Everyday Curators: Collecting as Literate Activity

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In Mary Louise Pratt’s oft-cited essay, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” she argues that her son Sam’s extracurricular hobby as a baseball card collector taught him about economics, racism, and American history, constituting literate activity that enabled him to hold his own in conversations with adults. Sam was also playing baseball at the time in Little League. While recognizing baseball’s particularly “masculine ethos,” Pratt celebrates her son’s interest. School, Pratt adds, taught him “nothing remotely as meaningful to do” (33). Composition scholars have similarly noted that current college students are more engaged with self-sponsored activity such as Sam’s baseball-card collecting than reading and writing for school. David Jolliffe and Allison Harl suggest, for example, that faculty members “create curriculums, co-curriculums, and extra-curriculums that invite students to engage in their reading and to connect texts that they read to their lives, their worlds and other texts” (613). In this article I take the positive view that our tasks as educators and human beings might not be to merely change what we do, but to re-see it. I think we should see ourselves most broadly as collectors, somewhat like Sam, who thus already engage in activities that can link personal and academic identities and practices, if over the long haul.

More emphasis on collecting as literate activity can also teach students to improve their thinking about primary sources and how selves, texts, and artifacts are constructed by culture. Collecting, annotating, and reflecting on collections can finally link the school activity Pratt chastises with the self-sponsored collecting activity she celebrates. To further these assertions, I analyze a variety of collections, including my own and those of my students. By sharing my own story of collecting along with my students’ stories of collecting, I model how our similar enterprises and corresponding texts become yet another collection, a collection that undercuts assumed binaries and boundaries, such as those between teachers and students as well as between the personal and the scholarly. Throughout the article, I therefore “curate” a new collection that reflects a certain place and time. As Bruno Latour puts it, “It is the sorting [of things] that makes the time” (76). Although these stories of collections may seem disparate, each of them situates human beings as students and products of culture, a culture that invariably conflates public and private lives.
Collecting in Context

My burgeoning interest in the collecting process began when perusing the materials of the late Janette Miller, whose texts eventually became the topic of my Ph.D. dissertation. Born in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula in 1879, this middle-class, white woman died in 1969 on the mountainous plateaus of Angola after a lifetime career as a missionary. During her long life, she amassed a variety of literate materials—several diaries, at least one scrapbook, personal correspondence, magazine articles, photographs, paintings, and poems. Many of these materials, both print and multi-modal, ended up in the archives at the University of Michigan’s Bentley Historical Library, where I discovered them. Miller’s collection of literacy materials are rich but limited and do not include the many texts she reportedly wrote and circulated in Africa, including those she wrote in the Angolan language, Umbundu.

I eventually organized my analysis around the main idea that Miller came of age during a profound transformation in American culture after World War I, when secular ideals usurped a largely Christian authority that had dictated a co-mingling of church and school in the nineteenth-century world of Miller’s childhood. Miller rejected this transformed culture, living out her Christian identity in a remote African community she largely directed herself—and that once the aforementioned secular ideals made female-administered missionary work no longer mainstream or fashionable.

When analyzing the artifacts kept in the Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania home, (now turned museum), of the late Christian Sanderson, Teresa Barnett theorizes how an individual’s collections can reflect his or her development of both personal as well as national identities, as does Miller’s. Barnett describes Christian Sanderson, a sometimes teacher and educator in his community during his long life, as “[a] man with very little social or economic power” who was nevertheless “involved in myriad ways in public life and, on a local level at least, served as a transmitter of a national historical discourse that was very much a part of early twentieth-century Americans’ understanding of themselves” (225). Sanderson’s life as a collector, like Miller’s life as a collector, teaches how the lives of ordinary individuals intersect with historical movements and ideas. When we engage in collecting, or in the analysis of collections, we invariably see how all lives are intertwined with a variety of so-called disciplines. For example, Sanderson’s collection contains “[a] counting exercise done by his class when the school bell tolled for Woodrow Wilson’s death,” which symbolizes Sanderson’s involvement with national discourse and mourning rituals. This object can be compared with a more personal relic, symbolizing mourning, that he kept to remember his deceased mother—“the string from the violin he played at [her] funeral” (233). Both of these objects show the intersection between Sanderson’s...
personal and public identities as an American citizen and son. Of course, not all collections are equal. Some collections are undertaken consciously for an overt and culturally clear purpose—as with arranging photos in a photo album to tell a story, to remember, and to serve as a complement to other activity—photography. Other collections might be more or less haphazard, undertaken beneath our level of awareness, as with a junk drawer or even an office bulletin board.

I liken my experience of interacting with Miller’s collection to Sam’s baseball-card collecting practice and also consider the parallels between the rewards of Sam’s activities with those experienced by a man such as Sanderson over a lifetime. Sanderson no doubt gained some esteem when seeing how his collection intersected with history making, both inside and outside of his local community. Likewise, when making meaning out of Miller’s life—studying and engaging with her texts: I began to see how individuals’ discourses reflect their engagement with local as well as national events, just as a baseball card collector might see how the endeavors of a home team compare with other teams across the country and across time. Moreover, the idea of life as interdisciplinary was illustrated to me by the many disciplines I had to mine in order to understand Miller’s texts—American history, feminist theory, Christianity, postcolonial studies, African Studies, diary studies, photography studies, quilt studies, and, of course, literacy studies.

Philosopher Kathleen Wider makes a similar observation when reflecting on the process of researching the life of her grandmother, August Wider, a renowned speaker of art history: “[T]o understand a life one must understand the social and political context within which it’s lived, the familial history of the person as far backward and forward as possible, the dreams and accomplishments of the person, the other lives that connected and supported the life examined and so much more.” She concludes that, ultimately, “it is a source of comfort to know that one belongs to more than oneself even in one’s own self-identity and beyond the confines of one’s lifespan. We are alone neither here nor in the grave” (72). Wider’s observation that learning about and studying a deceased individual’s collections, as well as the other texts that put these items in context, suggests that by living our lives, we are also living history. Our everyday interactions with events and places will someday be historical fodder to our descendants and to future generations, but, as museum studies scholar Thomas Schlereth asserts, “[b]oth history texts and history museums . . . subtly [suggest] that historical reality is found between the covers of a book or within the glass cases of an exhibition” (335). History-making as collecting, a process, challenges the notion of learning as static—or “under glass.” When collecting and annotating collections, we can see how history is made up of moving agents that might be trapped under glass—people, their stuff, and the shifting contexts that give them meaning. Furthermore, studying texts and related objects as part of a collection showcases what Peter Medway calls “fuzzy genres.” That is, a text produced for one context may later have a broader or different function when it is
reused or repurposed and becomes a mnemonic artifact (12). My own collection of literate materials, which I will discuss next, also reinforces the main idea I have introduced thus far: collecting is a lifetime, identity-forming process that leads to new collections through annotation and can connect school, personal, and even professional identities.

**Everyday Curators**

My interest in collections came to a head a few years ago after I returned to the environment of my youth, the Detroit area, after being gone for sixteen years. After applying for seventy academic jobs across the country, I ended up getting a job at the University of Michigan-Dearborn located between the town where I grew up and the town where I went to college. I was home on every front. Returning to a place after quite a bit of time away led me to remember many people and events I likely would have forgotten entirely had I not moved back. My memory was also enhanced because I was now able to access some of the materials I left behind in a “shrine” at my parents' home: two shelves of a cabinet with all of my papers from grade school to college.

Once I bought a house, my parents were all too happy to give me memorabilia from my shrine, along with a trunk to put it in. When gaining access to these new materials from my shrine, I was amused and entertained to discover more memories breathing through them. My parents put the shrine into a single trunk—the trunk my mother once used for her own memorabilia and that she took to the Peace Corps when she was in her twenties. The fact that the items from my shrine fit perfectly into this heirloom resonates with Latour’s notion that *things* have history as well as agency, as well as Medway’s observation that a genre’s efficacy and purpose can transform over time and when met with new contexts.

When I perused items from the shrine, now in the trunk, the most compelling souvenirs were those I had dismissed, texts about events I had entirely forgotten. In my senior year of high school, in addition to writing in my diary, I summed up the months on the back of the pieces of a big calendar. I had never re-read this writing until my recent perusal of the shrine items because this writing had not attracted me. It seemed kind of weird that I wrote on the back of the calendar pieces, and maybe I was hesitant to revisit more adolescent angst on top of what I read in my diary texts. I had been a reporter for the school newspaper, the *North Pointe*, my senior year. According to the “calendar diary,” one day the advisor for the paper, Mr. Amberg, pulled me into the hallway and said I was the best writer on the paper and that I ought to write a column like “Ramblings of Flem,” written by Dave Fleming, who had graduated the year before. In Dave’s column, he discussed his trials as a varsity athlete and shared his beefs with the school administration’s policies. His column came out every Friday. Dave was also a kind of love interest/personal nemesis of mine. I never wrote a column, I remembered then, worried that
people would think I was trying to be “like Dave.” I also read about a time when my friends Faye, Colleen, Lisa, and I sat up all night talking on the beach. After this talk, I decided that I could “always go to them” with something really tough. I ended up writing a poem about this night that was published in the high school literary magazine, *Eclectics*. It was cool to reread about these insights because Faye and Lisa are my friends again now that I have moved home. They live near me now. It also seemed like my instinct to sum up the month on the calendar pieces was like a column for myself. Perhaps I was not ready to “go live” with the things that were important to me—like friendship—in the newspaper. Or, I didn’t know how to go about making my interests public or interesting to others as Dave had been able to.

I ascertain a local and historically situated story of gender in this collection—I backed down from a public identity as a writer even though such had been modeled for me by Dave. But he was a boy. The artifacts in this collection also embody intersections between school-sponsored literacies (writing for the school newspaper) and self-sponsored literacies (when school becomes a topic for diary texts). The collection therefore foregrounds a discovery forwarded by Kevin Roozen in a recently published case study about a college student, Angela, which traces the intersection between Angela’s processes as a writer of a private journal and her work as a Communication major. As Roozen argues, “[D]iaries, personal journals, and scrapbooks have long been placed at a considerable remove from persons’ academic writing” (12), but Angela’s experience and her private and school artifacts suggest otherwise. My collection, like Angela’s public and private documents, hints at the relationship between self-sponsored literate practices—diary writing and poetry writing, diary writing and newspaper column writing—as well as to more concrete connections between self-sponsored and school-sponsored literacies. I wrote about an academic event, talking to Mr. Amberg, in the private texts. These documents in my collections also demonstrate the concept of “fuzzy genres.” Years later when I reread them, the calendar diaries continued to fulfill one of their larger purposes; they helped me to work out and think about issues of my identity as part of a larger habit of diary keeping. They also had a second function, serving as mnemonic artifacts, reminding me of a relatively significant event that I had forgotten about entirely—being asked to write a newspaper column like Dave’s, a column that was original and well-liked. Moreover, these items encourage my continued identity as a writer, and my ongoing “competition” with Dave. Dave is now a sports writer and has written two books. I remain on his heels. He is a role model for me even in his physical absence, as he was during my senior year of high school.

**The Curator of Communities**

My recently honed role as curator of my childhood literate materials came in handy in the summer of 2005 when I got in touch with a childhood friend, Amy, who moved away from our block in suburban Detroit to Denver when we were eleven.
In an email she sent to many friends and family, she implied that she was going through a break-up, which motivated me to call her. We hadn’t talked in twenty years. After talking to her, I went through some of my memorabilia to find letters she wrote me from Colorado over the years. There were only a few letters, but they covered a lot of ground, documenting Amy’s life from sixth grade through college. I recalled reading these letters years earlier and, when on the phone with Amy, had promised to send them to her because she lost a lot of her own memorabilia during her family’s frequent moves. In one of the letters Amy wrote me when we were both about twelve, she said she wanted a puppy for Christmas, but her mother said no. Amy had no memory of this conversation with her mother, but found it funny since she now owns four dogs. Hence, items in my collection served as mnemonic artifacts for Amy as well, suggesting that when we collect for ourselves, we collect for others who share our culture, like Sanderson whose museum chronicles not only his personal history, but the history of his community and the nation.

While looking through these letters from Amy, I also found an old school assignment for a psychology class in my sophomore year of high school: a list of “twenty things I want to do for pleasure before I die.” This discovery further suggests more fluid boundaries between private and public texts as well as between self-sponsored and school literacies. It was interesting to see also that I more or less had done at least ten of the things on the list—which included becoming a writer, going to college at the University of Michigan, and attending graduate school in Chicago. As with Amy’s conversation with her mother, and my conversation with Mr. Amberg, I have no memory of completing the assignment. But I do remember that our teacher, Mr. Keeney, never read our homework, which he called “word credits.” Rather, we’d put our assignment at the edge of our desks, and if we had our name and the date properly written on the homework, he’d give it a big stamp, “Credit.”

I do have a memory of a very sensitive day I was having—after all, I was sixteen—when Mr. Keeney did not stamp my work “Credit” because it hadn’t the proper date on it or something. I cried openly, and he sent me in the hallway where we had a tense exchange which resulted in Mr. Keeney reluctantly, if not unkindly, stamping the word “Credit,” and with a bit of drama in front of the class (he, obviously, was a behaviorist). After discovering this item buried for twenty-two years, I put it on my refrigerator, updated it, and had my parents and Amy write their list about what they wanted to do before they die. This activity had context for Amy, who had just moved to a new city and was starting her life over again to some extent. Mr. Keeney, the alleged audience for the original assignment, never touched it. It’s even possible that this was the word credit I almost didn’t get credit for. When it comes right down do it, even though he created the assignment, Mr. Keeney’s response didn’t matter at all. The item, like Amy’s letters, had a greater destiny. Decades later, both Amy’s letters and the word credit had persuasive power and arguably profound meaning. They aligned articulated goals with manifested destinies. As one of my students, Patty, whom I’ll quote again later, has said,
“Identity doesn’t happen in a vacuum. Our choices are rooted in thought.” Writing and reflecting on this writing can be “proof” that we live lives more fulfilling than we know. This writing and reflection can also get us on track, even back in touch with our past selves and perhaps with people who affirmed these past selves—as was the case with getting in touch with Amy during the summer of 2005 and also rereading the calendar diaries.

Again, these events further emphasize intersections between personal literacies and school literacies when artifacts from each “camp” are housed in one collection. They show furthermore how ordinary texts, even texts for school collected only somewhat consciously, can have a profound function, their contexts limitless. As Mikhail Bakhtin might argue about the efficacy of texts over time, “There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future)” (73). Medway similarly critiques the assumption that a text can “be immediately communicative” because it “rests on an over simplistic understanding of social action” (143). The 1984 word credit assignment was not “immediately communicative.” Its arguably more important meaning and audience would not be created for twenty years when the text inspired explicit “social action”: discussion about the concept of twenty things you might do before you die and the production of more lists about such, and by people a bit closer to the grave who could better look backwards and forwards. The story of the word credit can illustrate how the audience and purpose of texts produced for school can transcend the boundaries of a classroom, when these texts are repurposed as mnemonic artifacts and sources for further text production.

The Personal Literacy Inventory

These discoveries from my own archives motivated me to create an assignment for my students asking them to peruse and make meaning from their own collections. I call the assignment the personal literacy inventory. This activity is particularly possible at a school like mine, a commuter college. Many students live at home, or close to home, and therefore have access to childhood memorabilia.

I have most recently introduced the concept of collecting as literate activity first by asking students to think about their personal music collections, assuming that all students would have some type of relationship with music, and because not every student has a collection of saved schoolwork. While doing so, we read two published essays about music by two very different “curators.” In his essay, baby boomer John Rosenthal “annotates” his personal 1950s record collection, at first nostalgically and then critically, when he notices how the songs of his boyhood day were more saccharine than he had remembered and also encouraged unrealistic scripts about romance. He asks himself if “the music that introduced [him] to American popular culture . . . offered him a place to hide from more demanding claims of self” (19). His analysis, like the story of Sanderson’s collection, also
“We’d put our assignment at the edge of our desks, and if we had our name and the date properly written on the homework, he’d give it a big stamp, ‘Credit.’” (Above)

“One of my student’s, Henry’s, personal literacy inventory, an analysis of a comic book, demonstrates how the annotation of a personal collection can be mnemonic and can also help students better recognize how their choices are constructed by culture.” (Right)
shows readers the intersection between personal and cultural identities. Rosenthal’s actions and worldview as a boy and teenager were influenced by the music he listened to, the scripts he was assigned. Writer and scholar Paul Lauter is even more incredulous about his relationship with cultural scripts when discovering his post-World War II junior high songbook, a notebook of popular songs that students illustrated. These artifacts show Lauter how identities were prescribed to him by dominant American culture. He was inevitably complicit in the construction and distribution of these identities when engaging with songs about war, manliness, and Christianity, the last being ironic considering that Lauter is Jewish. Lauter’s discovery is yet one more example of “fuzzy genres,” when schoolwork acts as a mnemonic artifact, and in this case embodies a different kind of lesson about culture than Lauter’s junior high teacher planned fifty years ago. Composition scholar Morris Young makes a similar observation about cultural scripts and his identity as an Asian American when analyzing the context of items in his personal collection, including the records about his progress with a speech pathologist, his first library card, and items he produced in preschool. For Young, these artifacts represent prescribed cultural scripts that align literacy with economic mobility and American citizenship but in tension with the “linguistic discrimination” faced by his minority parents in Hawaii (23).

After reading these essays about Rosenthal and Lauter’s collections, students are better equipped to look “critically” at their own music collections, and similar materials, to see how their choices have been constructed by culture, particularly during their pre-teen years. Many girls, for example, write with horror about their former “boy band” obsessions, evidenced by artifacts in their home music collections. Lauter’s piece also helps students consider how their schoolwork is a kind of relic from which they can garner perspective about culture and prescribed dominant values. Most of all, these articles invite students to consider themselves as collectors who own and produce primary sources that can be “fodder” for scholarly analysis. Hence, curators are born.

**Student Examples: The Personal Literacy Inventory**

One of my student’s, Henry’s, personal literacy inventory—an analysis of a comic book—demonstrates how the annotation of a personal collection can be mnemonic and can also help students better recognize how their choices are constructed by culture. Henry produced the comic book outside of school when he was nine. Reflecting on its production reminded him that reading and producing comic books was not a valued literate endeavor in his scholastic past, a trend he aimed to buck when an educator himself in the future. Henry had fond memories of producing this book and was surprised, both pleasantly and otherwise, when revisiting the text. As he describes the experience, “I picked up the stack of nine yellowed pages and nostalgia instantly set in . . . I remembered the story as being great. I
was afraid, even at my age that the story would not live up to how I remembered it. Unfortunately I was right.” For one, he named his character the “Inihelator,” with an I instead of an A. He had sounded out the word phonetically. He recalled the comic as penned by the hand of original genius, but in revisiting it saw that his plot and character development relied on the tropes of common comic heroes. For example, his Inihelator is a lawyer as is the Marvel comic hero, Daredevil. Inihelator’s costume is also conventional in design and color. The plot jumps around, the villain is poorly developed, and, as Henry said, “the whole seven-page story is essentially one huge paragraph. Punctuation is present, but often incorrect.”

Despite its flaws, Henry writes:

I’m proud of Inihelator. At the age of nine, I created a hero, a story, and something that makes me smile whenever I think about it. My main issue with the story is that it remains unfinished. What did I want to write after the final sentence? How was the story going to end? Was the story going to end? What was nine-year-old [Henry’s] main goal? I guess I’ll never know my story would have led. Maybe that’s okay. Maybe that leaves a starting point for me to continue the (albeit short) legacy of the Inihelator. Maybe I’ll be able to collaborate with my nine-year-old self in order to further Inihelator. Someday, when the time is right and the world needs a new hero, a new savior, a new champion, the Inihelator will be reborn.

Just as Henry was reminded of his passion for comic books when a young boy, another student, Wendy, revisited her deep and long interest in language when annotating her collection of schoolwork and its gem: a book of nouns she wrote for a school assignment in third grade. As a current Linguistics major, she regarded this discovery of the noun book in her collection as both humorous and prophetic. She describes the experience:

One of the things that struck me in looking through my mom's folder of my childhood is my obvious interest in language. I distinctly remember making my “Nouns” book and being very careful not to confuse the different types of nouns there are. I took a concerted interest in seeing to it that each type was represented and identified in its own right. I also remember I wanted very badly to make my “word book” make sense. I wanted each page to have a complete sentence instead of just words. It didn’t feel right to me to have words in random order. These assignments probably seemed so trivial in third grade when I was doing them, but looking at them now with my adult eyes, I can see how important they were. I suppose, then, it’s not surprising that I now work as a tutor and proofreader for students of English as a second language making sure that their words are all in the right order and make sense.

As I got through my mother's saved memories of my childhood, I realize that saving my schoolwork is very important. I see pieces of my past that are very directly linked to my present. It's as if those ties had become

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so familiar and so understood that they just faded into the background. Looking through them now has helped bring them back to the foreground, has painted them in bright colors again.

Wendy’s observation that her earlier choices as a writer foreshadowed or even reflect her contemporary identities parallel Mark Leone and Barbara J. Little’s claims about museum collections: “Making connections among artifacts and between our genealogies and artifacts, therefore, is one way of exposing origins and laying claim to history” (370). Indeed, Wendy was able to “make claims with history,” her own history, by perusing previous schoolwork. Wendy’s analysis of her noun book in context with her earlier and persisting interest in language echoes Young’s observation about his similar early interest in language, which he reflects upon when undertaking his own type of personal literacy inventory. As Young puts it, “As I reflect back on my life it is not surprising that some of my most vivid memories of my childhood are about language” (20). For Wendy and Young, saved items are material sources that document their experience with school and literacy, draw attention to their persistent aptitudes, and put their career choices into a greater context.

Another one of my students, Patty, had a similar experience to Wendy when conducting a personal literacy inventory. Patty made a collage of some writing she did for school and linked the texts with artifacts to represent the phenomenon that she had achieved some of the goals that she had put in writing years earlier. Ten years prior, she had written an informal paper for school that outlined her goals to be a teacher. These goals are still relevant as she pursues a teaching certificate in college. Of this discovery, she said, “You are the same person no matter. I’m still interested in all stuff that I totally forgot about. Identity is a bit more constant [than we might think it is].” In Patty’s collections, she also found a journal entry she wrote for an assignment in school about her choice “to stay home and do homework instead of playing laser tag.” Later she found a receipt from playing laser tag. Her artifact collection showed her the constancy of her values. The artifacts themselves, the journal entry and the laser tag receipt, evidence further how school and non-school activities can be fused enterprises for identity formation. These items also became mnemonic artifacts for her to consider the events that shaped her identity and the practices that encouraged her and allowed her to build and maintain this identity.

The writing she kept was “a concrete example of identity,” Patty says, adding, we “don’t see our ‘selves’” every day. We might not “view ourselves as focused or motivated, always knowing what to do.” Rosenthal notes how dominant values of his 1950s American boyhood were embodied in the artifacts he perused in his record collection, which in hindsight felt constricting, and he felt some ambivalence about his collection, as does Young when thinking critically about literacy as assimilation. For Patty,
revisiting artifacts that she kept in her collections affirmed her goals and assured her that she was on the right track, or at least a thoughtful one. Just as my discovery of the word credit assignment led to the creation of a new collection—more lists—analyzing mnemonic artifacts also inspired Patty to create another collection, a collage of materials arranged to make explicit the links between her values and activities that were embodied in these artifacts. While young students like Henry, Patty, and Wendy obviously lack the long view afforded to scholars who study collections of the deceased or of older adults with more life experience, they can still benefit from critical distance as a tool, can see how they are products of culture, can “annotate” their materials with insights, and may use their reflections about their pasts to shape their futures.

The documents of one of my historical subjects, Enoch Price, who came of age years ago in the late nineteenth century as he completed law school at the University of Michigan and embarked on his legal career, also illustrates the potential of the “fuzzy genre,” when texts become mnemonic artifacts over time. While Rosenthal, Lauter, and Young, as well as Henry, Wendy, Patty, and myself, have used personal artifacts to remember and look back on lived lives, Price used writing to help him predict the future. The year before he entered law school, in 1889, Price actually wrote himself a memorandum outlining his goals for the next five years and put it in an envelope to be opened after these five years had past. He wrote, “Today I am 25 years old. Have been thinking much the past few days of what my past life has been and what the future may be. Will write a little prophecy of the coming five years. I believe in peering into the future by nucleus of self-study.” He classified “for brevity’s sake” the categories of life he knew would fluctuate or he hoped to improve upon: physical, religious, social, professional, and geographical. Predicting his future performance in the social category for the upcoming year, 1890, he had written “not brilliant—too much in love. Propose (?).” Price was pretty good at this fortunetelling. Nearly a year later, he proposed to his former college friend, ongoing love interest, and longtime pen pal, Louise. Geographically he guessed that he’d be “in the office of a good attorney in a thriving town of 40,000 west of Mississippi” by the end of 1892. Upon graduating from law school in 1891, Price actually moved to Chicago, began work as a clerk, and eventually began his own practice shortly before he got married. So this young man did go west, just not as far as he thought he would. Price also came from a family obsessed with memorial. He and his brothers kept diaries, saved letters, calling cards, and related memorabilia, and worked together to write a family history. Price’s father, an Ohio apple farmer who also ran a literary society, kept a diary for fifty years. Perhaps as a diarist Price learned that a present state of mind, if jotted down, can predict a future reality. Or, as Patty might put it, “Identity doesn’t happen in a vacuum. Our choices are rooted in thought.”
Conclusion

Henry writes about the possibility of collaborating with his nine-year-old self. He arguably is collaborating already with this self when talking back and forth with his artifact, the comic book. The same could be said of my friend Amy revisiting her love of dogs, of Wendy revisiting her love of language, of Patty revisiting her goals of being a teacher and finding balance between work and play, and of Enoch Price hoping to touch the future during a transitional period of his life. Collections as literate activity can link us to our past as well as to our future. Henry’s comic and Wendy’s noun book, for example, helped them see the genesis of their current values.

Collecting can also break down a strict distinction between production and consumption as literate activity when these artifacts act as mnemonics, such as Patty’s laser tag receipt and the many items in Sanderson’s collection. Curators of artifacts they have previously consumed become producers when they interpret artifacts in their collections and when these artifacts are used to develop narratives about selves and culture. Thomas Rickert and Michael Salvo associate this kind of reuse and “repackaging (of) content” with the “prosumer,” a role that breaks down “the formerly separate categories of consumer and producer” (298). When remixing and repurposing items in a collection for a new end, such as remembering or storytelling, curators of collections like the ones described in this article act as “prosumers” of the items they analyze and arrange.

These samples of collecting as a literate activity also suggest a more fluid boundary than we often acknowledge between private and public texts, between texts produced for a school, like mine, Wendy’s, and Patty’s, and texts produced at home, like Henry’s. When all texts become, for whatever reasons, artifacts in personal collections, their original context as private or public is often irrelevant. Just like Henry’s Inihelator, they are waiting always to be reborn when rediscovered, reread, and repurposed. As Bakhtin might observe, “[E]very meaning will have its homecoming festival” (73). Secondly, while school methods might be understood stereotypically as the disembodied, decontextualized consumption of knowledge, or knowledge “under glass,” as human beings, and in the long view, we engage in the production of knowledge that could be conceived as “scholarly” when simply making meaning out of our lives through the activities we choose to value, how and where we display artifacts representing them, and what they teach us about the culture we live in when we reflect on them. Finally, as several of these collections show, school assignments are often fodder for collections, and this work can profoundly shape lives and identities years after their original production.

Much of my pedagogy hinges on introducing my students to the efficacy of ordinary texts they produce for school, work, or pleasure. As mentioned, at the very least, by the end of the course students might value the texts
they produced for my class as artifacts with limitless contexts, if saved, or in some cases just remembered as literacy events, as Henry remembered producing his comic book. I like how the stories of text production and the reflection of texts situate me, Amy, Wendy, Patty, and Henry as students of our selves and the life choices shaping these selves. I also like the discovery that texts composed by a nine-year-old, and even an angst-ridden sixteen-year-old, can inspire and even motivate others, and even grown-up others, when these texts meet new contexts.

If we conceive of ourselves as lifetime collectors of meaningful, history-making, and transformative activities, we might better link what we do in school to the research and identity-shaping activities that give our lives meaning when “at home.” In other words, we might better see the liminal spaces connecting our “real-world” passions with both the materials and methods gained in formal school settings, and we might better understand ourselves as everyday history makers synthesizing complicated and competing discourses in an interdisciplinary world, every day, and all of our life. Having engaged with the personal literacy assignment myself, and having taught it, I’ve come to see the need for theories that better contextualize the life of texts in and beyond the classroom and, better yet, try to understand their function in shaping and building lives. I agree with Jennifer Sinor who “question[s] just how far we’ve come in reading the many ordinary things around us” (5). The academy would benefit by considering the production and reflection on texts, whether narratives about sports, comic books, or cataloguing nouns, as a collection process whereby the ultimate resting place and contexts of texts we assign remain mysterious, even as they bounce in our book bags prior to grading them, and long after a student has left our classroom.

Notes

1. As a common courtesy I have changed the names of the students whom I discuss, and partly to avoid confusion because two of the students have the same name!

Works Cited


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