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Cover Page Footnote

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The Rainbow Connection: Theorizing the Efficacy of Private Texts

Liz Rohan

Feminist scholars have long criticized the public/private hierarchy, which, roughly speaking, has privileged the study of mostly male-authored public texts and belittled or ignored the study of private or semi-private mostly female-authored texts. Literary scholar Jane Tompkins summed it up for many in her now iconic 1987 essay, “Me and My Shadow,” when she claimed most emphatically: “The public-private dichotomy, which is to say the public-private hierarchy, is a founding condition of female oppression” (169). Meanwhile, otherwise well-meaning contemporary scholars of writing can also perpetuate the perceived hierarchy between the public and private by celebrating the production of texts such as blogs, websites and wikis *because they are not private* and, more specifically, hail audiences beyond the classroom. Nearly ten years ago, Christian W. Weisser predicted the importance of public texts in composition studies when claiming, “The orientation toward public writing. . . seems to be a logical and progressive development in the field” (90). A few years later, Paula Mathieu explicitly identified a “*public turn*” in writing instruction which, defined as such, “asks teachers to connect the writing that students and they themselves do with ‘real world’ texts, events or exigencies” (1).

Wired magazine writer Clive Thompson recently picked up on this longstanding, and even a tacitly agreed upon hierarchy, between private and public writing when making claims about Andrea Lunsford’s research on student writing in the Information Age. He asserts:

The fact that students today almost always write for an audience (something virtually no one in my generation did) gives them a different sense of what constitutes good writing. In interviews, they defined good prose as something that had an effect on the world. For them, writing is about persuading and organizing and debating, even if it’s over something as [ordinary] as what movie to go see. The Stanford students were almost always less enthusiastic about their in-class writing because it had no audience but the professor: It didn’t serve any purpose other than to get them a grade.

It’s exciting and refreshing that scholarship in writing studies is making it into the popular press, that students are writing more than ever, and that new technologies are encouraging better and practical opportunities for text production. However, conversations about audience in conjunction with new media can promote a limited view of what texts can accomplish in the long run as the audiences for these texts change and their contexts shift. Furthermore, as for the power of texts having an effect on the world—what does that mean? Which world and for how long?

This analysis of private text production of several stripes, including those I’ve produced, doesn’t admonish efforts to open up what students can and should write in the classroom, nor does it admonish the so-called “public turn” and its advocates. It rather ideally opens up discussions about what different types of private writing is, what it can do, why it matters, and why we need to think about and study it more. As

Kevin Roozen similarly argues, “The growing interest in undergraduates’ more public extracurricular writing underscores the need for further attention to the full range of their literate activities, especially the private writing in which they engage” (545). In short, if the “public turn” opens up what “counts” as undergraduate writing, we might be mindful of what kind of writing might on the other hand get implicitly “discounted” while also better articulating the synergistic relationships between what we call public texts and what we call private texts.

My main contribution to a discussion about the efficacy of private texts is this, which might seem rather simple: the power of private texts and also texts written as schoolwork can be underestimated when considering foremost that these texts may have additional functions, including new audiences and contexts as time passes. Peter Medway, for example, critiques the assumption that a text, such as one produced for a teacher or for school, can “be immediately communicative”; this assumption, he argues, “rests on an over simplistic understanding of social action” (143). A text produced for one context may later have a broader or different function when it is reused or repurposed and becomes, at the very least, a mnemonic artifact. When studying student notebooks kept by students for an architecture program, Medway asserts that, although the audience for the notebooks was limited to the composers, the texts were also “indirectly communicative” in that they were composed “with an eye to future compositions, oral, written and graphical” (143). The sketchbooks might serve additional functions as mnemonics for the writers later when these writers revisit these notebooks over time. And, Medway argues, the writing “is partly rehearsal, of specific arguments and more generally of a discourse, for an expected or imagined performance” (144). The exigencies of these texts are not fixed but fluid.

As a diarist, I am not alone in my interest in the significance of time when measuring experience and assessing the value of texts. Tristine Rainer, who wrote a signature book on diary keeping that is now considered a classic, notes that diarists generally become interested in time—primarily because diarists who reflect on their past diary entries inevitably gain perspective about their lives with the critical distance from lived events possible via hindsight (262). By using my own experiences as a writer, I showcase also the relevance of scholars’ personal experience when developing theories and pedagogies, a trend which Eli Goldblatt encourages in his recent “literacy autobiography” when he claims,

I have often asked my undergraduate and graduate students over the years to write literacy autobiographies in order to help them see the intimate ways that reading and writing influence their lives. Teachers should be prepared to undergo the same trials they set up for their students (3).

Teacher’s literacy autobiographies should not be less relevant to our canon of research and best practices in the field of composition than those of students. After all, we are likely *more* conscious about the relationship between identities and the consumption and production of texts than novice scholars, particularly undergraduates, who are just coming to the concepts. To further my theory, I will provide a primary and quite personal example of how my experience as a diarist helped me develop a theory about time for measuring texts and their value and will provide some examples of how students have and can employ

the tool of time as a method for assessing texts for which the audience and purpose have become more or less fluid as the contexts for these texts have changed.

Measuring the Efficacy of Texts with the Tools of Time

Mikhail Bakhtin encourages a diachronic approach, or long-term approach, to text analysis when distinguishing between “*small time* (the present day, the recent past, and the foreseeable [desired] future) and *great time*—the infinite and unfinalized dialogue in which no meaning dies” (*Dialogic* 72). For Bakhtin, a “chronotope” represents one type of time space compression that can shape the depiction of narrative that does not necessarily represent time and space as it’s actually experienced. As one example, during the chronotope of “*adventure-time*,” the hero resolves his conflicts and gets the girl as depicted in an ancient Greek narrative and perhaps also in contemporary Hollywood romantic comedies (*Dialogic* 87). Yet this *adventure-time* chronotope, as Bakhtin argues, “lacks any natural, every day cyclicality. . . tying it to the repetitive aspects of natural and human life” (91). The constraints of *small time* or “*adventure-time*” might not only help us productively measure the difference between our lives and those of Jennifer Aniston’s onscreen ones, but might also work as a metaphor to consider the timespan of an average college semester. Within this adventure time chronotope, students might also produce texts for various publics and live audiences with a class blog when writing for a community organization or when sharing an essay with classmates. But how might these texts stand up overtime when the audiences are no longer immediate? Consider the relatively short time students spend with us and with each other during the “adventure time” of a class period, a semester, or even the span of the average college career. The chronotope of the “great time,” which takes into account “the repetitive aspects of natural and human life,” a phenomenon also noted by diarists, might be a better measure for assessing the value and potential of all texts and with it also, private, ordinary texts.

As a lifetime diarist, and a scholar who uses historical methods, I am often moved by texts for which I have been barely an audience, or not a perceived audience at all, as new contexts for these texts have proliferated. Private texts can be highly meaningful because they are candid or even because they were *not* “immediately communicative” to the highest degree. Stephen Witte similarly argues for better theories about the relationships between otherwise disparate texts, be they private or public, what he calls “text, context, and intertext,” to consider their interplay—even when analyzing the sophisticated set of contexts that inform writing as ordinary as a grocery list. “[S]uch a reconceptualization,” Witte argues, would bring together the seemingly disparate terms “*text*, *context* and *intertext* closer to the Latin root they share with one another, *texere*, which refers to weaving, interweaving, and plating or braiding” (264). Over-distinguishing the difference between public and private texts and those produced for school, but not for “real audiences,” can undercut an investigation of the synergistic “weaving, interweaving, plating and braiding” of texts, no matter their label. Also borrowing from Bakhtin, Paul Prior and Jody Shipka synthesize a framework to describe writing processes over time, and across genres, via what they call “chronotopic lamination.” While the term “lamination” connotes permanence, Prior and Shipka in fact emphasize literate activity as complex and dynamic *action* that evolves across genres, across disciplines and over lifetimes, the great time, and also the

weeding and braiding together, not only of texts, but their means of production as well, the “dispersed and fluid chains of places, times, people and artifacts that come to be tied together” (2).

Emotional Spying, Repurposing, and the Tying Together of Public and Private Texts

A private text, like a public text, can also transcend its “adventure time” when these texts are repurposed, or when we act as what songwriter Darrell Brown calls “emotional spies,” using others’ lives as fodder for our creative or scholarly projects—in effect repurposing others’ texts. Over the course of several years and as part of my dissertation project, I was an “emotional spy” when I studied the diaries of a deceased American woman. Janette Miller, who came of age at the turn of the twentieth century, kept a diary as a teenager and young woman, and then, when she turned thirty, gave up the practice upon leaving for Africa in 1910 to be a missionary. Typical of nineteenth century diarists and void of the confessions we associate with more contemporary diaries, Miller’s diary records are spare with little introspection, containing as she puts it, “bare records.” She began keeping a diary as a teenager and eventually realized she valued the diary as a mnemonic device and a means of behavior modification. As she put it in 1908, after reading Samuel Pepys diary: “I find I can review my days and bring myself up short when on the wrong track better when I see it written before me.”

Because Miller devoted most of her diary records to every day comings and goings, it was most profound for me as a reader when I stumbled upon passages that revealed her inner life. This was the case with an entry in her 1909 diary, containing her thoughts as she contemplated leaving her career as a librarian in Detroit to become a missionary. She wrote:

I cannot stand another year of irresolution and miserable sense of failure. Better attempt something with hope and courage than stand irresolute on the brink, or settle back to give up This thought of beginning life again at age 30 does not daunt me, but to live life useless fills me with terror. There has been an undercurrent of deep dissatisfaction this year with merely working to earn a living and living to earn my bread. Library work is interesting and pleasant and educational—as delightful work as I could find, it is not doing any special service for the master. I promised to serve so I ought to have everyday work which would be service.

When I first read this passage in Miller’s diary, I was the same age as her when she wrote it, 29. At the time I was contemplating getting a Ph.D., but I also was establishing connections at a posh suburban Chicago high school where I worked in the writing center. If I got my teaching certificate, I could probably have had a pretty nice job and a nice life. But I was drawn to scholarship. In certain moments when I thought about giving up on writing and scholarship, it felt deathly. So, like Miller, I was “on the brink” between going for it and settling for less. I eventually used this passage from Miller’s diary as fodder for writing personal statements about why I wanted to pursue a Ph.D. I wrote that Miller’s choice inspired me, which was true. Miller indeed became a missionary, which I knew, so I was able to put her private texts about her burgeoning choice to be a missionary into a

greater context, the result of that choice.

This greater context that shapes private, ordinary texts also challenges any assumed binaries between the public and the private, particularly when the discourse in private texts predict the content or production of public texts, and even public action. Miller wrote about becoming a missionary in private. Miller's choice eventually became public, a choice not only embodied by her arrival in Angola, but in public texts as well when she had the opportunity to publish a narrative about the factors that led her to become a missionary, in a 1910 edition of the missionary magazine *Mission Studies*. This magazine was published by the Midwestern division of the Congregational Woman's Board of Missions, called Woman's Board of the Interior or W. B. M. I. According to the article, Miller's "school life was interrupted by frequent removals as her father's business took [her family] from place to place" ("New Recruits" 263). Miller also assisted "a younger brother in obtaining his education" while she worked for several years at the Detroit Public Library. Given the arguable relationship between Miller's private texts, with which she made a choice, and an obviously public text, in which she describes this choice, Miller's collection of texts, private, semi-private, and public, highlights the interplay, *the tying together*, and not necessarily the hierarchy, between texts with various functions and audiences.

Furthermore, although the public text about Miller hints at some tensions—her father's career led to moves; she took care of and supported her brother—the article is, of course, absent of the emotion characterizing the 1909 private text where Miller admits she is dissatisfied with library work. As an emotional spy, I find the 1909 private texts more interesting than the 1910 texts. But reading them together, or tying them together, can be quite powerful and makes the reader a witness to the process of a young woman making a life for herself on her own terms, at last. We can see, for example, that Miller's private texts were a type of "rehearsal," as Medway might put it, for future text production, embodied in the decision to become a missionary and the texts that followed were a result of this decision. Or, as Prior and Shipka argue, "[A]ny experience at any time or place might become salient in some writing process" (15). The *Mission Studies* article is made all the more meaningful when considering the long road that led Miller to her career as missionary, a career she pursued until her death in 1969, and a career she chose with the help of her diary.

Later, when I could better assess Miller's methods as a diarist, I realized that she cut up letters and put them into her diary as in a scrapbook. I determined that this passage about finding "every day work which would be service" was from part of a letter Miller wrote to her former high school teacher and friend, Miss Hull. This letter scrap is therefore an example of the complicated relationship between writing and social action and also complicates the assumption that a text might be "immediately communicative." First, the idea "work which would be service" was embedded in a letter by Miller to Miss Hull, who was the original audience. Next, the letter was repurposed as part of a collection in Miller's diary, a diary that she used both as a mnemonic device and to monitor her behavior and values. Then the letter became scholarly fodder for my personal statements while also persuading me to take action by pursuing my Ph.D.

Miller is deceased, and conclusions about the interplay between public and private texts in her literate life are therefore inevitably speculative. However, fiction writer Katherine Towler, also a diarist, provides some insight about how a diarist, who employs

the tool of time, might come to recognize this theorized interplay—and how she might also become more self-aware about the role of time in identity formation and text production because she keeps a diary. Towler says,

By keeping a journal, I learned to be an observer of my own emotions and shifts and thinking and beliefs. I learned to look for patterns in my responses to these experiences. I came to understand myself as a being who changed over time. Writing an account of the ways I continually surprised and disappointed myself, how I made the same mistakes over and over. (39)

Towler's observations as a diary keeper, or "journal(ist)," shows how private text production can teach writers about time as both linear and cyclical, as history repeats itself. Towler's self-awareness as a person, which she learned from producing and studying her private texts, made her fiction better, she claims. Perhaps this self-awareness gave her characters more authenticity, or the observation of her own conflicts helped her better depict why and how people—fictional or real—make choices. As she puts it, "This practice of trying to truly know and understand myself was what I drew on most when I began to write novels" (39). Towler's experience, like that of Miller's, not only foregrounds the significant interplay between private and public texts, but once again shows how time can be used to better assess this interplay. Towler was able to see the connection between her personal emotions and those she developed for her fictional characters. Towler's experience also reinforces Medway's assertion that texts which are not "immediately communicative" (like Towler's diary entries), can serve as mnemonics, and can also help a writer "rehearse" for future text production. Diarist Joanna Field (the pen name for Marion Milner) has made similar discoveries about the efficacy of private texts over time, and about reflection, which she describes in part as thus: "I came to realize that the facts of my life were not so many fixed items which only needed adding up and balancing. They were rather continually receding horizons of the traveler who climbs a mountain" (44). As with Towler, Field's personal writing was not necessarily "immediately communicative," but it was efficacious in the long run, giving her insight on life: the relationship between problem solving and time.

Insights about Time from my Literacy Autobiography

The chronotope of the great time also shapes my perspective and my craft as a diarist. Unlike Miller's diary, which is rich in facts about her daily comings and goings but short on introspection, my diaries—particularly those written in my young adulthood—are too long on introspection and skimpy with specifics. Nevertheless, when reading these diaries I can usually find some insights that ring true and stand the test of time. Field also distinguishes her more authentic sounding diary sentiments from her less authentic sounding diary sentiments. She trained herself to notice, "the little motions of thought" rather than "look[ing] for something busier and noisier" (180-181). Jennifer Sinor likewise says it's one thing to write in time as a quality of "dailiness"—when the writer composes "in the days rather than of the days" and "is unable to create the critical distance we associate with reflection" (17). It's quite another to write in the "time when" the writer can

put daily events into a greater context (17). Diarists are invariably writing of experience in the thick of it. Sizing it up with any kind of authenticity or accuracy on the spot is a challenge and determining how to write about experience without “blind thinking” takes training (Field 181). As Trainer also describes the significance of time to diarists, “A dream, a coincidence, or an intuition preserved in a diary reveals its full, cumulative significance with time” (264).

Miller’s passionate claims about her desire to become a missionary, as expressed in her private texts, and as later manifested in her choice to become a missionary, might illustrate how a diarist could re-read and reflect on a text used for interpersonal development, or related purposes, to ascertain that writing might “predict” the future, even when the writer is well aware or even semi-aware of how and why she is making her choices. As a diarist I have also come to share Field’s observation that reading private texts can show us how problems are worked out on their own over time. Field describes the experience of reflection and how it relates to the process of rereading a diary, over the course of the “great time”:

Sometimes the meaning of an experience would only begin to dawn on me years afterwards, and even then I often had to go over the same ground again and again, with intervals of years in between. In fact, I came to the conclusion that the growth of understanding follows an ascending spiral rather than a straight line (55).

The chronotope of adventure time is too short to assess the value of a text as well as the experience it might represent. As Bakhtin argues about the value of time as assessment: “Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival” (“Methodology” 73).

The meaning of some significant texts I produced as a diarist did indeed have their homecoming festival in a set of events that technically took place over the course of almost thirty years as I acknowledged and revisited a connection I had to my middle school boyfriend Dave—about whom I wrote about in various contexts. My experiences as a witness to Dave’s life, as well as his public texts over time, draws attention to Field’s claim that diaries can be teachers of non-linear time and highlights the usefulness of the great time for measuring the meaning of records, spare or otherwise, a “time when” perspective. Dave became a significant *topos* for me as a writer partly because Dave was my boyfriend when I first began keeping a diary in seventh grade, because his persona evolved as a kind of icon in my dreams/subconscious, and because Dave and I have inevitably become kindred spirits as longtime fellow writers. This anecdote about Dave, and particularly a dream I recorded about him, will serve as a primary example from my own “literary autobiography” about how my diary taught me to value time as a tool of assessment for a text’s value and purpose.

This somewhat ongoing lesson in text analysis with Dave as *topos* began again and anew during a relatively recent signature experience when I visited downtown Detroit during the city’s Super Bowl celebrations in January 2006. The city dressed up with a Winterfest, complete with strobe lights and ice sculptures. I thought of Dave while downtown that night because he is a writer for *ESPN* and the NFL is his beat, so I figured he would be the only one I’d know going to the actual Super Bowl game. I hadn’t seen

or talked to him in years. Dave has a special online *ESPN* column for which his column at our high school newspaper, the *Northpointe*, was no doubt both foreshadowing and preparation. In this *Northpointe* column, which he developed as a high school senior, he wrote with both self-effacement and bravado about his world as a high school wrestler. I had read a few of Dave's *ESPN* columns over the years. Often, he writes of his boyhood home in Detroit with nostalgia, from his present home in North Carolina. As a result, I composed his column in my head that evening during my winter stroll downtown. At home that night, I read Dave's actual online column, which was a near facsimile of my imagined text, plus facts about football. I then emailed a link to the column to my friend Bill, who had worked with Dave in high school at the *Northpointe*, fell asleep on the living room couch, and had a dream about baby boys. Something bad was happening to them, and it was my fault as I lay on a cold metal operating table. These baby boys were sliding off the table and falling into an abyss one by one.

I shuddered awake, could not get back to sleep, and then, for something to do, checked my email. Bill had written back.

"It's too bad about Dave's son," Bill wrote.

What?

I went back to the *ESPN* Super Bowl column and noticed a link aside it, which led to a description of Dave's new book and an excerpt from it. The book describes Dave's journey to process his grief when his son died in the womb of a rare disease, shortly before he was supposed to have been born.

The dream about baby boys in association with Dave's actual life was jarring. I revisited my adolescent relationship with Dave, during which I had experienced some similar phenomena, and I had used my diary to measure its meaning. That evening, I remembered some ancient and buried emotions from childhood that I thought I had entirely buried, but as texts produced in "great time," they began their homecoming.

The connection between my texts, their intertexts, and their contexts linking me to Dave's grew greater when I was motivated to read Dave's book a year later, the summer of 2007. I had made an important discovery going through old notebooks from graduate school. I hadn't kept a diary during the years when I was getting a Ph.D., but sometime during 2000, I happened to jot down in a notebook a dream I had about Dave.

I discovered why I was compelled to record that dream somewhere, since I wasn't keeping a diary at the time. I had been collecting dreams about Dave for years in which he has starred as a distant but instructive presence in narratives often riled with melancholy tension and hope. Witte might refer to these dream entries about Dave as "memorial texts" (265). However, as I compared the 2006 dream to my 2006 dream, I realized that the 2000 dream was actually a nightmare. In the 2000 notebook dream, I bumped into Dave as he ran down his childhood street. Dave was holding his son, who was very sick. I gave Dave my condolences.

Dave's son died in 2000.

The tying together of this memorial text to its "homecoming festival" is made even more meaningful by considering the interplay between my diary and Dave's book.

Although I had written Dave few times over the years, I hadn't talked to him since the last year we were both back at home from college, living in suburban Detroit. That summer, in 1987, Dave had acquired someone's tandem bike and took it to ride around.

He happened to stop by my friend Libby's house one July evening when I was sitting on the stoop, a bit forlorn.

"C'mon, I'll ride you home," he said. It was about a mile ride from Libby's house to mine.

On the back of the tandem I was singing the song, "Rainbow Connection" from the Muppet movie that was popular that year. "Kermit sings this song, too, you know. On the bike. In the movie," I said. Several double rainbows had appeared that summer when a tropical weather pattern hung over the city. It had rained almost every afternoon, and then cleared up. Rainbow weather, I call it.

When we arrived at my driveway, Dave and I had quite a frank conversation about love and marriage, which included a cryptic discussion about the meaning of our long childhood acquaintance. I wrote down in my diary everything I remembered about our encounter the minute I got inside the house. In fact, most of that summer's diary included snippets and recap of this conversation as I thought about it, the last summer I'd spend with my childhood associates. As a result, the conversation has echoed like a transcript in my head over the years. I slowly recognized the meaning of that night as a kind of closure to my childhood. I also began to recognize the role that my diary, and inadvertently Dave, had in shaping my perspective.

May of 2007, I read Dave's book about his son in one sitting. I literally could not put the book down. Dave and his wife Kim decided to name their son Noah while Kim was pregnant. Noah never made it into the world, but he made his spirit present on the day of his funeral. A rainbow appeared in Kim and Dave's backyard.

The book itself is actually structured like rainbow weather. It begins with the excruciating details of Dave's slow horror that he would not be a dad, just yet. Noah would never live outside the womb, where he had already become a beloved son. The book ends with Dave's life as a new father—with the birth of his daughter. Kim is the real hero of the book. I could not imagine enduring a pregnancy when still raw from such a profound loss. While Dave's book chronicles an adventure-time, a year of grieving, the interplay of our collective texts over the course of almost thirty years adds a layer to "great time," for me at least, as a longtime student of my own private texts, demonstrating how diarists (producers of quintessentially private texts) hone their intuition as well as their memories, and, in doing so, can better identify themes shaping their lives as well as the lives of others, through time and over time, as their memorial texts repeat history in different contexts.

Some Pedagogical Applications

The experiences shaping my perspective about the efficacy of private texts over the great time may seem farfetched to some, particularly to those who have not used their texts, private or otherwise, as mnemonics. Yet the application of my personal experiences and philosophy to my pedagogy might resonate with those looking for practical applications of a theory valuing the production and teaching of private texts and also ordinary schoolwork. Discomfort that readers have with my attempt to share the meaning I have extracted from reading and writing private texts might furthermore draw attention to the paucity of theories about ordinary, private text production and analysis, particularly

those that are highly personal. (Rainer, on the other hand, catalogues the experiences of many diarists who describe experiences of intuition developed by diary keeping much like mine.)

I have applied my theories about time and its relevance for measuring texts through an assignment that I have developed called the “personal literacy inventory,” which I have written about elsewhere (“Everyday Curators” 57). This assignment requires students to retrieve and reflect upon texts they produced in the past, preferably as young people before arriving to college, but not necessarily—texts which they valued enough not to throw out. As one example of how time can be used as a form of assessment, one of my students, Patty, created a collage of artifacts she saved over the years that embodied her interests and values.² When assessing the collage, a significant artifact emerged—an informal paper that she wrote for a school assignment ten years prior that outlined her goals to be a teacher. These goals remained relevant as Patty pursued a teaching certificate in college. Of this connection between a text she produced years ago and her current goals, Patty asserted, “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].”

Another student, Ilana, writes a literacy inventory that further demonstrate the interplay of public and private texts—the interplay between texts produced and consumed for school and those consumed and produced for personal enjoyment. Ilana also shows how time can be used to assess the connection and hierarchy among and between myriad texts. Tucked along with papers that Ilana had written and saved from her first year of college decades previously were poems she wrote about a painful breakup, flyers for music events, invitation to parties, articles from a local hipster paper, and one cartoon. Quoting Margaret Finders, who borrows from James Gee, Ilana described this collection as her “identity kit” which reflects her “seeing, acting, thinking and talking in the world” (3). All of the texts in Ilana’s collection, which included graded schoolwork, served as mnemonics to help Ilana remember and reflect on a certain time and place when she was coming of age. Time provided the critical distance which allowed the tying together of these texts thematically as she ascertained their meaning, the tension between them and also their connecting threads. Comments by teachers on Ilana’s writing also served as mnemonics to help Ilana remember her attitude about school at the time and her efforts to negotiate the demands of the academy that didn’t always make sense to her and about which she was relatively cynical. As she puts it, “I obviously knew what the instructor wanted to hear and was able to feign interest in a bunch of essays I don’t remember being particularly captivating.” The perusal of these artifacts helped Ilana assess how her “identity kit” of yore featured a time and place as well as a continuum. Time in this case, compressed the interplay between the public and the private, schoolwork and interests outside of school. Time also transformed the audience of her schoolwork from her teacher, to her younger cynical self, and finally to her older and wiser self, a self who was able to sort out the significance of the items in her collection as they related to a range of literate practices that she had been experimenting with and was being encouraged to develop, inside and outside of school.

My work, Patty’s work, and Ilana’s work reflecting on our literate inventories, while

² To maintain consistency with earlier scholarship, I have changed the names of the participants.

also using the tool of time as a form of assessment, might be considered a form of memoir writing promoted by Kristie Fleckenstein, a type of writing which she also regards as a prerequisite to social action. For one signature assignment, Fleckenstein encourages students to assemble a range of artifacts through a scrapbook journal to represent their “selves” and their values, what she calls “bricolage,” and which arguably encourages the “tying together” of various texts for which the contexts have been, and are, fluid. As Fleckenstein explains, the assignment “relies on cutting up the specious stability of memoirs into fragments and then reordering them into patterns,” ultimately encouraging students “to participate more fully in the material implications of a text for action in the world” (184, 155).

In the cases cited here, Patty, Ilana, and I have also created a form of bricolage, if unconsciously, during the “great time” of our lives beyond a semester. This bricolage includes texts and artifacts produced in school, outside of school, and tangentially related to school. They could be labeled both public and private, given the contexts. We have used time as an assessment tool in order to shape an analytical frame about the bricolage in our “tool kits,” linking these disparate materials not only to each other, but to larger theoretical concepts, or broader topics such as identity formation, romantic attachments, and coming of age. Like Fleckenstein’s project, the literacy inventory project draws attention to the interplay between the public and private and how a range of texts—including those designed for school or a limited audience—can represent or encourage “social action,” over the “great time.” So was the case most concretely, if also speculatively, with Janette Miller, who developed her goals to be a missionary over time and used writing to do so. These projects can help writers like us recognize the trajectory of our lives in relationship with larger societal trends, in relationship with our evolving and transforming selves, and also in conjunction, in tension, or even in harmony, with the lives of other people.

Conclusion

Keeping a diary has taught me the significance of time and the necessity of waiting when it comes to judging what is ordinary or extraordinary, as well as the complicated relationship between, texts, intertexts, and their contexts. Like Joanna Field, I have taught myself how to use a “time when” perspective in order to measure the phenomenon of non-linear time—when the past informs the present and/or history repeats itself, a phenomenon that might be illustrated by the “rainbow connection,” the evolving history of Dave’s life linked inadvertently to my ongoing literate practices as a diarist and memory keeper, literate practices which Dave, perhaps ironically, also inspired.

I offer one more example from the bricolage of texts that ties me to Dave’s literate practices as a writer: because Dave and I both wrote for the same school newspapers—when we were middle and high school students—I have a copy of an article that Dave wrote in eighth grade in the early 1980s for our middle school newspaper, *The Parcels Post*. It, too, is part of my longtime collection of literate artifacts. This article about the Detroit Lions lists the “good” and “bad” facts that supported and challenged hopes among Lions fans, that the team could make it to the Super Bowl that year. As he put it, “I like

the Lions, and it would be great to see them win the Super Bowl. But to be faked out by all of these unreal facts would be bad.” Dave was prescient in withholding optimism about this football team that has yet to have a significantly successful season, although it came close last year when making the playoffs after a 10-6 record. The initial audience for this artifact was to some extent ideal from a more recent and contemporary perspective, represented quintessentially by Clive Thompson’s cited earlier. The article, sponsored by a school journalism class, was written for a public audience, for peers and not “just” the teacher. Presumably, it was developed from the writer’s personal interests. Yet the artifact’s context and its audience over “great time” might be more interesting as part of a bricolage, considering that Dave now writes about the NFL for ESPN. The article could be compared also to the informal paper that Patty wrote for a school assignment in which she articulated her vocational goals, and might also be regarded most broadly as Dave’s rehearsal for future text production as a journalist. It furthermore might serve as a final example of how the great time as an assessment tool can draw attention to the linking together of otherwise disparate people, texts and themes, in surprising and profound ways. That the article might be a more significant artifact over the “great time” as part of a larger bricolage of literate activity, mine and Dave’s, suggests the limits of legitimately measuring texts that “affect the world,” in the short time span of a writing teacher’s metaphorical “chronotope,” one semester of school.

The “rainbow connection” that linked Dave’s experience with mine over the years has depended upon my literate activity as a diarist. The texts produced because of this literate activity, as well as the coinciding subjects of Dave’s public texts and my private ones, hopefully reinforce a point I make here and elsewhere: we lack language/theories to discuss texts that are not “immediately communicative.” Schoolwork, for instance, written for a teacher in the short run can have multiple functions later when re-read or even thought about in connection with other bodies of texts written for school and/or personal use. At the same time, texts produced during a semester can serve as mnemonics at the end of a semester when writers reflect on them to recognize progress they’ve made, patterns or ideas they’re attracted to, and errors they’ve made again and again, a method of reflection sanctioned by diarists when re-reading diary entries. Finally, while it’s great that new technologies are encouraging people young and old to write more and to reach new and authentic audiences, I hope we all can agree that all if not most texts can have efficacy and perform cultural work to various degrees, and therefore, we might develop better terms and vocabulary to reflect this agreement.



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