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Literacy Stewardship at William Smith’s *The Ridge*

In 1908, William Smith college began with nineteen women. Nearly a century later, over a thousand women are matriculated, studying the liberal arts in the same halls as their predecessors. Over this century, a vast and rich culture was nurtured and built upon by year after year of female scholars. One of the greatest artifacts of this history is William Smith’s literary magazine: *The Ridge.* First published in June of 1909, *The Ridge* was commercially available on campus up until the winter of 1969. Over those sixty years, *The Ridge* published four issues a year, two to a semester. It had a staff that included editors and business managers who produced poetry, short stories, essays, editorials, and campus reporting. Readers were encouraged to submit these as well, as long as visual artwork. Over the decades, all of these people served as literacy stewards, a term proposed in Alanna Frost’s essay *Literacy Stewardship: Dakelh Women Composing Culture.* Frost defines and explores the types of literacy relationships that don’t fit into the traditional capitalist model of literacy sponsorship: “*Literacy steward* introduces a theoretical means to describe community members whose rhetorical decisions depend on traditions that are alternative to dominant literacies.” By examining *The Ridge* and its contentsthrough two different periods, 1909 -1919 & 1955 -1965, the traditions and contributions of these stewards can be elucidated. I propose that *The Ridge* originated with a strong yet rather conformist tradition, but by holding true to their founding sentiments, they evolved into an outlet of literacy stewardship that championed female voice and literacy to form a counter narrative to the hegemony of Hobart College.

The first issue of *The Ridge* ran in June of 1909, with Emily Wybrants Smith serving as editor in chief. In her first address to the public, Smith states that *The Ridge* is to “represent the interests, record the doings, and voice the sentiments [of William Smith] (Smith 3).” As the founding editor of *The Ridge,* Smith openly encouraged other students to submit their work and continue the magazine (Ibid). Under her guide, the first year of *The Ridge* featured a variety of short stories and poetry. These were typically of a transcendentalist or romantic works, they heavily featured nature, spirituality, and the soul. There was also, by the third issue of the year, some inroads to reporting and community bulletins. The editorial well was also populated with ads featuring local Geneva businesses, such as dress shops, hat stores, boutiques, etc. Smith understood what her role was, opening her letter “with this, the first issue of *The Ridge,* the students of William Smith College are introduced to the reading public” (Ibid). She gave the students of William Smith a platform, and from there it was ever evolving. It is impossible to know for certain if Smith was aware of what her true role on campus was, but it is also impossible to deny the keystone role that she played for every subsequent William Smith student and their literacy, whether they read *The Ridge* or not. She was battling some serious prejudices, as “in 1906 the average boy was apt to look upon a girls’ college as just a school for future schoolmarms; … a college girl was visualized as earnest, prudish, and homely” (Smith 193). Not just was her defiance a narrative against these stereotypes, but an enlightened choice to steward and foster all the other girls that the discourse was ready to devalue. Smith built *The Ridge* with the ideals of giving every William Smith woman a place of proud display, where their rhetoric, arts, and artifact might sway the misheld beliefs of their era.

Yet even as *The Ridge* gained more and more readership, and the sponsors took on a more conscious role, it still displayed some hegemonic tendencies that were rampant with the activism of the time. A selection from *Rhetoric at the Margins* reveals that “Despite a growing body of scholarship on women’s rhetorical activities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we often still think of the era … in terms of … the silenced author, rather than, say, very real, vocal, and effectual public figures such as Ida Tarbell or Ruth Hale” (Gold 65). Reviewing *The Ridge* over its first ten years, this concept of the silenced author proves true in the editorials, the short stories, and other submissions. A surface level reading of the submissions at the time makes no challenge or disruption to social, gender, or class norms. Indeed, the editorial that served to announce the William Smith prayer preached “docility and diligence in the pursuit of knowledge, responsiveness and reverence in all relationships with teachers” (Brown 2). This is a different direction from Smith’s goals, which were to foster a publication that would present the brightest and best of William Smith to the literary world. Here, the hegemony has subverted the stewards, in spite of their best efforts.

Or so they would have you believe. A critical reading of *The Ridge* from this time reveals the seeds of societal change, sown by the stewards. The spirit of sly resistance remained, built into surface level commentary that on a second reading reveals the gendered subtext. This excerpt from the winter editorial of ’19 is a perfect exhibit of this discourse, suppressed but beautifully stewarded all the same: “We cannot blame Hobart for complaining, when we go over there and annoy everyone who is there for real work by a constant tittering.” (Tremaine 4) The act of reading between the lines very swiftly spells out the author’s real message, one that the various William Smith students no doubt read with firm eyes and nodding heads. Their discourse had to encompass yet camouflage itself from the public and hegemonic discourse of men. Women couldn’t speak openly and challenge the hegemony in an era where the greatest concern was the first World War. Social uprising at this time was synonymous with treason, with suffragists and other women’s right activists facing public accusations of treason and cowardice. Susan B. Anthony, the suffragist whose life laid much of the groundwork for *The Ridge* once remarked “[They will]have no idea of how every single inch of ground that she stands upon has been gained by the hard work of some little handful of women in the past”(Anthony 151). The heirs to this legacy, the stewards made sure that the poetry and prose that populated *The Ridge* in this day had some restraint in their message, but nothing of the sort in their care and cultivation of the very platform.

The editors that followed still encouraged student submissions and patterns of female literacy, both in their direct words and their overall work. Anna Tremaine, the editor of 1919, openly challenged her readers as she wrote “Don’t sit back and say, ‘I can’t do it’” (Tremaine 4). Her engagement with her readership was a direct contribution, and rather altruistic sponsorship of female literacy on the campus that was contradictory to the overarching narrative of that point in the century. Her stewardship was unique and individual to the interactions and literacies that she brought out of her fellow William Smith students, using her bold tone to not intimidate, but invite. Gloria Anzaldúa, the feminist scholar, offers some theory that elucidates Tremaine’s challenge: “We oppress each other trying to out-Chicano each other, vying to be the "real" Chicanas, to speak like Chicanos. There is no one Chicano language just as there is no one Chicano experience” (Anzaldúa 361). Exchange Chicana for female, and it’s more or less the same seed that Tremaine was planting in her stewardship. She was cultivating a discourse that elicited and encouraged female involvement in education, giving them an outlet and print voice of solidarity against the ingrained patriarchal value judgements that people were so quickly willing to assign to educated women of the era.

Nearly fifty years later, the fruits of the early stewards’ efforts were borne in the 55’-65’ editions of *The Ridge*. The women of this time were publishing alongside the Civil Rights movement, the anti-Vietnam demonstrations, and other protests across the nation that gave the hegemony a run for its money such as this country hadn’t yet seen. As such, the stewards of the time didn’t need to hide their struggle, their task was to link it to others and connect them in a greater discourse against the hegemony.

As such, the submissions to *The Ridge* began encompassing a more diverse area like fields of academia where women have historically had accessibility issues. In an essay entitled “Who Stole the Integer Sign?” in the Spring 59’ edition of *The Ridge,* William Smith student Alice Steinberg passionately explores both mathematic problems, and makes a gendered critique of STEM fields. “There is the Westchester Executive, who can swiftly calculate his average golf score for an entire season… but who can’t help his twelve year old son with a simple algebra problem” (Steinberg 29). This critique, and the mathematical ethos that Steinberg establishes within her voice would have never graced *The Ridge* in its initial years. It took decades of women sponsoring literacy and discourse on William Smith campus for the conditions of this piece’s authorship to form.

*The Ridge* wasn’t just pushing against hegemonic forces in STEM, but in the representation of gender in liberal arts as a whole. In the edition of Winter 62’ editor Sandra Makas wrote an editorial titled “Attendance Required.” In it, Makas describes her feeling of isolation and intellectual assault on Hobart campus, connecting them into a larger critique of the university culture of the era. “I am not bored. It is not that Hemmingway and I do not understand each other, or rather, that I do not delight in Hemmingway. I am too much enthralled by his words, by his realistic conversations. I am not bored; I am merely too much a stranger in his prose” (Makas 6). When a student connects most with Hemmingway as a misogynist, and not a grand literary figure, and then goes on to craft a gorgeous piece continuing this theme, it becomes a clear case of sponsors taking a direct and vocal stand. *The Ridge* wasn’t satisfied to just provide an alternative narrative, they sought to battle the very institutions and dialogues that kept them sidelined.

In doing this, the stewards of this era of *The Ridge* fulfilled the founding sentiments that were laid out by their predecessors. With openly critical and alternative discourses taking place in *The Ridge,* the need for stewardship waned. While they certainly deviated from the social values of the first wave of stewards here at William Smith, the final stewards of *The Ridge* maintained the rhetorical traditions and held them fast against a college that was seeking to swallow them and their agency whole. Acting with ‘docility and obedience’ may have been a necessary subterfuge for the initial stewards of *The Ridge,* yet the stewards of 55-65 managed command the same respect from the hegemony, without masking their discourse. In every edition, there was some piece or another that addressed the disparity of the gender norms, academics, or rhetoric’s at the colleges. It wasn’t always a smoking gun, sometimes it was subtle, hidden from the hegemony. Yet through all of their work, the stewards of *The Ridge* managed to ensure that their discourse survived until it thrived, independent of their publication or Hobart College.