countered the philosophical underpinnings of her mother’s and her in-laws’ takes on, specifically, parenting and cooking.

For example, Donna prioritized playing with and reading to her children over a housework routine. She involved them in some chores through play, such as helping wash dishes or prepare meals. But she describes her commitment to their growth and development over household chores through a memory of walking with her children to the library every few days to fill their red wagon with twenty-five books at a time, the lending limit. She considers her way of caretaking “child-centered at the expense of housework,” while her European in-laws “put neatness over children.” In another instance of resisting ways of homemaking within her family, Donna shifted the focus of feeding her children from their discipline to their health. Since she grew up to resent her own mother’s model of feeding children based on a reward/punishment system, Donna drew from her nursing education to focus on food, as her original recipes exemplify, as an element of one’s health. Donna resisted these conservative values through her cooking literacies.

Whether or not literacy practices uphold or resist a particular value system or ideology is a central question in the study of social-practice literacy. While some contemporary scholars highlight the potential for critique and political action in literacy practices, such as Young’s “resistant literacy,” others are more cautious since they recognize that literacy endeavors can be halted by users’ subject positions and/or material resources (112). For instance, Brandt & Clinton are skeptical of the agency some scholars believe literacy affords its user because sponsors of literacy are often not at the scene of literacy and extend their influence without users’ awareness of them (349). Scribner also sees a need for this type of caution

when she describes the metaphor of “literacy as power.” She writes: “the expansion of literacy skills is often viewed as a means for poor or politically powerless groups to claim their place in the world [...] yet the capacity of literacy to confer power or to be the primary impetus for significant and lasting economic and social change has proved problematic in developing countries” (11-12). Indeed, while Donna’s and Edna’s original recipes offer evidence of how literacy affords its users the power to sustain or resist a value system, the fact remains that neither woman ascribes this type of social or ideological power to her cooking.

Recently, the work of Rumsey on “heritage literacy” has emphasized the importance of context and change in her study of Amish women’s “home-based or indigenous” literacy practices such as cooking and quilting (“Heritage” 584). Interested in how changing tools and technology affect these types of literacy practices, Rumsey highlights the recursive process that literacies undergo both in their routine performances and their longevity (or lack of) within a culture. She writes:

Connection of object to context is always evolving and always growing because objects change and the context changes over time. The object changes because people adopt and adapt new or different technologies and literacies, such as my mother getting an electric mixer or a wider variety of ingredients being available in grocery stores. Further, heritage literacy is recursive. As contexts and objects change, people adapt to these changes and change how they pass on their intellectual and literacy inheritances. (“Passage” 92)

Rumsey’s attention to *how* and not *whether* dominant social forces and groups of literacy users affect each other moves beyond considering literacy “as a dichotomous variable, perceived either as conservative and controlling or as liberating” (Graff xix). That is, rather than seeing literacy as a stable variable that exacts changes (or not) within a context, Rumsey sees literacy practices and tools themselves as flexible and changeable, working in contexts for users in specific, though perhaps fleeting, ways. This takes the onus off of literacy to be the game-changer that Brandt and Scribner have argued that it cannot be. A question therefore arises: if literacy users themselves do not see their sociocognitive practices in everyday settings as important or powerful beyond the scope of their kitchens, where and with what practices do they see themselves contributing, via change or simply cooperation, to their communities or the world? The answer for the women in this study: traditional literacies, and especially writing.

More Interesting Things to Do: Dee, Anna, and Donna

Dee, Anna, and Donna are each semi-retired women who fill their free time with continuing education, community volunteerism, babysitting grandchildren, and social events. These women shared experiences with me regarding recipes that had a lot to do with their literate abilities, though nothing to do with cooking. Each coming of age during second wave feminism, or the time that Dee remembers as “women’s lib,” the three women balanced caring for their families with attending college and building their careers. They value their accumulated literacies greatly, having acquired them in spite of expectations of their families to assume traditional domestic roles and responsibilities as young women.

These experiences and their reasons for joining the Red Hat Society cast a long shadow on perceptions of “home” as a productive or even pleasant place to be. As such, Dee, Anna, and Donna are prone to dismissing and belittling housework as a concern appropriate for a study on women. In relying on a key principle of Kathleen Weiler’s feminist research methodology, I aimed to emphasize “women’s lived experience and the significance of everyday life” and resist approaching the study of women from “a male hegemonic ideology or language” (58, 61). Weiler instead suggests that women’s consciousness:

is grounded in actual material life. What focusing on the everyday life of women should do instead [of dichotomizing the public and private] is reveal that connection between public and private, between production and reproduction. In socialist-feminist research, the everyday world is not a self-contained world; quite the contrary, it is an integral part of the social whole. (61)

Yet, as will become evident in this section, the dichotomy was palpable. Clearly, the differences between the women’s and my experiences, material circumstances, and generations were at play. Women like my participants contributed to the broad-scale social changes that removed “housework” as a fraught and gendered social expectation of many children of my generation. Thus, my freedom to embrace or reject housework in my everyday life allows me to consider it a subject of interest. The differences between our perspectives resulted in some uncomfortable moments during our interviews, and I suspect the women felt disappointment in what I was describing as feminist research.

Despite having agreed to participate in the study and signing an IRB consent form, Donna, Dee, and Sandra were disconcerted by my interest

in housework, and their reactions to some questions ranged from curiosity to disdain to ridicule. However, using an interview approach advocated by John Creswell comprised of “unstructured and generally open-ended questions that are few in number and intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants,” I followed the women’s leads as I learned more about them and their literacy practices (188). Moreover, according to Stephen Doheny-Farina & Lee Odell, “the researcher’s goal is not simply to confirm the researcher’s own intuitions or conclusions but to find out what the participant thinks—to stimulate the interviewee to express the meanings that he or she attributes to the topic at hand” (522). Dee, Anna, and Donna, in describing their uses of recipes in family history projects, self-sponsored writing projects, and community fundraising, were stimulated to express their disdain for the domestic and affirm their esteem of literacy in a traditional, text-based sense. Perhaps more importantly to them, discussing recipes also resulted in data that I did not anticipate: the questioning and critique of a (my) positive stance towards housework.

Painting a mutually exclusive relationship between housework and one’s career, Dee and Donna both use the word “boring” to describe housework, and perhaps rightfully so given the variety of their interesting activities and commitments. Alongside contingent work as nurses, the two women volunteer at organizations as varied as the Providence Performing Arts Center, a nursing home, hospice care, and the city zoo. At the time of our interview, Dee was also enrolled in a Spanish class at her local senior center, an effort aimed at improving her communication with patients at an adult care center where she worked. Her prioritization of education and career and her concomitant attitude towards housework stem in part from her experience in at least one consciousness-raising group. Dee stated:

Housework...it’s boring. I have more interesting things to do, and now I don’t have to keep clean for anybody in particular. I think people who don’t have much of an education might make more of it because that’s what they can be proud of. But, when you’re working and you’re educated, you want to be known for more than a clean house. I was, when women’s lib first started, I was in those groups...it was ‘where are you going in your life?’ rather than ‘what are you doing at home?’ It was more than just raising kids. And I actually didn’t stay home that long with my kids, I was either going to school or working part-time when they were young, like when we adopted my oldest daughter I was getting my bachelor’s degree and then I got my masters when my youngest was a baby.

In support of these accomplishments, Dee delegated housework, sometimes employing cleaners, au pairs to watch the children, and, when they were older, her children for a few extra dollars. Dee didn't—and doesn't now—cook much, so she is hard-pressed to recognize the usefulness of recipes in a traditional sense, saying: "I planned ahead because I was working full time. My daughter says she learned to cook by herself because 'my mother was working.' I used the crock-pot a lot because I could throw things in in the morning." Dee sees this type of planning and organizing to feed her family as a way to minimize housework, allowing her to expend more of her time and energy on her career and educational goals.

Yet, recipes remain important to Dee in a far different capacity than cooking; her main use of them comes in the form of preserving her family history. She keeps "two little [recipe boxes] with all the recipes I have in the kitchen...I have some of my mother's that I keep because they're in her handwriting. And, I have my sister's cookie recipe." As static texts, the recipes serve a memorial function, like heirlooms for Dee to save and pass down. They are reminders of the important women in her life, though not necessarily their cooking. And, while the recipes are artifacts of Dee's mother's and sister's cooking literacy, Dee prizes them for their sentimental, and not practical, value. The material aspects of the writing—the handwriting, the boxes they are stored in, and their daily presence in Dee's life—are most important for Dee, who values texts over cooking.

Like Dee, Anna has prioritized other interests and responsibilities over housework, including her long-term babysitting commitment to her granddaughter, her main hobby of gardening, and her talent for creative writing. She compares the relative importance of housekeeping and pursuing a career, suggesting that women who have careers don't or can't focus on housework. She herself is retired Air Force administrative personnel, who worked mainly at a data entry job while her children were growing up. She also spent time volunteering in her children's schools. In Anna's experience, women like her who have careers and especially those with children hire help for housework. She explained her own attitude:

I'm not into being like, super particular about everything because housework is boring. There's a lot more interesting things to do than housework...I keep up the standards, but, you know, there's too many more other things that are more interesting than just housework.

For Anna, creative writing is one of those things. As a writer, she is known for composing rhyming tribute poems that celebrate, entertain, and sometimes poke fun at her friends and family members: "Sometimes it's just to cheer somebody up, making fun of something so that it's not a dreary

event for someone, seeing the lighter side of something. Sometimes these little ditties just go through my head, so I sit down and write them and then later I'll go to add something or change them." Anna sent me an example of her personalized specialty poems shortly after our first interview:

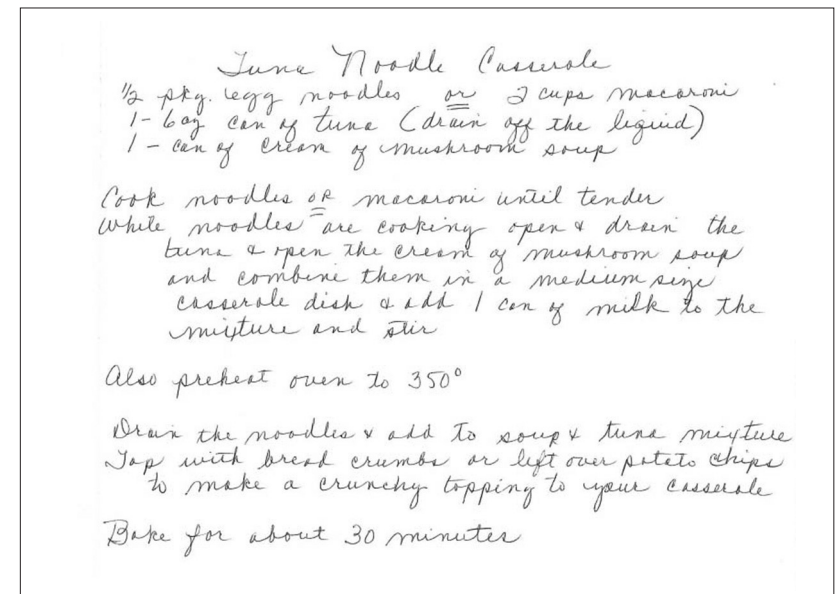
One day in my e-mail I was surprised to see

That someone actually wanted to interview "little 'ole me"

The young lady was a student and was working on her PhD

So, in the interest of education I thought "why not me?"

Anna's hobby and talent explains some rhetorical aspects of her recipes, which exist as entries in a hand-written cookbook she is at work compiling. Anna laments the loss of some artifacts, including recipes and housework instructions she wrote for her daughter many years ago: "My daughter has been out of college for over ten years so [the recipes] that I wrote for her are long gone." Therefore, Anna has re-written what she calls "the college recipes," including the one pictured here for Tuna Noodle Casserole.



Anna's recipe for Tuna Noodle Casserole

The influence of Anna's creative writing is evident in this example, as the recipe tends toward narrative form rather than practical instructions. As well, its presentation is attractive, centered on the page and written in pretty handwriting. Since she doubts that her daughter actually cooked this meal in the dorm, Anna writes the recipes to commemorate her daughter's coming-of-age and not necessarily to keep the recipe in circulation as a cooking practice. In handwriting recipes out again, Anna revives the memories for both of them. Of the cookbook project, Anna says: "It's still in the works... not very accessible right now. It needs to be organized," highlighting the presentation of the document, its suitability to be considered a "book," rather than the recipes' potential for their typical use in the kitchen. The writing of this cookbook out of Anna's own collection of recipes, which may have once guided her cooking practices in this kitchen, but don't now, is a contribution to her writerly identity and legacy in her family.

Finally, Donna also regards the importance of literacy in terms of writing; however, her recipes are directed toward an audience not only outside the kitchen, but also outside her family. As a member and former president of several community groups—a women's church group, parent volunteer committees at her children's schools, and a local hospital committee—Donna participated in compiling, publishing, and selling cookbooks as fundraisers for four different community organizations over the years, a fairly common fundraising activity. As I have described, Donna's literacy efforts have been directed largely toward education: her children's literacy learning, her own career training, and her continuing education in Women's Studies coursework. Therefore, despite her impressive cooking literacies, Donna notes that the recipes themselves were not her main contribution to these projects. Instead, she emphasizes other elements central to the cookbooks' production, including tasks that drew on her own and other group members' professional skills:

Jamie: Did yours or the other women's professional experience lend a lot to [the cookbook]?

Donna: Yes, we were very organized. All the women in one capacity or another worked outside the home. One woman especially, who was another RN, was definitely an advantage. She knew how to find a publisher to keep the cost reasonable and still be able to turn a profit. That [committee] was more structured, more direct. It took three or four months with a firm deadline. Others I've seen took over a year.

Donna's late 20th century education and professional life are evident in her praise of the committee on which she served, especially the importance

of organization, collaboration, and follow-through. Here, Donna aligns her work with "recipes" not with the domestic duty of cooking, but with her professional experience and knowledge. This corresponds with Donna's underlying motivation in the creation of her original recipes—her value of education. She is proud of her contribution to the projects not as an authority with recipes, but as a commodifier of them, taking advantage of recipes' material value in support of communities built on traditional Literacy. Perhaps it is not so surprising that committees such as Donna's consider a book a worthy item to help maintain institutions of literacy such as schools and churches. I find it ironic, however, that given the strength of resistance to cooking and housework among the women in the study, of Donna's generation and demographic, the committee would choose to sell cookbooks. Yet, Donna describes these projects as successful. The communities surrounding these institutions may not use the recipes for cooking literacy; however a book represents Literacy in its traditional form, and is therefore worth the community's money, time, and respect. In undertaking projects for which recipes serve a public function, Donna sees the community groups she served as sites for which the process of writing and her expert literacies are more appropriate and impactful than in her home.

Dee, Anna, and Donna's experiences acquiring professional literacies during second-wave feminism have shaped their views on what forms of literacy matter—writing and reading—as well as the limiting effect the "domestic" can have on those forms. Accordingly, since the women have little interest in the notion of cooking, or any chores they consider housework, as a set of practices worth their time and attention, recipes are mainly valuable to them when their purposes are other than simply practical and their audiences are located outside of the kitchen. In these capacities, recipes have provided each woman with an opportunity to leave a mark on her family and/or community, audiences far wider and far more important to these women than a single cook—especially if that cook is meant to be her. The women's rhetorically diverse use of recipes as family histories, self-sponsored writing, and community service projects reflect Dee, Anna, and Donna's commitment to and appreciation for the goals and contexts they see as most appropriate for Literacy.

A Case of Bifurcation?

Perhaps the most striking account of the women's struggle between literacy and housework in this study is articulated by my participant Emme, the Queen of the Red Hatters, a single mother who put herself through college while caring for her two children. While Emme's main contribution to the study concerns her leadership role in RHS outside of this account of recipe

use, a brief story she shared with me speaks volumes about the home/work dichotomy present in the data. Balking at the idea that housework could be a priority for her while pursuing a career by way of a college degree, she says: “My housework consisted of opening a can of food up for the kids, dropping them at the babysitter, going to class, and then coming home to pick them up sleeping and lug them up the stairs.” A former military reservist, Emme has a reputation as the most fun-loving and “wild” Red Hatter. If Emme’s priority is to have fun and let loose, it is not only to escape from “various responsibilities at home and in the community,” as the Red Hat society mission statement suggests, but also to counteract a work history that, like the other women’s, pulled her in many directions and made housework a laughable non-issue (Red Hat Society).

One way to understand the strength of the women’s anti-housework conviction is the concept of bifurcated consciousness, which may account for the women’s simultaneous undervaluing of housework and their pitting the domestic against the professional, even when their commitment to a variety of literacy-rich pursuits is evident. According to rhetorical scholar Mary M. Lay, “a bifurcated consciousness potentially affects a woman’s ability to appreciate her own experiences and to interpret their meaning outside the gender role assigned to her” (Lay 85). For example, in her study of midwives’ arguments for their practice’s legitimacy in public policy, Lay asserts that the spokesperson for direct-entry midwives (as distinct from certified nurse midwives) was forced to leave out of her argument the fact that midwives rely often on their instincts and feelings, which comprise a strong knowledge base and successful practices. The reason for the omission was not only because experience-as-knowledge wasn’t “scientific” enough for her audience, but also because even when such instincts and experience work well, midwives have often downplayed their authority as knowers and therefore examples of their success are not powerful enough for a public policy argument.

In one instance, an apprentice midwife prevents a baby from bleeding to death simply by checking on him, but doesn’t give herself credit for saving his life: “I don’t like to think what might have happened if *someone* hadn’t investigated the little noises he was making” (86, my emphasis). In discussing the apprentice’s undervaluation of her role in the episode, Lay writes: “[the spokesperson’s] challenge, then [...] was to legitimize midwives’ knowledge to establish the midwives as knowers despite cultural assumptions and individual perceptions that might discredit their knowledge based on experience” (86). Midwives, like other professional feminist communities, value “women’s ways of knowing,” but don’t present the known as if it were a solid truth, an effect that Lay suggests results from a bifurcated consciousness.

Extending the concept of bifurcation to my participants’ stances offers at least one reason why Dee, Sandra, Donna, and Anna tend to focus on a work/home dichotomy, even amid the obvious variety of their talents and interests. Must home and work mutually exclude each other? Perhaps it did for these women, since housework remained, even while enrolled in college or working full time, their own individual responsibilities. The women, each of whom in this case are/were married to men, point out that while their husbands were supportive of their professional goals in terms of financial and moral support, few of them provided specific help in terms of housework. Anna relates that sharing household duties is part of a learning process for married men today. She sees a more balanced attention to housework within heteronormative families such as her daughter’s and describes the arrangements for cooking, cleaning, and childcare of her daughters and sons-in-law: “Younger men expect to help with housework since their wives have careers. There was a strict gender division for housework in my time, for my generation, but not now.”

Though their responses to questions regarding housework and literacy prioritize the professional over the domestic, none of the women solely identify themselves as professionals; indeed, their interesting variety of experiences is one of the reasons many of them enjoy the Red Hat Society so much. However, the women take similar stances regarding housework as an obstacle to more worthwhile professional, social, and personal pursuits: as Dee puts it, “more interesting things to do.” In disparaging housework, the women distance themselves from the site of domestic roles and responsibilities that, in their experiences, does not command respect in the same way other sites do. Sandra enumerates housework’s place in her life, which includes her marriage, her teaching career, Red Hat events, and avid travel: “Housework is not even secondary for women—more like 100th.”

Rhetorical Recipes

In terms of the sociopolitical effects attributed to literacy in its traditional sense, the women who focused their literate energies on their professional success and personal interests have indeed made significant changes on both broad and personal scales. The broader anti-sexist social changes to which my participants have contributed include the blurring of gender roles within families, wide-spread acquisition of professional literacies by women under daunting material circumstances, and wresting traditional domestic practices away from narrow conceptions of homemaking into sites of personal interest and satisfaction. The knowledge and skills the women have acquired in their range of literate experiences reflect Brandt’s view of literacy acquisition as a response to large-scale technological and social changes such as the proliferation of the service economy, women in professional

settings, and digital technology (“Accumulating” 660). In fact, the pursuit of higher education and professional literacy by these women and others like them not only respond to, but *constitute* such social change. One can understand the prioritization of the women’s literacy practices.

Yet, the question of what to do with the theorized sociopolitical potential of everyday literacies remains. That is, how do expanded notions of “literacy as power,” especially in regards to social practice literacy, help users if they themselves don’t recognize them as even worthy of a brief conversation? In this case, inquiry into housework literacy and recipes occasioned an at-times uncomfortable re-telling of the women’s struggles between housework and literacy, and I believe the women’s descriptions of their literacy practices interrupt what otherwise threatens to become a seamless feminist progress narrative. It certainly reminds me that my opportunities to study, write about, and do (or not do) housework exist because of the experiences of women like my participants—including my own mother, whose acquisition of professional literacy constitutes a similar story—to which I am indebted.

The women’s struggles also offer support to Scribner’s “literacy as power” myth, since they manifest limits of the power that practices of both everyday and institutional literacies can afford their users. On one hand, Edna’s and Donna’s uses of recipes reflect their commitments to certain value systems that motivate their practices and afford the women opportunities to contribute to and/or change the lives of their families and communities—Italian-Americans for Edna, the health profession for Donna. However, the women render these contributions almost meaningless by chalking their proficiencies in the kitchen up to “instinct” and “playing it by ear.” One could also argue that these are such small and individual examples that there is no model that might be extrapolated and systematically employed to help those who are oppressed, as Brandt and Clinton have noted.

Additionally, consider the element of disregard that my participants bring to discussions of housework and literacy, evidenced by Sandra’s scoffing and Dee’s description of housework as the drudgery of the uneducated. While these stances align with a long-standing feminist argument against housework traceable to Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “sexuo-economic imbalance,” or the connection between women’s financial and social dependence on men, they also suggest emotional scars. The difficulty in pursuing literate success in the face of oppressive, gendered traditions has a long-lasting effect; not only has it minimized the participants’ esteem of “home-based practices,” but they continue to see housework as a threat to the rich lives they lead (Rumsey “Heritage” 584). Traditional literate success has not mitigated their resentment, even forty years after the fact.

In providing an account of the literacy practices of the Red Hat Society, a community of women who have banded together based on their common and difficult work histories, this study does not seek simply to celebrate domesticity with an uncritical “girl power” stance. That is, I want to honor the women’s experiences while also conducting inquiry into what I see as a productive, though perhaps unpopular, context. Discovering the variations of the women’s recipes for a number of rhetorical purposes and audiences within the women’s families and communities unearthed very broad and flexible conceptions of what “recipe” can mean: cooking practices, interesting writing projects, or even a joke. For Donna and Edna, recipes are not a set of instructions, but an inventional resource for rhetorical decision-making in what is so often considered a limiting context. And, in their textual forms as relics and novelties, recipes comprise opportunities for Dee, Anna, and Donna to put their considerable knowledge and talents to the best uses they see fit, including to support traditional literacy institutions. The women whose professional literacies obscured the domestic obstacles in their way today enjoy a relative freedom to employ the literacy practices they wish in the contexts they wish, choosing to embrace, denounce, or ignore cooking and housework altogether.

Endnotes

1. These names are pseudonyms the participants chose for themselves.

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