Editor’s Note: In the late 1980s, when Caroline Heller was a doctoral candidate at the University of California, Berkeley and working as associate editor of this publication, she did not barricade herself behind ivy-covered walls. Rather, for three years she made the trip across the Bay to San Francisco’s Tenderloin district, a neighborhood populated by, in addition to immigrant families, people who are old, poor, sick, homeless, addicted or otherwise disadvantaged. Here she became part of the Tenderloin Women Writers’ Workshop. Her study of this group led to the book we are excerpting here.

In this section we meet Laraine, a homeless African American woman, who is working with the group on a revision of an essay she intends to publish. Because of space considerations, we have had to make some minor deletions from the original; these are indicated by ellipses.

It’s ten minutes before the workshop is scheduled to begin. Maria Rand enters the front meeting room of the Herold Hotel, home to the workshop since May 1988, and announces that she’s in bad shape. “I’m coming down off a bad haircut!” In mock seriousness, she warns the three women — Clara, Laraine, and me, seated around the mahogany table — “Don’t even look at my hair! This is the worst haircut in the history of haircuts. Even Samson had a better haircut than this! That’s what I get for spending two-fifty!” Clara and I can’t stop laughing.

Now, neither can Maria. Clara in her punk haircut offers to rescue Maria’s hair. “I could do it real short with scissors,” she suggests. “It just needs to be shaped a little more.” But Laraine, a thirty-year-old African American woman who has attended the workshop regularly since her arrival three months ago, seems oblivious to the carrying on. Bent over her spiral notebook, she writes at a furious pace, as if under deadline to get all her thoughts down before others arrive this morning and the workshop officially begins.

Once the entire group has assembled, Laraine volunteers to read first. She’d been rushing to finish the piece because she hopes to turn it into an article for the first issue of Homeless Link, a small news sheet highlighting issues concerning homeless people, that Laraine, with the workshop’s encouragement, is trying to get off the ground. In her deep Maya Angelou-like voice, Laraine begins. “Okay. So this is a first draft. So you can say anything you want! I guess the title is ‘Homeless Women, Don’t Give Up! Get Up!’ Okay, first I also want to say the idea I’m writing on is that police are not responding to homeless women and their problems.” Laraine begins.

Homeless women are a breed of women who have been ignored by the democratic process. We have been silenced because we
are emotionally unequipped to live the American dream. We have our own dream and that is the right to grow as individuals and become what our creator designed our emotional and physical bodies for. We want to create, grow, and share our love rather than follow, suppress our destiny, and live up to the male ego expectations of what they think love ought to be. For this society has turned their backs on us. Many homeless women have given up. Rather than fight being raped, many give in. Why fight five or more men when your screams are ignored and the police only respond when you use a weapon to protect yourself, which is against the law, and the woman is the one who goes to jail? The democratic process has denied us civil, state, and our constitutional rights. We have been bombarded with false prophets—social workers and psychiatrists—who exploit our emotions and force us to take psychotic medications that have put us in a state of “I can’t. Why try? I give up.” Anger. Some great person of wisdom said, “It’s always darkest before the dawn,” and as a woman of experience, I say to you, “Don’t give up. Get up.”

In an interview, poet June Jordan responded to the question “What constitutes relevant writing?” by saying that for her, writing is “just another form of activism” (1991, p. 13). She added that when she herself considers the value of a text, she asks “if it is relevant to survival, relevant to justice.” Then, careful that her literary values not be misconstrued as distantly high-minded, Jordan added, “What I really want is for people to be able to think about what it would be like, what it would mean, to have a nice day” (p. 14).

While in its present form her writing is unfocused and Laraine, homeless herself, relies more on a barrage of incompletely formed political clichés than on her more grounded insight “as a woman of experience.” Jordan would undoubtedly place great value on what Laraine is trying to accomplish. However imperfectly, Laraine is attempting to examine the many forces that prevent homeless women from attaining productive lives, the countless issues that make “having a nice day” for some a rare achievement. Her sense of urgency to complete a draft of her piece before the workshop begins is based on her knowledge from past experience that the conversation her writing will likely spark will assist her, as it has others and her before, to think more clearly about the issues she’s addressing and then to formulate her argument with more grace and certainty.

Here, workshop members help Laraine to discover what she’s trying to get at:

Maria (who had been in New York caring for a sick friend for several weeks and hadn’t yet met Laraine): You’ve been homeless?

Laraine: I’m homeless now.

Maria: I’d like to hear about that.

Anita: When you say you are homeless, what does it actually mean? Where do you sleep at night?

Laraine: I live in a shelter. I’m homeless because I came to San Francisco three months ago and I haven’t found an affordable place to live.

Anita: And this shelter, you have to be out of the shelters during the day?

Laraine: Yes, mmm-huh, and you sleep on the floor, and you...

Clara: It’s horrible! I think you should get into it more. I literally lived on the streets for six months until we got into St. Anthony’s, and God, they treat you like dirt ‘cause you’re on the streets.
Martha (the group's facilitator): Like it's your fault?

Mary: They turn them out before dawn, while it's still dark. It's dangerous!

Maria: Where do they go?

Clara: I had to get out of St. Anthony's at five in the morning. We'd go over to the Civic Center and lay on the bench. I had to get (my daughter) to school. Someone — the guy who waters and cleans — would call the police, and they'd come over and knock me with their sticks, start telling me what a bad mother I am because I don't have a place to live and my daughter's not in school. Ooh!

Marsha: And your daughter went to school all that time?

Clara: No, she missed quite a bit. She was too tired and all. You know how the diet is. She was sick. She was anemic. She had walking pneumonia. Oh, that was a real circus!

Martha: I understand that you don't want to, but what you might do is maybe include a few short stories like Clara's story. "Here's an example of somebody who is on the streets. It is not their fault. They were not able to afford housing ..."

Maria: The issue is getting someone housing!

Martha: Right, be real clear that this is it. I also think that it's a good idea to include experiences from people. You don't have to say names. You can say — for example, the thing with the rape was a real good point.

Laraine: So you understood it?

Martha: Oh, yeah, that was the clearest thing. ...

Laraine: I was trying to say that we have no rights. We're homeless because we have no places and they want to send you to these doctors in order to get into a place and then you have to go to therapy. I mean, you're there because you have no place to live.

Mary: I think you should actually put that up front, right in the beginning. The problem for the homeless is that they have no place to live. It's not because they're crazy. It's not!

Marsha: There was a great article in the Tenderloin Times about that. It took thirty years to find out that poor people need money! (Many in the group, including Laraine and Clara, break into laughter.)

Mary: Oh, I love that!

Marsha: We hope it doesn't take another thirty years to find out that homeless people need housing! (Again, much laughter—Marsha, Clara, Laraine, Mary, and Maria are in stitches.)

Maria (still laughing): We ain't nuts. We're homeless!

Marsha: It's because you have to put down eight hundred or a thousand dollars on your first apartment.

Maria: But also, this is election time, ladies. It's a good time to take advantage. And if a bunch of us get together and march to City Hall with signs, the TV guys will be down there because news is getting dull. No one's been murdered lately!

Laraine: That's already in the works, and if you guys would like to join us as a local group.

Maria: I'll join you.

Mary: We'll join you. I will. Let us know when it is.

Already, the concrete condition of being homeless — what living in a shelter or on the streets actually means as a daily experience — is brought home to the women in the group who hadn't experienced these conditions in their own lives. Both Mary and Maria move from referring to "them" in the questions they asked Laraine about homeless people to exhibiting the sense of solidarity evinced by the comment Maria — who isn't homeless — makes, "We're not crazy. We're homeless!" ...

(Marsha, who has long battled depression and has educated herself in the pharmacology of
treat it, steers the discussion to Laraine's text, in which she uses the term "psychotic" to describe medications.)

Laraine: It makes people psychotic! You get a person who has a problem and is depressed and then they put him on this medicine and they start hearing voices. I think I meant it that way. I meant psychotic.

Martha: What you might want to say is medicine that makes people feel crazy.

Laraine: That's exactly why you got a lot of people out there who can't take care of themselves. It's because of that medicine!

Martha talks about her own experiences with psychotropic medications, drugs that she feels have helped her with her own depression. The women discuss the difference between seeking assistance and having medications imposed on one, often as a poor substitute for economic and social assistance. Anita asks for clarification of Laraine's reference to "male ego expectations," and Mary asks her to read that part again. Laraine does so and suddenly realizes from rereading her draft that she isn't clear about her point, either.

Laraine (writing comments in the margin of her binder): Well, I thought I was attacking the American dream.

Martha: You mean male ego as in how men handle themselves? How men are in the world? How men treat women? Is that what you mean, Laraine?

Laraine: I was saying that the American dream is: "I have to get married or I have to live up to your expectations of what you think a woman is." And we don't want that American dream. We're not strong enough to deal with that.

Mary: That's good. What you just said there actually makes it clear.

Carolyne: You could expand that.

Nikki: When you say emotionally unequipped, it feels like a put-down. I forgot what line came next, but I just don't think that it fits for the article for women to be described with any kind of deficit, even if it's in somebody else's eyes.

Mary: Read it again, Laraine. (Laraine reads her piece again.)

Mary: What you mean is that other people think that homeless people are unequipped?

Laraine: I was saying that we are not emotionally equipped to live a life that is not designed for us to live. Did you understand?

Nikki: I understood that.

Mary: I understand that you're saying it wasn't even a choice. It's kind of like, how did I get to this world when I'm supposed to be this kind of person and I don't feel like I want to be this kind of person?

Laraine discusses her desire to explain to people through the article that some women on the streets are, in fact, particularly fragile and would find it difficult to lead what might commonly be considered normal lives. Marsha is still uncomfortable. "But that's just what they want to hear! They want to hear that we're all emotionally unequipped."

Laraine: Mmm-hmm. I know!

Marsha: Some big guy up top — captain of the police — is gonna say, "Aha! She said it!

Laraine: Okay, thank you. I got to be more clear.

Mary: Yeah, because what we want to do is, we want the powers that be out there to listen, not just to turn off because they have their own ideas.

Laraine: Right.

Maria: Yeah, what I would like is the myths stop right there in your poem! Stop it! (Maria, suddenly and uncharacteristically, begins to cry, and then chokes back her tears with laughter. Mary puts her hand on Maria's.)

Laraine (looking at Maria): When I said that word, I know, it got me, too. But that's why I read it, because I just wrote it and I thought, well, I'll get some more ideas on it.

Martha: Once again, that's the really good thing about reading a draft like this, because then you start to talk about your ideas, and what you just said there was very clear.

Finally, the "American dream" is analyzed from a multigenerational perspective, with particular attention given to how this dream, as a cultural imperative, affects
those who imagine different goals or require different life circumstances than they anticipate are culturally acceptable or available.

Marjorie, a shy woman 30 years Laraine’s senior, who has lived as a widow in the Tenderloin for 30 years, had been jotting down notes throughout the discussion but hadn’t yet spoken.

**Marjorie:** Could I ask a question? Would you give me your definition of the American dream? I realize the definition has changed over the years. What is your definition?

**Laraine:** The American dream would be, I get married and ... (She pauses.) I fulfill my husband’s desires rather than being myself.

**Marsha:** That’s the American dream?

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**See, that’s the point I was trying to make!** The American dream doesn’t fit everybody. A lot of those people, they’re not as strong as other people, but it shouldn’t be held against them because they’re not as strong. There’s nothing wrong with not being emotionally equipped.

**Laraine:** See, that’s the point I was trying to make! The American dream doesn’t fit everybody. A lot of those people, they’re not as strong as other people, but it shouldn’t be held against them because they’re not as strong. There’s nothing wrong with not being emotionally equipped.

**Anita:** No, I see that point. ...

**Carolyn:** (co-facilitating this session with Martha) You know, I think you could do a whole paragraph on what the American dream is ... There are a lot of parts to this. Is cleanliness one? Are jobs? Are male-female relationships, or how you do those roles? Is that part of it?

**Martha:** You’re using it very ironically, Laraine. You don’t believe in the American dream. It hasn’t worked for you. This piece got people really talking. It’s going to be a good article. Really good ideas.

**Carolyn:** Will you bring it right back so we can see how it progresses?

**Laraine:** Okay.

**Martha:** We’ll see it published.

It’s been the kind of exhilarating conversation that would likely have lasted the full two hours of the workshop’s time had others in the group not brought in work to be critiqued today. Because of the workshop’s location, its limited audience, and the participants’ disinclination to create an opposition between the affective and the intellectual, the discussion certainly hasn’t been the Lehrer News Hour brand of social analysis—“today’s group of experts diagnose our world.”

But like the spirited and opinionated conversants who offer social commentary on televised national news discussions, the women of the workshop have their own deeply felt expertise and here exercise critical commentary and social analysis over an array of complicated issues affecting their own lives. And they do so with an intellectual hunger and curiosity that is rarely attributed to people living in the circumstances under scrutiny here.

For such individuals, policymakers are in the habit of creating narrowly conceived functional definitions of literacy and literacy programs that fit Marjorie’s description of how our society tends to consider the poor and homeless. (For excellent critiques of literacy programs, particularly for poor women, see Brodkey, 1986; Horsman, 1990; Bee, 1993; Hull, 1993.) Such programs are created to offer people living in tenuous circumstances a second chance at some version of the American dream. But they are programs that often fail to honor the high intelligence, feistiness, and social needs of individuals like Laraine, Clara, and others in the workshop, each of whom feels both well-earned disappointment and well-reasoned reluctance either to embrace or to be embraced by an American dream antithetical...
to her own experiences and aspirations...

After the workshop discussion, Laraine decided to turn her article into a poem, which she brought to the group the following week, and which appeared in the inaugural issue of *Homeless Link* in October 1988. Her piece is powerfully improved in clarity and focus.

My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. He is trampling on the police department where harassment of the homeless is adored. He has loosed his power of justice on the brutalizers of the poor. Our God is making noise. Glory, glory, Lord of Justice Glory, glory, Lord of Protection Glory, glory, Lord of Justice Your will is being done.

In the streets of San Francisco Where the homeless cannot sleep Where the poor is arrested Just for standing on the street The women are not protected; They are abused and disrespected. Lord, let your will be done.

The discussion that followed Laraine’s drafted poem was illustrative of many others inspired by workshop members’ written texts—texts that then served as fulcrums for wide-ranging discussions and explorations. Each such discussion partook, in its own way, of what Jerome Bruner, as a description of the finest form of education, calls “the spirit of a forum” (1986, p. 123), where participants became critical and articulate about their own lives and about far-reaching subject matter. Again, through these explorations, distances between participants diminished as stories were told, knowledge was acquired, and forces that manipulated individual lives were analyzed and sometimes acted upon.

**References**


Marjorie, always one of the quieter workshop participants, was asked to read “Ode to Pigeons” for comic relief at many public readings.

I really do like pigeons— They help keep the streets clean. Although I’ve never seen them move out a wino, they did a good job on the half-a pizza on the sidewalk.

I really do like pigeons— They sleep in my bedroom windowsill, They get into fights and whack on the glass And scare the hell out of me and the cat, And I can’t open the window because they would fall in. They sit on the bathroom sill and they get into fights and whack on the glass and scare the hell out of me and the cat and I can’t open the window because out there are two baby pigeons and four dead eggs.

I really do like pigeons— They picked the windowsill as the ideal maternity ward and eight different pigeons laid 32 eggs and raised 26 kids and they all want to live on the sill and I opened the window and the screen was loose and one morning I had 26 pigeons in my kitchen having breakfast and getting into fights and the cat fainted. In the living room I can open my window because they don’t live on the sill; they live over the door to the street and when I go out, they drop stuff on my head. I really do like pigeons—but I wish they’d move next door.

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