

Literacy Intermediaries and the “Voices of Women” South African National Quilt Project

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Contemporary nonprofit and governmental organizations actively mediate relationships through and compose representations of literacy initiatives and their participants' literate abilities for multiple national and transnational audiences. Connecting Deborah Brandt's theory of literacy sponsorship and New Literacy Studies scholars' conceptions of literacy mediation to Bourdieu's idea of the cultural intermediary, this article identifies critical processes of literacy intermediation during a 2008 "Voices of Women" national quilt project collaboration between nonprofit organization Create Africa South, the South African Parliamentary Millennium Programme, and women project participants. Intermediating relationships and processes intensify at postcolonial and multilingual sites of literacy initiatives, in particular through acts of framing and translating that literacy intermediaries engage. Identifying literacy intermediaries affords literacy studies scholars a critical tool to connect local sites of literacy to transnational organizational processes and policies.

In 2007, the South African Parliamentary Millennium Programme (PMP) published an announcement for the

“Voices of Women” national quilt project on its website’s homepage. The PMP justifies the project, in which 270 South African women from all nine provinces would create narrative cloths, “documenting the[ir] ordinary perspectives on what democracy means to them,” by arguing that because of the “high level of adult illiteracy.... media other than the written word therefore need[s] to be explored to illustrate a wide range of perspectives” as well as to “facilitate optimal participation in the projects of the PMP.”¹ The initiative proposes that a craft-based composition project will open up fuller democratic participation, “especially” for rural women who have been prevented from “active participation in the Parliamentary processes that affect their daily lives” (PMP). In a little over 100 words, the online announcement offers a short but ideologically dangerous argument: alphabetic literacy increases the quality and level of individual civic participation and without it, the state must create programming and services to accommodate it.

A variation of the “literacy as empowerment” myth that Harvey Graff and other literacy scholars have analyzed for decades, the connection between literacy acquisition and an increase in formal political or social participation, has been challenged by several qualitative and a handful of quantitative studies over the years. While these studies show slight but meaningful increases in participatory “tendencies” of women living in postcolonial sites such as India and Bolivia, transnational feminist critiques of development more broadly argue that ideologically freighted literacy initiatives may challenge women’s indigenous knowledge systems and social structures.²

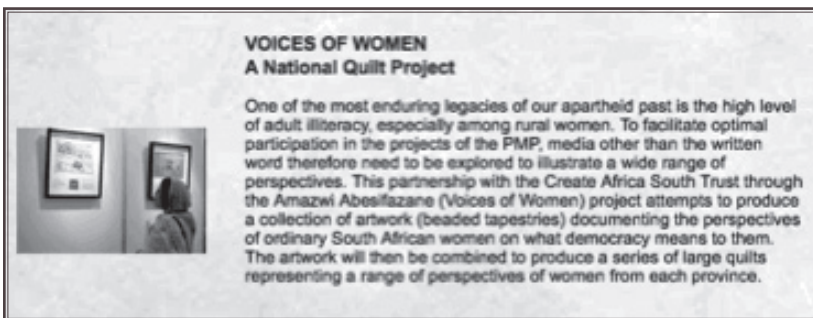


Figure 1: “Voices of Women” project description in “Current Events” section of the South African Parliamentary Millennium Programme homepage. 2007-8.

The misdirection of the PMP's argument is not entirely attributable to the tenuous link it suggests between alphabetic literacy and increased social participation: it is what the PMP *means* by illiteracy. The "high level of illiteracy" the PMP establishes as the basis for an alternative media project does not accurately reflect the literate abilities of the women who ultimately participated in the national "Voices of Women" quilt workshops. Likewise, it does not reflect statistical estimates of literacy from organizations like the CIA and United Nations, which estimate overall adult women literacy rates in South Africa to be around 86%.³ The implicit argument the PMP offers—despite South Africa's official recognition of 11 languages—is that *English* illiteracy prevents rural South African women from democratic participation in the PMP's projects and, by extension, the "new" South Africa. Although cloths the women produced in the workshop would overwhelmingly counter this myth with examples of community participation and insightful government critique, the website's language relating to the announcement seems only to emphasize this conception of literacy: each feature and downloadable resource about PMP and its projects are composed almost exclusively in English, with occasional titles and taglines in Zulu or another official language.

Instead of tracing the circulation of literacy myths connected to civic engagement and English acquisition in South Africa, this essay focuses on the actors who circulate these myths as they enact processes leveraging their position as organizations serving "local" populations through a transnational literacy advocacy network. Arguing that state and nongovernmental organizations such as the PMP function as literacy intermediaries, this essay analyzes several moments from the "Voices of Women" national quilt workshop to offer an initial theory of literacy intermediaries and intermediating practices. A pervasive sponsor of literacy in postcolonial, multilingual, or multicultural locations, literacy intermediaries are individuals and organizations that mediate, compose, and disseminate strategic representations of participants involved in literate practices. Like other sponsors of literacy, literacy intermediaries create, foreclose, and direct opportunities for literate development and expression. But they also actively mediate between multiple audiences and genres, forging relationships with audiences as the central hub in literacy

initiatives that connect disparate sites of transnational literacy practices and policy together (see Figure 2).

In rhetoric and composition studies, critical attention to South Africa has re-emerged, perhaps largely due to the complex history and unfolding present of South Africa as a multilingual, postcolonial democracy. It represents a critical site of English “styling” (Trimbur, “English”) as well as a space that demands composition scholars to reframe their understanding of public literacy (Royster). As a material rhetorical space, the country offers stark contrasts between popular ideology and daily practice. The South African constitution, broadly considered to be one of the most progressive in the world with respect to gender, clashes with “South Africa’s heritage of overlapping patriarchies (colonial, apartheid, Calvinist, missionary, traditional African)” on a near daily basis as the country continues to experience the highest rates of rape in a non-conflict zone (Moffett). Brought together by the literacy intermediary PMP, the women participating in the “Voices of Women” national quilt project composed multimodal narratives that highlight some of these same contrasts, patriarchies, and conflicts. In the next section, I review the concepts of the literacy sponsor and literacy mediator to delineate the distinctive functions and relationships of literacy intermediaries such as the PMP. Following that, I analyze the relationship between the PMP and fellow literacy intermediary Create Africa South (CAS) to explore the types of relationships these sponsors structure. I conclude with examples of women’s narratives from the Mpumalanga Province quilt workshop to challenge the dominant representation the PMP produces as a literacy intermediary.

Literacy Sponsors, Mediators, and Intermediaries

Deborah Brandt offers the concept of the literacy sponsor in her landmark 1998 essay that addresses the “analytical failure” of scholars to discuss individual literacy development without recognizing its systemic connection to larger economic forces. The field’s intense focus on the individual, Brandt argues, had reduced the “structural conditions in literacy’s bigger picture” to mere context for accounts of literacy that “sometimes even managed to enhance the literate potentials of ordinary citizens” (“Sponsors” 166). An examination of the sponsors of literacy illuminates the forces that shape opportunities

and ideologies surrounding literacy that individuals navigate on a daily basis. Evoking corporate sponsorship activities ushered in by radio and television, Brandt defines literacy sponsors broadly: “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (“Sponsors” 166). Almost any entity with influence could serve as a literacy sponsor for an individual’s literacy development—from a grandmother to a labor union training program. But few sponsors, even composition instructors, possess the affluence or power to sponsor literacy on “[their] own terms” (“Sponsors” 183).

Brandt focused her research on identifying the influence of the “more powerful sponsors” of individual literacy development, concluding over a decade later in *Literacy and Learning* that industry and the market have eclipsed church and state in the United States as dominant sponsors of literacy. Brandt describes the broad influence and processes of these sponsors in her original essay:

Literacy as a resource becomes available to ordinary people largely through the mediations of more powerful sponsors. These sponsors are engaged in ceaseless processes of positioning and repositioning, seizing and relinquishing control over meanings and materials of literacy as part of their participation in economic and political competition. In the give and take of these struggles, forms of literacy and literacy learning take shape. (173)

In her definition, Brandt highlights the function of a sponsor powerful enough to mediate flows of information about and resources for literacy. I want to focus on and develop these aspects of literacy sponsorship—the processes and materiality of literacy mediations—through the concept of the literacy intermediary. Not to be conflated with literacy mediators, a figure that New Literacy Studies scholars worked through in the 1980s and 1990s, the intermediary differs from those individuals who possess closer, frequently familial, relationships with the communities they represent.

Although it has fallen out of use, the idea of literacy mediators afforded New Literacy Studies scholars such as Arlene Fingeret, Liezl Malan,

and numerous others the ability to identify literate engagement by actors who mediate between distinct cultural-linguistic spaces, frequently on behalf of those who do not possess the skills to “mode shift” and “codeswitch” across linguistic groups (Malan).⁴ Fingeret’s early use of the term positions an illiterate woman’s husband as her mediator to a “larger society” that ultimately isolates the woman and “creates asymmetrical inner network relationships” (140-1). Through processes of literacy mediation, the woman’s marriage becomes a relationship she believes she can never fully reciprocate, despite the amount of housework she pushes herself to accomplish each day. While literacy mediators and literacy intermediaries both forge asymmetrical power relationships, from its inception, the literacy mediator has almost always figured as a member of an inner network charged with mediating responsibilities for fellow members (Baynham and Masing). Unlike literacy mediators who are recognized for their ability to establish a bi-directional relationship between members in their family or community and the dominant culture, literacy intermediaries are not typically close members of any community. Yet they identify with multiple communities as they establish intersecting relationships in which they become the central hub, intermediating action and communication between groups (as I have graphically represented in Figure 2). Literacy intermediaries are also frequently larger than any one mediator, while literacy mediation research has frequently focused upon the

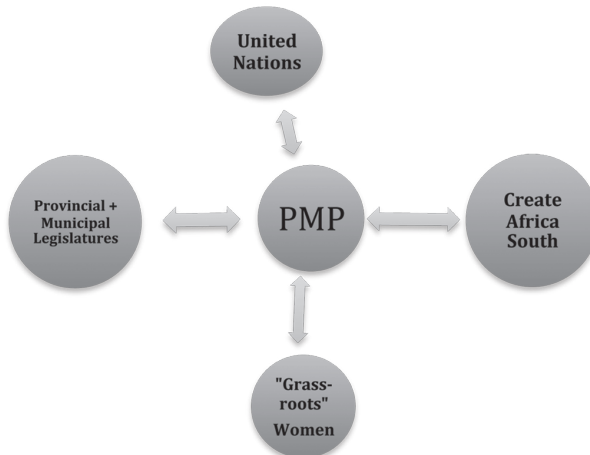


Figure 2: *The Parliamentary Millennium Programme (PMP) represented as a literacy intermediary for “Grassroots” South African Women, nonprofit organization Create Africa South (CAS), South African Provincial Legislatures, and the United Nations.*

individual. In order to engage literacy sponsorship practices that can influence literacy development as powerfully as Deborah Brandt describes above, literacy intermediaries must possess considerable representational influence across several communities of meaning.

In his book *Distinction*, which is based on a study of 1960s French culture, Pierre Bourdieu identifies agents and avocations of cultural intermediation. He locates cultural intermediaries in “all the occupations involving presentation and representation (sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decoration and so forth) and in all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services” (359). He theorizes the social construction and reproduction of taste as it functions to stratify social hierarchies, transmit cultural capital, and impede social mobility. In the text, Bourdieu attempts to account for the seemingly contradictory cultural embrace of “low” or “popular” art without a concomitant elevation of the lower social classes from which the art originated. He touches briefly on French cultural intermediaries, such as literature reviewers or clothing shopkeepers, who represent popular and high art for audiences as they frame public positions of taste through review and representation. Focusing almost exclusively on individual tastemakers working to reproduce consumerist culture in France, Bourdieu does not analyze the symbolic goods governmental or nonprofit organizations produce. However, as entities that also have a stake in influencing and reproducing cultural values, these organizations may commit significant resources to the representational activities he ascribes to advertising and public relations occupations above. Keith Negus advocates for the value of studying cultural intermediaries because it highlights how production processes are mediated prior to consumption (513). He argues for a broader conception of the work cultural intermediaries perform and identifies professionals such as accountants as cultural intermediaries in addition to Bourdieu’s initial description.⁵ Negus explains that accounting “has emerged as a particular way of ordering and assessing the actions of individuals” that reduce these actions “to figures and these are then abstracted out of the social context within which they were created and which they seek to explain” (506). His example asks critics to pay closer attention to the representational work that a broad range of professional activities – even those connotatively understood to be “objective,” like accounting – brings to bear on organizational activities and cultures.

Like Negus, I want to extend Bourdieu's initial conception of cultural intermediaries, in this case to account for the representational acts of organizational employees who shape popular understandings of literacy and literate participation. Nonprofit and governmental organizations, to a greater degree than artistic cultural intermediaries, must become adept at mixing "high and popular cultural forms" (*Distinction* 359), to frame their observations of populations with the research literature they marshal to justify their intervention into individuals' lives. In fact, Deborah Mindry demonstrates how a popular construction of the category of "rural women" in South Africa, developed in the 1990s as a subject position ripe for intervention, and how organizations that claimed the most access to "grassroots" women stood the best chance to receive international development funding. Moreover, an analysis of these organizations highlights a critical intersection between literacy studies and professional writing scholarship since intermediaries not only engage popular audiences but also produce specialized forms of writing, such as grant proposals and financial reports, which have limited circulation among organizations.

Extending the concept of cultural intermediaries to governmental and cultural organizations has proven fruitful for anthropology and art history scholars, including Nicholas Thomas. In *Colonialism's Cultures: Anthropology, Travel, and Government*, Thomas examines "scientific explorers, missionaries, and official administrators" who investigate, challenge, and co-opt artifacts and cultural elements from colonized peoples as they produce knowledge for the West (51). He characterizes the actions these colonizers engage in—"fighting tigers and savages, collecting Egyptian mummies and drawing crusader castles"—as "self-fashioning exercises that discompose and recompose" the cultural intermediary (5). Thomas identifies a crucial function of cultural intermediaries operating in colonial and postcolonial sites: the representations they disseminate about indigenous or "grassroots" knowledge frequently reveal more about the intermediary's desire for identification over the actual population's being represented.

The PMP's "recomposition" of its homepage in late 2009 provides a compelling example of contemporary self-fashioning as a cultural intermediary. The "Voices of Women" announcement appeared on the website in 2007 below an announcement promoting the upcoming

commemoration for the 1987-1988 Battle of Cuito Cuanavale, which occurred when a largely conscripted South African military fought on the side of the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola during the Angolan Civil War that pitted two former liberation movements against one another for power of the country. Together, these announcements display symbolic identities—the historically oppressed rural woman and the conscripted veteran—that the PMP wants viewers to identify with the organization. These announcements appear directly below the organization's objectives, one of which is “to make visible and assert our South African and African identity.” By late 2009, however, the PMP shifted from fashioning its organizational identity through rural women and veterans to an intense focus on the nation's youth. In the same space reserved for the previous two announcements, the site now promotes the “*Bokamoso Ba Rona / Our Future is In Your Hands*” initiative.⁶ Below the short description, viewers can access the separate “Boka Buddies” website or download the project's *URTURN Magazine*. PMP's “recomposition” mediates youth culture and neoliberal theory to encourage young South Africans to focus on the development of individual skills as a way to contribute to South Africa's future. While youth development has always been a PMP concern, the “Boka Buddies” project distinctly represents the organization's future-oriented focus—signifying South Africa almost exclusively as a space for economic opportunity for young people who commit to individual development.

At postcolonial sites such as the ones Thomas investigates and the “Voices of Women” national quilt workshops, these self-fashioning acts have significant implications for the populations that cultural intermediaries represent. Beyond just engaging in representational acts, then, cultural intermediaries possess positions of power where their representations are accepted as credible, frequently, because they are the only representations available. Consider the United Nations, CIA, and the United States Agency for International Development as paradigmatic examples of this representational dominance. Intermediaries take advantage of the broad access they achieve through the relationships they manage between communities and project stakeholders. With intermediation, comes hierarchy, and although the intermediary may function as the hub for relationships,

they may still have to “answer to” international financial entities above them because of funding conditions.

Literacy intermediaries negotiate these potentially fractious relationships through models of patronage that work to reconcile and erase conflict rather than highlight it. The PMP established itself as a patron to CAS and women workshop participants when it provided the monetary resources to support the quilt project, fund independent workshops for CAS, and provide women participants with a small stipend at the end of the workshop.⁷ Brandt and Clinton identify patronage structures in literacy sponsorship that “integrated otherwise antagonistic social classes into relationships of mutual, albeit, unequal, dependencies” (350). At its root meaning, an intermediary is an entity that seeks to bring about agreement and reconciliation. A process with significant cultural resonance in South Africa since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) reconciliation is a process that may intend “to forge a common memory” but is always “predicated on making public particular kinds of knowledge” (Ross 251). A critic of the TRC as a venue for women’s testimony, Fiona Ross argues, “witnessing needs to take into account that which is left unsaid in testimonies” (272). The intermediating practices the PMP engaged to present the women’s narratives—from website descriptions to reports digesting the women’s narratives for various Parliamentary Portfolio Committees—also silenced women’s voices whose narratives fell outside of “agreement” with the relatively narrow function PMP envisioned for the cloths. Perhaps the most challenging narratives to encounter after the conclusion of the Mpumalanga workshop were written by women asking for immediate help to address a dangerous living situation. Because the PMP conceived the purpose of the cloths to account for South African democracy more generally, an individual woman’s plea for help was ignored during the workshop week and continued to be ignored through intermediating processes that delivered the narrative’s translation to CAS offices almost a year later, in February 2009.⁸

Beyond applying a concept to envision the specific relationships and processes literacy intermediaries engage, a study of literacy intermediaries demands robust qualitative inquiry to challenge

the “public” representations intermediaries produce with direct observation and interviews with members of the groups being intermediated. Brandt and Clinton argue that “attention to sponsors can be shaped out of the struggle of competing interests and agents, how multiple interests can be satisfied during a single performance of reading or writing, [and] how literate practices can relate to immediate social relationships while still answering to distant demands” (351). The qualitative methods of participant observation and interviewing reveal the “struggle of competing interests” and the “multi-sourced” agency left out of the public representations literacy intermediaries produce. Literacy intermediaries perform critical representational roles, actively mediating relationships and ultimately shaping our understanding of literacy initiatives, communities, and individuals through print, digital, and other media forms. In this section, I have grounded the concept of literacy intermediaries theoretically while identifying three key actions they engage: self-fashioning through mediation, constructing relationships where the intermediary figures as a central hub, and engaging processes of reconciliation. After explaining the social context and background of the “Voices of Women” national quilt project in the section below, I explore PMP and CAS as they negotiated the project collaboration through an extended case study of a literacy intermediary relationship.

South Africa, Literacy Intermediation, and the “Voices of Women” National Quilt Project

Unlike the United States that Brandt describes in *Literacy and Learning*, South Africa experienced a rise in state-sponsored literacies from the 1990s forward. With the end of apartheid in a newly democratic country led by the African National Congress (ANC), the South African government invested more meaningfully in popular literacy education as it finally recognized nine indigenous languages from the Niger-Congo language family as official languages in addition to English and Afrikaans.⁹ John Atchison describes the “decimation of the NGO sector” for 1990s South African adult education programs during the democratic transition, and John Trimbur’s article “Popular Literacy and the Resources of Print” explains key reasons why literacy NGOs and other “education, labor, and community organizations that vitalized civil society” disappeared (103). Before the end of apartheid, local, national, and even international groups may not have been unified in practices, but apartheid resistance unified

them in purpose. After its end, many working with these groups left for a place in the democratic government. Denise Walsh describes how the “dynamism” of the Rural Women’s Movement faded after 1994, when “its most talented leaders moved into parliament” (53).

Unfortunately, this “systematic demobilization of popular energies” occurred at the same time the South African government shifted from the rights-based, populist principles of its Reconstruction and Development Programme to neo-liberal economic practice with its Growth, Employment, and Redistribution strategy in 1996.¹⁰ Its impact on literacy education was significant as “the terms shifted from the consciousness-raising of alternative education in the 1980s to capacity-building” (“Popular” 104). At the same time, funders (who previously supported community organizations like the ones Trimbur describes above) “prioritized support to the new government’s programmes, ostensibly with a share earmarked for channeling to local NGOs. While there were diverse programmes and donors, in general the conditions placed on funding increased” (Wallace, Bornstein, and Chapman 83-4). In other words, the confluence of an emerging democratic government and late twentieth century neoliberal economies forged new relationships between citizens, local NGOs, the state, and international development networks in South African civil society. And out of these new relationships, the South African state emerged as a powerful intermediary, creating conditional opportunities for nonprofits and individuals to work toward literacy development that conciliates international funding sources.

The relationship forged between the PMP and CAS with the alternative literacy “Voices of Women” quilt project provides a compelling example of the shifts described above as it illuminates literacy intermediary practices that resonate across transnational literacy initiatives in postcolonial sites. As I outline the history of these South African-based organizations, I discuss how their collaboration arose out of an intersection at an American university hosting a UNESCO-sponsored event. In other words, I begin to sketch the transnational relationships PMP and CAS engage in as literacy intermediaries.

A joint project of the Speaker of the National Assembly and the Chairperson of the National Council of Provinces, the PMP

defined its mission in the early 2000s “to be Parliament’s primary tool for nation building” by fulfilling three constitutional mandates: “providing a national forum for the public consideration of issues; fostering unity in diversity; and improving the quality of life of all South Africans.” Past projects include artistic and educational exhibitions as well as creative projects that target participation from South African youth almost exclusively.¹¹ The “Perspectives On and Of Africa” marked the PMP’s inaugural educational project, producing an exhibition and educational materials on the mapping of Africa and its international history. They have since expanded to host outdoor art exhibitions, literature readings, and a national film festival from 2002 to the present.

The PMP projects that preceded the “Voices of Women” quilt project primarily created opportunities for the organization to produce media *for* an urban South African public rather than *with* any specific South African communities. Its 2004 collaboration with the Frank Joubert Art Centre in Cape Town stands as an exception. The collaboration asked the young student artists at the Centre to submit visual compositions of their “perspective of Africa.” Four years later, the “Voices of Women” national quilt project marked the PMP’s first initiative that incorporated the “perspectives of ordinary South African women” (PMP) into the national forum it sought to create and represent.

CAS emerged during the same time as the PMP and held its first “memory cloth” workshop in 2000. In this collaborative workshop sponsored by CAS and the African Art Centre, a group of women from the Richmond Farm informal settlement composed a narrative and embroidered a cloth in response to the theme “A Day I Will Never Forget.” Workshop organizers recognized the value of the workshop process and were inspired by the conversations and connections the shared composition process evoked in the project participants (Zagel). They also recognized the historical value of the women’s compositions that evoked striking events from everyday South African life during apartheid, transition, and the “new” South Africa. They called the initiative *Amazwi Abesifazane* (Zulu for “Voices of Women”) and began conducting workshops primarily in the townships surrounding Durban.¹² They have since archived over 2300 memory cloths that represent an everyday history of South

Africa. The organization's founder, Andries Botha, has used his position as a contemporary South African artist to disseminate some of the project's archive across the globe in art exhibition spaces and an online searchable database. While Botha constructed a somewhat limited global art audience for the *Amazwi Abesifazane* project, the collaboration the PMP proposed redefined the "Voices of Women" national quilt project's audience to include national and provincial legislators.

The Executive Director of CAS, Janine Zagel, narrated how the PMP first approached the nonprofit organization with the desire to create a national quilt representing women from every province of South Africa. In October of 2005, the Speaker of the South African National Assembly, Baleka Mbete, opened the 6th Annual UNESCO Comparative Human Rights Conference at the University of Connecticut and introduced its attendees to an exhibition of *Amazwi Abesifazane* memory cloths. At the reception, Mbete spoke with Botha and Zagel at length about the narrative cloths, and she expressed her interest in its mission but lack of awareness of the project. At that time, Mbete set the agenda of the PMP as speaker, and she encouraged the PMP to launch the national quilt project. Just over a year later, in August 2007, the first workshop took place in the Northern Cape Province. Zagel implied at several points in her interview that Mbete proposed the collaboration because her lack of knowledge about the project in the environment of the UNESCO conference pressured her. Although an accomplished politician, Mbete had nowhere near the level of experience working as a literacy intermediary as UNESCO, a United Nations agency that was established in 1945 and is committed to development—with an emphasis on literacy.

In March 2008, I traveled with two CAS staff members to facilitate a weeklong "Voices of Women" quilt workshop sponsored by the PMP for rural women from the Mpumalanga Province. Although this was my first workshop assisting CAS as a facilitator for the "Voices of Women" initiative, Morongoe Tsoaeli and Eunice Gambushe had traveled together to the Western Cape a few months prior to collaborate with the PMP, and their experience was not entirely positive. The relationship PMP initiated had proven unequal from the onset, as CAS facilitators Tsoaeli and Gambushe (who represented a decade-long history of conducting cloth workshops as well as

translation and embroidery knowledge) were demoted to assistants for the PMP staff who managed the events of the workshop. The inequity of the partnership, which ultimately lasted from 2007-2009, resulted from disparate access to municipal and provincial government support (two relationships the PMP managed as the more powerful literacy intermediary to CAS). PMP sponsorship of the cloth workshop transformed the process into a highly publicized event, and women traveled from as far as five hours away to room with fellow women from their province they had never met before to participate in a range of PMP-sponsored activities. The women received room and board for the week and a small stipend for their cloth and time. Surprisingly, none of the women were told about the stipend before the end of the week, and most did not know the theme or purpose of the workshop prior to arriving.

In contrast to the original workshop model CAS created—where women from the same community participated in the workshop—PMP shifted the project goals from historical consciousness to a nationally intermediated experience. Although the women came from the same province, they would likely never see one another after the end of the week. In contrast, most of the original women from the Richmond Farms settlement have continued composing narratives and embroidering memory cloths about their experience, recently exhibiting “What Makes Me Happy” at the African Art Centre in Durban eight years after their first workshop together. This section has embedded the history of the PMP and CAS and the relationship they developed together to demonstrate the larger socio-economic forces structuring the activities of literacy intermediaries and the unequal relationships they forge through literacy initiatives. The shift in project direction—from *Amazwi Abesifazane’s* focus on community building to the “Voices of Women” project focus on representative government—was possible only through the actions of the PMP as literacy intermediary.

Conclusion

Despite what the “Voices of Women” online project announcement that I examined at the beginning of this essay implies, the average literacy rate for women participating in the Mpumalanga province workshop was 96.7%. All but one of the 30 women could write a

robust narrative in her home language in her own hand. In terms of narrative content, eight women write about participating in community meetings, and another describes her past position as a local councilor (Nkambule). The narratives composed during the project demonstrate a nuanced understanding of governmental structures that directly counter the representation PMP presents of these women in its announcement. Even the sole workshop participant who requested a scribe, arguably the only project participant matching PMP's description, composed a narrative that demanded the government to recognize democracy as "our heritage" and with that heritage, a responsibility to provide basic services, in particular roads to support tourism for the traditional dance group she organized. Citing nepotism in provincial government and unheeded requests, her narrative argues insufficient government service delivery and *not* a lack of knowledge that prevents her from engaging with civic society fully (Malele). In this instance, the PMP's representation of rural woman such as Anari Mona Malele reduces the complexities of her life and local economic opportunities merely because of a focus on her alphabetic literate ability in Pedi or English as a determining factor for her development.

Just a few years after the first democratic elections in South Africa, Brian Street recognized that "formal systems" and even families implemented the illiterate "label" to devalue South African political activists, despite their ability to "incorporate" literary documents for their causes and navigate "literate environments" (3). The PMP similarly devalued the literate abilities that "Voices of Women" project participants possessed: it applied the label of "illiterate" to explain why the women couldn't access civic life when the women's narrative cloths demonstrated engagement with their community and named specific governmental and social resources they wielded or desired to help them seek fulfillment in a democratic South Africa. But with access to composition technologies and multiple audiences, the PMP's representation of the project and rural South African women occludes both the women's agency and inequities in service delivery and human rights protections that persist from South Africa's colonial history.

In this analysis, I have demonstrated how researching organizations as literacy intermediaries who compose strategic representations



Figure 3: A complete, framed “Voices of Women” unit is pictured on the left and was used by CAS and PMP facilitators to explain the project to Mpumalanga Province participants. PMP facilitators laid the finished Mpumalanga province cloths on the table for provincial officials to view on the final day of the workshop that featured a tea and speeches. (Photograph taken on 20 March 2008 by author at Mthunzi Lodge in Hazyview, South Africa).

of participants and literacy initiatives helps us better recognize the transnational processes of intermediation that connect “literacy on the ground” to ideologies about literacy and literate development. Literacy intermediaries are particularly significant organizations to study because of their claims that they represent and empower communities marked as most vulnerable or in need of development.

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Notes

- 1 The short description of the project referenced and reproduced in Figure 1 no longer appears on the PMP homepage, although a screen shot of the site from 23 July 2008 is available online through the Internet Archive, “Wayback Machine.”
- 2 See Nelly P. Stromquist’s “The political benefits of adult literacy” for a comprehensive literature review of studies conducted in India, the United States, Turkey, Nepal, and Bolivia. Most studies found small but not statistically significant correlations between literacy and social participation. Burchfield et al. found increases in political knowledge and activity for women participating in literacy initiatives in Nepal and Bolivia. For an introduction to feminist critiques of development, see Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal’s “Transnational Feminist Cultural Studies.” Swai provides a recent critique of how postcolonial state and development regime claims of empowerment (with literacy figured as the first step toward development) work to eradicate women’s knowledge systems in Tanzania.
- 3 The United Nations recognizes that literacy rates vary dramatically between South Africa’s urban and rural areas. At the same time, the UN estimates the literacy rate for women ages 15-24 to be as high as 98.1%. My argument will challenge the processes of literacy intermediary organizations such as the UN that construct ideologies of literacy, so I use these statistical figures critically and paired with direct observation of the PMP workshop held in 2008 in the Mpumalanga Province. Of the 30 Mpumalanga workshop participants I will discuss shortly, 29 (or 96.7%), were able to compose a written narrative in their first language (11 Zulu, 9 Tsonga/Shangaan, 5 Pedi/Northern Sotho, 3 Swati/Swazi, and 1 Xhosa). Although this may reflect a higher than average literacy rate, the high literacy rate and linguistic diversity reflects the abilities women possessed who were recruited for the national quilt project.
- 4 The study of code switching continues to explore linguistic practices of mediation, but scholarship hasn’t consistently engaged the term since the early 2000s. Previous scholarship

has failed to identify literacy mediators as a kind of literacy sponsor, so, subsequently, when scholar Alanna Frost offers the concept of the “literacy steward” in a recent issue of *CCC*, her argument misses out on making a valuable distinction between the “mediating for survival” processes that Malan describes compared to Frost’s “stewarding cultural and traditional literacy practices” for cultural autonomy and preservation.

- 5 In Bourdieu’s later work, *The Rules of Art*, Hesmondhalgh suggests that in the title, Bourdieu draws “attention to the structured nature of making symbolic goods, and the way that the social making-up of the rules surrounding such activities, is hidden from view, or misrecognized” (216). Hesmondhalgh adds “a related problem in *The Rules of Art* is that Bourdieu has nothing to say about the domination of cultural production by multinational entertainment corporations across all cultural industries” (220). He highlights where Bourdieu’s conception of cultural intermediaries remains limited in theorizing the cross-cultural reach of contemporary intermediaries through economic connection.
- 6 In the forthcoming *Uncivil Youth: Activism and Affirmative Governmentality* (Duke UP), Soo Ah Kwon interrogates opposing representations of youth as categories of need for nonprofit and governmental intervention and the ever-increasing forms of governmentality that structure civic life for youth.
- 7 PMP covered room and board and compensated women 250 Rand for participation in the workshop and the production of the cloth. At the time, this was worth a little under \$30 US dollars, with higher value on food purchases but not manufactured or imported goods.
- 8 In related research, I discuss these three narratives at length to consider the conflict of rhetorical exigency held by these participating women and the PMP. One narrative describes an ongoing situation of domestic abuse while the other two express deep concern over stable access to sanitary conditions, shelter and food.
- 9 At the same time, as with my example of the PMP website above, official governmental business is predominately and almost

exclusively conducted in English. According to the 2001 South African census, .5% of the population speaks something other than the eleven official languages at home. These languages are Zulu (23.8%), Xhosa (17.6%), Afrikaans (13.3%), Pedi (9.4%), English (8.2%), Tswana (8.2%), Sotho (7.9%), Tsonga (4.4%), Swati (4.4%), Venda (2.3%), and Ndebele (1.6%). If assumed relatively constant, these figures suggest that prior to 1994, South Africa's official languages of English and Afrikaans represented a little over 20% of the population.

- 10 See Trimbur's "Popular Literacy and the Resources of Print" as well as Naomi Klein's "Democracy Born in Chains: South Africa's Constricted Freedom" in her book *Shock Doctrine* for further discussion of this shift to neoliberalism in South African policy.
- 11 Interestingly, the "Voices of Women" project appears to be the only creative initiative it has facilitated with adult South Africans. At this time, the site no longer promotes the project. An increasing and intensifying focus on youth—figured both as "in crisis" and the country's future—currently dominates the PMP interests, as I discussed above.
- 12 To avoid confusion between the larger *Amazwi Abesifazane* project possessing 2300+ narrative cloths in response to the theme "A Day I Will Never Forget," I will refer to the specific national collaboration between CAS and PMP as the "Voices of Women" project and continue to refer to the original project as *Amazwi Abesifazane*.

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