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Philip P. Marzluf
Kansas State University, marzluf@ksu.edu

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Literacy, Home Schooling, and Articulations of the Public and the Private

Phillip P. Marzluf

Home schooling in the United States may signal a new type of literacy crisis. Maureen Hourigan, Richard Ohmann, and others have identified these crises as markers of social and economic transformations, of moments when historically-marginalized groups enter the educational system in larger numbers and incite concern for standards and language purity (Hourigan 3). However, home schooling is not tainted with the same contagion metaphors that frame the “illiteracy” of historically marginalized groups in the United States (Ohmann 676; Stuckey 101, 106). As one of several movements to privatize education (see Molinar), home schooling offers an opposing narrative to those of unclean, vernacular languages confronting the official, public, and elaborated standard codes of the white middle class (e.g., Rose 192-193). Precisely during the period when these vernacular voices are beginning to gain recognition and legitimacy in the educational and public spheres, home schoolers are retreating from public institutions and constructing literacy and social boundaries of their own.

In this article, I examine home schooling as one of many “sites of literacy learning” (Brandt 194) that has been neglected by composition and literacy researchers, despite the fact that home schooling has increased dramatically over the past ten years and, in 2003, represented 2.2% of the entire K-12 student population (National Center for Education Statistics). I am interested in the ideological role that literacy plays, which, Elspeth Stuckey argues, disguises social inequity by concealing the traces of economic and cultural power and by explaining educational failure as a result of poor individual choices or an innate lack of ability (104-107). Literacy daily enacts this drama between the public and private, between the social goods of literacy and the ways that personal desires and motives are portrayed. Home schooling is especially interesting because of its invisibility within literacy studies and because it challenges how literacy studies privileges public, civic, and community educational values. In this study, I will examine a particular formation of home schooling, one composed of a relatively homogenous white, middle-class, Christian, and Midwestern identity. Dominating the public assumptions about home schooling, this formation calls for the retreat to the private sphere and the support of what I will describe as “frontier” literacy values, which represent less of a reactionary return to a nostalgic vision of the traditional American home and more of an objection to the social responsibilities mandated by the public sphere. During the same period that home schooling retreats to the private sphere of the family, literacy researchers, as indicated by this journal, the New London Group, Paula Mathieu, Jeffrey Grabill, Ellen Cushman, Anne Ruggles Gere, and many others, have

intensified their public gaze, decentering the attention placed on the literacy opportunities available in American classrooms. Instead, these scholars have extended their gaze to alternative sites of literacy, such as the quasi-educational spaces supported by traditional post-secondary institutions (Goldblatt), alternative conceptions of public rhetorical work (Higgins, Long, and Flower), and previously marginalized literacy practices (e.g., Gere). Yet, home schoolers quietly develop their literacy practices outside of the gaze of literacy researchers, who have been reluctant to examine home schooling as an educational site of reading and writing values.

In this study, which examines the literacy case studies of seven university students who were predominantly home schooled, I investigate how these students frame their literacy development and opportunities in order to reveal how they define the public and the private spheres, prioritize them, and describe how the two are interrelated.

Home schooling juxtaposes a literacy crisis alongside a rhetorical one: the crisis over the demise of the public sphere. Similar to its literacy counterpart, this crisis serves an ideological function, articulating, according to Gerard Hauser, a transcendent, monolithic form of the public that serves the particular and historical interests of bourgeois rhetoricians and intellectuals (30-31).

This mythical public, depicted as a common ground for “shared interests” (30), troubles Hauser and others, including Sharon Crowley and Krista Ratcliffe, who argue that it erases differences and valorizes consensus and commonalities (Ratcliffe 59). When home schoolers express skepticism or antipathy toward public institutions and the maintenance of healthy public spaces, they articulate their own literacy attitudes and rhetorical definition of the public. In this study, which examines the literacy case studies of seven university students who were predominantly home schooled, I investigate how these students frame their literacy development and opportunities in order to reveal how they define the public and the private spheres, prioritize them, and describe how the two are interrelated. Home-schooled students, I argue, because of their adherence to frontier literacy values, offer an important opportunity to explore the connections of literacy with rhetoric. As home-schooled students frame their literacy opportunities, they define their commitments to the public and the private and, in the process, reproduce a vision of educational possibilities that is overlooked by literacy researchers.

It is important to emphasize here that my conclusions about the literacy values of home schoolers are limited by the small sample size of this study as well as the racial, social, and regional homogeneity of the study participants. Although they possess similar racial, income, and other demographic variables that constitute the majority of home schoolers in the United States (see Baumann 7-12; “Characteristics”), the participants’ experiences obviously do not reflect the various motivations for home schooling (see Stevens 34-60), the diverse range of home-schooling practices, and the involvement of African American and other nonwhite groups. Indeed, African American home schoolers confront the racism implied by assumptions, circulated both by public discourse and the home-schooling textbook industry, that home schooling is reserved exclusively for a white, middle-class, and Christian suburban or rural audience (McDowell, Sanchez, and Jones 128). Although this study is careful not to reproduce the popular caricature of home schoolers, its conclusions, again, should not be recognized as the “true” perspective of home-schooling literacy values but as a reflection of the specific ways that the study participants represented their own literacy.

My goal, furthermore, is not to question the goals of community literacy nor to promote—nor denigrate, for that matter—home schooling as an educational alternative. Yet, there is a great deal at stake in how the responsibilities of the public and private spheres are determined. Jonathan Kozol’s *The Shame of the Nation* and Jean Anyon’s *Radical Possibilities*, among many other texts, point out the educational crises of unequal school funding, a disparate lack of access to literacy development opportunities, and the re-segregation of schools along racial lines. Therefore, it is imperative that literacy, composition, and other education researchers listen to what home schoolers have to say—even though they may challenge the values of the listeners—in order to examine the assumptions forming private literacy attitudes that may challenge the critical vocabulary of our discipline, including community, globalization, diversity, identity, collaboration, and schooling.

This article consists of four sections. The first discusses the conflict between the public values of literacy with private alternatives, in which literacy development becomes a familial responsibility and may reflect values consistent with the trope of the American frontier. In order to provide a more exhaustive list of the range of public and private sponsors available to the home-schooled students in this study, the second section presents a case study of how one of the home-schooled participants, Ashley,² describes her literacy opportunities. In the third section, I present the case study of another home-schooled student, Aaron, whose literacy opportunities and sponsors represent an agonistic alternative to the public. I then discuss how Aaron’s educational experiences, as well as those of several of the other home-schooled students, may trouble educators who are concerned about diversity as a public value. Finally, in the concluding section, I briefly discuss how the literacy crises of home schooling invoke crises over defining the public sphere.

Public and Private Literacy Values

Circulating powerfully in composition studies, critical pedagogy, social justice education, service learning, and other allied inquiries, the public values of literacy studies exhort students, teachers, researchers, and administrators to see themselves as agents in a pedagogical narrative that involves all work, community, and school literacy experiences (Grabill 3). In their concise formulation of community literacy, for example, Lorraine Higgins, Elenore Long, and Linda Flower rehearse the public assumptions of this pedagogical narrative: their project envisions a “local public” (16) that convenes to deliberate shared community problems (9). Importantly, this public is necessarily formed by human difference, in which the problems and the force of problems vary according to different perspectives (13), and by a “hybrid discourse,” in which “ideas and identities are argued and performed in the languages of its multiple participants” (18). Similarly, the New London Group’s manifesto, “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures,” addresses the utopian “us” to envision the future possibilities of a pedagogy that meets people’s work, public, and personal needs (14-17). It asks literacy educators to confront an authoritarian, hierarchical, and imperialist state public, which restricts learners’ identities as readers and writers to the mono-medium of print, unitary language standards, and a dominant national culture (9). It implores educators instead to adopt a more radical democratic vision of the public in order to better grasp the proliferation of media, technologically-mediated delivery systems, genres, and sign-producing behaviors. This strong sense of the public will also allow them to engage diversity more meaningfully as human differences become more significant in fast-capitalist workplaces, decaying civic spaces (14-15), and the complicated, overlapping, and possibly virtual communities to which people ally themselves (17). Finally, this manifesto calls educators to see a pedagogical vision that leads toward the success of all people, “a vision of success that is not defined exclusively in economic terms and that has embedded within it a critique of hierarchy and economic injustice” (13).

The many examples that exist of literacy practitioners who have responded to this call of the public will be familiar to readers of this journal. I will only briefly mention two from composition studies. Writing from her perspective as a writing director at a public university, Linda Adler-Kassner recommends that university literacy leaders adopt media activist strategies to better frame and circulate their own values of reading and writing in order to actively counter commonsensical narratives of literacy and literacy learning, many of which may endorse the private logic of individuality. Eli Goldblatt focuses more on the institution building that needs to occur outside of and in partnership with the university in order for university literacy leaders to become more responsible for their students’ writing as a practice that extends far beyond the classroom; in order to do so, writing programs need to work collaboratively with stakeholders within and outside the university, including community-based learning projects (122), partnerships with other secondary and post-secondary institutions (e.g.,

159-60), and community writing centers and publication venues (197). Using Brandt's terminology, Goldblatt advocates cultivating "joint sponsors" for literacy instruction that span several different spheres of the public (162).

Yet, how inclusive is this call for public literacy? To what extent will all people recognize themselves or wish to participate in this public? How are literacy and composition specialists to respond to those who doubt the assumptions about human difference and the multiplicity of literacies and who resist the vision of fast-capitalist workplaces, diverse civic spaces, and digitally-mediated personal communities? Many studies, for instance, document student resistance toward classes that ask them to demonstrate their public commitments to the objectives of diversity and social justice education (e.g., see Mio and Awakuni). Gerald Graff identifies students' rejection of their public roles as one of the main conflicts between them and their instructors in English studies, the "refusal to become the sort of public self that schooling assumes we all naturally want to be" and the "aversion to the role of public spokesperson that formal writing presupposes" (57). Students' cynicism about the efficacy of discourse in the public sphere may weaken their acceptance of the values of community literacy.

Moreover, Grabill, Mathieu, and other community literacy advocates may create their own boundaries, actively excluding such skeptical groups as home schoolers, by the metaphors they use to define their theories and methods. Composition studies, according to Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen E. Schell, privileges urban metaphors (16) and thus perpetuates stereotypes about rural and other non-urban spaces and students. The editors of *City Comp*, for example, claim that "city context" allows for "the identities that students carry with them into the composition classroom [to be] particularly varied and complex" (11). In his well-known critique of the feel-good term "community," Joseph Harris questions its "romantic, organic, and pastoral" connotations, in which "everyone pretty much shares the same set of values and concerns" (108). Instead, Harris advocates an urban public metaphor for composition, one which is, again, more diverse, chaotic, and vibrant, similar to a "thriving square or market in a cosmopolitan city" (109). Finally, Mathieu's metaphor of the "street" (xii) and Wayne Peck, Linda Flower, and Lorraine Higgins's use of the urban settlement house for their definition of community literacy further underscore literacy studies' inability to envision a non-urban space as a site for its particular conception of the public.

In order to account for the literacy of the white Midwestern home schoolers in this study, different metaphors are necessary, those that, unlike the ubiquitous community or urban-public metaphors, do not include assumptions that these home schoolers may reject. The counterparts to community and the public are not hard to imagine, as we live in an era of walls, borders, and boundaries (Žižek 102): gated communities are a commonplace in the suburbs; fundamentalists of many sorts segregate themselves in settlements or enclaves, constructing literal walls or metaphorical barriers of values and claims; governments build firewalls to censor their citizens' access to the Internet;

countries, including the United States, member states of the European Union, and Israel, are fortifying their national boundaries and blocking the entry of people that they have deemed to be dangerous, contagious, or unsuitable. In separating themselves from public educational institutions, these rural and suburban home schoolers, I argue, participate in a similar drawing of boundaries when they articulate their literacy values. As Grabill reminds us by invoking the work of sociologist Anthony Cohen, this metaphorical drawing of boundaries is oftentimes political and “oppositional” and may function to separate certain groups from each other (90). In short, home schoolers’ decision to privatize their educational choices is more than a politically neutral pedagogical decision and is one that says a great deal about those “public” families that lie beyond the literacy boundaries that home schoolers have constructed.

Tentatively, I borrow Frederick Jackson Turner’s concept of the “frontier” as the counter-community or anti-public trope that best expresses these home schoolers’ literacy values. Turner’s frontier, the historical and geographical concept that he felt best explained the development of the United States and American identity, is less static than other descriptors, such as “conservative,” “fundamentalist,” “evangelical,” or “apocalyptic” (see Crowley), which not only portray a monolithic home-schooling identity but also fail to recognize the innovative rhetorical strategies that mark how home schoolers articulate private and public literacy values. Consistent with home schoolers’ rejection of the public sphere and their preservation of social and cultural values, Turner’s frontier is “productive of individualism”; it sustains a “primitive” family social organization and a raw form of democracy in which there is a tremendous amount of suspicion for governmental control (30), a lack of commitment for preserving civic institutions (32), and an inability to promote a sense of public sentiment (35). Moreover, Turner insists that, because of these rustic and private values, the frontier is a space of individual and social rebirth, in which values and institutions are recreated. Turner’s frontier traces people who, because of their rustic conservative independence, begin to represent a future possibility and norm for American identity. Although it is not my intention to argue that home schooling represents a new social frontier—that is, a new American norm and identity—I do hope to show how home-schoolers’ decisions are rhetorical ones; they respond to current social and political exigencies, building and maintaining new boundaries of literacy values and actively involving themselves in determining how the private and public spheres influence their literacies.

Needless to say, the trope of the American frontier is by no means a new metaphor in composition studies, and I use it with some trepidation, aware of its colonizing connotations. Nedra Reynolds, in her analysis of spatial and geographic metaphors in composition studies, traces its use in Mina Shaughnessy’s depiction of the urban writing teacher (22-23) and, more problematically, Shaughnessy’s exotic construction of basic writers (24). Urban geographers, moreover, have indicated how the “imagery of frontier” legitimizes strategies of colonization (Smith 87): it erases and silences those who lie outside of its borders. Gloria Anzaldúa’s well-known post-colonial vocabulary of borders

and borderland—*la frontera*—attempts to make these silenced identities, these “transgressors” and “aliens,” more visible. She juxtaposes them alongside a colonizing conception of non-hybrid normality (25) and describes the cultural movement between two communities—from both sides of the border—in order to account for the formations of new dual identities. On the other hand, Turner’s frontier borders, these demarcations between “savagery and civilization” (4), separate nascent Americans from the silent, invisible cultures who lie before the frontier. Turner’s frontier is colonizing precisely because those people who remain before (and outside of) the frontier are destined to remain a silent part of its geography.

The values of Turner’s frontier repudiate the vision of community literacy, rejecting the New London Group’s concerns for strong civic institutions to arbitrate conflicts based on human differences (14-15) as well as the active types of publics that Harris and Hauser envision. Many home-schooling families, as well as those whose Christian fundamentalist or other values place them in an antagonistic relationship with secular public institutions, may live within micro, suburban frontiers, which may not demarcate geographic differences but separate families from their local communities based upon differences of values, religion, class, and race. Frontier literacy values, in this case, help maintain boundaries between individual families and their communities and, therefore, between private and public commitments and between, in many cases, the sacred and the profane.

In the past thirty years, the development of the frontier values of home schooling parallels political, economic, and social transformations that I only have room to briefly list here. Home schooling, in addition to the other private challenges to public schooling, parallel the dominant role of conservative economic and social policies (see Phillips), the liberalization and globalization of capital (e.g., Collin and Apple 433), the enhanced visibility and political influence of Christian groups, and the radical backlash against the positive political and economic gains experienced by African Americans and other nonwhite groups (Marable 178-182). Although there are many motives behind parents’ decisions to home school their children, home schooling may reflect, especially in areas such as the American southwest undergoing dramatic demographic changes, the anxiety of white and middle-class Americans over their identity and values (Sikkink 62-63). Because of the importance home schooling places on building strong nuclear families with well-defined gender responsibilities between mothers and fathers, home schooling may also represent a response to a crisis in masculinity.

Jürgen Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* can help explain the emergence of these particular literacy values. Habermas traces the disintegration of both the private and the public sphere—the latter which Habermas famously defends as an ideal democratic space of rational exchange between citizens, in which individuals’ private claims become legitimated in the public sphere based upon their own merits and, ideally, without the biases of status and authority (36, 41). A healthy public is predicated upon a

healthy private experience, out of what Habermas calls the “audience-oriented subjectivity of the conjugal family’s intimate domain” (28), which develops and encourages the growth of a middle-class “world of letters” and a reading public. Habermas focuses on the letter, the diary, and the domestic novel in the eighteenth century to demonstrate how the intimate subjectivity cultivated in the private sphere directed itself outward to a public audience. However, disintegration occurs in the private, intimate sphere of the family when the public authority begins to take on the responsibilities that the family once held: most importantly, the reproduction of social values and, of interest here, literacy values. Habermas explains:

[T]he family increasingly lost also the functions of upbringing and education, protection, care, and guidance—indeed, of the transmission of elementary tradition and frameworks of orientation. In general it lost its power to shape conduct in areas considered the innermost provinces of privacy by the bourgeois family. (155-156)

The family, as Habermas and others have observed, begins to fulfill more of the role of a site of consumption (156; see also Laclau and Mouffe 161). Privacy now becomes a “pseudo-privacy,” not directing itself towards public audiences but towards consumable leisure activities (163). At the same time, also impacting the public sphere, private corporations have begun to develop “pseudo-publics” by taking over many of the social responsibilities once reserved for state authorities. In short, Habermas points to the transfer of responsibilities of social production, which transforms the intimate sphere of the family and weakens the public sphere.

Habermas does not foresee the conservative social movements in the United States that challenge the disintegration of the public, democratic sphere—movements that, paradoxically, demonstrate little commitment to the public and instead cultivate the “public” responsibilities of the private, patriarchal, and sacred home. Home schooling envisions a return to a mythical sense of the family as autonomous from the social forces of the economy. This is the frontier family, marked by its social isolation. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, though they are more interested in the rise of Christian fundamentalism in the United States, argue that it is the ideograph of the family, an imagined “stable and hierarchical nuclear family,” that is at stake (148). Hardt and Negri are careful to note that this type of American fundamentalism is an innovative political response to new global capitalism (150): “The ‘return to the traditional family’ of the Christian fundamentalists is not backward-looking at all, but rather a new invention that is part of a political project against the contemporary social order” (148). Reacting to a public that is undergoing economic, social, and cultural transformation, the retreat to the private frontier becomes an innovative strategy to legitimate identity by its ability to, in turn, reproduce and legitimate social values. Sharon Crowley places this fundamentalist isolation and emphasis upon the private family in a rhetorical context. This isolation strengthens the force of fundamentalist appeals, making them appear natural and uncontested;

at the same time, fundamentalist isolation serves a private educational purpose: by recreating their children within the vision of their own private values, home schoolers, Crowley hints, make them less susceptible to persuasion (194). Specifically studying home-schooling families, Jane Van Galen labels these home schoolers as “Ideologues,” who “want their children to learn fundamentalist religious doctrine and a conservative political and social perspective that places family at the center of society and strongly emphasizes individual freedoms” (55). Since the 1980s, these Ideologues, and their private structuring of persuasion, have dominated the discourse of home schooling.

As I hope to demonstrate in the following two sections, the home schoolers who participated in this study articulate frontier values that impact their attitudes towards literacy, education, public discourse, and their participation in the public sphere. Though it is impossible to generalize across the range of motivations, formations, and practices of home schooling, those families that strongly adopt frontier values may challenge the particular public vision of literacy studies and perceive the intimate sphere of the family as the proper site for the reproduction of such social values. Additionally, although these literacy values may be articulated in the discourse of Christian fundamentalism, it is important not to subsume home schooling completely as an educational practice motivated by Christianity. As I will demonstrate, religion is an important literacy sponsor, yet the home-schooled students in this study frame religion as only one of a rich set of sponsors, motivations, and values that constitute their education and literacy development.

As Ashley will suggest in her case study, literacy learning is motivated—or curtailed—by sponsors, the nature and force of which shift according to economic, technological, and cultural contingencies.

Home-schooling Literacy Sponsors

The seven students who participated in this interview study—Aaron, Ashley, Blake, Jeff, Jeremy, Kevin, and Samuel—had been predominantly home schooled prior to entering a public Midwestern university. All participants were white and middle-class and came from a variety of backgrounds, including rural western Kansas, a suburb north of Dallas, Texas, a small Midwestern college town, and a military base. Six of the home schooling mothers had college degrees, and four of those had teaching certificates. The home schooling fathers had professional occupations. Only Samuel, who attended a private Catholic high school, had significant classroom experience. He was also the only participant who emphasized that his home schooling was a secular experience. The other participants came out of home-schooled backgrounds that were influenced in various degrees by religious faith. Kevin, for example, claims that his parents

decided to home school him and his ten siblings partly to fulfill their religious responsibilities. Blake, who emphasizes the importance of his Southern Baptist upbringing, grew up on a series of military bases and describes his few public school experiences as conflicts between these institutions and his family. Jeremy, meanwhile, emphasizes how his home schooling was responsive to his individual needs and describes it as “open ended” and similar to a “tiny private school,” which enabled him to begin studying mathematics at age four and piano lessons at age five and focus more on spelling, one of his problem areas. Finally, Jeff, Ashley, and Aaron participated in community college courses to gain college credit in composition and other courses. Jeff claims that, unlike the stereotype of home-schooled students, he was not a strong student and relates, unlike the other participants, friction between himself and his mother, in particular in his last two years of home schooling.

Below, I provide the literacy case study of Ashley, who grew up in the most isolated and rural area of the home-schooled students I interviewed. I am interested in identifying the sponsors that Ashley mentions and in making generalizations about how this broad range of private and public literacy sponsors legitimizes frontier values. Brandt’s concept of the “sponsor” makes the connections between social and economic contexts and individual experiences more transparent. Literacy sponsors, according to Brandt, denote the “agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (19). The ideological work of literacy, in other words, is performed through sponsors who benefit by underwriting certain types of literacy or by circumscribing it. As Ashley will suggest in her case study, literacy learning is motivated—or curtailed—by sponsors, the nature and force of which shift according to economic, technological, and cultural contingencies.

Ashley, who describes herself as fifth-generation German and Danish, grew up in Rawlins County of rural northwestern Kansas on a 5,000-acre non-dairy farm within three miles of her grandparents and a network of extended relatives. Rawlins County is approximately thirty miles north of the state’s primary east-west transportation artery, Interstate 70, and has a population of 2,643 (“Rawlins County”). Ashley’s choices of two schools to attend, one with 33 students in her grade and the other with fifteen, may have influenced her parents’ decision to home school her. Additionally, they were concerned by the generation of Ashley’s would-be male classmates, whom she labels as the “rowdy bunch.” After reading about home schooling in *Reader’s Digest*, Ashley’s parents decided to home school her and her older brother, using a curriculum they developed themselves and adapting it with materials they collected at home schooling fairs. They adopted, for example, the Saxon Math textbook series that the local public school was also using.

As a home-schooled student, Ashley attended elementary school only for one day, when she accompanied her mother, a part-time substitute teacher. The sole question that she remembers asking her mother was, “Why do they stand in lines [all the time]?” Ashley contrasts the regimentation of her publicly-schooled

peers to her home-schooled experiences. Ashley describes her typical day as a home-schooled student as one that “depended on what we wanted to do.” After waking up, usually between seven and eight o’clock in the morning, she would help prepare breakfast and then begin school, which could mean working on her own subjects or “daily grams” (skill-based grammatical exercises), participating in the “doing together activities” with her brother, or practicing the piano. If Ashley’s mother was busy, she and her brother were told to “go do [their] PE [physical education].” After lunch, she worked on “extra stuff” and could work ahead on the following day’s activities. Her home-schooling day could be completed by two o’clock. On certain days, if she knew that there was going to be a special activity—such as a home-schooled group meeting with other families—Ashley could continue to work ahead. One of the few traces of curricular regimentation was the daily plan that Ashley’s mother created, which then became Ashley’s responsibility to check off when she had completed something. Thus, if she saw she had a week of “daily grams” to complete, she could do them all at once and get them out of the way.

Ashley’s day was full of reading, including literature readers that contained short stories and excerpts from canonical authors such as Tolstoy and Shakespeare. Her early reading was supplemented by the *American Girl* books, the Scholastic Books series, and the “Book It” Reading Program sponsored by the local Pizza Hut. As she grew older, Ashley’s personal reading often took place at the breakfast and lunch table, during which she read and discussed historical texts, Hemingway (starting first with her parents’ copy of *Old Man and the Sea*), classics such as *Kidnapped*, and the poetry of Sylvia Plath, whom she heard about from the movie *Ten Things I Hate About You*. She also read books from a high-school literature list a cousin gave her, which included, among others, *Catch 22*. Ashley claims that her parents, who she describes as “not fanatical,” were not overly concerned with controlling her reading.

Other early literacy experiences included Ashley’s “daily grams,” which prompted her to identify the differences of problematic verb pairs—such as “set/sit,” “lay/lie,” and “raise/rise”—chant out prepositional phrases, and do other usage and memorization activities. She also practiced critical thinking by figuring out “problems or patterns,” based on mathematical or logical word problems. Ashley was less specific about her experiences with writing as a home-schooled student. At the elementary level, her mother would set topics for “littler stories,” and Ashley remembers writing a paper about the platypus because it was a “unique mammal,” using her family’s set of encyclopedias and the local library to find research sources and a computer to print out a picture. This report was presented to her mother. Otherwise, before she entered a community-college course her junior year of home schooling, Ashley recalls few formal writing experiences. She mentions practical writing opportunities, such as writing thank-you notes or scholarship applications, that helped develop her writing. “It was more like you learn how to write through other stuff,” she claims, emphasizing the practical contexts of good writing experiences. At the regional community college, Ashley’s more structured, formal writing opportunities occurred in her

two required English Composition courses, for which she produced mode-based pieces, several of which focused upon religious or home-schooling themes.

Ashley emphasized that her home schooling was not a solitary experience. She conducted science experiments with her brother and father using experimental kits they received in seventh and eighth grade. On a regular basis, Ashley's mother would drive her to a Christian fellowship group in the area, where they would break into smaller groups and participate in weekly Bible quizzes and basketball practice as well as, less regularly, musical performances and skits. Additionally, she would meet with a group of sixty families in order to have their pictures taken and participate in track and field events. As she reached high-school age, Ashley became involved in youth groups and community service. She also attended the local high-school's football and basketball games. Finally, Ashley took piano lessons for eleven years.

Ashley's narrative of the richness of her private and public sponsors demonstrates what Brandt calls literacy's "accumulation of different and proliferating pasts." For Brandt, literacy learning events are complicated meeting points between the public and the private, between historically-situated events and technological and economic transformations. Brandt writes, "Rapid changes in literacy and education may not so much bring rupture from the past as they bring an accumulation of different and proliferating pasts, a piling up of literate artifacts and signifying practices that can haunt the sites of literacy learning" (104). In her study, Brandt records the accumulation of nineteenth-century mass literacy movements, Protestant morality, shifts from an agricultural to an industrial economy, and the vast social, economic, and technological changes that occurred during and after World War II. In Ashley's narrative, her literacy development shows traces of a middle-class personal reading culture—the remnants of the active reading public that Habermas documents. Ashley's aleatory reading decisions stem from a complicated range of private and public sources, including her parents' choices, traditional notions of the canon, public school standard reading lists, and popular culture sources. Ashley's "popular" reading sponsors are quasi-public ones in that they are organized around private organizations' roles as public literacy sponsors on one hand and their commitments to private consumption and marketing on the other. Ashley's identification of the *American Girl* series and Pizza Hut's reading competition demonstrates this integration of public literacy opportunities and private marketing and consumption.

Ashley's home-schooling reading curriculum reveals an alternative literacy sponsor, the highly moralistic and canonical excerpts of a "Great Books" paradigm, in which texts, including popular home-schooling readers such as A Becca books, possess universal standards of literary and moral excellence. Her completion of the "daily grams" also is a sign of an earlier literacy practice, one which emphasized the use of drills and memorization of explicit language usage rules. Also, though Ashley downplays its importance, religion plays a role, not only in the Christian Bible quiz meets she participated in but in the context of her entire educational experience. In order to legitimize her education for the

public university, her parents placed Ashley's home schooling in a religious context, naming it the "Centennial Christian School." Furthermore, when she did write for a public context in her community college composition classes, religion and conservative values marked the majority of her papers, including one on the benefits of home schooling, another on the problems of restricting public religious expression, a proposal to her church congregation, and an argument depicting the problems of Cuba's economic system. The community college also represented, according to Ashley, her main writing sponsor. She recognizes fewer writing opportunities and influences than those that supported her reading. Outside of her family, which motivated her to write letters and use a computer, a literacy technology she mentions only once, there were only the more traditional public sponsors of the public library and the community college.

A final important sponsor, the economy of Ashley's rural community, echoes Brandt's recognition of the literacy transformation in the earlier part of the twentieth century, which was impacted because of the shift from an agricultural economy to an industrial one (80). The literacy development of future generations, Brandt reminds us, bears the traces of previous economic and technological changes. Describing one individual's literacy development, Brandt argues it reveals "a repository of accumulating material and ideological complexity that carried the history of economic transformation within his region and his family" (101). Ashley's rural Kansas county, from 2000 to 2006, lost close to 11% of population; its remaining inhabitants are predominantly white (98%) and aging (26% are above the age of 65) ("Rawlins County"). As an example of the depopulation of western Kansas, as well as areas of western Oklahoma, Nebraska, and the Dakotas, communities like Ashley's have been described as new frontiers on the "Dying Plains" (Popper and Popper). Although Ashley was unable to further elaborate on her parents' motivation for home schooling, besides the serendipitous *Reader's Digest* article and the worries of maladjusted classmates, her parents' educational and literacy choices need to be placed in the context of the economic and demographic changes of their western Kansas county. Importantly, these decisions are not ahistorical, nor are they a return to a "traditional," illusionary past. Ashley's literacy—a combination of frontier values and literacy attitudes—emerges from specific historical, economic, and local factors that help account for the complicated range of her private and public sponsors.

The other home-schooled participants share similar literacy sponsors. Though I do not have room in this article to provide all of their literacy narratives, I do want to list the several private, quasi-public, and public sponsors that the students identify. By "public," I am referring to a more narrowed sense of the term and am focusing on governmental, educational, or other secular organizations that widely sponsor the reading and writing of Americans. By "quasi-public," I indicate all of the private organizations, large-scale faith-based groups, and commercial companies that sponsor secular and religious literacy opportunities (see Habermas 154). Finally, by "private," I refer to the intimate sphere of families as well as the private-religious sphere of family-related

organizations or churches that sponsor literacy development. The quasi-public sponsors were the most numerous, in part because of the number of Christian publishing companies that market faith-based materials to home schooling families. The following tables list the sponsors.

Public Sponsors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •4H Clubs •Public libraries •Community colleges •Public schools (for supplementary classes, such as Spanish, and for access to athletic opportunities) •Boy Scouts •Kiwanis Club •ACT/SAT testing services and other standardized testing companies
Quasi-Public Sponsors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •National Christian evangelical groups and churches •Local Christian private schools and universities <p>Regional and national home schooling organizations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Home School Defense League •National home schooling conferences •Home School Athletic Association <p>Companies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •American Girl •Pizza Hut •Games Workshop Group (designer of War Hammer 40K) <p>Internet sites</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •social networking sites (e.g., Facebook) •conservative political websites (e.g., Townhall.com) <p>Faith-based Publishers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Bob Jones University Press •A Beka Books •Rod & Staff Books •Advanced Training Institute International <p>Secular Publishers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Saxon Publishers •Scholastic Books

Private Sponsors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Family •Parents as literacy coaches and as literacy monitors or censors •Christian fellowship and missionary groups •A local constitutional law course taught for home-schooled students •Local home-schooled speech and debate competitions <p>Local secular and Christian home-schooling parent support groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Christian Homes in Educational Fellowship •Midwest Parent Educators

Ashley's narrative legitimizes frontier literacy values because it reproduces a notion of the public, even if it occurs only temporarily within the confines of the private home. Moreover, this is a public that, according to the home-schooled students, is less regimented, more flexible, and more responsive to individual needs. Importantly, frontier values do not separate the home-schooled students' official and formal literacy from their personal and private literacy, nor, for that matter, do they compartmentalize their official educational selves from their home selves. The students describe their homes as places that, in the morning, quickly transformed into schools. Similar to Ashley's description of her meals as reading opportunities, another home-schooled student, Jeff, recalls that different parts of the house were sectioned off for different subjects. These are homes, moreover, that are rich with print and that place an important role on reading. According to Blake, what "set him apart from his public schooled friends" was the fact that he read three to four hours a night, particularly in his favorite fantasy and science-fiction genres, as well as the western fiction of Louis L'Amour and the masculine military fiction of Richard Marcinko. Jeremy, who also avidly consumed fantasy and science fiction, as well as military history accounts, relates how his mother tried to cut down the amount of reading he did at night. Kevin, finally, describes his personal reading interests in terms of the American meritocratic individuality that sponsors the adolescent literacy of these students. Kevin, while talking about what draws him to fantasy, science fiction, and historical fiction, including Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* or the more "formula[ic]" fiction of G.A. Henty, points out the intricacy of complicated events and the importance of strong individual characters: "That really appeals to me, how a conflict or a problem is thrust upon people, and they are forced to take great measures and do great things."

The home-schooled students' description of their writing sponsors emphasizes this lack of separation between public and private literacies. Indeed, except for two of the home-schooled students, Jeremy and Kevin, the other students report little in the way of formal writing instruction and describe brief, informal writing experiences, oftentimes only for personal satisfaction. Blake, for example, stresses how his mother relied upon his personal, fantasy-based "fan fictional" writing to base her formal judgments on his writing ability. Blake

comments, “I didn’t really have to write that many paragraphs or essays on the papers; I’ve been writing just fan fic[tional]... so she knew I could write.” In this case, although it represents a pedagogical practice that may concern composition specialists, Blake’s mother substituted a formal writing experience for his personal writing. Similarly, four of the home-schooled participants claim that the limited focus on writing enabled them to interact more immediately with their parents and siblings about the texts they were reading; these were texts that a parent would oftentimes read aloud to them. Kevin proposes that this dialogic interaction allowed him to check his comprehension immediately, which would have been impossible in a public classroom. These students’ attitudes towards writing as well as their attempts to conflate formal and personal writing recall the literacy attitudes toward reading and writing of Brandt’s participants. Whereas they considered that reading still held traces of a sacred tradition and brought family members together (150-153), they regarded more secular-based writing as an individual, secret, and private act (147), one that carried with it feelings of shame and pain (154). The majority of the home schoolers in this study legitimize these values inflected with the imagery of the frontier: all writing experiences, though deemphasized, are recognized; reading, meanwhile, enacts important public and private roles.

An Alternative to the Public

When you come to a different environment, such as K-State, which is oriented toward one political persuasion it seems, it’s helpful to have another outside experience to tell me that what I believe is okay and also how to articulate that... to defend what I believe or at least reason with them logically, so that helps.

I begin this section with a quotation by Aaron, whose home-schooling experiences reveal an agonistic expression of frontier literacy values: in Aaron’s case, his private family and several quasi-public sponsors serve as an alternative to the public sphere. This alternative set of values provides him with the “outside experience” with which to negotiate the public ideology of his university, the “one political persuasion” of liberalism. Additionally, unlike Hauser’s and Harris’s attempts to defend the diversity of healthy publics, Aaron’s literacy privileges private and quasi-private events that may eschew the public altogether.

Aaron, who was home-schooled along with six siblings in a mid-sized college town in Kansas, describes a “typical” home-schooling day that is similar to the other accounts, except for one factor: the close involvement of Aaron’s father. An instructor at the local university, his father was involved significantly in his education and was the lead teacher in Bible Studies, business, law, politics, and economics. Waking up around 6:30 or 7:00, Aaron recalls his father having them watch a video series on “financial freedom” and then leading them in Bible Study. When he was seven or eight, his father would also play a game with him about a hypothetical town in which Aaron made business and economic decisions.

Throughout the day, Aaron and his siblings would then work with several curricula, including reading textbooks from Bob Jones University Press, A Becka Books, and Rod and Staff, educational publishers that specialize in Christian-based curricula. Aaron would also read *Wisdom Booklets*, produced by the Advanced Training Institute International, which focus lessons around Biblical scripture through different topics, including character development, language and communication, and health and medicine. During lunch, Aaron remembers his mother testing him with flashcards highlighting presidential trivia or Greek and Latin roots while he ate.

Many of Aaron's reading opportunities centered on his Christian faith. As a young child, he remembers reading a Picture Bible, which showed him "faith" and taught him history; as a teenager, he continued to read the Bible every day. His formal home-schooling reading curriculum, the faith-based Bob Jones University Press, included summaries of the literary classics, such as Shakespeare, as well as many "random" and "different stories," including narratives about missionaries. Additionally, citing the influence of a secular and public sponsor, the local public library, Aaron supplemented his faith-based reading with children's books, such as Graham Oakley's *Church Mice* series and biographies about cowboys like Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys. Aaron's mother, performing the role of the literacy censor, restricted the number of books for personal entertainment that he could check out.

Aaron's additional literacy sponsors were similar to the mix of private, quasi-public, and public sponsors of the other students. Aaron participated in music lessons, a local home-schooling organization, and took local classes in constitutional law and "chalk art," the latter which he would use for Sunday school presentations or for his father's business talks. He also remembers participating in 4H, the only other public sponsor that he mentions, and taking field trips to the local university and to a nuclear power plant. What sets Aaron's literacy opportunities and sponsors apart from the other home-schooled students is his participation in larger and well-structured national home-schooling conferences. As a home-schooled high-school student, Aaron attended a national law symposium and attended a home-schooling conference in Knoxville, Tennessee, where he completed "apprenticeship tracks" in law and creative writing. These experiences are indicative of the "outside experience" that

Whereas they considered that reading still held traces of a sacred tradition and brought family members together (150-153), they regarded more secular-based writing as an individual, secret, and private act (147), one that carried with it feelings of shame and pain (154).

Aaron is proud of: these quasi-public home-schooling conference sponsors have provided him with an alternative to the public with which he can challenge the “different environment” of the secular university.

This alternative public conception demonstrates how home schoolers can negotiate their private, quasi-public, and public sponsors in order to carve out a space that focuses the social reproduction not upon teachers, politicians, administrators, nor, for instance, the literacy designers of the New London Group, but upon families—and families, in this case, defined as patriarchal, middle-class units. Kevin, for example, when describing his parents’ motivation for home schooling him along with his ten brothers and sisters, places their educational choices in a context of divine responsibility. According to Kevin, his parents “felt that children were a gift from God and that it was their responsibility to bring us up [...] with a strong belief in God and a strong foundation in scriptures and an understanding of why we believe what we believe.” Religion, as well as the conservative social values that Aaron identifies, are important factors of the intimate social reproduction of frontier values. Except for Samuel, who describes his home schooling as secular, and Jeremy, who emphasizes the educational flexibility of home schooling, the other students mention the importance of faith either in their early literacy experiences or in their parents’ motivations to home school them. For example, the first entry on each of Jeff’s daily curriculum planning cards dictated the need to perform religious devotions. Blake, whose early conflicts with classmates and public school authorities led to his parents’ decision to home school him, recalls his parent’s objections to a Halloween alphabet book that was part of the official first-grade curriculum. This example demonstrates an early conflict between public and private values.

Finally, the home schoolers in this study depicted their literacy as mono-cultural and patriarchal, the home-schooling characteristics that most trouble educational leaders. Michael Apple describes home schooling as another form of “white flight,” one in which home schoolers’ withdrawal from the public educational sector seriously threatens those who remain behind, in particular nonwhite students (Apple 267-268; see also Sikkink 62-63). Whereas Ashley’s parents may have been motivated to home school her because of the underpopulation of her local schools, other demographic shifts may have influenced the decisions of the other home-schooling parents. Samuel describes his local school system as “terrible” and dangerous and one with mediocre teachers. Samuel claims that the east side of Plano, Texas where he grew up was largely a poorer community with a high minority population. The official census data indicate a 15% population increase from 2000 to 2006 and, according to the 2000 data, a population of which 22% spoke a language other than English at home (“Plano, Texas”). Atypical of the other home-schooled students’ accounts, however, Samuel is able to narrate rich and formative experiences interacting with nonwhite peers at a local recreation center. Blake, whose parents withdrew from an elementary school on a military base in Kansas, was also extracted from a student population that was highly diverse, especially when compared to other

Kansas schools. According to 2006-2007 demographic data, approximately 45% of the students in this school were nonwhite, and half of all students were listed as economically disadvantaged (Kansas State Department of Education).

Although the withdrawal of home-schooled students from diverse public spaces is consistent with Turner's definition of the frontier, the strong traditional gender roles that perpetuate themselves in home-schooling instruction (see Stevens 11-12) challenge the definition of the frontier as an innovative and rhetorical concept. Gender identity, as revealed in the experiences of the home-schooled study participants, limits the use of Turner's frontier to traditional and reactionary gender roles. All of the home-schooled students report that their mothers were their primary teachers, describing the roles of their fathers in various ways, such as the disciplinarian, the principal who decided upon overall curricular decisions, or as a tutor for particular subjects, especially science, mathematics, and Bible study; in the case of Samuel, for instance, his father taught practical skills outside of the official home-schooling curriculum. These polarized roles for mothers and fathers may have important consequences for how these students make assumptions about literacy and other educational experiences. Two participants talked about sisters who were creatively engaged with reading and writing projects, whereas brothers oriented themselves around mathematics and the sciences. Kevin, furthermore, demonstrates how the polarized gender roles of home schooling coincide with his religious beliefs. Framing his concerns about how he perceived the overemphasis of women's equality in his university writing course, he asserts that, as a Christian, though he does not define women as "lesser," he does believe there are essential, divinely-sanctioned roles for men and women.

Conclusion: Two Literacies and Two Publics

The values of the American frontier, the home-schooled students in this study suggest, frame the ways that many home schoolers perceive the public sphere. According to some versions, the public is a space that needs to be replicated in the private home in order to counter the regimentation of the public, its mediocrity, and its lack of attention to individuals. In this particular framing of the public and the private, home schooling privileges private or quasi-public sponsors that do not separate the students' personal values from the official, school-sponsored accounts of them. In other versions, this public space needs to be contested or counterpoised by sponsors that can replicate its institutional and rhetorical features. These responses indicate, it is important to remember, that home schoolers are producing re-articulations of powerful cultural keywords, such as family, independence, and responsibility, that redefine the commonsensical ways of describing the public and the private and that meet political, economic, and social exigencies (see Laclau and Mouffe 168-169). In other words, home schooling can represent an active and innovative rhetorical space.

Teachers and researchers committed to the public expectations of literacy studies may recoil from the private alternatives to the public that appear in home schoolers' revitalization of frontier values. According to Collin and Apple, home schooling and other strategies to privatize education can intensify social divisions in the United States and contribute to the neglect of public schools that increasingly replicate a two-tiered system of literacies, one based along socioeconomic and racial lines (445). That is, home schooling invokes yet another literacy crisis, and home schoolers' rejection of the public is yet another symptom of "uncivility." Ohmann, some twenty-five years earlier, highlighted the two-tiered logic of literacy, arguing that new forms of monopoly capitalism "will continue to require a high degree of literacy among elites, especially the professional-managerial class" and yet "will continue to require a meager literacy or none from subordinate classes" (687). Collin and Apple, likewise, describe an underprivileged form of literacy that reproduces the literacy values of industrialist, Fordist capitalism, whereas its privileged version reproduces the literacy values of post-industrialist, global capitalism. What troubles Collin and Apple is that this two-tiered system generates "social closure," in which middle- and upper-class white students isolate themselves (445), providing them with a different set of ways of defining the public and the private and allowing them to escape the more stultifying consequences of Fordist education, such as standardized assessment.³

When this two-tiered literacy crisis is placed alongside its rhetorical counterpart, a contested two-tiered system of defining the public emerges. Many of the proponents of community literacy as well as the more rhetorically-sensitive accounts of Hauser and Ratcliffe reject a mythical, nostalgic, overly rational, and unified conception of the public (Hauser 39). Hauser, in particular, emphasizes pluralistic notions of "publics" that do not only privilege the official discourse of the "podium, printed page, legislative chamber, or executive office" but that can account for the "everyday dialogue of symbolic interactions by which [people] share and contest attitudes, beliefs, values, and opinions" (36). Yet, home schoolers who possess agonistic frontier values will certainly reject Hauser's redefinition of the public. For home-schooling families that exploit the appeals of the frontier, they practice rhetorical strategies that maintain their privilege to *not* be forced to hear the public call of literacy and to recognize a heterogeneous public that they would find unrecognizable. Their refusal to join, as well as their desires to distance and enclose themselves and remain silent, are rhetorical strategies, according to Ratcliffe, to refuse to recognize difference and the entire social logic of privilege and nonprivilege (63).

Therefore, perhaps it is more helpful to emphasize less home schoolers' rejection of the public sphere and focus more upon their desire to re-articulate a sense of a public that appears more recognizable and that reveals how home schoolers identify themselves. The literacy sponsors that are privileged are those that recreate a sense of a public as legitimating the values of the white and middle-class frontier. For example, the one ubiquitous public sponsor, the public library, is not a threat, as it maintains a sense of a monolithic reading

public that unites family members together. Literacy sponsors that are strikingly absent, given the attention paid to them in Brandt's study and the New London Group's manifesto, are those that highlight the importance of multiliteracies and technology in the formation of identity. Except for Blake, who emphasizes the role of fan-fictional writing in his literacy development, the home-schooled students' description of their literacy experiences are stable and homogenous, relating more to the sponsors of the twentieth century than those of the twenty-first. Jeremy's and Kevin's accounts of their writing development, the only two that emphasized writing instruction as an important part of their home-schooled curricula, also invoke the dominant writing theories of past sponsors, including, respectively, a correctness-based current-traditional approach and an informal, expressivist one. Undoubtedly, the racial, economic, and regional homogeneity of the participants limit the range of their sponsors.

As they maintain the literacy values of the American frontier, home schoolers will continue to challenge definitions of the public space and civil society, in particular those of Hauser, who describes an ideal civil society as one "whose members, through social interactions that balance conflict and consensus, seek to regulate themselves in ways consistent with a valuation of difference" (21). Additionally, they will continue to refuse to recognize themselves in the calls of public literacy. For those who reject the public and logic of difference altogether, private, quasi-private, and limited-public sponsors can provide an alternative to rhetorical definitions of the public and underwrite literacy opportunities and produce literacy attitudes. What teachers and researchers of both literacy and rhetorical studies need to explore are those moments when home schoolers forsake their private roles and engage with a public that they must recognize and that must recognize them. When home-schooled students enter public and secular secondary and post-secondary institutions, for example, they necessarily need to re-examine the frontier literacy values with their rhetorical definitions of the public. As more home-schooled students adopt the public and secular selves of college students, it will be fascinating to watch how the sponsors of post-secondary educational institutions enable these students to fulfill institutional roles (Goldblatt 113) and become a part of an educational narrative that home schoolers had previously rejected.

Endnotes

1. A Kansas State University Small Research Grant helped support this research study.
2. Pseudonyms have been selected for study participants.
3. Researchers observe that the two-tiered system of literacies may also be replicated in home schooling. Many new home-schooling parents, Van Galen indicates, arbitrarily adopt curricular packages, such as those from Bob Jones University Press or A Beka Books, and reproduce the ideology and pedagogical philosophy of these institutions (62). These parents, especially if they are Ideologues, may privilege highly-controlling teaching

practices (Cai, Reeve, and Robinson 373, 378) that inculcate the literacy attitudes and experiences of marginalized students.

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