4 An Impromptu Theater: A Local Public That Turns Its Back on Formal Institutions

In Heath's *Ways with Words,* the local public is a street theater where impromptu performances teach children socially appropriate uses of language and reinforce the social hierarchy of a tightly knit community. The image of an impromptu theater organizes Heath's analysis of community life in 1970s Trackton, an African American neighborhood in the Piedmont Carolinas. On the local public stage, the "way with words" that mattered were not the practices associated with schooling. Instead, performances entertained Trackton's residents with competitive verbal play even as they prepared children to survive in a world that adults knew to be unpredictable and unfair.

Distinctive Features: Dramatic and Spontaneous

In Trackton, the local public was a dramatic performance, one that burst spontaneously onto an improvised stage.

Dramatic. On Trackton's plaza, "actors" in both the "permanent cast" and "chorus" performed "roles" complete with "cues" and "lines." They made their "entrances and exits" within "scenes" as performances played out across "sets." In addition to the leading roles, the responsive "chorus" and the interactive "audience" intensified the drama of each performance (Heath 72, 79).

Spontaneous. Trackton's public performances ignited whenever conditions were right. Consider, for instance, conditions that sparked the ritualized performance in which wage earners returned home on payday with treats to distribute among expectant children. Specific condi-

tions—the scheduled paycheck, the willingness of working residents to cash their checks and stop for groceries on the way home, the preparation of those who awaited their return, the anticipation that intensified as each minute passed—each of these conditions was required in order for a particular performance of "the distribution routine" to burst forth on stage (Heath 97). As this example shows, time (in this case, payday) and place (the plaza or porch) were necessary, but insufficient, for creating the local public. Also vital were the community's actors, prepared and willing to perform various roles—leading roles, yes, but also that of a discerning, responsive audience and chorus. Trackton's local public came into being in the moment that these necessary conditions were met.

Heath directs us to look outdoors for such performances. Beyond that, performances could have cropped up in several alternative locations, the plaza being the most central but not the only candidate for a public stage. And several performances could have ignited simultaneously, or a particularly dramatic show may have sparked subsequent performances elsewhere. After the burst of creative energy, each stage returned to its original state, whether a porch, yard, or plaza. In this context, spontaneity suggests fluidity and synergy. This is not to say that schemas and repertoires weren't involved, for they structured these performances just as they do the impromptu performances in nightclubs and subway stations (Bennett 106). Rather, the impromptu street theater brings to mind the creative flash of joint story telling and competitive verbal play that ignite as people go about their day-to-day lives.

The Impromptu Theater in Context: Location, Power, and the Integrity of Community Life

In Trackton, the plaza was a "public area" (Heath 79) and its discourse—from story telling to yo-mama insults to hand-clapping playsongs—"public performances" (81). The descriptor *public* distinguishes Trackton's literacy events from those of the neighboring white community where language learning was the private endeavor of individual households. But Trackton's location, its circuits of power, and its integrity as a community distinct from nearby public institutions also qualified Trackton as a distinct local public.

Location. Trackton's geographic location helped to create a local public distinct from the public institutions in the nearby town of Gateway. Given the "good stone's throw" that measured the road running between Trackton and Gateway, location separated and distinguished Trackton from town (Heath 47). At the center of the neighborhood, Trackton's plaza invited residents to turn their attention to one another and away from the demands in town. The plaza's public performances were not about preparing children for life outside the neighborhood where as adults they would likely go to look for work but rather about asserting their places in the social hierarchy of the neighborhood.

Location also distinguished Trackton's local public discourse from the discourses of the institutions in town. Because of the political and economic history behind its geographic borders, Trackton's location separated residents from the town's political processes, decision-making, policies, and procedures (Heath 62). Thus, location signaled differences in how residents used words at home and in town. For instance, the problem-solving orientation of the town's banks, housing office, and real estate firms would have stipulated that upon learning that her house had been condemned, Aunt Bertha would have immediately gone to town to start searching for another house and financing its purchase. But performances on Trackton's public stage were compelling in their own right, providing Aunt Bertha with the ready option to spend her time, instead, in the company of her neighbors, leaving "everyday challenges of current life" to sort themselves out (66).

Power. The politics of Trackton were different from the politics of the town's public institutions where power plays and contests referred to election campaigns and where it took appointments and paperwork to infiltrate the bureaucracy associated with state and federal social programs. Though Trackton's politics also involved status, control, rewards and penalties, the dynamics were not institutional but informal. On Trackton's public stage, performances were challenges, and challenges measured youngsters' abilities to "outwit, outtalk, or outact their aggressors" (Heath 84).

Public performances reinforced power relations among residents in Trackton, relations stratified by age and gender. For instance, it was the prerogative of the preschool boys to perform on stage; girls prac-

ticed their roles on its periphery (Heath 95). Public performances continued to grant boys power as they grew older by extending public roles to them. A young man's social status was tied to his ability to assert his own identity and to position others in relation to it—as a teenager named Darret did when he told a toddler named Teegie, "'You gonna be all right, boy, you be just like me'" (80). Expectations for girls' performances were more limited and limiting, endorsing a certain kind of "girl talk" as a requisite for becoming "good 'mamas'" (98).

Integrity of Community Life. Trackton's impromptu theater recognized and preserved the internal integrity of community life distinct from the nearby town and its public institutions. Rather than drawing attention to the gap between Trackton residents' home discourse and the demands of public institutions, the theater underscored the integrity of the habits, preferences, and practices that defined social life in Trackton and made the plaza its center stage. In a community where the ability to struggle, to make do, and to survive was judged more valuable than traipsing into town to fill out forms for some ambiguous bureaucratic process, public performances affirmed the integrity of the community itself as well as the identities, roles, and social positions of residents within it. Public performances permitted the residents of Trackton to assert themselves as a "closed community" (Heath 63), distinguishing themselves from the sometimes "snobbish ways" of the neighboring African American townspeople (62).

Tenor of the Discourse: Edgy and Competitive, Curbed by Play

Trackton's public discourse had an edgy quality to it. Even though public performances were largely entertaining—the "hostility, disrespect, and aggressive behavior" only "feigned" (Heath 81)—the tension is palpable in Heath's descriptions. The edginess is most evident in the ritualized insults and accusations characterizing boy talk but was also true of girls' fussing, reprimanding those who violated various social codes. Verbal competition tested youngsters' discursive adaptability and flexibility. "[M]eanings of a particular word, phrase, or set of actions [. . .] are often neither literal or predictable" (84). Thus, public performances tested the performer's ability to respond sponta-

neously to subtle and changing contextual cues, intensifying the competitive edge of verbal play (79).

Residents used verbal play to assert their place in Trackton's social hierarchy. Given its premise of winners and losers, competition gave children the chance to practice responding to the nuances of a challenger's assertions. Indirection and competition were part of a tradition designed to initiate children into an unstable and unpredictable world where one's survival was often based on the ability to improvise. Conversely, to violate the codes of discourse was to risk a public shaming that struck to the core of a person's identity, a threat that ran throughout not only childhood but also adulthood. Thus, the tenor of the discourse maintained rules that reinforced residents' social standings.

Performative Literacies

Three distinct oral practices characterized Trackton's public stage performances: boys' public-stage challenges, in all their variations; two kinds of girl talk, fussing and playsongs; and story telling, especially among elderly matriarchs.

- *Boys' Public-Stage Challenges.*[1] These "put-downs" combined aggressive words and gestures to provoke other boys to respond with retorts of their own (Heath 80). Challenges could take the forms of teasing, defying, bossing, begging, arguing, babying, scolding, boasting, insulting and ridiculing (85). Used to gauge quickness and intelligence, challenges were embedded within other rituals—for instance, determining how treats were allocated within the distribution routine.
- *Girl Talk.* Girls accessed the public stage primarily through their participation within two practices: fussing games and playsongs. Through fussing games, girls berated someone of lower social status for violating an aspect of the social code—say, not showing due care when slinging a baby across one's hip. Playsongs used rhythm and rhyme to structure and to sequence patterned games, including handclap games and jump-rope playsongs.
- *Matriarchs' Story Telling.* Story telling involved ritualized narratives marked by repetition and a "lilting chant-like quality" (Heath 65). Recounted primarily by the elderly, these stories reinforced a shared sense of pride in past accomplishments and

> acceptance of life circumstances, including stories of the living and working conditions that elderly residents had encountered growing up further south. Stories emphasized "the fact that there were some good things back then in spite of the hardships" (65). Miss Bee's story of her childhood featured a wood cabin, cracks in floorboards, and chickens visible between these cracks.

Trackton's residents used these literacies both to call into being and to access their local public.

Rhetorical Invention: Practice, Modeling, and Feedback

Given the emphasis on repeated practice, modeling, and feedback, Trackton children's inventive processes parallel other descriptions of children's language learning (e.g., Halliday 24), but embedded in the rich description of a specific, rural African-American community.

Repeated practice. Public life provided Trackton's boys with repeated opportunities to practice countering verbal insults and accusations. In a similar vein, older siblings noted the value of repeated practice when they attempted to compensate for the infrequent invitations issued to their younger sisters to participate in public discourse. Girls were "not excluded from this scene, [. . .] but they [were] rarely given parts to play and almost never full-stage performance opportunities" (Heath 79). However, because they were disconnected from the promise of an audience's "rewarding response" (86), "these sessions rarely last[ed] longer than a few minutes, since the younger child quickly los[t] interest" (96). As the older siblings knew, practice makes a difference. Without it, girls "ha[d] a much smaller store of experiences from which to draw" (96). Those boys judged to be best at public discourse were given the most opportunities to continue to practice and, thus, to hone—even as they demonstrated—their performative prowess. Consequently, those who practiced most also became most adept at handling their public roles.

Modeling. Children learned their roles by watching other Trackton players perform theirs. Sometimes, the modeling was made quite explicit, with an older sibling, for instance, cuing the learner to mimic the modeled behavior, as in the prompt "'[S]ay––, say it like I do'"

(Heath 96). But more often, boys learned the art of the counterchallenge by watching their challengers' moves and tactics.

Feedback. How did young actors on Trackton's public stage assess the adequacy of their own performances? Through feedback, often in the forms of laughter, applause and verbal praise but also packaged as "food, affection, and gifts" (Heath 82). In countering public-stage challenges, some combination of "a verbal and nonverbal put-down" typically elicited enthusiastic responses from audiences (80). But feedback wasn't consistent. Instead, adults used indirection and inconsistency as tools for developing children's inventional capacities, especially their ability to discern judgments from subtle contextual cues.

Through invention, children discovered not only what to say but how to handle the kinesis of the entire performance (Heath 81). Catching a child in the throes of invention—in this case, thinking on his feet—was often the very point of a challenger instigating a public performance. Practice and learning "t[ook] place on stage" (86), rather than offstage in preparation for a performance as strategies for rhetorical planning typically suggest. Performances tested whether young performers had the wherewithal to assess and to respond instantaneously to an audience's multiple demands.

Implications

1. *Local publics are simultaneously discursive as well as physical spaces.*

A local public need not have some pre-existent status as a physical entity—as in the case of a New England town hall that holds regularly scheduled town meetings. As the distribution routine demonstrates, local publics burst into being virtually anywhere in Trackton—as along as the necessary conditions were met. Yet Trackton's location also constrained and configured what went on there. Location separated Trackton from town, not only geographically but also ideologically, privileging residents' own priorities and values.

2. *With integrity of its own, a local public can be a welcome alternative to public institutional spaces that people find hostile and alienating.*

Heath illustrates one way that a local public supports a community's integrity; Scott Lyons's New Ghost Dance, another. On Trackton's public stage, integrity meant that performers like Darret—rather than,

say, the institutions in Gateway—set the terms for public discourse. This measure of integrity is also central to Lyons's analysis of the rhetorical sovereignty of Native Americans for whom the ultimate hostile public institution was the boarding school that stripped native children of their culture, language, and practices and often humiliated and brutally punished them for refusing to fulfill their teachers' demands.

But Lyons replaces a closed community's hierarchical public performance with that of the intercultural New Ghost Dance. The difference means that the New Ghost Dance sets "at least some" of the terms of debate (Lyons 462). That is, rather than reinforcing rigid borders, the New Ghost Dance allows issues that bubble up in local publics to find their way into more formal arenas. The benefit of this apparent compromise rests in its outcomes. Consider, for instance, the Supreme Court's upholding of native people's "right to hunt and fish on ceded land" and the federal Trademark Trial and Appeal Board's "disrecognition of the Washington Redskins trademark" (466). Crediting the victories' local origins, Lyons writes: "Both initiatives arose from the grassroots, each in their own way fought over questions of land and identity, and the ultimate outcome of both was an honoring of 'a whole way of life'" (466).

3. *Expressions of researchers' working theories of local public discourse, the metaphors used to describe local publics carry important theoretical implications.*

Heath compared Trackton's local public life to a theater, where actors performed roles across scenes and acts. Theatrical imagery dominates descriptions in public-spheres studies, as well. Fraser, for instance, explains that "'[t]he idea of the public sphere' [. . .] designates a *theater* in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk" (110, emphasis added). This chapter suggests theatrical imagery is particularly well suited to describing the performative aspects of public literacies. However, it follows from Catherine Prendergast's reading of *Ways with Words* that the image does not sufficiently illuminate political dynamics between and among the other publics with which a local public inevitably interacts.

Foremost, Prendergast has taken issue with Heath's characterization of Trackton as a closed community ("Race" 48–50).[2] Prendergast argues that this description isn't so much untrue but insufficient. Using critical race theory to revisit *Ways with Words,* Prendergast argues that

Trackton was a closed community not because it was free of racism, nor because it was isolated from the neighboring white community (for it was not), nor even so residents could take a break from racism's grasp. Rather, the fact that Trackton was a closed community is testament to the multi-generational mechanism of racism that shaped the history of these Piedmont mill communities and—by implication—that continues to shape racist public opinion and educational practice.[3] Prendergast argues that at the time of Heath's study Trackton was already socialized into the discourse of racism. For this reason, adults found it necessary to teach children "[s]trategies for dealing with the basic inconsistencies and inherent contradictions" that constitute "the experience of double-consciousness" (Prendergast 48), the paradox "in which people of color have to believe simultaneously that they have a right to participate equally in society and that rights are whatever people in power say they are" (49). Comparing Trackton's public discourse to a theatrical performance captures many of its distinctive qualities, but not its race relations with other Piedmont communities.

4. *Performative discourse is especially adept at public making.*

In *Publics and Counterpublics,* Warner uses the phrase "world making" to refer to the capacity of certain discourses "to bring a public into being" (129). It is this world-making capacity that Heath captures in her choice of dramatic imagery. Public stage challenges, for instance, created a crucible in which children developed signature styles such as Darret's "smart-cat strut," capable of calling into being a public space and drawing others into the public stage performance. Dramatic performance—what Warner calls "corporally expressive performances" (147) and what Heath calls "public [. . .] stage performance" (79)—creates a discursive reality that is more dimensional, more compelling, and more provocative than any text could create or any textual analysis could suggest. In choosing theatrical imagery to characterize and interpret Trackton's public qualities, Heath highlights the capacity of Trackton's discourse to make its own world. When it comes to world making, performative practices are far more effective than venerated academic texts or the "straight talk" rewarded in Roadville (294–310), both of which value extended, consistent, and predictable discourse. Heath makes clear that some communities cultivate this world-making capacity better than others.