Why Things Matter to Writing: A Material Perspective on Literacy and Selfhood

By

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To P.D. Eastman, for *The Best Nest*, and Richard Scarry, for *The Best Storybook Ever*, two books so thick with objects that they are probably responsible for this dissertation.

To my mother, for reading them with me.

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Abstract

Why Things Matter to Writing: A Material Perspective on Literacy and Selfhood

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Material goods accompany us throughout our literate development, from our first contact with handwriting paper in grade school to our repeated contact with the kitchen table throughout childhood and adolescence. This dissertation builds on life history interviews with 27 individuals in order to understand the complex, charged relationship between people, and specifically those who write on a daily basis, and their possessions. This relationship begins in early childhood and perpetuates throughout adulthood, making inquiry into the connection between childhood and adult literate practice, and specifically writing practice, vital.

I argue three main things. First, that every person who writes on a daily basis has a *practice* bound up with goods, and that in order to understand it, we have to take a closer look at how writers use possessions to stabilize, negotiate, and manage writing anxiety, writing pleasure, and writing identity. By looking at seemingly simple objects such as the Moleskine notebook, we can uncover rich interactions between writers and possessions, from childhood on. Second, rituals that support literacy development, such as back-to-school shopping and the purchase of a writing desk, are keys to understanding how children learn to *do school* and develop both a *schooled self* and a positive self-concept around learning (and writing). Through these rituals, schools and families *pass down* critical information about what it means to be a student, writer,

and family member. Lastly, objects and writing engage in a process of mutual mediation whereby each continually works on the other. On the one hand, objects mediate writing; a computer, for example, changes the way that writing is performed, understood, and experienced. On the other hand, writing mediates objects. When teenagers write all over their clothes and notebooks in middle school, this writing transforms not only the objects themselves, but also social relations within school walls.

This dissertation argues, then, for a material perspective on literacy and takes a psychological approach to the importance of *things* in writing lives.

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I recently remarked to my friend and peer reviewer Nicholas Purdy that it takes a community to write a dissertation. He responded, “It takes a community to live a life.”

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I've learned both experientially and through my research that most scholars can trace the winding path of influence and inspiration that put them on their life path. Thank you to my high school English teacher, Mrs. Cremer, for her inventive reading (for her own Master's degree) of *A Tale of Two Cities*, which I still think about; for the Brown University award that suggested I am good at the subject; and for continual support, even after she found me smoking cigarettes in

the girls' bathroom. Thank you to my University of Florida mentors Donald Ault, Stephanie Smith, and Dr. Glue (Gregory Ulmer).

My dissertation research was based on life history interviews with 27 participants who shared intimate details about their lives, literacy histories, families, and writing practices. Thank you for your time, your trust, and for what you revealed to me about the complex interactions between material objects, writing practice, and writing identity. I have labored to keep your life stories whole; I hope they enrich others' lives, as they have mine.

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Introduction

"We think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with."

--Sherry Turkle

Picture yourself as you sit down to write. Like Laura Ingalls Wilder, you might write using a lap desk given to you by your husband. Perhaps you write in your bedroom—in your bed, in fact, as did Marcel Proust and Mark Twain. If you do not have the luxury of your own writing space, you might work in a common room, in the way of Jane Austen. Like Helen Keller, you might work on a Braille typewriter. Or, you might subscribe to Steven King's belief that a writer only needs a windowless wall to face and a door that locks (*On Writing*). Like scholar Claudia Mon Pere, a working mother, you may have developed "a pretty good sense of what can and cannot be accomplished in a moving vehicle" (*Herspace* 166). No matter what environment you typically write in, one thing is fairly certain: you have developed preferences and habits in and around it, you have populated it with objects, and your behavior within it follows some kind of pattern, which you sometimes abandon.

The above examples call attention to the materiality and physicality of the writing process. This materiality is embodied not only in the objects we write with, such as paper, pen, notebook, and the computer, but also the things we write around. As we use them, we participate in inscribing these objects with histories, memories, and practices—and we attach to them. As much as writing is a product of the mind, it is a physical act, one of writing, dwelling, conversing with others, and inhabiting places. One cannot generally write just anywhere and with any materials. Virginia Woolf voiced this concern explicitly in 1929, in *A Room of One's Own*, when she stated that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write" (4). Her

words point both to the economic and material exigencies that confront, support, and—at times—bear down on writers.

Despite the elaborate and intimate relationship to objects, place, environment, and rituals that writers form, research in composition and rhetoric has largely ignored the topic. As Sherry Turkle asserts in Evocative Objects, "We find it familiar to consider objects as useful or aesthetic, as necessities or vain indulgences. We are on less familiar ground when we consider objects as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought" (5). Coffee-table type photography books such as J.D. McClatchy's *American Writers at Home* offer snapshots of writers' work spaces accompanied with biographical text or an excerpt from their writing. In the *Paris Review Interviews* and *Paris Review Writers at Work* series, now in its ninth volume, writers narrate their writing peculiarities and preferences, usually in the context of a discussion of their literary corpus. While these texts are not academic in nature, they have been useful in delimiting areas of research and exploration into the issues at hand in this research project.

One of the more referenced books besides the *Paris Review* series is Krementz' *The Writer's Desk*. In this book, Krementz pairs her photographs of writers' home writing environments with excerpts from these authors' *Paris Review* interviews. Krementz foregrounds the materiality of writing by emphasizing the writer's desk, one object that has had great significance in my research. Some writers mention their desks quite literally; John Updike writes that he has "three desks, each of a different substance and each trained to support a different activity" (xi). Although he suggests that he "trains" the desks to support his needs, the desks (and perhaps their makers) act as agents, dictating his aesthetic and work choices, as they do for the

participants in my study. In Updike's case, each desk is paired with a certain utilitarian purpose. He writes:

> An oak desk . . . is, along with a metal typing table and an old manual Olivetti, where I answer letters and talk on the phone. An olive-drab steel desk . . . is where I write by hand, when the fragility of a project—a poem, the start of a novel—demands that I sneak up on it with that humblest and quietest of weapons, a pencil. Also this desk, whose ample surface (annoyingly dented in the center by some mishap in its previous career) I try to keep relatively empty, is where I read proofs, comparing a novel's successive versions side by side. The third desk, veneered in white Formica, holds the word processor where everything gets typed up and many items, including this introduction, are composed. Being able to move from desk to desk, like being able to turn over in bed, solves some cramps and fidgets and stratifies the authorial person . . . (xi)

Although the poetic quality of the writing belies that this is not an impromptu meditation on the writer's workspace, and instead an introduction written with forethought, it makes explicit two points that have arisen frequently for my participants: First, the habitual use of a desk for functions that are not inherent to a desk, but are instead more totemic roles, and second, the mobility of writing practice, how we use objects as material task or genre facilitators and how they direct our practice based on their aesthetic and physical qualities.

The desk photographs also depict the organization and ritualized use of objects within the authors' writing workspaces. Lewis Mumford, for example, hangs sheets of paper with memos, notes, and lists written on them in two rows of metal clips above his desk (15). Because

Krementz did not interview Mumford herself, the reader can't question Mumford about this practice and whether it is a function of neatness and organization or something that falls in the realm of ritual.

A more pervasively referenced issue that writers raise is their struggles with and pleasure experienced during writing. Discussing a failed attempt to write—on the spot—a doctor's note for his child, who was in a "panic" while trying to get the note before boarding the school bus, E.L. Doctorow narrates:

> I wrote down the date and I started, 'Dear Mrs. So and So, my daughter Caroline . . . ' and then I thought, No, that's not right, obviously it's my daughter Caroline. I tore that sheet off, and started again. 'Yesterday, my child . . . ' No, that wasn't right either. Too much like a deposition. This went on until I heard a horn blowing outside. The child was in a state of panic. There was a pile of crumpled pages on the floor, and my wife was saying, 'I can't believe this. I can't believe this.' She took the pad and pencil and dashed something off. I had been trying to write the perfect absence note. It was a very illuminating experience. Writing is immensely difficult. (15)

Although the Paris Review series and coffee table books give the most extensive treatment of writers working with objects in defined places, this treatment is still always peripheral and focused on published writers. However, they only nick the surface of the why and how behind our ritualistic writing behavior. These popular texts also focus on the established, well-known writer; we know little about the day-to-day materially dependent writing practices—

a term I explore throughout this dissertation—of more everyday writers. This study centralizes the study of the writing habitat and hones its attention on more everyday writers.

As a field, we also do not know enough about how people who identify as writers develop a writing identity, articulate it with and around others, and negotiate it with and through object use. This is so because most of the identity work in writing studies either focuses on entrance into/exclusion from academic discourse communities (Ivanic) or on writing from liminal positions or writing as it intersects with various identity categories such as race, ethnicity, and gender (Anzaldúa; Finders; Villanueva). I did not find ethnographic research that traces the development writing identity from current practice back to childhood, and especially research that locates this development around objects.

The Writing Habitat

This dissertation is dedicated to the exploration of our writing environments, or what I refer to throughout as the *writing habitat*. In *The Oxford English Dictionary*¸ the primary definition of the word “habitat” is the "locality in which a plant or animal grows and lives," as well as the "geographical area over which it extends.” This metaphor works nicely for the context of writing, which extends farther than one's home (often into public spaces, as well as conversations). Writing extends past one's self and private space, and writers too numerous to cite in their entirety have pushed for a definition of writing that unbinds it from mass culture and media’s portrayal of it as springing whole from individual genius (Cooper; Barton) and have pushed for literacy to be recognized as a social, contextual practice that emerges out of

geographic, technological, economic, and institutional forces and networks (Barton and Hamilton; Besnier; Brandt; Heath; Scribner and Cole).

Embedded in the word habitat is also one's "dwelling place" or "habitation." The notion of dwelling in writing and in one's habitat, of taking one's time, hanging around and inside, returning, and mulling over, is critical thinking about writing practice. As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton write in *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*,

> The home contains the most special objects: those that were selected by the person to attend to regularly or to have close at hand, that create permanence in the intimate life of a person, and therefore that are most involved in making up his or her identity. The objects of the household represent, at least potentially, the endogenous being of the owner." (17)

The objects that comprise a person's writing habitat speak most intimately to that person's beliefs about and patterns around writing; however, as I demonstrate in Chapter One, the identity marker of "writer" is complicated, as it has been culturally assigned to the sphere of fiction writing. We call those who write news stories journalists; we call those who write about others biographers; and the label "writer" has stuck to those who compose poetry, prose, and creative non-fiction. This is a problem for academics, whose primary life work is creative writing, which comprises not only research, but the weaving together of facts and narratives so complicated and intricate, and requiring such elaborate knowledge of the cultural conversation around it, that it is miraculous that it is achieved on top of scholars' other duties. So although the writers in my study live lives mobilized and dominated by writing, they did not always think of themselves as

Writers. In this context, it was of utmost urgency to me to investigate, in Czikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton's terms, the "objects that are most involved in making up . . . identity." This project considers, however, not just the home writing habitat, but the elements of that habitat that people take with them when they write out of the home, as well as the habitats they travel out of their home to write and work in.

My project's main emphases are on three aspects of the writing habitat: the things within it, or the materials we rely on throughout the writing process; the environment itself, and our perceptions of it; and our habits and rituals within it. Most of us are familiar with needing to sit in a particular chair by a particular window when we write, or with the feeling that we cannot write unless we find a certain pen. Many of us have developed very particular habits within our workspaces, and we travel to other places that provide us with physical comfort of material goods that kickstart our writing process.

For many readers, the word "habitat" will also bring to mind its ecological dimension, and indeed, Czikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton write that "Household objects constitute an ecology of signs that reflects as well as shapes the pattern of the owner's self" (17). Although the word *habitat* extends beyond ecology, a few writing studies scholars have made powerful arguments for the use of such a metaphor in order to posit the situatedness of writing. In 1986, Marilyn Cooper proposed an "ecological model" of writing in order to challenge the cognitive model of writing of figures such as Flower and Hayes. Cooper writes against a view of writing as "parthenogenesis, the author producing propositional and pragmatic structures, Athena-like, full grown and complete, out of his brow" (366). For Cooper, the ecological model encourages a view of the relationship between writer and reader as symbiotic: "An ecology of writing," she

proposes, "encompasses much more than the individual writer and her immediate context. An ecologist explores how writers interact to form systems: all the characteristics of any individual writer or piece of writing both determine and are determined by the characteristics of all the other writers and writings in the systems" (368). Cooper's ultimate goal diverges from mine in that she is concerned most with encouraging research into the interconnected relationship between writers and readers in order to advance writers' knowledge of audience; my goal, on the other hand, is to posit a writing habitat in which people engage not only with peers and discourse, but with their constructed writing environment.

In "Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language," David Barton uses an ecological metaphor to point to the "interrelationship of an area of human activity and its environment;" by pointing to this interrelationship, he suggests that literacy is "influenced by" and "influences" the environment (29). Here Barton references the agency of objects, an idea that has been suggested (though often with a corresponding apology for the absurdity of the idea) by scholars as diverse as Michael Pollan (arguing that we organize ourselves and our lives around natural objects such as flowers, and not the other way around) and object theorist Bill Brown, who cites a line from a 1906 *Atlantic Monthly* article that reads, "We realize that we do not possess [things]; they possess us" (5). Brown references Mark Twain, whose house was a notorious ecological disaster and "toe-stubber" (21). Twain and his wife obsessively collected, decorated, and re-decorated their home until their health was threatened and the house was overrun with objects and they were overrun with debt. They eventually had to flee their house's object-excess, perhaps the anti-example of ecology. Brown discusses Twain's novel *The Prince and the Pauper*, in which Twain chronotopically realizes his material obsessions. My question is

how people's relationship to objects spill over into the writing process, simultaneously spurring on and inhibiting the writer. The ecological notion of the habitat, then, looks at how person and objects exist together in a place, in a fluctuating continuum of concordance and discord generally oriented, despite Twain's cautionary tale, towards achieving balance.

I have used the notion of the writing habitat to extend my inquiry into writers' private and public dwellings and ask questions of the people, objects, and routines performed within them. Borrowing from the ecological metaphor and the notion that "literacy is embedded in other human activity," I propose an investigation of the writing process that sees the writer embedded in a writing habitat that is integral to the writer's process (Barton 32). In order to study the writer, we must study the habitat and understand the complex relationships writers form with the objects they wield and that wield them and the places both occupy.

Material Threads in Writing Studies

In the landmark study *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*, Janet Emig used the term "alchemy" to describe the state—in 1971—of our field's knowledge of the composing process. Although research has been conducted on the cognitive aspects of the writing process, it has either generally ignored the writing habitat or treated it as peripheral. The metaphor of "alchemy" is still a good one to use to describe our knowledge of the why and how behind our choices in creating the writing habitat and using objects within it. This is particularly the case with writing behavior and rituals, to which writers often assign magical powers, despite knowing little about whether they are helping or hampering process.

In her study, Emig asks questions such as "If the context of student writing—that is, community, milieu, school, family—affects the composing process, in what ways does it do so, and why?" "Under what conditions—physical, psychic—do students start to write?" and "What psychological factors affect or accompany portions of the writing process?" (8). Emig, and later others (Flower and Hayes), attempted to study the writing process in a more clinical setting that reflected the social scientific and psychological research they were emulating. Hence these researchers pulled writers from their writing habitats and studied them in several one-to-one "sessions." Interestingly, in her study design chapter, Emig does not even cite the particular location (i.e., school/home) where the meetings took place. Each subject was tape recorded as she or he composed aloud in Emig's presence. It is clear that though she cites the need to study and understand context, community, psychology, and process, and though she made perhaps some of the most important steps for our field towards studying these parts of the writing habitat, Emig leaves much to be explored.

My work also stands on the shoulders of more recent scholarship that has addressed objects mostly in passing, leaving them on the periphery. It is these texts (in combination with my work towards a certificate in Material Culture Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison) that illuminated material dimensions of the writing process, practice, and identity that demanded focused, ethnographic attention. A handful of texts, for example, reference the "scene of writing" or beg for attention to writing's material or environmental context, such as Linda Brodkey's "Modernism and the Scene of Writing," Marilyn Cooper's "The Ecology of Writing," Ann Ruggles Gere's "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of Composition," and Kevin Kopelson's *Neatness Counts: Essays on the Writer's Desk*.

Many ecocompositionists call for attention to writing's environmental locality, but stop outside of the home (Dobrin; Dobrin and Weisser; Weisser and Dobrin; Reynolds). Objects pepper the literacy practices in foundational literacy and sociological research, such as Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words* and Deborah Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives*.

Shirley Brice Heath's "Literate Traditions" chapter in *Ways with Words* is populated with references to the objects that guide and inhabit the Trackton and Roadville residents' literacy practices. As you'll read in the passages excerpted below, these objects are not the locus of Heath's attention; however, she references dozens of objects as diverse as yield signs, books, and bicycles. By citing these objects, she points at the interconnectedness between objects and the community members she is studying. Notions of objects' agency are embedded in her references to them; yield signs encourage reading practices and children learn how to read or use written texts in order to make better bicycles out of the ones they have. At the very least, Heath uncovers the dependency between her participants and the objects that populate their lives.

Neither Trackton nor Roadville residents practiced frequent writing in the home, yet Heath references writing habitat-related details, and particularly, the scene of writing (at the kitchen table); of one Roadville home, Heath writes: "Parents and children frequently wrote letters or cards or colored. Bedtime stories and sessions of coloring and cutting and pasting in books at the kitchen table come to an end when children go to school" (228). Concerning a Roadville resident, Heath says, "Mrs. Macken, while kneading bread, kept one eye on Kim, who was studying a single sheet of lined stationery at the kitchen table. Kim twisted and turned, chewing on the pencil, while Mrs. Macken said, 'Just ask how they are, and tell them what you've been doing. Then tell them 'thank you' for the nice birthday present.'" In these two above

passages alone, Heath cites various objects: letters, bread, lined stationery, the kitchen table, and a pencil, many objects that surface repeatedly throughout my own research. While some of these implements are writing tools (such as the paper and stationery), others have a more complicated and multi-faceted relationship to writing, such as the table. The kitchen table has been a primary site in my project, as many people cite the kitchen as the site where they performed their schoolwork from pre-kindergarten until their adolescence, when their work shifts into more solitary spaces such as bedrooms. The kitchen table is complicated and re-inscribed with cultural and biographical meaning when used as a literacy site, and not an eating surface.

The back-to-school shopping process also surfaces in Heath's work; significantly, she references it in order to discuss children's use of objects to convey aspects of their identity:

> When the children were preparing to go to school, they chose book bags, tee shirts, and stickers for their notebooks which carried messages. Almost all of the older boys and girls in the community wore tee shirts with writings scrawled across the front, and the children talked about what these said and vied to have the most original and sometimes the most suggestive (191).

While Heath does not dig closely into the why of this behavior, the attention to these school-centered objects is helpful.

Ultimately, Heath includes an unexplained laundry list of items in this chapter worthy of study, such as hymn books, hymn boards, Bibles, obituaries, newspapers, cards, bicycles, letters, pencils, stationary, tool sets, yield signs, and stop signs, just to name a few. These are the objects that populate Trackton and Roadville residents' lives and foster the literate practices they engage in.

In *Literacy in American Lives*, Brandt not only calls explicit attention to the materials of writing, but details how they are important components of "sponsorship;" in fact, it is hard to read her work without noting the important role that objects from the printing press to the computer play in the economics of literacy and the lengths some of her less privileged study participants travel to access objects that promote literacy. Citing Daniel Bertaux, Brandt suggests that one way to trigger research participants' memories is by asking questions about their "material surroundings" (12). This is important, as objects' agency asserts itself through its complex relationship with memory. Brandt links the concept of "sponsors of literacy" to the "commercial references" that inhabited her research participants' literacy narratives, "the magazines, peddled encyclopedias, essay contests, radio and television programs, toys, fan clubs, writing tools, and so on, from which so much experience with literacy was derived" (20). Early on in this project's conception, I could not forget a reference in Brandt's text to "literacy's material: the things that accompany writing and reading and the ways they are manufactured and distributed" (20).

In "Limits of the Local: Expanding Perspectives on Literacy as a Social Practice," Brandt and Katie Clinton lean on Bruno Latour in order to ascribe "thing status" to literacy and to show how "literacy as a something is still there when people around it are gone . . . that which is still acting when people have stopped talking, reading, or writing" (348). As materials accompany us throughout our lives, endemic to nearly every action we perform (even a handstand requires ground, after all), their appearance around literacy is not surprising.

Because of objects' significance to writing, I am surprised by the lack of sustained ethnographic attention to the operation of objects in the writing practice and the implication of

them in the development of a writing identity, especially considering that for the past thirty years, scholars in various fields, such as material culture studies, consumer research, marketing, and social psychology have labored to show how "things matter," that "taxonomies of materials forms [are] often of significance precisely because being disregarded as trivial, they [are] often a key unchallenged mechanism for social reproduction and ideological dominance" (Miller 3).

In these fields, studies of material things as diverse as the pencil (Petroski), teapots (Prown), one kitchen table (Epp and Price), and shopping lists (Miller), have highlighted how much everyday objects can teach us about human life and human-object relations. In writing studies, a few works stand out for their focus on the material dimension of writing. In her dissertation, Susan Wyche lays the philosophical groundwork for investigations of ritual behavior in writing by emphasizing both the rhetorical tradition's and ritual's reliance on invention; in a short piece titled "Time, Tools, and Talismans," Wyche contributes what is perhaps the most extensive research into ritual and the writing process, though she leaves "ritual" largely undefined. Wyche surveys two classes of academically "at risk" students at San Diego State University in order to discover more about their writing behaviors. Taking a psychophysiological approach, Wyche briefly analyzes her students' behavior and its effect on the writing process. She stops short of elaborating on ritual's psychological and emotional impact on writing practice, but this piece is an important needling into the under-researched material practices of writers who perform them largely in secret, not realizing that all writers are plagued by demons, obsessions, and good and bad habits.

Lastly, in "Chronotopic Lamination: Tracing the Contours of Literate Activity," Paul Prior and Jody Shipka discuss illuminating case studies of academic writers and the layering of

experience, of time and place, that occurs throughout our writing practice. They ask us to consider how the activities we do in the interstices of writing traditionally conceived, such as biking, gardening, or being with friends, is inseparable from the writing act itself. Their work encourages a complex, sensitive reading of what could be read as strange behavior, such as when one of their study participants, before a challenging writing task, uses her furniture to blockade herself into her writing space and restrict her free motion throughout her house. Her reward is finishing and dismantling this physical obstruction. Although I came to Prior and Shipka very late in the writing of my dissertation, the notion of chronotopic lamination, as well as of the chronotope (Bakhtin) has invaded my object research.

In response to the conversation that has been starting around objects, and building on work in other fields reviewed in depth below that addresses material things more directly, my dissertation proposes three things. First, that in order to understand the writing process, we need to know about the places and objects writers perceive as important to it. Second, that writers' affective connection to these objects and places is of greater importance to the writing process than its truthfulness; by this, I mean that it is possible that writers could write in circumstances and with things that their emotions or mind tell them they couldn't, but the latter is less potent than an understanding of these writers' emotional and material attachments. Third, that knowing why writers can't write is as important as knowing why they can, and that understanding the material things they write with and places in which they write will contribute to our field's understanding of writing's pains and pleasures.

Accordingly, this study aims to put considerations of the materials, environment, rituals, and lived experience of writers in their right place—as elements of what I am terming the writing habitat.

Disciplinary Intersections: Building on Material Culture Studies

The lack of attention to things and place where the writing process is not a condition of writing studies' myopia; instead, this blind spot is one that is reflected in culture and the academy as a whole. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton write that "It is surprising how little we know about what things mean to people. By and large social scientists have neglected a full investigation of the relationship between people and objects," as well as the role of "material objects" in "understanding human life" (*Meaning of Things* 1). As they write, "Social scientists tend to look for the understanding of human life in the internal psychic processes of the individual or in the patterns of relationship between people; rarely do they consider the role of material objects" (1). The trend in writing studies is similar; studies of the writing process have tended to focus either on cognitive processes of writing that extrapolate the writer from her or his natural writing habitat (such the writers in Emig's landmark study *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* and the work of Flower and Hayes) or they take a socio-constructivist approach, emphasizing the collaborative and social nature of writing (Vygotsky, Barton). In "Fieldwork in the Living Room," Stephen Harold Riggins makes a related claim, that the "few passing comments about the most obvious features of informants' homes" in sociological ethnography might be based on sociology's emphasis on "face-to-face interaction," rather than "physical setting" (103).

Material culture studies and related fields have foregrounded the role of things that others have devalued and/or scholarship has ignored. Material culture studies scholars might study the social history of the dining room chair, the cultural importance of the shotgun house, or the practice of quilting. In what is now the classic material culture studies methodological text, and also a gripe for material culture scholars searching for a method that can be used across disciplines, "The Truth of Material Culture: History or Fiction?" Jules David Prown defines material culture as "the manifestations of culture through material productions." "The underlying premise," he writes, "is that human-made objects reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of the individuals who commissioned, fabricated, purchased, or used them and, by extension, the beliefs of the larger society to which these individuals belonged" (Lubar and Kingery 1).

Prown outlines a methodology for studying artifacts by analyzing their style, a process that begins with thick description of the artifact and ends with analysis prompted by metaphoric association (such as that a teapot might remind one of a breast, warmth, and comfort, for example). The idea is that "Style is most informative about underlying beliefs when their expression is least self-conscious, and a society is less self-conscious in what it makes, especially such utilitarian objects as houses, furniture, and pots, than in what it says or does, which is necessarily conscious and intentional" (5). Although it is arguable that utilitarian objects are less self-conscious than other objects (after all, companies invest a lot of money into market testing, branding, and design), it is true that as a culture, we tend to take these objects less seriously than others that we invest with more meaning, often meaning heightened by cultural and media-driven appreciation and valuation (such as wedding rings, cars, and computers). It is not part of our

cultural training to dwell on more everyday objects such as the writing materials we organize or litter our work desks and studies with. As Steven Lubar and David Kingery write, "Too seldom do we try to read objects as we read books—to understand the people and times that created them, used them, and discarded them" (viii).

What I intend to bring into focus in the field of writing studies, then, is ethnographic research into writers' everyday psychological and sensory relationships with their habitats and the objects within them. By "object" I generally mean those man-made things that are three-dimensional and can be held and touched. However, the field of material culture often studies modified and unmodified natural objects (such as gardens and food/foodways) that help us "to understand better the relationship between the structure of human-made things and the structure of natural things in the physical universe in which we live" (Prown 2).

Some "objects" in my study posed a classification dilemma. Books, for example, have a material exterior and an artifactual history that can be traced and studied (an important facet of artifact analysis). Inside of books is intangible content that cannot be studied in the same way as its physical container. Computer files are now immaterial manifestations of what were historically text-based objects. And music is complicated, as its case is generally the physical, material, tactile thing, one that historically has been valued in its own right as an artistic production (this is increasingly not the case with digital music forms), while the immaterial, intangible music itself has an expansive spatial component that surrounds and floods writers and becomes inseparable aspects of their writing practice. This has raised a semantic problem in my research, as writers tend to treat objects such as the Ipod, MP3, and computer files in similar ways as their material counterparts, expressing object attachment as they would to any other

three-dimensional object. For the purposes of this project, I will note when I am stretching material culture's notion of the object to meet my semantic needs.

Consumer Research, Marketing, and Social Psychology

Throughout this dissertation, my work has been dependent on the extensive, elaborate, and revealing research conducted in consumer research, marketing, and social psychology. I have grouped these fields together because of the network of influence authors in these fields have on one another. These works—that are broadly concerned with revealing the human dimensions of consumption and the impact of consumption rituals on people's lives, are woven throughout each chapter of my dissertation.

In his article "Why We Need Things," Czikszentmihalyi suggests that objects help people to stabilize themselves through objects, which remain fixed, while life does not. Objects "reveal the continuity of the self through time, by providing foci of involvement in the present, mementos and souvenirs of the past, and signposts to future goals" (23). In his work with Rochberg-Halton (cited above), for which the pair interviewed more than 200 families, the researchers conducted one of the largest qualitative studies of the relationship between people and things. Their research revealed which objects people value and how this changes over time, and presents a catalogue of the meanings people attach to particular possessions over the course of their life span.

Russell Belk is an inexhaustible force in exploring the many ways in which humans make meaning of their lives through possessions, as well adding body and weight to the way in which people's attachment to and desire for things is discussed in scholarship. In "Possessions and the

Extended Self," he traces the history of self-concept literature and showcases research that displays how objects over which people exert control come to be "extensions of the self" valued as much or more as certain body parts. In "The Sacred and the Profane in Consume Behavior: Theodicy on the Odyssey," Belk outlines the history of treatments of ritual performance and theory—as both relate to possessions—in the literature. This text forms part of the backbone critical to my understanding of the way that writers in my study came to sacralize certain objects, such as the Moleskine notebook. Belk's research encompasses the workplace ("The Extended Self and Possessions in the Workplace"), theorizes consumer desire for objects ("The Fire of Desire"), and analyzes the favorite possessions of Indian immigrants ("Artifacts, Identity, and Transition"), to name just a few pieces that have enriched my inquiry into human/object relations.

Many scholars have pulled on intellectual threads hanging in Belk's work. Kleine et al. expand the notion of the extended self with qualitative research that argues for a view of selfhood that is multiple. Individuals, they argue in "Mundane Consumption and the Self: A Social Identity Perspective," possess multiple identities; hence, they argue for not extension of self, but extensions of selves. Their work is critical, as well, for pointing out how identities develop in a social context; in my research, it has been impactful in helping me to theorize the identity of Writer.

Identity has also been explored by "possible selves" researchers, scholars who explore the way that self-concept not only fuses individual's' past experiences and current selves, but the way they envision and enact future selves, the selves they wish to become. In "Possible Selves," Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius write a history of self-concept research and argue that "to

suggest that there is a single self to which one 'can be true' or an authentic self that one can know is to deny the rich network of potential that surrounds individuals and that is important in identifying and descriptive of them" (965). Their work, along with that of Oyserman's, relies on possible selves as a concept with the potential of helping underserved populations develop self-concepts that help them to achieve in school and beyond. In "A Socially Contextualized Model of African American Identity: Possible Selves and School Persistence," Oyserman et al. reveal the potential of "future-oriented components of the self-schema . . . for putting the self into action" (1217). This text also posits a social model of identity encapsulated by the phrase "What others are now, I can become" (1216). My work builds on possible selves research in order to showcase the role objects play in this imagining and becoming of future selves, the way that objects are used to support the performance of identities and to envision—and enact—new ones.

Lastly, consumer research highlights how family practices and family identity is tied up with objects and object use. The impact of two works by Amber M. Epp and Linda L. Price reverberates throughout this dissertation. A simple question that appears in Epp and Price's "Family Identity: A Framework of Identity Interplay in Consumption Practices," "Who are we as a family?" triggered large-scale reevaluation of my dissertation data in its wake (50). The notion that family identity is practiced through objects and object rituals helps to conceptualize the strong role of the family not only in literacy acquisition, but identity performance, and specifically schooling and writing identity performance, in childhood and adolescence. "The Storied Life of Singularized Objects: Forces of Agency and Network Transformation" features, as its protagonist, a kitchen table; in this work, Epp and Price highlight the impact that one

object, in its participation in and direction of the construction and disappearance of family practices, has on family identity.

Consumer research and possession scholarship is too vast of a field to treat in any more depth here; however, I refer to it throughout my dissertation, as it is central to understanding how children began to develop a *schooled self*; how they begin to develop a self-concept and multiple identities in adolescence that they try on and practice with goods; how certain students begin to develop identities as Writers that they perform and inhabit with, against, and around others; how they articulate these identities, and maintain them, through possession choice and use; and how their (writing) identities and practices persist in adulthood and surface through practices performed with and around objects and in their various writing habitats.

Study Design and Methodology

One primary research question motivated this study: "How do objects and writing environments mediate the writing process?" Supplementary questions that undergirded the study were:

1. What is the role of material goods in the mediation of writing practice and identity? How do writers lean on objects in the expression and maintenance of this identity? What is the psychological relationship that emerges between writers and objects meaningful to their practice? What cultural phenomena support this relationship?

2. How far back can people track the development of their relationship to objects, and what correlation is there between childhood relationships with learning objects and places and adult writing preferences and practices? How early does a writing identity

emerge and what cultural practices support the development of this identity? How is the grossly understudied, $22.8 billion dollar back-to-school ritual implicated in this development?

3. Which material objects play the greatest role in the mediation of writing? How does access to material goods impact the procurement of these objects, the development of a writing identity, and writing practice?

In order to honor my study questions, which required in-depth, life story interviews (Atkinson), and in order to honor my study participants, who yielded intimate personal life history experiences, I used a hybrid study design and methodology. Although my principle method is one that might be new to the field of composition and rhetoric, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is gaining popularity in psychology and related fields (Reid et al. 21). I describe IPA in depth below, because of its potential novelty to and promise for readers in our field. Throughout my study, and particularly in the data collection and coding stages, my work was informed by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss; Strauss & Corbin), and particularly by the work of Kathy Charmaz, as conceptualized in *Constructing Grounded Theory*. I ultimately turned to IPA as a primary methodology for its "double-hermeneutic approach," a "two-stage" interpretive process in which both participant and researcher are involved in meaning-making (Smith and Osborn 53). IPA "emphasizes that the research exercise is a dynamic process with an active role for the researcher in that process . . . the researcher's own conceptions . . . are required in order to make sense of [the participant's personal world] through a process of interpretive activity" (53). I gravitated towards an approach that would be dynamic in this way, as my pilot and post-pilot initial interviews revealed that although many themes and

ideas persisted across interviews, each participant's interview, as it spoke to that person's particular life experiences and self-reported memories of them, had an internal logic. IPA allowed me to make connections across interviews, while still mining each one separately for its revelations about my topic. My research also situates me within the psychology of writing, and indeed, both my interview script and my interviews yielded rich data about the writers' psychological dependencies and emotional states throughout their writing process and practice. This is not surprising, considering the vast phenomenon of writer's block and writing anxiety, both psychological states that play a large inhibitory role in writing practice. My study participants also communicated a large degree of anxiety over the quality of their writing and (perceived) expectations of their audience, which were often interrelated. Because of these themes, using a method that allowed me as the researcher to probe carefully into psychological, affective dimensions of writing practice was helpful.

The IPA method is recommended most, in fact, for studies involving sensitive data elicited from a small number of study participants, as few as one, with the mean being 15 (Smith and Osborn 55; Reid 22). Small sample sizes are recommended because the IPA researcher exhaustively reads and re-reads interview transcripts, looking both for themes and superordinate themes; as Jonathan Smith articulates, "The detailed case-by-case analysis of individual transcripts takes a long time, and the aim of the study is to say something in detail about the perceptions and understanding of this particular group rather than prematurely make more general claims" (55). Although larger sample sizes are less frequent, samples sizes as large as 42 have been documented (Reid et al. 22).

My study's sample size of 28 far exceeds the average; however, by using both grounded theory and IPA, I was able, as I detail below, to select participants and record, transcribe, and code interviews consistent with both methods, and then—in the second stage—to subject the 18 most salient interviews to "the painstaking analysis of cases" required by IPA (Smith and Osborn 56). This method is in line with IPA's prescription that researchers use "homogenous samples:"

> The general idea is that if one is interviewing, for example, six participants, it is not very helpful to think in terms of random or representative sampling. IPA therefore goes in the opposite direction and, through purposive sampling, finds a more closely defined group for whom the research question will be significant." (56)

Rather than aiming for homogenization, I searched for as diverse a set of participants within my study parameters; I searched for participants who showed an engagement with material things in the writing process, who write or used to write on a daily basis or had some similar reason for being in my study, and who either expressed interview in my topic or were recommended through word-of mouth. On the latter point, I followed Robert Atkinson's advice that

> Generally, in cases where you want to learn something about how individual lives unfold over time or interact with other lives, the best candidates for a life story interview may be those people who emerge naturally from your everyday interactions. It may be a friend or someone that you stumble on by chance, or a friend may tell you about somebody interesting that he or she has met. The key is in zeroing in on someone who intrigues, inspires, fascinates, or perplexes you. (*Life Story Interview* 27)

I purposefully tried to avoid interviewing one category of writers: people who wrote fiction and were already published or people who defined themselves as almost entirely fiction writers. This was for one main reason: the coffee table and writers-on-writing literature had already detailed, very poetically, writers' daily routines. I was concerned with capturing the writing habits of more "everyday" writers, by which I mean ordinary writers who write for a living or write daily in some capacity. In this sense, a project assistant at the university is as interesting to me as a retired Department of Natural Resources employee (both of whom I interviewed). In other words, I wanted to include the voices of people I had not heard as much from in published work on writing practice. I also sought out interviews with schoolteachers. I am interested in this cohort because they not only write themselves on a daily basis (teacher reports, lesson plans, comments on student work, writing on the chalkboard), but construct materially rich learning environments for students. They could also speak in detail about the way they see materials operating an institutional, regulatory level at school, as well as on a personal level at home. First-generation students, underrepresented populations, and people who had grown up in families that broke with traditionally-conceived family dynamics (such as people who were raised by people other than their parents or in single-parent households) were important to me so that I could see if and how their material dependencies were unique, how their parents or guardians procured materials for their schooling, and how they navigated the school system (and its demand for access to material goods) in novel, creative ways.

Instead of looking for a homogenous group of participants, I instead looked for diversity in terms of age, first-generation schooling status, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomics, and race, holding constant the key criteria for my study listed above. My participant pool included the

following: 14 women and 13 men; four middle and high school teachers, three of whom were middle-aged and had children of their own; and three participants who self-identified as "African-American" or "black," one Puerto Rican man, one American Indian man, and two men who identify as Japanese-American. This means that roughly 26% of my participants were minorities. Four participants, of diverse ages, were first-generation students.

As the study progressed, I discovered that objects and environments were complicated in similar ways in all of my participants' lives, regardless of age, socioeconomics, etc., but the types of materials used or the types of spaces people wrote in varied. Put another way, writers formed dependencies on things, places, and routines, despite their differences. The writers who self-identified as having the poorest backgrounds conveyed ways in which their families (whether single-parent or not) provided them with access to goods to the best of their abilities, so that they generally described themselves as having had everything they needed; they also said that it was not until middle school that they became aware that they were less advantaged. Only one participant had a very strong negative response to material attachments while growing up; her mother, indeed, was extraordinarily creative in her procurement of goods for her schooling, taking a job as a janitor to provide her daughter with a private-school education for a few years and, later, coordinating a group that organized school supplies for the less advantaged. This participant is the only one who remembered back-to-school shopping as a torturous time; she felt extreme guilt and anxiety over needing things, especially since her family was homeless several times during her childhood.

Following the practices of IPA researchers, I conducted semi-structured interviews, which "[allow] the researcher and participant to engage in a dialogue whereby initial questions

are modified in the light of the participants' responses and the investigator is able to probe interesting and important areas which arise" (Smith and Osborn 57). I designed an interview script (Appendix) with more than 100 questions grouped into sections. As one of my supplementary research questions was written to try and capture how writing behavior, object attachment, and writing identity develop over time, with early childhood experiences impacting adult practices, the first section of my script asks for a wealth of biographical data and questions meant to elicit information about both the participant's literacy development around objects, as well as family literacy history. Other sections asked in-depth questions about my participants' early reading, writing, and schooling histories; early access to learning materials; scenes of childhood learning and writing; the back-to-school shopping process; adult writing behaviors; adult object use; and family identity practices, both in an ideational sense as well as those that involved material objects.

Before the interviews, I outlined the focus of my study, explained the procedure I followed in obtaining permission from UW-Madison's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study, asked the participant to read the IRB consent form, and obtained my participant's signature. I detailed the course the interview would take and let my participants know that it was okay to ask to stop to take breaks, to ask for clarification, or to let me know if they did not feel comfortable responding to a particular question. The nature of my study required me to ask for sensitive biographical data in the first section of the interview; I was concerned about how this might affect rapport between my participants and me and so I discussed the interview structure right away and explained my purpose in asking them these sensitive questions up front. I asked the majority of my participants the more than 100 questions

that appear on my interview script; however, the semi-structured format ensured that I could be "guided by the schedule rather than be dictated by it" (Smith and Osborn 58). If a participant raised an issue out of order, it was generally more important to me to follow her or him down that conversational path than to redirect the interview. I tried, in fact, not to redirect, except when time or other pressures, such as awareness of my participants' schedules, required me to. Semi-structured interviews also enabled me to alter my script in response to their feedback and ideas; I added many questions that repeatedly surfaced as critical, deleted questions that were off-putting or that did not generate useful information, and in general, was flexible with the subjects my participants felt were important. In the end, this yielded some critical data; for example, several participants told me information about what I now categorize as "associative objects" in Chapter Three, objects that are neither writing utensils nor connected with writing on the surface, yet play important roles in the formation, expression, and maintenance of schooling and writing identity, such as clothing worn to school and objects written on in school.

Following the advice of qualitative researchers across the spectrum, and ignoring Glaser's insistence that "one of the strongest evidentiary invasions into grounded theory is the taping of interviews," I recorded the interviews two ways: on my MacBook using music recording software called Garage Band and also using a digital recorder (82). Glaser sees a conflict between the recorded interview's suggestion of evidentiary completeness and grounded theory's "use of interviews for conceptualization or for generation of concepts or hypotheses" (82). However, because of my perspective that one of the most important tasks a researcher has is to honor her participants' language and life experiences, and because of the inaccuracy and slowness of hand-written notes and the faultiness of memory, I instead subscribed to Charmaz'

notion that "transcribed tape recording of interviews provide details for nuanced views and reviews of data" (87). I took limited notes while writing, so that I could actively engage with my participants during the interviews.

When transcribing interviews, I was sensitive both to linguists' concerns with transcribing interviews whole and with Smith and Osborn's suggestion that "one does not need the more detailed transcription of prosodic features of the talk which are required in conversation analysis" (65). Although Atkinson advises researchers in *The Life Story Interview* not to transcribe their own questions, so that the transcript might read more like a whole story delivered by the participant, I departed from this method because of the semi-structured interview format and my desire to relay my participants' stories as accurately as possible. Since I was diverging from the interview script in order to follow the conversational train, I wanted to make sure that I had recorded our digressions accurately, as well as to have the ability to be aware of the impact that my questions had on the responses I elicited. For example, I did not include responses in my dissertation that I felt I, unaware of my role, had prompted to a high degree. However, since it is a foundational principle of IPA that the researcher is visible and is an important part of the interview and interpretive process, I felt my contributions to the discussion through questions and responses should also make up a part of the total story that the interview script recorded.

Capturing pauses, diction, and conversational/relational cues such as laughter was a more complex issue. In general, I transcribed everything I heard, including pauses, laughter, and idiosyncratic speech features. As dialect is hardly fully captured by a scholar untrained in linguistics, and since I would not be capable of performing linguistic analysis, I did not go beyond this in my transcription, knowing that I could return to the audiotapes if I needed

clarification regarding how a person was feeling as we were talking. I wrestled with how to transform transcriptions into quotations, but ultimately was more concerned about how my participants would feel having their verbal tics transcribed on the page; I did not feel I lost meaning by cleaning up their speech in this way. I tried as diligently as possible to present their ideas as they were uttered. I was moved and persuaded by Brandt's presentation of her transcription process in *Literacy in American Lives*:

> Such editing indeed washes out the dialectical diversity of the people I spoke with. However, not trained as a linguist, I lacked the skill to transcribe accurately the range of regional accents and dialects that I heard. Although the racism of our society often invites researchers to hear and inscribe aspects of the most stigmatized dialects (for instance, Ebonics or the 'broken' English of second-language speaker), the speech of the nonstigmatized is not so closely scrutinized for its deviations from the accepted standard. It is out of a sense of evenhandedness, then, that I have converted all the speech that I quote into standard edited English." (14)

Deviating from Brandt, I did not edit each person's narrative into standard edited English; at times, I left in the speech of all of my participants phrasing that was likely a product of the context of being recorded and of engaging in an atypical, sometimes one-sided interview. I left some hazards of the interview process in the text when it felt pressing or wrong to edit such things out.

I analyzed the interviews using a grounded theory methodology, and specifically that outlined by Charmaz. As she explains, "The core components of grounded theory studies are

analytic categories developed while studying the data rather than preconceived concepts or hypotheses." Beginning with hypotheses and applying them to my data, I felt, would prohibit me from fully engaging with and honoring my participants' life stories.

In the initial stages of coding, my process was informed both by grounded theory and IPA, as they use similar methods. Following Glaser and Strauss, I refrained—as much as possible—from applying a critical lens to the interview transcripts. Instead, I followed Charmaz' extraordinarily cogent and visually rendered process of coding line-by-line and experienced her contention that "ideas will occur to you that had escaped your attention when reading data for a general thematic analysis" (50). For example, a second coding of an interview with a close friend, following Charmaz' advice to code using active verbs, revealed a theme of "peer relations," as well as other themes, that had escaped my attention during the first round of coding. Following IPA procedure, when coding, I read the transcript several times, annotating interesting aspects of the narrative on the left and coding, or listing emerging themes, on the right (Smith and Osborn 67). In later stages of analysis, I used the "constant comparison" prescribed by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss; Charmaz). I wrote memos, following Charmaz' graphic, detailed instructions (72). And I read and re-read the transcripts, looking for themes (Reid et al. 23), theme "clusters," and "superordinate themes," higher-level categories that describe the phenomena observed in theme clusters (Smith and Osborn 72).

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis stresses freedom in writing up the study (Reid 23), but the general purpose is to make connections across data, both noting convergences and divergences. One of its central tenets that I adhered to quite naturally was the idea that "analysis should be developed around substantial verbatim excerpts from the data" (Reid et al. 22).

Incorporating my participants' voices in my work was important to me throughout; by doing so, I invite the reader to weigh my reinscription of their words within my own narratives against my interpretive rendering of them. My affection for my participants' life stories, I hope, translates into my attempt, in many places, to keep their narratives whole. As a result, my participants' voices resound throughout my dissertation.

Dissertation Chapter Outline

Chapter One, "The Sacred Life of the Moleskine Notebook: Material Things, Writing Practice, and the Expression of Writing Identity," performs a "cultural biography" (Kopytoff) of the Moleskine notebook. In this chapter, I show the richness of what a single object can reveal about writing practice, writing identity, and the way in which objects come to be "sacred" (Belk) in writers' lives. First, I present the social history and cultural phenomenon of the Moleskine notebook, an object that has taken on cult status in the recent past. This cult status can be attributed in part to branding; Moleskine's various parent companies took a type of small, anonymous, black notebook published by hundreds of bookbinders in France and branded it with an aesthetic and a history. Despite the falseness of this "history"—Moleskine's claim that famous authors and painters such as Hemingway and Picasso used these notebooks—the Moleskine has come to be seen by writers as a weighted object of desire inscribed with the promise of connecting them with the literary divine. Awareness of this promise, and its impact on writers, surfaced throughout my interviews; the writers in my study were able to recite Moleskine's branding narrative, which is smartly printed on a little pamphlet that sits in the back pocket of each Moleskine.

In the second part of the chapter, I turn to three case studies of Moleskine users, one who shows extreme attachment to the object, one who falls in the middle, and one who does not. Using Russell Belk's distinction between the "sacred" and "profane," I argue that the more sacred the object to the writer, and the more it takes on quasi-religious and mystical significance for the writer, the more the object's use is compromised and the more strained or conflicted the relationship becomes between writer and Moleskine. I show how desire for the object can co-exist with this strain, at the same time that the most complete use of this writing object was displayed by the writer with the least totemic attachment to it. The Moleskine is an example of an object that signifies being a Writer; as such, people turn to the Moleskine as a way of trying on the role of the writer and to find inspiration through contact with the object.

In Chapter Two, "Schooled Selves, Writing Selves: Identity Articulation through Sponsored Rituals," I develop a materially dependent theory of writing identity and practice that begins in childhood, intensifies in adolescence, and ricochets throughout adulthood. When children enter school, they begin to develop a *schooled self*, or a general education identity, that emerges in the context of school and because of and around objects. This happens in part through the back-to-school shopping ritual, part of a roughly $22.8 billion dollar industry (second only to holiday shopping) with no peer-reviewed scholarship analyzing it. Back-to-school shopping is an institutionally sponsored ritual through which schools regulate early childhood object use and the meanings children associate with school objects and through which schools also pass down rules regarding behavior that is expected. It is unique in that it is also a family sponsored ritual through which parents pass down critical information about their object preferences, family values, and the construction of family identity through objects. Although this ritual has a regulating function,

it is also a highly nostalgic one for both parents and children, one that generates excitement about and facilitates learning. This chapter shows how access to material goods impacts one's ability, in childhood and beyond, to do school; to develop an educational identity; to articulate that identity to family, friends, and teachers; to negotiate the schooling situation; to learn; and to help in defining family values around objects. The schooled self that emerges in grade school and middle school serves as the foundation from which a more particularized writing identity later develops.

I then turn my attention to another writing ritual, the family-sponsored purchase of a writing desk, which marks one's entry into adolescence, the development of more particularized identities (such as writer), and an inward turn—adolescents, in search of privacy and an identity of their own, generally make a move towards working in private spaces, such as the bedroom. Rather than working at a writing desk, however, my participants use the desk to demarcate space in shared rooms, to begin to imagine possible selves as writers, and as a means of articulating their emerging identity to those, with those, and against those around them. In this chapter, I posit a materially dependent practice (Reckwitz; Schatzki; Warde) of writing that emerges around objects and is inseparable from them. I argue that no study of writing practice is complete without attention to the objects that help writers perform it.

Chapter Three, "Object Lessons," answers some of the research questions I began with: "How do objects mediate writing?" and "How and why do writers lean on objects to negotiate feelings of writer's block and writing anxiety?" It also functions as a sort of catalogue of the objects that continually surfaced as important in my interviews and through my grounded theory approach, objects that I did not have space to address in depth in my other dissertation chapters.

The first section does the anticipated and expected: I look at objects' mediatory role in writing, the way they help writers to approach difficult tasks, they way they act as accompaniment, the way they stand in-between writers and their thoughts, in both facilitative and constraining ways. I use the terms "cold" and "hot" to describe the way in which objects enter our life inert, or "cold," devoid of history, save what we know about them from prior experience, culture, and media; as we use them, and as they accumulate cultural, biographical, and experiential meaning and history, they become "hot" and take on totemic power in the lives of writers. I observe that hot objects have extraordinary ability both to facilitate and constrain. In the second section, I reverse the focus of my analysis. My research revealed many ways in which writing mediates objects, the way that writing changes the value, use, and nature of objects through repeated contact with writers and in practices. In the third section, I look at three cases in which "mutual mediation" occurs—these "objects," the kitchen table, the coffee shop, and the (Apple) computer participate in an endless chain of mutual influence and transformation, with writing and object impacting each other and inscribing in each other new meaning and purpose. Finally, I contend with associative objects, objects that are not writing utensils and are not on the surface correlated with writing, but which my study participants reference as critical to how they developed schooled selves, to how they formulated and now practice their writing identities.

The Conclusion addresses patterns across chapters, issues that emerged through my study's write-up and both faculty and colleagues' responses to my work, limitations of the study, and directions for future research. I define more carefully some words and phrases that proved to need further turning over and explication as the study progressed, such as "writer," "writing," "writing identity," and "writing selves." I discuss some of the implications of these terms' use

and meanings, as well as their import for writing studies. Many topics for future research surfaced throughout the duration of the study, often as a result of the study's limitations, such as my having chosen, for this first pass at this subject, not to interview children and adolescents. Here, I sketch some of these important topics that revealed themselves as noteworthy, but did not get full expression in a chapter. Issues of access/lack of access to material goods pervaded my study, for example. As I note above, I found that in most cases, growing up poor or with less access to traditionally conceived family dynamics did not change the degree of object attachment, access to material goods, or object use; instead, my study participants grew up in families that obtained material goods in creative ways, often using other networks or resources than economic ones to procure them. It is important to address, however, the point that most of the people whom I interviewed were success stories: almost all of my study participants who grew up less monetarily advantaged were on the cusp of finishing post-graduate degrees. This means that they are good examples of the potential for families to provide in unique ways, as well as of the impact that their parents' creative strategies—combined with the writers' persistence—had on the development of their schooled and writing selves. This and many other topics will be explored in the book-length version of this dissertation and, hopefully, in other scholars' work.

Chapter One

The Sacred Life of the Moleskine Notebook: Material Things, Writing Practice, and the Expression of Writing Identity

In a life history interview with David, a writing program administrator at a Midwestern university, David describes himself as a "compulsive notebooker." His fetishization of notebooks—including reading other writers' notebooks and beginning to write in his own—began when he was a freshman in college:

> Fetishize is not too heavy a word . . . I became so fixated on them . . . At that time I was getting into writing. I was an English major. I was reading a lot. I was sort of discovering reading, really, for the first time. I was fantasizing about being a writer . . . I started reading writer's notebooks . . . I started reading the notebooks of Albert Camus.

David connects his emergent identity as a writer, his *writing identity*, and its relationship to a material object, the notebook. His fantasies about being a writer and his performance of writing involve looking to other successful writers' *practices*. By doing so, he begins to internalize tropes of the successful (literary writer) and incorporate these tropes into his own writing *practice*.

Although the term "practice" is often associated with figures such as Bourdieu, in this article, I use it in the sense championed in recent work by Reckwitz, Schatzki, and Warde, all of whose work attempts to push off from Bourdieu's more abstract, structural theories about "Praxis," or the "whole of human action" (Warde 133) in order to concern themselves with the

human dimension of consumption, in order to capture what people "do and feel" (Warde 132). Reckwitz offers the following definition of a practice:

> A 'practice' (Praktik) is a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge. A practice – a way of cooking, of consuming, of working, of investigating, of taking care of oneself or of others, etc. – forms so to speak a 'block' whose existence necessarily depends on the existence and specific interconnectedness of these elements, and which cannot be reduced to any one of these single elements. (249)

By positing a *practice* of writing, I mean to incorporate more than that which is implied by the phrase "writing process," which circumscribes a sphere of activity tied solely to the act of writing and preparing to write. Instead, a writing practice, I hope, implies the larger scope of living as a writer. It suggests a skill, a trade, a way of being. It includes the space in which writers work and the objects they employ and are surrounded by when they write. It is relational, meaning that a practice develops with and against others. In Schatzki's terms,

> To say that the doings and sayings forming a practice constitute a nexus is to say that they are linked in certain ways. Three major avenues of linkage are involved: (1) through understandings, for example, of what to say and do; (2) through explicit rules, principles, precepts and instructions; and (3) through what I will call 'teleoaffective' structures embracing ends, projects, tasks, purposes, beliefs, emotions and moods. (89)

Most practices are nebulous and learned through the act of becoming literate in their ways; we can read David's turn to the notebooks of famous writers as a way in which he begins to try, understand, and adopt the practices of individuals who have successfully embodied cultural expectations of what it means to be a writer. Connected to Schatzki's notion of "emotions and moods" are the aesthetic properties of writing, the sensory experiences of connecting with physical things, places, and practices.

On a trip to Europe, David found the notebook that for him would become quintessential, the Moleskine. In a bookstore in Florence, he saw a pile of little black notebooks and he described for me their appeal:

> I found this notebook and I thought, "Oh, this is really cool," and I bought one. And it had that little story in it about how Hemingway used these notebooks and that really drew me in. I thought . . . "This is an artist's notebook." I was still wearing the hat of the expatriate writer. So that's something that, at the time, kind of, drew me in.

David tapped into an exoticized literary heritage in order to imagine and practice being a writer and expatriate. He was and continues to be drawn to the Moleskine notebook because of its aesthetic (he calls the notebooks "clean little slabs of black") and his sentimental attachment to them, which developed out of this trip to Milan, as well as their relationship to his early envisioning of himself as a writer.

This article's purpose is to bring attention to the importance of the kind of relationship described above—that between writers and material objects— into the heart of writing studies. In specific, this article is in part a cultural biography (Kopytoff) of the Moleskine notebook, an

object that has achieved cult status amongst writers; through it, I argue that objects such as the Moleskine are an important component of the *practice of writing* that writers begin to develop at an early age and that these objects figure prominently in the identity work that transpires from adolescence onward. Igor Kopytoff argues in "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process" that "biographies of things can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure," such as how an object is used and made meaningful by people (67). Cultural biographies of things can ask questions such as, "What are the biographical possibilities inherent in [an object's] 'status' and in the period and culture and how are these possibilities realized? Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things?" (Kopytoff 66).

Considering the deep reliance on objects that people and writers experience from childhood onward, and considering the deep link between writing practice and objects, the latter have largely remained untheorized in our field, despite their meaningful, frequent appearances in works as diverse as Deborah Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives*, Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words*, Ann Ruggles Gere's "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of Composition," and Fulwiler's edited volume *The Journal Book*[1]. In "To Seem and To Feel: Situated Identities and Literacy Practices," Lesley Bartlett begins to articulate a material approach to writing studies when she calls for attention to the "cultural artifacts" that open up figured worlds of literacy practices. These artifacts, which for her are sometimes tangible objects (such as an inkpad used to sign one's name or notebook used to signal being literate), but are

[1] The Journal Book, and other works in the notebook and journal scholarship, tend to focus on the activity of writing, the relationship between journal-keeping and thought, and classroom practice, as it relates to notebook-writing. These works do not reflect a material culture approach to the study of objects, which keeps objects as the centerpiece or uses them in order to theorize human behavior and social practice.

often intangible things, such as narratives, help students to perform literacy (52). Perhaps the first serious foray into the connection between people, their workspaces, and objects is in Prior and Shipka's "Chronotropic Lamination" which I came to only recently, and which investigates the impact of objects on workflow and idea generation. My work in some ways picks up where theirs left off, as it asks how objects "mediate behavior" (Prior and Shipka 180). However, my focus is more material in nature and is concerned less with how objects impact workflow and idea generation and more on employing objects to uncover writing practices and relationships between writers and objects that are as often less consciously performed and experienced as they are consciously constructed.

By performing a cultural biography of the Moleskine notebook through a case study of three writers, I answer questions such as: What role does the Moleskine notebook, and others like it, play in the practice of writing? What writing phenomena does the Moleskine mediate? How do writers rely on Moleskines to help them manage writing anxiety and writing pleasure? How do writers make meaning out of writing *materials*? How do writers interact with objects such as the Moleskine in the formation of a writing identity and their exploration of this identity? The purpose of this article is to set the stage for a body of work that shows that "things matter" (Miller) to the field of composition and rhetoric and that we cannot understand the complex practice of writing, including its impact on the beings who write, without attending to writing's material dimension.

In an attempt to merge a material culture studies approach with the practice of writing studies and to perform a cultural biography of the Moleskine, I begin with the object: I trace its history, design, and marketing, in order to show at once the powerful branding that the

Moleskine producers have achieved, as well as the inevitable gap that always emerges between a maker's product and consumers' use of it. To reveal the complex, personal ways that writers relate to objects, I read the branding of the Moleskine through work in material culture studies that makes sense of the push and pull between commoditization and individualization of objects. Next, I present a case study of three writers whose uses of the Moleskine exemplify the intimate connection writers have with objects throughout their writing practice.

The Moleskine Phenomenon: Through this Tool, You Might Become the Next Hemingway

By now, you are probably familiar with the classic Moleskine, a simple, black bound notebook. But unless you are a dedicated Moleskine user, and even if you are one, you may not be familiar with the expansiveness of the Moleskine phenomenon. Each of the classic Moleskines are bound, covered in faux leather, held together symbolically by a plastic band, and contain a pocket attached to the back cover into which is inserted a "history" of the Moleskine notebook whose purpose is to perform important branding and marketing work. In this narrative history, each Moleskine contains a promise: that its users can tap into an imagined, exoticized literary and artistic heritage, that of legendary writers and artists. Each notebook is physically inscribed with this promise through the following text:

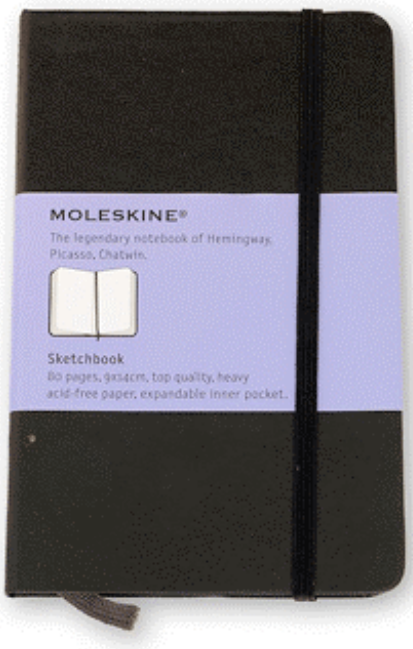

Fig. 0: The Moleskine Notebook, (Photo courtesy of moleskine.com)

Moleskine is the legendary notebook, used by European artists and thinkers for the past two centuries, from Van Gogh to Picasso, from Ernest Hemingway to Bruce Chatwin. The original Moleskine parent company, Modo & Modo, successfully branded not only its creative past, but also its aesthetic present:

> A simple black rectangle with rounded corners, an elastic page-holder, and an internal expandable pocket: *a nameless object* with a spare perfection all its own, produced for over a century by a small French bookbinder that supplied the stationery shops of Paris, where the artistic and literary avant-gardes of the world browsed and bought them. A trusted and handy travel companion, the notebook held invaluable sketches, notes, stories, and ideas that would one day become famous paintings or the pages of beloved books. (Moleskine.com)

Embedded in the words "simple," "nameless," "spare," and "small" is a classic aesthetic, one that foregoes the contemporary clutter of logos, overdesign, and corporate identity in order to locate itself in cultural longing for a perceived simpler, analog, less cluttered time.

It is not an exaggeration when I say that Moleskine users constitute a cult of sorts; a simple search in newspaper archives yields hundreds of articles. Typing the word "Moleskine" into Google reveals thousands of user photographs and blog entries, detailed images and accounts of writers' and artists' creative, often obsessive, uses of this object. A Moleskine user created a fan blog (Moleskinerie.com) that achieved such popularity that the company eventually took it over and now runs it itself. On Flickr, users upload hundreds of thousands of images and create groups for Moleskine users and photographers. The Moleskine company itself manages a

Flickr group called "Moleskinerie" with more than 15,000 members. Users have created several Moleskine groups with members in the thousands. Contributors upload photos such as these:

Fig. 0: "Moleskine Travel Kit," (Photo courtesy of Dmitri Popov)

The photo titled "Moleskine Travel Kit" is an example of a trend called a "hack:" user-designed customizations of objects. All one has to do is type "Moleskine hacks" into Google to access a vast resource for individuating one's Moleskine.[2] Figure 4 depicts a user's hand-cut, tabbed, and labeled Moleskine. The urge to customize an object such as a Moleskine can be understood through the consumer's desire to take an object out of the commodity realm and "singularize" or "sacralize" it. *Singularization* is an individuated experience of making meaning from a thing and decommoditizing it by integrating it into one's life (Kopytoff; Epp and Price, "Storied Life" 821). According

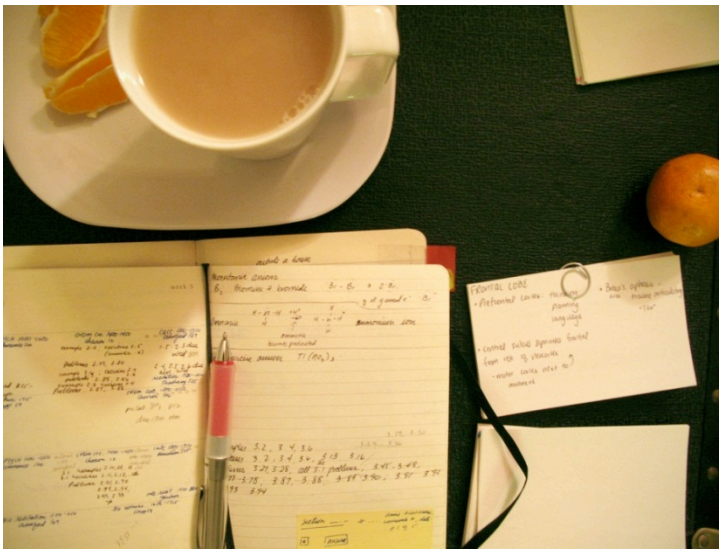

Fig. 4: "(work) flow," (Photo courtesy of HaagenJerrys, public image on Flickr)

[2] For example, "The Monster Collection of Moleskine Tips, Tricks, and Hacks" painstakingly details the Moleskine notebook for each sort of user (such as visual artist, graphic designer, student, writer) as well as catalogues websites and blog posts that offer Moleskine hacks which in general include instructions and often photographs.

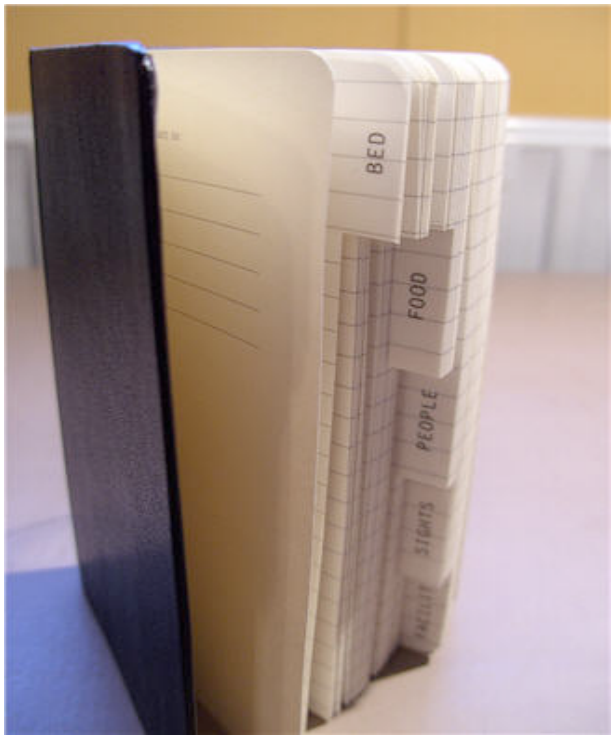

Fig. 5: Hand-cut, customized Moleskine (Photo courtesy of gtdfrk

to Kopytoff, "an eventful biography of a thing becomes a story of the various singularizations of it" (90). The elaborate tabbing and hacking systems discussed above can help a writer to transform and ritualize what might otherwise be seen as mundane work (such as keeping a calendar) or to organize what is perceived as already singular: one's writing. In effect, notebook- and journal-keeping is one of the most interesting acts of singularization, as the self is implicated through the act of writing, and handwriting in particular is viewed as a trace or mark of the self.[3]

There is a vast theorization online and in the news media about singular relationships people have with their Moleskines. And, similar to the Apple phenomenon, the aesthetic relationship appears deeper because of the company's branding than is warranted just based on the product or technology alone. Many Moleskine users suggest that they turn to the notebook to counter their technology-cluttered lives. One journalist writes, "In this digital age where everything is electronic and online . . . there is an unsurprising movement towards the simple pleasures of paper notebooks. Given how intangible our new millennium of Word documents

[3] In chapter 3, I discuss in more detail the ways in which an individual's handwriting is an extension of the self and a projection of the self into the public sphere.

and e-mail is, the tactile nature of good-quality paper and the scratch of a pen as you write on it seems to enhance, even *sanctify*, the act of writing" (emphasis added) (Shapshak 4).

It is hard to say exactly how many Moleskine users are aware of the company's aesthetic and literary branding, but if popular response through various media such as newspapers and blogs is any indication, it seems safe to say that the narrative—and its internalization—is widespread. There is some tension in the company's branding, in that this object, which was once produced by small bookbinders in France and then distributed to bookshops, is now widely available in bookstores such Barnes and Noble (and, formerly, Borders), distributed worldwide, and mass produced in China.[4] The branding is also mostly spurious. "It's not even clear that Hemingway used a Moleskine at all," Joe Lavin writes; "He merely mentioned that in Paris he wrote part of a novel in a notebook that fit in his pocket." Small, anonymous, unnamed notebooks were commonly produced by small bookbinders in France until the 1980s.

As the story goes, author Bruce Chatwin named this anonymous book the "Moleskine" upon discovering that the last family-run, artisanal bookbinder in Tours (Moleskinerie.com) had gone out of business, when its factory burned down ("Le Moleskine n'existe plus," Chatwin exclaimed in his novel *Songlines*). Before this, the Moleskine was a "Franglais generic term for stout waxed canvas: a waterproof cover that protected the contents of your protected notebook from rain, spilt milk and bodily fluids" (Bywater 7). In 1997, a Milanese Italian design company, Modo & Modo, began producing the notebook we now know as the Moleskine, patented the

[4] Moleskine's Wikipedia page indicates that there is some fan controversy over the Moleskine's high cost, in light of its production in China, a notoriously cheap labor market. Moleskine argues that production in China is necessary because of its tradition of bookbinding and various paper production and arts; it also claims that the making of a Moleskine requires both mechanical production and hand-performed tasks and that quality control for this hand-rendered work is superior in China to other countries. Moleskine claims to have exhaustively researched and tested production at various sites.

name, and "began one of the most audacious branding exercises of recent decades"(Bywater).[5] In 2006, Modo & Modo, unable to keep up with demand for the notebook, sold the company for 60,000,000 Euros to Société Générale, a French investment fund, which re-named the company Moleskine Srl.

The Moleskine's narrative, however, is not the only point of tension. These notebooks are expensive, running in the neighborhood of $10-15 for the smaller sizes, and $20 for slightly larger ones, and their aesthetically charged design makes some writers very conscious about how they use them. "I have tons of Moleskine," one person writes, "All empty . . . It's terrifying to aim anything that resembles a writing implement at it. I've gone back to those sordid, crass pedestrian notebooks."[6] This terror at abusing the Moleskine is another example of the tension between the sacred and the profane: once an object becomes sacred to a writer, it may demand particular behavior and uses, as my case studies reveal.

Yet despite these tensions, the Moleskine has become a very popular artifact for contemporary writers, perhaps the quintessential artifact. The branding and ubiquity of the notebook account for only a part of its popularity. "It's a personal object of desire," journalist Juan Rodriguez writes. This gets closer to the heart of the matter. Writers desire something, something that the Moleskine advertises and delivers. What we desire reflects on who we are and who we wish to be. Part of desire is tactile, and so the sensory and aesthetic relationship writers have to Moleskines cannot be discounted. In the same way that contact with a religious object

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[5] Modo & Modo's marketing department itself acknowledged that the branding is "An exaggeration. It's marketing, not science. It's not the absolute truth." Modo & Modo seems to have gone even further in acknowledging the spurious marketing through recent revisions to the history of the Moleskine found online and in the back of Moleksines. The text now reads, "The Moleskine notebook is the heir and successor to the legendary notebook used by artists and thinkers over the past two centuries . . . ." (emphasis added) (Bywater).

[6] Comment by Raymond Arzadon on Jose Dalisay's blog entry. See Works Cited for Dalisay's URL.

such as prayer beads can help a person to get in touch with what is considered sacred, a connection to the Moleskine can help writers tap into what they consider to be a sacred literary heritage.

What's clear in the above examples is that the Moleskine transcends the status of the ordinary notebook. Like the Apple computer, it has successfully branded itself in a way that yields an aesthetically-charged quality that writers use in trying to access something beyond themselves. As filmmaker Llewelyn Roderick attests, "Writing in a Moleskine is different from writing on an ordinary piece of paper. There's a certain respect and reverence for your thoughts and ideas. It's not as transient as a scrap of paper, and there is nothing as disposable as a Word document" (Qtd. in Shapshak 4). "It doesn't make what you're writing special," he says—"it makes *that* you're writing special" (emphasis added). A bookstore manager attests that "It's also nostalgic, to put your pen to paper. It definitely has a retro feel about it, although retro is maybe the wrong word. It's more classic, like Charles Dickens, the good old classic authors. It creates that sense of literature" (Qtd. in Shapshak). Journalist Oliver Farry writes that the Moleskine appeals to his "sense of writerly gravitas" (23).

What's apparent is that writers have a deep connection to this object that likely surfaced from the company's very successful branding and design. Yet not even Moleskine could have predicted the fervor with which consumers have approached this simple object. Because of its popularity, Moleskine has entered the calendar market and produces countless specialized, discipline-specific journals. The company has launched the Moleskine Artist Marketplace, where consumers can buy "one-of-a-kind, customized notebooks, journals and planners directly from

artists" (Moleskine.com). Once again, Moleskine taps into writers' and artists' desire to become artists and writers themselves through the inculcation of a practice.

Additional Theoretical Background: The Sacred, The Profane, and The Extended Self

This cultural biography of the Moleskine considers how writers make meaning of objects that are purchased as commodities and then removed from the commodity realm by being given meaning, made individual, by being incorporated into writing lives. Whereas a commodity is something that has exchange value and can be exchanged for an object of similar value (Kopytoff 69), writers' notebooks such as Moleskines—once "hacked" or written in— are particularly unsaleable, unexchangeable, and decommoditized. Moleskines, and notebooks and journals in general, could even be regarded as things that are restricted by "terminal commoditization, in which further exchange is precluded by fiat" (75). Although there is no direct prohibition on the re-sale of a notebook, and although many writers' notebooks are sold during writers' lifetimes and upon their deaths, writers see the violation or sharing of their journals and notebooks as a violation of self. It is probable that even the loss of a hacked, but not yet used, Moleskine would be seen as a violation of self.

The concept of "sacralization" (Kopytoff , Belk et al.) is critical to understanding writers' attachment to writing objects (and places). In "The Sacred and the Profane in Consumer Behavior: Theodicy on the Odyssey," Russell W. Belk, Melanie Wallendorf, and John F. Sherry exhaustively theorize the notion of the sacred and note that in an increasingly secular world, consumption has become a sacred (and often ritualistic) act; through consumption, people

"sacralize experience" (1, 9-12) and objects, often treating them reverentially, as "set apart, extraordinary, or sacred" (2).

Writing, in popular discourse and personal practice, can be added to this list of sacred activities, and the physical container of writing becomes a sacred object. I have no interest in critiquing this sacralization of consumer/object experience. Instead, I wish to understand and shed light on the phenomenon of attachment between writers and objects in order to learn what it can teach us about writing practice. For, as Belk notes, "Consumption involves more than the means by which people meet their everyday needs. Consumption can become a vehicle of transcendent experience; that is, consumer behavior exhibits certain aspects of the sacred" (2).

Consider a notebook anecdote: Fiona, a 22-year-old graduate student and "dedicated and compulsive" Moleskine user, describes her relationship to her Moleskines as "stewardship;" she says that she "panics" not if she loses her keys or purse, but if she loses a Moleskine for even a few seconds. Losing a Moleskine feels "disrespectful--I feel like a sort of steward of them as very personal objects, I feel responsible for them, and so it feels like a really big failure or carelessness on my part given the kind of investment I've made." This investment is partially financial, but mostly emotional.

Fiona's notion of "stewardship" highlights nicely two concepts: first, the degree to which Fiona, like others, has sacralized the Moleskine notebook: how personal, and a part of her identity and family, this object has become. Secondly, it reflects bi-dimensional agency. To feel responsible for an object is in some sense to anthropomorphize it, to note that the object—like a person with feelings—must be cared for. This is not strange when we consider possession research that helps us to understand how objects "extend the self" (Belk 1988) reflect "me-ness"

(Kleine et al. year), and come to represent and be seriously interwoven with one's identity, even one's family identity (Belk "Possessions"; Czikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton; Kleine et al.; Epp and Price "Storied Life" and "Family Identity").

In the multi-disciplinary research on people's connection to things, the investment displayed by people in objects is often referred to as "attachment;" attachment belies the process through which people define themselves and "maintain" (Kleine et al.) their identities through their connections to objects. As Kleine et al. note, "People are motivated universally to establish and maintain a personal and unique identity, distinct from that of others (i.e. autonomy seeking), while at the same time they are motivated to maintain interpersonal connections that also define the self (i.e. affiliation seeking)." This helps to explain the Moleskine phenomena I sketched above. People singularize their Moleskines through hacking and writing, yet they develop extensive online communities in order to use their Moleskine attachments to connect with others. Kleine et al.'s research also illuminates and supports much of what I found through my interviews with writers such as David, whom I referenced above. Klein et al.'s data from two quantitative studies shows that our relationships with other people are just as critical in understanding how and why people value objects. As "artifacts of the self" (328), possessions both "place identity in its sociohistorical context" and "are used in the processes of *becoming* by signaling that a desired identity is developing" (328). Through use of objects, writers such as David, referenced above, start to imitate the codes of a practice and embody an identity that performs such a practice.

Consumer culture research has "examined extensively how consumers can singularize commodities and use them in purposive identity work" (Epp and Price, "Storied Life"; see also

Arnould and Thompson). In a landmark article on the relationship between people and possessions, Russell Belk argues that "a key to understanding what possessions mean is recognizing that, knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, we regard our possessions as parts of ourselves" (139). They become aspects of the "extended self." Humans will rate possessions next after the brain and face, and before body parts such as the throat and ears, as more a part of themselves. In short, "the feeling of identity invested in material objects can be extraordinarily high" (144). The notion of the extended self helps to explain Fiona's stewardship of her Moleskine journals. Similar to the way a child might feel responsible for a stuffed animal or blanket, a security object, a writer feels responsible for writing, which is a very material manifestation of the self and brain, as well as for its vessel, the thing which allows a writer to contain it.

Case Studies

As I hope the previous section reveals, the Moleskine has been successfully branded as a literary object, one with the potential to unlock writers' hidden creative potential through ethereal contact with the literary past. If we unwrap the Moleskine phenomenon, however, we find much nuance in the relationship between it and writers that even this successful company could not market and predict. My interviews with Moleskine users have uncovered a very complicated—sometimes productive and sometimes vexed—relationship with this object. In this section, I present three case studies that explore this complex, emotional, psychological relationship. In particular, I look at the varied life this seemingly innocuous, standard object lives in the hands of three writers. I look at their attachment to and sacralization of this object and

what it reveals about their writing identity—how it is mediated and expressed through human/object relations—and writing practice. I also argue that sometimes, the more sacred an object, the more vexed, perhaps, our relationship with it can be. It is not necessarily the case that being attached to a Moleskine makes us good users of such an object. As you'll see, my three case studies teach us that there is a relationship between our reverence for a writing object and how we then are able to use it in the performance of a writing task. An object's sacred status merely signals a connection worthy of more concentrated exploration.

David

David opened up the subject of the sacred and its connection to the Moleskine notebook during our 3-hour, life-history interview.[7] In the middle of our discussion of David's notebook use, he told me the following story, one that I repeat here at length in order to preserve his thoughtful storytelling:

> My friend gave me this poem called, "Ezekiel's Wheel." And it's just really difficult to understand. I just couldn't get it. But there was something about it that was just beautiful and I just thought, I wish I could understand poetry. I wish I could write poetry, but this is so far beyond me, you know. I don't understand why I love this. I don't understand why I'm moved by this at all. And this is part of the larger problem that I have—I'm thinking at the time—of not being able to really fully respond to what's happening to me, especially those things that are most deeply moving me. And so I was upset by the poem because I was moved by

[7] In the the form and structure of this interview, I follow the example laid out by Robert Atkinson in *The Life Story Interview.*

> it and I couldn't say why . . . So I copied it down on this piece of paper and I folded it up and I stuck it in my pocket. And I was just going to live with this poem for a while. And I just thought I'm just going to look at it every now and then and maybe after a few days I will, you know, penetrate it in some way. *And so it was an object that I was carrying around as a kind of way of dealing with a larger problem, which was that I was not a poet . . .*

Here again we find an object at the nexus of a person's imagining of what it means to be a writer. David folds up the poem and carries it with him, an example of how writers live with writing, but also with objects. Writing is more than just the act of putting words down on paper—writing is, instead, embodied and lived.

David's story continues at length. He takes a pottery class and one day, he is sitting at a pottery wheel that is normally occupied by a very skilled potter. When that potter walks in while David is sitting at his wheel, David tries to get up:

> I was in his space and he's this master and I'm this idiot messing around. And he walked in and he kind of looked at my—what I was doing and he, you know, he smiled and kind of, you know, didn't say anything—he didn't speak English. But he just kind of smiled in a very kind way. But I felt, I've got to get out of here because this guy's coming in.

What struck me in this narrative, and throughout David's interview, is David's perception of himself in relation to others who are practicing similar activities. Though the activity in question is not writing, he feels similarly about his writing and thinking: that he is, in relation to those close to him, unable to execute as he wishes he could. To return to David's story, the potter

leaves shortly after his small interaction with David, and David returns to his wheel. One of the studio workers then asks him, “Have you seen Ezekiel?” And David realizes that the man’s name was Ezekiel. And he was sitting at Ezekiel’s wheel. And the title of the poem he had folded in his pocket was “Ezekiel’s Wheel.” This is a transformative experience for David, who was becoming connected to religion once again and theorizing his relation to the sacred through everyday, co-incidental acts. David summarizes this connection:

> And this is the kind of thing that would happen to me every day. And that was—I mean, it was just, how do I—now it's not just about not being able to penetrate this poem, it's about not being able to penetrate this experience . . . I just had to, kind of, just sit there and dig my hands in the mud and just be present. And I guess that's what I mean by the connection with prayer is that I feel like that's what it means to be prayerful . . . That's like dwelling in your life. It's really being present.

David can be characterized as an extremely thoughtful, meditative, gentle, and religious person. His religion is carried into his daily life through the practice of prayer and observation of religious rituals, and also in the grace with which he interacts with others. I mention this to underscore not only the importance of the sacred in David’s life, but also the surprise I exhibited when I found, through coding, a pervasive concentration on his relation to peers and others throughout his life, particularly in the distinction between his perception of his own and their writing identities. Embedded in David’s story of Ezekiel’s Wheel is a consciousness of his relation to the writer of the poem and to Ezekiel, both of whom he feels awed by. This tension—of wanting to become something that he is not, yet witnessing it in others and trying to access

it—can be understood as the tension between the sacred that David tries to access and the profane that he tries to thwart or subvert. His attention to details and experiences such as "dwelling" and "being present" are an attempt to move from the profanity of daily life to an experience of something elevated, sacred. He does this more traditionally by attending church and raising a family, but he also tries to access the sacred through the act of being a writer.

The sense of frustration with not knowing his place and trying to understand it through his relations with the others around him is observable in his childhood and in what I read as the emergence of his identity as a writer, which develops with and against his siblings and peers. David grew up in a family of three and shared a room with his brother, against whom he defined his identity. His brother was a musician whose part of the room was occupied by musical equipment. David asked his parents to buy him a desk at a young age, and the "motivation was just trying to claim more space than [his] brother had in the room," to have more "territory."

David grew up close to two male friends in particular. Speaking about who influenced his writing most, he says:

> The people I think of as influential were sort of the people I was competing with more than anything. I remember two friends . . . we were close friends, but I remember they, every year or every semester there would be an award for language arts, an award for social studies or something, a little medal, in grade school. And the three of us always won it, but it was like some –you know, one of us would get the math one and one of us would get the language arts one and one would get the social studies one, but it would always kind of change, but we were always the three who would have it. And so I remember them as being somebody

> I was in competition with. But it was somewhat uncomfortable because one of them was a real reader, a pathological reader and he was extremely imaginative and my mother sometimes used him as a—to try and get me to read. She'd say, "Nate reads all the time." And I'd say, "I don't want to do that." You know, it would really bug me . . . He has a Ph.D., too, and he's the chief of staff at [an influential foundation].

This awareness of and discomfort with his own writing identity and others continued into college, when he was explicitly using notebooks like the Moleskine in order to support his budding career as an academic and creative writer. David met his wife in college, and he describes trying to doodle in his notebooks to make them interesting to her. He says "I would spend hours a day just writing in these notebooks. I'm not an artist at all, so I was fiddling around with visual design stuff, but not effectively."

Yet as he describes his fascination with his wife's artistry, he also narrates a tension between sacred and profane in her use of her own notebooks, a tension that he replicates in his thinking about his use of the Moleskine. Whereas he felt that his notebooks were not to be "sullied with class notes," her notebooks reflected another orientation:

> That's something that kind of both upset me and fascinated me about her notebooks when I first started flipping through them. She would just write on anything and everything. She'll be writing, you know, a poem or a story and there'll be some information about a doctor's appointment and then class notes from a history class.

In their discussions of singularization, neither Belk nor Kopytoff dwell on the role of others throughout the act of singularization. David's interview displays the degree to which he is conscious of the public image of the writer, the expectations for one who writes, and the role of peers, colleagues, and loved ones while one is becoming and performing his identity. This is part of the "ongoing social practice of self-making in conjunction with others through interaction; in other words, 'individuals make claims about who they are by aligning and contrasting themselves with others'" (Bartlett, citing McCarthey & Moje 53). His struggle to define the proper use of things, and in this case, the notebook, is a part of his effort to manage his identity.

David narrates a similar experience with the Moleskine notebook upon an occasion in which he gave a Moleskine as a gift to a cousin who was embarking on a long vacation:

> Since that time he's become this compulsive journaler in these notebooks. Recently he picked up one of mine and flipped through it and said, "This is just a list. It's lists of stuff to do, like to-do lists, and mine's a story." And I said, "Yes. I don't have time to do that." I felt kind of sad to hear that. And he was just observing something, saying, "We do this really differently." So yes, I still use these notebooks. I have tons of them, but they're more of just information than anything else.

David feels angst that he is not a "real" writer, by which he means creative writer; he sees himself as just writing down plain "information." He worries that he is profaning the sacred space of the Moleskine, which has come to symbolize the exalted state of being a (creative) writer. Part of the Moleskine's sacrosanct quality, for David, is its design. As he says,

> I have a sentimental attachment to [the Moleskine]. I like the way it looks. But I don't know the first thing about design. I wish I could look at a building or a painting and discern the language of design. You know what I mean? Read the language of design or discern the pattern that's there. And I envy people who can do that. And I feel that rather than being literate in that way, I'm pretty much at the mercy of that kind of visual rhetoric or design rhetoric.

The awe he feels for the Moleskine, then, is very tied up in conflict over his own identity as a writer and his relation to other writers and artists. Although he earned high honors in his discipline and is a successful writer and administrator, he laments, "I wish I were a better writer than I am. I wish I were a scholar, but I am not. I am a writing teacher." The Moleskine seems to lodge, for David, anxieties about what it means to be a productive and creative writer. This is because, in Bartlett's words, "doing literacy is not merely about mastering a code, but largely about developing command of literacy practices that are recognized as 'legitimate'; that is, situationally defined, arbitrarily sanctioned forms of reading or writing with (real or implied) legitimate audiences" (54). Here, David is practicing writing and experiencing the conflict that emerges when tension exists between the effort to learn a code and one's perception that one is not mastering the code. Both Bartlett and Theorodore Schatzki are useful here. Bartlett theorizes the difference between the "seeming" (the "interpersonal" identity work we do with others) and "feeling" (our internal identity beliefs)(55). Schatzki defines identity as "binary":

> In the first place, someone's identity derives partly from his or her position in arrangements and, in turn, is partly responsible for his or her position there . . . In the second place, insofar as who someone is is who he understands himself to be,

> a person's chief identity is what, if anything, he understands himself principally to be. (54)

Merging these two definitions, I propose that tensions in identity are experienced when the various roles a person occupies (writer, administrator, father) come into conflict with that person's sense of how well she or he is performing those roles. David, for instance, feels more at home with the demands of administration than writing; this is partially because of the expectations of writing that he has internalized, as well as the writing practices he observes in others, however real or imagined.

The Moleskine is an object that is bound to and reveals this identity negotiation. As Kleine et al. note:

> Self-signifying possessions help mark a path, or trail, as it were, along which we have traveled in arriving at the current me, placing identity in its sociohistorical context . . . people use possessions, events, or places to infer the meaning of self when those entities are connected to a developmental episode in the life story. That is, people use external objects to infer meaning of the self. (341)

David's sacralization of the Moleskine is something that helps him to transcend more profane aspects of existence and to access the sacred status as a writer and being that he has aspired to achieve since his younger years, as revealed through his childhood experiences, the story of Ezekiel's Wheel, and his college obsessions with notebooks and Moleskines. It helps us to understand the triad of self, object, and other that Kleine et al. note as critical in identity work with objects. They argue against literature that theorizes the importance of objects only through

the connection between self and object. “This approach,” they argue, “emphasizes self as me, ignoring the importance to self-conception of relations with others” (16). As they write:

> A possession's potency for self-significance arises indirectly via its link to a meaningful life narrative episode. Thus, possessions are not literally the self, but artifacts of the self. Self-artifacts help narrate stories of the self and reflect self-developmental tasks similar to those underlying life narratives. Self-identifying possessions reflect who I am as a unique individual, and/or who I am as I am connected to others. Possessions that mark who I am not, or who I was but am no longer, also signify identity. (16)

It is just as consequential, then, that the Moleskine notebook inhabits David’s conception both of what he is and what he is not. At a critical moment in his development as a writer, David found the Moleskine and identified in it something valuable to his self-narrative. Through this object, he tries to understand and define his writing identity, his relation to others, and his desire to escape the mundane, everyday quality of the profane. At the same time, it is undeniable that the Moleskine also reveals more troubled feelings David holds about writing and his relationship to others who write. It is likely that David’s sacred connection with the Moleskine has affected his ability to use the object freely. Lodged in it is a tension between the writer he imagined, continues to imagine, and finds himself to be.

Fiona

Fiona is a 22-year-old English graduate student at a Midwestern land-grant university. She is one of five siblings who were critically interwoven with the emergence of Fiona’s writing

identity. She describes her sibling dynamics as dominated by a "sort of economy of theft and exchange." If something was left in a common area, it disappeared. She also describes her family as "territorial" and trips to the store for back-to-school shopping as chaotic, as everyone in the family claimed styles and colors and used objects in order to represent his/her individual identity. Because her family was large, "self-definition was really related to having and owning things . . . it was really just a way of saying, 'I am an individual person, and I'm here.'" During the interview, she remembered several critical object transgressions between siblings the impact of which lasted years. Out of these dynamics, Fiona's writing identity emerged:

> At the time I started journaling, I would have been sharing a room with my younger sister, who wasn't engaged with reading or writing . . . It was all a part of a process of claiming identities that were different from each other, and so by being the child who wrote, and by being the child with books and notebooks, I had an identity that was separate from the children on either side of me that hadn't identified with those things. So, I think the strong identification as a writer who needed space and time to write was all a way to create personal space and time, so writing became this kind of impetus or excuse to gain those things that I might not have been able to gain in another way.

Thinking about the politics of her family in retrospect, she understands the development of her writing identity as "married to a desire to gain territory and space." Through argument, a valued skill in her family, she was able to argue for her own room when she was an early adolescent. This moment coincided with the start of her journaling, which developed out of a place of conflict. Fiona describes herself, as a child, as "precocious, troubled, lonely, performative, and

rebellious." She was struggling with not being challenged intellectually in school and was as a result causing trouble. When she was around nine years old, a teacher suggested she begin journaling.

Fiona is now a self-professed "dedicated and compulsive" Moleskine user. Since the age of 14, she has amassed several dozen Moleskine notebooks, a fraction of which I photographed when I interviewed her.

Fig. 6: A fraction of Fiona's Moleskine collection

Fiona is very particular about which Moleskines she'll use. Until the company changed its notebook design, she used small notebooks with a black cover that came in packs of three. When the company changed the cover of the notebook to something slightly less durable (a change Fiona did not like), she switched to the small, navy-covered Moleskines pictured above, the insides of which are comprised of graph paper. The size and graph paper are both very important to her. She chooses both of these because they reduce the anxiety of "expectation" that a notebook imposes. She chooses small notebooks because a large page implies that it has to be filled. Graph paper already takes up space on the page, which also reduces expectation.

Another part of Fiona's decision to use the smaller-sized Moleskine is because it fits in her back pocket. She says she always has one in her back pocket unless she doesn't have a pocket, in which case she has a bag that always has a particular pocket for the Moleskine, which

is an example of the type of agency objects have, at times, in their dictation of human behavior. Fiona describes them as "charming, elegant, and discreet." By discreet, she feels like they are so unimposing that she can carry them around everywhere and not be observed. Because the pages are small, her writing—or the act of it—can remain private even in public.

She is also a "compulsive writer." She uses Moleskines to process her thoughts and ideas. Their dominant use is not for writing projects, academic writing, or even lists. She uses them to record her mental experience in stream-of-consciousness format. In class, she takes notes using a more generic notebook, but the Moleskine is also out; in the Moleskine, she records all of the things that social rules would not allow her to say out loud. In short, the Moleskine is a record of her mental life, thoughts, and emotions. She cites the Moleskine as a site of "unclogging," and contrasts this to academic writing, which causes anxiety and blockage. "In class," she says, "I have to be an adult, a student who is being respectful, attentive, and engaged, and in a notebook, I can be crabby, or mean, or whatever. Over it, tired—I can be other things." Needless to say, she cites her Moleskine writing as the most pleasurable. Although she refers to her Moleskine writing as "scrap" writing, she describes her extreme emotional attachment to her Moleskines.

Most notably, this writing is not something she feels she must revisit. She knows that others conceive of journaling as a kind of record that they can return to in order to understand their lives. She says, "That's not *me* at all" (emphasis added). By saying not "that is not how I write," or "that is not how I journal," but instead, "that's not *me*," Fiona has linked her sense of self, her identity, and her writing identity to this never-ending processing that the Moleskine makes possible.

As is the case with David, Fiona's writing identity emerged with and against her siblings. The Moleskine is a sacred object that helps her to singularize herself as a writer and thinker and to conduct "purposive identity work" (Epp and Price, "Storied Life," 821"). The Moleskine is deeply integrated into her writing practice and self-conception. Whereas David has never felt at home with himself as a writer, almost as if he has always been chasing something that internally he feels he is not (whether or not this self-narrative is true), Fiona has worked out a powerful, consistent use of the Moleskine for identity work and the recording of her interior life. It is perhaps because her use of the Moleskine is so singular and uncomplicated that the Moleskine has come to be a strong symbolic marker of the sacred dimension of self-writing.

Lily

Lily, a 36-year-old graduate student who was about to defend her Ph.D. in Curriculum & Instruction at the time of our interview, is a very different Moleskine user than Julia and David, largely because of her lack of fetishization of and disdain for the Moleskine. Although she was on her second Moleskine at the time of our interview, she dislikes its branding, its link to the male canon of writers, and her experiential feeling that it is mostly male writers to whom the Moleskine and its narrative appeals. It is safe to say that for Lily, the Moleskine is a profane,

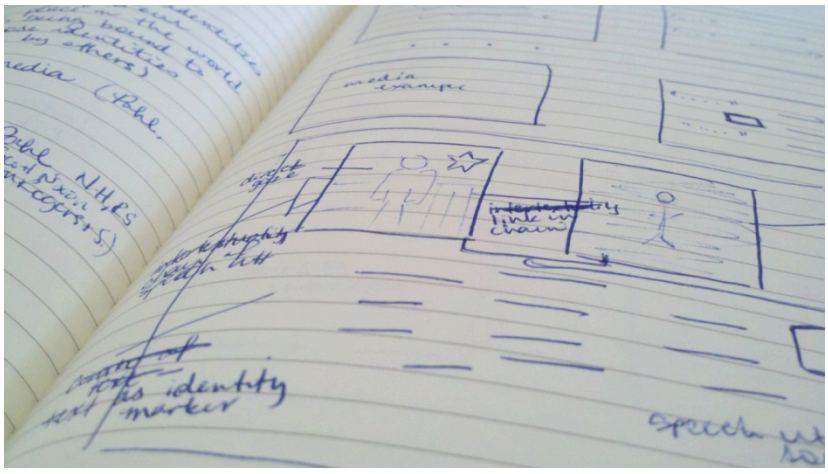

Fig. 7: A page from one of Lily's Moleskines, featuring notes and drawings

though used, object. Its profanity is linked not only, then, to its more everyday quality, but to the degree in which it does not reflect the self. As Kleine et al. have shown, "liking" does not necessarily identify "attachment" (10).

As a last resort, she began using Moleskines a year before our interview when she could not find a notebook she liked better. The notebook's aesthetic is what eventually compelled her to buy one. She prefers to have an expansive writing space, so she buys larger-sized Moleskines, which afford enough room for her to take class notes, jot down paper ideas, write down names of speakers at conferences, and even sketch PowerPoint presentations. She is fond of drawing in the Moleskine, as opposed to drawing on slips of paper, because this keeps her drawings "contained better." For her, invention, space, and the Moleskine are linked; of the Moleskine's large dimensions, she said "I like the ideas to come out; I like that space."

Lily displays an atypical (amongst Moleskine users) lack of awareness of Moleskine features beyond its shape and size. She was not aware, until I pointed it out, that the inside back cover of the Moleskine doubles as a pocket for loose papers. She does not use the page marker that is built into the notebook. She also rarely uses the elastic band that is provided to keep the notebook closed.

Still, she is extremely conscious of the Moleskine's utilitarian and aesthetic functionality. She chose it because it was big enough so that her "hand could rest on the page while [she] is writing." She cites also the Moleskine's narrow rule ("wide rule is a waste of space"), its binding ("the ring on spiral-bound notebooks always get caught on my backpack"), and its black cover, which she likes the aesthetics of, but also has conflicted feelings about. She resists the cover in that it is "boring," which somehow makes it seem "gendered masculine."

Like David, Lily switched to the Moleskine notebook from other spiral-bound notebooks, in graduate school. She says that Moleskines, being bound, "have a kind of permanence that other notebooks didn't." She feels her writing is being "preserved," partly because the Moleskines she uses, the classic style, look like bound books.

Yet although she is connected to the utility of the Moleskine, it is the act of writing that holds her attachment. She says that she has "an emotional attachment to the act of writing and keeping my life ordered or keeping the ideas going or the creativity that can be engendered through the act of writing in this book . . . . I am emotionally attached to thinking through ideas in this way."

While she says she "hates writing," she likes every stage of the process where she is the primary audience. When I asked her if the Moleskine helps her manage her displeasure with writing, she answered, "Yes, absolutely . . . I enjoy writing in the Moleskine . . . because there's no risk to it . . . . This stage is what gets me out of writer's block . . . in fact, I sometimes will just take this to the coffee shop and not my computer . . . because it will help me to get over just the fear of having to actually do the writing of it." What appears to help her unblock is the audience-free "space" the Moleskine provides. The Moleskine is her site for idea-generation. No other eyes read what she produces. In her words,

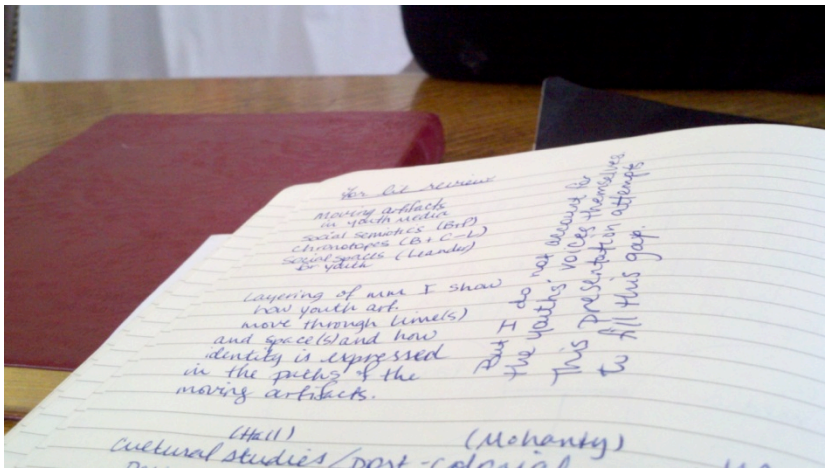

Fig. 8: A page from one of Lily's Moleskine notebooks

“when I have to translate my ideas [from Moleskine-writing] for someone else to understand, it becomes a trickier space.” “Translation” is the word she uses to metaphorize the process of moving from pleasurable self-sponsored writing (Emig) to the less pleasurable academic writing she must produce for others. The Moleskine is a site of pleasure, of invention, and of productivity. It also acts as an “unclogging” tool, as it does for Fiona. When asked if she turns to the Moleskine when she is experiencing writer’s block, she said, “Yes, absolutely. It’s right next to the computer, usually . . . and I'll go back and forth, sometimes when I'm working, I'll be taking notes, working at the computer, I'll be taking notes in the book. It depends on what I want to keep track of in my mind at the time.” Or, put another way, “The blank screen is something I just can’t deal with, and maybe this substitutes for the blank screen.”

For Lily, then, the Moleskine is a tool and a space that helps her to produce writing, to begin the creative practice that she loves. It is a stress reliever when she is working on less pleasurable tasks like the academic writing that is so central to her career. But it is not an object of obsession, liking, or attachment. In fact, Lily noted that if and when she finds a notebook that offers what the Moleskine does, she will switch. The Moleskine has not been integrated into her conception of “me-ness.” This could possibly be because unlike David and Fiona, Lily found the Moleskine at a much older age, once her identity as a writer and understanding of her writing practice needs were already cemented. The notebook’s branding also conflicts strongly with her sense of self, as it is connected through the Hemingway myth to the male canon.

Notably, Lily has the most untroubled history with and most integrated use of the Moleskine. Whereas David’s negotiation of the boundary between sacred and profane seems to prevent him from being able to use it as he’d like and while Fiona has attached the Moleskine to

a very self-sponsored, segmented part of her writing practice, Lily's lack of attachment, or her view of it as a profane object, perhaps allow her to use it in complex, integrated ways, for all forms of writing. It is her writing, instead, that is sacred, that takes this object out of the realm of the profane and into the realm in which she performs her identity work.

Conclusion

The field of composition and rhetoric needs to turn to the relationship between people and objects in order to fully understand the complicated practice of writing, one in which writers are continually managing and negotiating their writing identities.

The Moleskine notebook is just one object through which writers perform critical identity work that is an instrumental component in the development of a writing practice. As this chapter makes clear, becoming a writer is composed of many instances in which one both imagines what writers do and performs acts of writing and related tasks. A practice of writing, then, cannot be understood without considering the various tools and settings with and within which writers work. As the case studies above reveal, it is also the case that writers practice their craft with a strong awareness of their relation to those around them, whether it is the identities of siblings and peers or of a literary canon. David, Fiona, and Lily each use the Moleskine notebook aware that by using this object, they are engaging in identity work.

Talking with writers about objects such as the Moleskine can help us to understand how objects function as tools that help foster creative thinking and pleasurable writing, or how writing objects can, on the other hand, inhibit productivity. David, Fiona, and Lily each exist on a continuum of object attachment and sacralization. There may be a connection between the

degree to which a person sacralizes an object, or sees it as intimately linked with one's disciplinary performance and that person's ability to use this object freely. While Lily feels free to reject the Moleskine at any time if another, better object comes along to take its place, Fiona cannot stop using this object that is so attached to her writing identity and writing practice. Through the Moleskine, David will likely continue to work through his anxieties regarding his writing identity.

Writing is a sacred act. Writers, trying to access this sacred performance, use objects both as vehicles for this sacred production and as embodiments of it. How a person approaches and uses an object is intimately connected to that person's family, sense of self, writing history, relation to peers and others, and life story. Turning to objects is one way of uncovering the very complicated identities that make up the individual writer and writing practice.

Chapter Two

Schooled Selves, Writing Selves: Identity Articulation through Sponsored Rituals at Home and in School

Objects are symbolic representations and markers of the self, communicating to ourselves and others who we are and who we wish to be. Objects help us to perform certain aspects of our identities in childhood that develop as we enter school and begin developing a schooling identity both at home and at in the social space of school. Objects play a critical role in self-definition, helping children to learn the regulations of school, participating in the generation of excitement over school, and providing an aesthetic means through which children connect with the world around them. In adolescence, objects play a parallel, yet more conscious role in the negotiation and expression of identity, and pre-teens begin to use objects to publicly express their selves with, around, and against others. Through objects, they are beginning to discover their place in the world.

In this chapter, I turn to literature in material culture studies and social and consumer psychology to discuss the link between material possessions, object attachment, and writing identity. Work in these fields has led to a deeper understanding of individual identity and the role that objects play in its manifestation, expression, and maintenance. While these disciplines do not attend explicitly to the study of writing, they offer critical insight into adolescents' formation of self-concept (Belk; Kleine et al.), the development of identity, the relationship between identity expression and objects (Belk; Czikszentmihalyi and Rocherberg-Halton; Richins), and

the link between possession and performance in school (Oyserman). I hope to show how drawing on these theories may illuminate a foundational period in writing identity formulation.

I turn to fields outside of writing studies because, despite deep attention in writing studies and related disciplines to the link between literacy and identity, identity categories as they intersect with literacy, and disciplinary identities, our field has not fully considered what it means to develop a writing identity, how it morphs out of one's experiences as a student, and what it means to see oneself as a person who writes. For example, many have written about the way in which their literacy and writing intersect with race and ethnicity (Anzaldúa; Brandt; Heath; Jimenez; Mahiri and Godley; Perryman-Clark; Villanueva), gender (Finders), and age (Aronson; Dyson). Others have written about interactions between identity and voice (Ivanic), identity and discipline (Perryman-Clark), and many other permutations of the category/identity combination. A few education researchers write at the intersection of literacy/identity/ethnicity, such as Mahiri and Godley, who in "Rewriting identity: Social Meanings of Literacy and 'Re-Visions' of Self" present a powerful argument for how loss of the ability to write due to Carpal Tunnel Syndrome affects the identity of a college student whose self-concept is tightly wrapped around her ability to write, her literacy skills, her identity as a Mexican-American, her first-generation student status, and her ability to serve her family with her literacy. Yet even Mahiri and Godley, in this fascinating and important article, focus more on literacy as a whole and the impact that it has on identity formation and not on what it means, in particular, to see oneself as a writer, separate from other identity identifications. Furthermore, none of the work in writing studies concentrates explicitly on the role that objects play in emerging writers' lives as they attempt to develop, express, and maintain their writing identities. Forays into the experience of

being a writer, and the impact of that identity on self-concept, have mostly been left to the purview of creative writers such as Annie Dillard, Stephen King, and Anne Lamott.[8] The absence of discussions of the formation and maintenance of writing identity in the writing studies realm is a curious omission for a group of academics whose self-concept and livelihood depends on a strong conception of themselves as efficacious writers and on their having, and feeling connected to, a writing identity.

This chapter emerges from analyses of my data that show how, at an early age, my participants were practicing literacy skills and the formation of a schooling self. These skills develop around others, and in particular family and friends, and the input of these social and family realms has a significant impact on our self-development. These skills also develop around and because of objects, sometimes as simple as crayons, chalkboards, kindergarten cubbies, and toys. One's relationship to schooling objects and one's relationship to others in the school community—family, friends, and authority figures—develop simultaneously and in connection with one another. As we develop social identity markers, we shift our object preferences; as we shift our object preferences, we align ourselves with one or another social group. Around adolescence, something shifts: my participants speak to a transition from a generalized educational identity, or schooled self, to the development of more particularized ones, of which being a writer, or wanting to be a writer, becomes a component, if not a solid part. This happens with the support of social communities and often in friction with the developing identities of siblings and peers. By the time my writers are in college and beyond, they develop complex writing identities. One of the challenges experienced by the vast majority of the academic writers

[8] See, for example, Annie Dillard's at once breathtaking and gritty *The Writing Life*, Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*, and Stephen King's *On Writing*.

in my study was at once thinking of themselves as people who write, but not "writers." Society at large, and most disciplines, bracket off only fiction and poetry as "creative writing," causing identity crises for these writers who generally shifted from playing around with writing as children and adolescents to feeling cordoned off from the socially conscribed community of writers as they developed skills in their fields.

On the positive side, my research indicates that writers lean on objects in order to pursue and stabilize their images of themselves as writers and their practices as people who write. It is one of my academic goals in the wake of this research to help academic writers, workplace writers, and others begin to reconceptualize themselves and reclaim the general term "writer." Doing so has serious implications for our field and for our work, which is often trivialized in popular discourse. More importantly, perhaps, making the identity marker of "writer" salient for academics, workplace writers, and others who write on a daily basis has the potential to empower writers and help them to envision new possibilities for what they can achieve. Such a result would be consistent with literature in social psychology that shows that having a possible self-image, seeing examples of people similar to oneself achieving desired goals, and having a strong social network of people pursuing similar goals positively impacts performance (Oyserman). Just as highly-skilled mechanics who value their work, are praised for it, and know how to manipulate tools to achieve desired ends will have better success than ones who feel none of these things, people who understand the power of a connection with the identity that describes their major life's work will likely be more successful and able than those who do not. An empowered writer knows how to craft words for rhetorical impact, has an efficacious writing practice, and shares that experience with similar, reinforcing others. One who sees her or himself

as a writer also builds an arsenal of tools that correspond to that practice, making that practice's articulation more possible. In order to comprehend the power and daily experience of being one who writes, we have to understand the relationship between writers and the objects they choose to write with.

In looking at the ways in which my subjects equip themselves to perform their identity as writers, we must first dismantle the notion of the global self. Kleine et al. argue that instead of having one global self, people have a self that is comprised of many salient identities, identities that are supported by objects ("Mundane Consumption"). They write, "Markus and Wurf (1987) put it bluntly: 'Among both psychologists and sociologists, an emphasis on the multiplicity or multidimensionality of the self-concept or identity has led to the realization that it is no longer feasible to refer to *the* self-concept'. Thus, consumption phenomena might be studied more efficaciously as they relate to an identity rather than to the global self" (306). Kleine et al. demonstrate that people buy products that relate not to their "global" or "overall" self, but to one of their specific identities; as they write, "the salience[9] or importance of an identity to people drives them to enact its behavior, using identity-associated products . . . the significance of a product to consumers depends on *which* of their identities it enables and the *importance* of that identity—what it contributes to their overall sense of self" (210).

That objects reflect identity is both widely acknowledged and hotly contested. I say hotly contested, because many people reject the consumerist notion that the materials we buy and work with are expressive, as opposed to being merely functional or utilitarian. Yet consumer research and psychology have abundantly proven that humans very consciously live with and use objects,

[9] "Identity salience is the relative importance of a given identity in an individual's self-structure" (Kleine et al. 223, citing Callero, 1985; McCall & Simmons, 1978; Stryker, 1968, 1980).

that they *mean* things (in themselves and to people), and that they reflect identity (Belk; Czikszentmihalyi; Czikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton; Kleine et al.). William James, a thinker credited as being one of the first philosophers of the self, wrote that "a man's Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands, and yacht and bank-account" (qtd. in Belk, "Possessions," 139). This is an early demonstration of the notion that our possessions reflect our identities and our sense of self. Jean-Paul Sartre similarly asserts in *Being and Nothingness* that being is tied up both in our actions and our possessions. Building on James, Sartre, and identity theorists such as Erik Erikson, consumer researchers posit that we have selves that we experience, access, and perform, and that objects are deeply rooted in our experiences and performances of self. As Kleine et al. note, even "mundane" objects that we use in daily living perform this function (210). This is a partial explanation for why the writers in my study can speak, at length, about the particular pens they use, the erasers they prefer, the papers they are attached to, and so on. Only one of my participants said she could write with just about any materials, but, because this writer is engaged in a mighty struggle to complete her dissertation, her lack of object-attachedness cannot necessarily be read as enabling writing. A couple of writers who displayed very strong object attachment said that, when under pressure, they found it easier to write with any materials in any place. Yet on the whole, people seek out objects that support desired identities.

Russell Belk exhaustively researches the connection between object and self through the notion of "extension" referenced above. Building on researchers such as McClelland and Prelinger (1959), who tested for which objects people felt most reflected their selfhood,

including both possessions and body parts, Belk demonstrates that possessions are as tightly incorporated into sense of self as are body parts, and sometimes more so (people in these studies rate, for example, the liver and throat as being unreflective of self, while they rate some possessions as being highly reflective of self). Work by Belk, McClelland, Prelinger, and others demonstrates that the degree to which objects are seen as extensions of the self relates to the degree of control they have over them, as well as the degree to which they feel possessed by an object. This dualism is observable in American culture at large, and in my interview data, through the phenomenon of the computer, and the Apple computer in general. On the one hand, humans have a large degree of control over this object, which gives them control over a variety of tasks and information. In the case of the iPad, the device can be held in the hand and easily carried around wherever a writer goes. Furthermore, being able to manipulate a screen by touch, and write by touch, is an intimate relationship that is not easily separable from the self. What is the computer doing and what is the hand doing? Yet in order to understand the deep attachment my participants feel towards the Apple computer in particular (none of this attachment was expressed by users of other brands of PCs), we have to look at the aesthetics of the object, the branding of the object, and also the way in which it possesses the user, the way it demands research, time, and technological knowledge.

The aesthetic of the Mac—like the aesthetics of many objects—is important to consider, because people turn to objects for their ability to extend, or reflect, the self. They also signal group membership and have impacts in the social realm, signaling membership in a particular community or communities. This is one reason why companies such as Apple, Facebook, and Amazon take pains to create ways for users of their products to develop communities around

these objects, such as support forums, book sharing, instant messaging, and other applications. Part of this is driven by marketing; part of it, however, develops out of the recognition that people who attach to objects feel kinship with others who attach to similar objects. Kleine et al. acknowledge this when they argue that "People's activities and enabling possessions are organized around their *social identities*—the multifaceted labels by which their Me is recognized by themselves and members of society" (211). Kleine et al. turn to social identity theory to broaden Belk's notion of a global self that is "extended" through material possessions, proposing instead that the self is comprised of multiple identities: "decomposing the global self into its distinct identities," they write, "elucidates which facets of a person's Me are reflected in various products (through activities) and in that sense tells us more about who he or she 'is'" (212). In their view, people's possessions are linked not to the global self, but to individual identities that make up the self.

For the purposes of my research, and writing research in general, I lean heavily on Kleine et al.'s work, which is critical in establishing an understanding of what the impact of being a writer—which is one of many identities that contribute to most writers' self-concepts—has on a person. The important question that arises from this idea is: what gives a writing identity salience?

Through two studies, Kleine et al. demonstrate several things that accord with my data: first, that identity salience comes from identification with an identity, of which a social component is an important part; second that performance of an identity, as well as identity salience, is enabled by the use of identity-related possessions (224). "Identity-related esteem" comes from performing an identity well (224), and possession of objects is related to that

performance. In Kleine et al.'s words, "The greater our *capacity* to enact such rewarding behaviors (reflected by the number of our enabling possessions), the more likely we are to feel confident in exercising that capacity—one does according to what one has, as it were" (228, emphasis author's). The arsenal of goods we surround ourselves with when we write, in other words, performs a stabilizing function; helps to create an environment, or habitat, in which we can write; and these goods also remind us, on a daily basis, that we do write and that we want to write.

Put another way, our habitat—and the objects inside of it—"frame" our writing. In "Limits of the Local: Expanding Perspectives on Literacy as a Social Practice" Deborah Brandt, and Katie Clinton write that Latour

> recognizes that objects have roles to play, independent of other (human) agents, in the conduct of various activities . . . One of them is to hold steady a certain frame such that a discrete interaction can take place and another is to mediate and aggregate events—to relocate them—in a network of events . . . Things hold you in place. (344)

Part of our writing identity, then, a large part, is constituted by our writing habitat and our writing objects. This is perhaps our habitat's greatest function and one of the largest problems cited by my participants who cannot find a private place in which they like to write. A mother in my study, for example, expressed a conflicting sentiment about the loss of private possessions and the "permeability of space" that come with having a large family and several children. On the one hand, she sees this permeability of space and possessions as promoting an ethic of shared experience and shared ownership that she values; on the other hand, she laments never knowing

where any of her (writing) possessions are, as well as not always having her own space and time in which to work. On the other hand, my participants rely on habitats and the objects within them to provide a stable frame, such as when this same writer successfully began working on her dissertation again after creating a quiet workspace in her house in which her writing could take place. Many writers in my study reporting mobile writing practices that shifted from site to site; yet each returned to a primary site that they seemed directed back towards when they needed to accomplish a difficult writing task. For one participant, this site was the kitchen table; for another is was a desk gifted to him by his uncle; for yet another it was a small, cramped desk that served to keep her awake and remind her to stay focused on the writing task.

Lastly, Kleine et al.'s studies suggest that "an attractive product is one that 'fits' consumers in two ways: (a) as part of a *cluster* of products that complement one another . . . and (b) as a *facilitating* artifact for some identity that is important to people (which gives them a reason to be a consumer)" (229, emphasis author's). Studying athletic identity among college students, Kleine et al. found that "clusters of products" were critical their subjects' performance of athletic identity.[10] Thus, objects used in pursuit of an identity or task are not valued necessarily on their own, as a single product, but only in relation to the other products that one uses in service of a task. I observed this in the little object communities the writers in my study would bring with them when they worked in public, in cafes. They would set up habitats of their most critical writing implements, usually comprised of their laptop computer, an iPod or similar device, a set of specifically chosen pens, necessary books and folders, and food and drinks, the latter often being cited as the most important to the writing process. Incorporated into this

[10] In Chapter Three, I explore these "clusters of products," which I term "object clusters," as they relate to writing identity.

environment is also the space of the coffee shop itself; the particular table that they *always* seek out first, the one they seek out second, the lighting, and so on. That they return to the same coffee shops again and again, or a cluster of shops, signals the importance of the establishing a network of habitats, including objects, spaces, and aesthetics, they can turn to for mobility and inspiration, but also as a stable frame that remains constant even as they move around with their writing. Kleine et al.'s notion that objects must both "facilitate" and be relevant to an identity that is important to people explains, perhaps, why writers carry around and keep so many objects that they don't necessarily even use, whether empty notebooks, pens, etc. These objects are important to their writing identity and perhaps act as facilitators even when they are sitting idle. As I demonstrate in Chapter Three, however, my study participants attached equally to objects that constrained their practice; at times they objects wielded even more psychological and emotional power of the writer than ones that facilitated writing.

The rest of this chapter is dedicated to examining the development of a writing identity, which starts in childhood first with the development of a more generalized educational identity, or schooled self. It is perhaps obvious to assert that the responses we receive to our performance in school when we are young, and our experiences of school, influence how we see ourselves as students. The communities we form, our parents' expectations, and our abilities are all factors in how we read ourselves as students. More novel and necessary is an investigation of the framing role objects and environments play in our childhood and adolescence and how they facilitate the continual growth first of our schooled selves and then of our writing identities.

In the first part, I turn my attention to the back-to-school shopping ritual, a monumental, highly cherished, and understudied ritual that has a pervasive impact on the formation of a

schooled self. It is second only to Christmas holiday shopping in the overall revenue it generates in a calendar year, and I have found only one article that discusses it, a work-in-progress that focuses on back-to-school shoe shopping in Croatia. This is a surprising gap in the world of academic research, as in every one of the interviews I conducted, and in every informal conversation I have with people about early childhood schooling experiences, back-to-school shopping holds more memories, nostalgia, and emotional weight than any other ritual. Children—and their families—almost ubiquitously love and look forward to this ritual, and for students who grew up in poverty, this ritual was often a very conflicted one that housed emotionally charged memories of exclusion, guilt, and pleasure. I use this ritual to demonstrate the powerful role objects play in the formation of a schooled self, in the generation of excitement over school, in the assimilation into school roles, and in children's understanding of what tools are required to be a student and how they must behave with and around them in order to learn (or be perceived as learning). I also include a discussion of how the back-to-school ritual is rooted in social frame of the family, further elucidating the inextricable link between the objects school kids use to develop their schooling selves and their social development.

In the second part, I turn to another ritual, the purchase—usually in adolescence— of a writing desk. This is usually performed by families as a unit and requested either by a family member or the one receiving the desk. I show how desks are used not merely as writing surfaces, and frequently not even for writing, but as objects that help writers to inhabit the role of the student and writer, as one of the first steps in the morphing of a more generalized schooled self into a writing identity. I use the social psychological notion of *possible selves* (Markus and Nirius; Oyserman) to illustrate the powerful role that family rituals such as this one and certain

objects play in writers' imagining of themselves as writers and conceptualization of their future goals. Put simply, objects can come to represent, and denote, both our current potential as writers and the ideals we hold for our future selves and occupations.

I. Back-to-School Shopping and the Formation of The Schooled Self

Nearly seven in ten (67%) adults say that back-to-school season means something personal to them. For many (60%), it's the official end of summer, while close to two in five (38%) say it's the best time of year to find great sales and bargains. About a quarter (21%) say the back-to-school season marks the beginning of a new year, while others (18%) admit it makes them feel nostalgic for their own school days.—PR Newswire

"Yeah, I loved it. Yeah, get my Trapper Keeper. I remember going there, getting fresh pencils, fresh erasers, you know, a binder. Sometimes those yellow folders with pictures of baseball and football players on the front that were—I can't remember what they were, what the company was called . . . And I actually saw it on a T-shirt recently. And it was just two slots on the inside. It was made out of lightweight cardboard. And it's the kind of thing where you see it and you're like oh, my God . . . It's that crazy experience of actually feeling this sort of nostalgia and sentimentality and emotional connection to a mass-produced product."—Mason

K-12 back-to-school shopping is a roughly $22.8 billion dollar industry which—combined with yearly back-to-college expenditures of $46 billion—comprises the second-largest shopping event of the year, second only to Christmas holiday shopping (National Retail Federation). School supplies generally comprise ~77% of this spending, exceeding by a long shot the money spent on clothing (58%)(NPD). Individual parent/family expenditures vary, but marketing surveys figure that parents spend between $200-500 per child, from kindergarten on, and $600-800 per college student (Business Wire; PR Newswire; National Retail Federation). Despite the vastness, institutionalized nature, and pervasiveness of this event—one that holds very intense meaning for children and adults alike—there is virtually no academic scholarship

analyzing it. Back-to-school is not alone; there is also virtually no scholarship that addresses the cubbies that housed our materials and our bodies in grade school, the impact of the tools we wrote with on the development of our feelings about writing, or even—except for a rare few articles[11]—the materials that hung on the walls of our classrooms.

We have a historical relationship to the objects we write with and around. We have worked with objects since we were children, and we participated in the back-to-school ritual with our families. We developed habits when we were little, such as how we hold our hands when we write, how we feel about writing, how we envision our educational identities, how we use learning objects, and how we began to envision ourselves as writers. People develop connections to the materials associated with schooling from the time they enter kindergarten and learn how to be a student with them. This continues through each grade, as the materials that accompany schooling either stay stable or shift. Within writing studies, we haven't asked enough questions about the materials that have accompanied us throughout childhood and beyond, such as our writing desk or our favorite pens; our material preferences are usually trivialized and viewed as instantiations of a consumerist culture that overvalues material goods.

Material culture and consumer research scholars have successfully labored since the 1970s to show that mass-produced objects are more than just their packaging and branding; people connect with objects in meaningful ways, and objects perform critical functions in the development, maintenance, and negotiation of human identity. Brandt and Clinton note that

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[11] See, for example, Patricia Tarr's "Consider the Walls" and Simco's "Whose Work is it Anyway? Display in a Negotiated Classroom." Very few articles I have found consider the semiotic, aesthetic, and material consequences of material culture in the classroom, though the Reggio Emilia school system in Italy and the Montessori tradition both have a strong investment in the importance of materials and material encounters in learning.

objects are a stable component of literacy practices. These practices develop when we are young and adhere. Objects are both used by humans and take on their own lives, directing human behavior, such as when families labor in buying a certain house that will accommodate a certain beloved table at which their family practices take place (Epp and Price, "Storied Life") or children begin to incorporate into their self-image lessons learned from their parents about family identity values expressed through objects.

Within writing studies, objects have mostly lived a peripheral life, existing, but not directly being studied for, their agency in writing practices. Paul Prior and Jody Shipka contribute much to our understanding of the writing habitat in the sketches and analyses they provide of writers' work spaces and dwellings in "Chronotopic Lamination;" they evidence the impossibility of ignoring the things and spaces that accompany our writing practices, our use of these spaces, and their use of us. That objects are keys to practices is obvious if we think about how a practice is conducted; yet as contemporary practice theorists (Reckwitz/Warde) note, we do not have a complete scholarly understanding of the important role that objects, as agents and otherwise, take on in a practice.

In a very basic way, material objects are critical to writing studies. Writing utensils of all kinds not only accompany our work, but are critical to expression. Most writers would probably agree, for example, that each method of writing, whether by hand with a pen or typing on a computer, enables the translation of ideas from brain to page in unique ways. Our preferences in utensils signify more than empty desire for products or submission to marketing; we pick tools that feel good to use, aid us in forging our (writing) identities, help us to express those identities, encourage productivity or breaks from writing, and support our writing practice. Hence it is the

case that every writer in my study could detail, even if at first they said they couldn't, the particular pens, notebooks, and other implements that they purchase to express their identities and support their practice, for utilitarian, but more often, sensory and totemic reasons.

For my interview participants, my questions about back-to-school shopping elicited the strongest emotional and nostalgic response of any questions I asked. My participants gasped or laughed when I asked them if they remembered this process and then fondly unfolded often deeply buried memories about this ritual. They remembered who took them shopping, where they went, what they were allowed and not allowed to buy, and—most notably—how back to school shopping was more than just a functional event. Yes, the schools they attended often armed them with a proscribed list of the supplies they needed to buy. Yet more than simple preparation for school was involved. In the list, they saw and experienced creative possibilities for expression in the goods they bought, and their creative expression through goods increased each year. This event generated excitement about school. It signaled, for poor participants, an escape from daily realities of living in poverty and the return of school lunch, as well as potential escape from poverty in the distant future through educational attainment. Back-to-school shopping was one strong means through which they acquired the material tools they needed in order to *do school.*[12] Through back-to-school shopping, families pass down family values and

[12] I am beginning to conceptualize what it means to "do school" and have constructed this phrase by leaning on Amber Epp and Linda Price's notion of "doing family." The phrase "doing school" singularly has the ability to help read schooling as a performance that requires props, or tools—in this case, the materials of learning. "The Storied Life of Singularized Objects: Forces of Agency and Network Transformation." *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 36, No. 5 (February 2010), 820; "Family Identity: A Framework of Identity Interplay in Consumption Practices;" and "Connected Families: How Consumption Practices Survive Distance" (with Hope Jensen Schau).

practices and help their children to begin to inhabit an educational identity. This is not unusual, as rituals are central to the creation, maintenance, and performance of family identity.[13]

In adolescence, my participants began to be more keenly aware of material, sociocultural, and economic differences between themselves and others and began at the same time to use material goods to express their developing identities and to feel the impact of having or not having the same access to materials as their peers. Finally, in adolescence, my interview participants began to feel a shift in their educational identity from being generally centered around education to feeling some sense of a *writing identity*, however complicated and sometimes vexed, that they desired to express to family, friends, peers, and others and which they maintained in part through writing materials (and this identity is explored in Part II of this chapter, through the ritual of buying a writing desk).

Part I of this chapter presents data from ethnographic interviews in order to show how objects are central to the formation *schooled selves*. I show how access to material goods generates excitement about school and impacts one's ability, in childhood and beyond, to *do school*; to develop an educational identity; to articulate that identity to family, friends, and teachers; to negotiate the schooling situation; to learn; and to help with defining family values around objects. In addition to objects, role, schools and families *pass down* critical information to their students and children about what it means to be a student and family member. The schooled self that emerges in grade school and middle school serves as the foundation from

[13] These concepts have been explored by Bennett et al. in "Family Identity, Ritual, and Myth;" Epp and Price in "Family Identity: A Framework of Identity Interplay in Consumption Practices"; Bossard and Boll in *Ritual in Family Living*; Curasi, Arnould, and Price's "How Individuals' Cherished Possessions become Families' Inalienable Wealth"; Fiese and Marjinsky in "Dinnertime Stories Connecting Family Practices with Relationship Beliefs and Child Adjustment;" Dennis W. Rook's "The Ritual Dimension of Consumer Behavior; and Wallendorf and Arnould in "We Gather Together".

which a more particularized writing identity later develops (a transition I discuss in Part II of this chapter through another ritual, the purchase of a writing desk).

In the following section, I present an analysis of what it means to *do school* and theorize school as a practice that requires materials for its execution. These materials, and their importance to learning and schooling, are introduced to children through the ritual of back-to-school shopping, a unique ritual in that it is both institutionally and family sponsored.

Doing School

Work by contemporary practice theorists builds on fundamental scholarship by figures such as Bourdieu, but attempts to get at the human dimension of consumption, in order to capture what people "do and feel" (Warde 132). Andreas Reckwitz offers the following definition of a practice:

> A 'practice' (Praktik) is a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, *'things' and their use* . . . A practice—a way of cooking, of consuming, of working, of investigating, of taking care of oneself or of others, etc.—forms so to speak a 'block' whose existence necessarily depends on the existence and specific interconnectedness of these elements, and which cannot be reduced to any one of these single elements. (emphasis added, 249)

"Things and their use" are a necessary, interconnected, and inseparable part of any practice. In this instance, the practice at stake is doing (K-8) school, one interesting because virtually everyone in society does it, in some capacity. The back-to-school shopping event is particularly

relevant, as it is often the first introduction children have—through the institutionally prescribed shopping list—to schooling. The ritual of back-to-school shopping happens, largely, in advance of school. Through it, before they even enter school, children experience the link between the purchasing of material goods and these goods' implied promise that they will embody a new social role (that of student), enter a new social space, and become socially proficient in ways that are generally important to the execution of familial and other social relationships. Acquiring increased literacy allows communication with family and others in socially and institutionally determined and meaningful ways. Even though some children's kindergarten experiences likely predate the first concrete, remembered back-to-school shopping event, this ritual becomes a physical marker of the end of school and the start of a new year, which promises just as much in terms of sociocultural development as it does an advance in content and skills education.

What does it mean to *do school*? To be successful at school requires an arsenal of material goods through which schools begin to distribute, or pass down, rules for engagement and behavior, the first iteration of which is quite possibly the shopping list. Theodore Schatzki writes:

> To say that the doings and sayings forming a practice constitute a nexus is to say that they are linked in certain ways. Three major avenues of linkage are involved: (1) through understandings, for example, of what to say and do; (2) through explicit rules, principles, precepts and instructions; and (3) through what I will call 'teleoaffective' structures embracing ends, projects, tasks, purposes, beliefs, emotions and moods. (Schatzki 89)

The school, as one of the first sponsors of writing, begins to communicate important information

about how to do school via the back-to-school shopping list. The fat red pencils, erasers, crayons, and other materials that appear on schoolchildren's earliest lists circumscribe the realm of activities that will be engaged in once in the classroom. They also perform three functions critical to acclimation to school: they generate excitement about learning; function as expressions of self and family in the social context of school; and they introduce a connection between object choice, task, and expression that schoolchildren experience and understand in increasingly complex ways throughout adolescence and adulthood.

Generating Excitement. The importance of objects (and the consumption ritual of back-to-school) in generating excitement about learning cannot be underestimated because a connection develops between the things we use and the tasks we use them for. This is part of why we experience intense nostalgia for products from our childhood, such as crayons. Researchers have linked smell and memory and acknowledged that odor plays a contributing role in helping people to recall information. But there is more to this phenomenon, as objects become interlinked with the act of learning and developmental progress, and this relationship carries on throughout adulthood. So it is significant when Jacob, a high school teacher and parent, says that:

> That Big Chief notebook, even if I didn't write much in it, signified for me this beautiful, wonderful world of writing. I'd get a pencil, and I'd get to write. And it looks so cool, and it's so neat. And it's this notebook. And it feels good; it smells good. And the pencil feels so good in my hands. But I think what I liked about it was because my brother went before me to school, and he would read to us. And we would see him go off to school and I was like, I want to go to school; I don't want to

be stuck here.

A theme across my interviews and my dissertation is that what objects signify is perhaps as important as what people actually achieve by using them. But for those learning how to do school, the sensory impact of materials and learning cannot be underestimated, as cannot the impact that peer relations, and in this case sibling relations, has on generating excitement about school and learning.

Similarly, Gretchen, who was a college student when I interviewed her talks about the power of what the back-to-school shopping process and the objects she bought, signified:

> It was a big deal. I looked forward to it for the last half of the summer. My brother and I always asked, 'Dad, when are we going to go get school supplies?' in the beginning of August. He'd say, 'It's too early. Just wait.'" Then he would set a date. And we'd go. We always went to the same store . . . And then, after that, [my brother] and I would stack up all of our notebooks and pens—maybe I just did that—I don't know if [my brother] did—in the middle of the living or the den floor. And it would sit there until school started and I would just look at it every day."

The excitement generated by objects is a component of our affective relationship with things, and, in particular, with our sensory experience of them. The aesthetic and affective dimension of writing remains undertheorized in writing studies, partly, as Alice Glarden Brand notes in *The Psychology of Writing: The Affective Experience*, because of the emphasis placed on scientific knowledge, cognition, and the cognitive aspects of writing (such as in the work of Flower and Hayes). As she notes, not only are feelings difficult to "isolate" and to verify scientifically, but

"the entire Western world privileges the cognitive" (xx). Another problem is the division between thinking and feeling posited by the philosophical tradition, in addition to Western culture's association of thought with masculinity and emotion with femininity. As Peter Elbow remarks in his foreword to Brand's text, "With all the research and study of the writing process in the last quarter century, it's remarkable how little research and study there's been of emotion or feelings in writing."[14] Read through these connections, Gretchen's simple story of piling up her school supplies takes on new meaning and life. She walks by these objects daily and experiences them in an aesthetic, meaningful way before they are even used. This experience also surpasses any reading of it as solely consumptive; her narrative explains a relationship that takes on charge after the moment of purchase, once the goods are in the home, and in anticipation of their particularized use.

Jacob narrates a very rich life with objects that began in first grade. When I asked him to share his earliest memory of writing, Jacob immediately connected memory, writing experience, and material goods:

> My best memory of writing is the Big Chief notebook, real thick paper. It was just huge. And nowadays it wouldn't be considered very politically correct. But I couldn't wait to get that notebook. It was a tablet. And get my pencil. And they

[14] My approach to the aesthetics of writing is a little different from Brand's, who was concerned with legitimizing the study of the psychology of and the feelings involved in cognition and writing: the key relationship, as far as objects are concerned, is the way in which learning—and a desire to do school and to write—is promoted through contact with schooling (and writing) materials. I am less concerned with cataloguing the emotions experienced while writing, and more invested in the memories schoolchildren have of becoming literate and becoming students; the ways in which these memories—and the experiences that undergird them—promote learning; and how these early experiences impact the formation of a writing self.

> were the bigger pencils, this big [Jacob illustrates the width], not the little thin ones. And I loved writing in it, just anything. The very first experience I guess, the real experience I ever had or felt—I think it's more with emotion and feeling is that nostalgia for that Big Chief notebook . . . and just wanting to put my name in it and just, I don't know*, tell stories* (Jacob's emphasis added).

This last utterance of Jacob's is critical to understanding the complex relationship between schooling selves, educational identities, and objects that emerge around back-to-school. What is revealed in his narrative is the tied togetherness of nostalgia, the sensory experience of the object, the weight of the object, and the desire not only to write, but to put one's name on the object, to mark it as a possession that represents and extends the self through the signature and through the telling of stories. The object is important in its ability to generate excitement over learning and it translates, in schoolkids' minds, into the learning and writing that will be practiced and performed at school. Much of what children learn about objects and their role in family and school life comes from their parents, who also experienced this ritual and who communicate valuable information about schooling and identity through this consumption practice (and object consumption in general). The next section tackles family identity, as it is expressed through the consumption ritual of back-to-school.

Passing Down

Literacy scholars debate the family's role in how children acquire the ability to read and write (Auerbach; Brandt; Chall; Chall and Adams; Chall and Snow; Heath; Taylor; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines). In an attempt to validate the literacy practices of immigrant families who

practice literacy with their children in ways not recognized by majority scholarship, Elsa Roberts Auerbach, for example, argues for a social-contextual approach to family literacy that "defines family literacy more broadly to include a range of activities and practices that are integrated into the fabric of daily life" (166). Included in Auerbach's vision for reconceptualizing family literacy are activities such as cooking and being involved with the school system (178). An important sphere of literacy practices that aid in the development of a schooled self is comprised of those that involve objects: through objects, and rituals related to objects, families pass down critical information to their children about the importance of school, the importance of tools with which to do school, and ways to express educational identities through goods. For as Epp et al. note, "Consumption practices represent some of the most ensconced, durable practices that make up family life, hold the family together, and help families define who they are as a unit" ("Family Identity" 3). Families also pass down information about what makes them a family through consumption activities such as the frequenting of certain stores, communicating rules for consumption practices and spending limits, brand loyalty, and the purchase and use of particular goods (Epp and Price; Kleine et al.). In "Family Identity: A Framework of Identity Interplay in Consumption Practices," Epp and Price look at how families "enact" identity; they define "enactment" as "communicative performances, that is, rituals, narratives, everyday practices, and other forms in which families constitute and manage identity (51).

Thus, the "rituals, narratives, and everyday practices" through which families pass down information about schooling and the materials required for schooling communicate information about family identity that translates into individual practice as children enter adolescence and develop their own practices. Parents play a key role in the formation of schooling selves and

writing identities as they make consumption choices for their children. The role that parents play, however, in family identity practices is complicated by children's movement in and out of school. Parents play both a top-down and bottom-up role both in communicating the value of school, family identity, and goods. For example, they are mediators, in many cases, between the generic list of items passed to them by schools for back-to-school shopping and the purchasing of goods, and thereby when a list is flexible, they can interpret it in a way that accords with family values.

Schools, on the other hand, are institutional sponsors of literacy that pass down critical information about behavior through the regulation of both behavior and the use of goods; schools also determine which types of goods the school values and equates with learning and development (and sometimes with grade levels). Sometimes, they determine even the actual material and aesthetic forms they take (such as religious and Montessori schools, some of which allow or require parents to pay for supplies that the school then purchases. These goods are often aesthetically and brand neutral, meant to signify certain principles, such as parity; sometimes, certain colors are assigned to certain grade levels.) But the family is a critical translator of the school list, and through consumption choices, parents communicate shared values that are central both to "doing family" and to "being a family," which Epp and Price argue is a "collective enterprise that is central to many consumption experiences" (Epp and Price, "Storied Life;" Epp and Price, "Family Identity" 50).

In a very general sense, nostalgia over their own memories and experiences of back-to-school shopping often generates parents' excitement over continuing this ritual with their children. Note how in the narrative below, Jacob—from whom we heard earlier in this chapter

on his early object attachment and memories of schooling and learning to write—cannot help but conflate his own experiences of the power of the back-to-school ritual with his children's:

> And every year when school starts even now I love getting a new notebook. Even if I don't use it all the time, I love getting that notebook. And I try to -- I guess I try to convey that enthusiasm to my students and to my kid . . . [My son's] going to be in 8th grade, and we're going to have to do his school supplies. God, I love doing that. I was like, oh, man, new glue, new pencils, new pens, brand-new folders—neat, you know? And I always loved that part. So the objects were related more—not necessarily only to writing but to everything school. Everything school. And that can go a little deeper. As far as motivation, I don't know what, I mean, how you would look at it . . . we all have this—we get this visceral response at times to memories, nostalgia, right? A certain smell and all of a sudden your body responds. I mean, I'll smell certain elements that would be considered cafeteria, and it'll take me right back to 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade, where they cook the food there, you had seconds and thirds, everything.

Food memories are particularly potent for Jacob because his family was poor, and often hungry, and at school, he and his siblings got fed, and for many students, including the ones in my study who grew up in poverty, school and food are linked, if not inseparable. But this memory is powerful in how it signals the associative power of objects, the ways in which seeing or thinking about a nostalgic, valued object calls to mind feelings and ideas about events, places, and experiences such as going to school and writing.

Across my interviews, through both participants' memories of their back-to-school

shopping and their parent's memories or current practices of their children's back-to-school shopping, certain categories of behavior emerged. My participants experienced the (1) Expression of family values through store choice and brand preferences, (2) Definition of their family identity through decisions made through the back-to-school ritual, and particularly which objects they were/were not allowed to have or did/did not allow their children to have, and (3) The way in which their parents helped to define or recognize their identities through the purchase and supply of products that could express burgeoning identities.

Expression of family identity: The dominant trend across all of my interviews was that parents returned to the same store year after year to buy back-to-school items, whether they lived in a small city with only one all-purpose store or whether they lived in a big city with multiple options. Except in a minority of cases, my participants cited discount stores such as Wal-Mart or K-Mart as the site at which their shopping took place. Some lamented the disappearance of their childhood back-to-school shopping site; these were generally small business that functioned as multi-purpose stores, selling goods from stationary to school supplies to food. A couple of the young participants experienced a more corporate and institutionally sponsored ritual, going to Office Depot or another big-business store that already possessed the school's shopping list. Store choice appeared to have little to no impact on attachment to the ritual, though the parents in my study, when they lived in the same city as they grew up in, returned to that store to shop for goods. None of my participants had parents who switched out this task; the same parent, generally the mother, conducted the shopping year after year, and only in a small fraction of cases did families participate in this event as a unit, with the result that one parent—as is the

trend with most shopping—has a larger impact on everyday objects associated with learning that children use. This ensures a relative sameness of values passed down from families to children about the value of goods, the choice of brands, and the necessity of various objects.

Defining family identity through the back-to-school ritual. My participants described values shared by their family in their narrations of the back-to-school ritual. The families repeatedly mentioned that they valued "thrift," "economy," and "not wasting," while, at the same time, remembering the particular excitement over getting new goods, which they usually negotiated for. One of my participants, Emilie—a mother of three, a graduate student, and a college English instructor—instituted with her husband a "no logo" practice for their children, emphasizing the communicative and symbolic power of goods; as a family, they talk through consumption choices and decide what values they want expressed in the products they use. From the time that her children were old enough to speak and reason, they have talked through and negotiated, as a family, which products are seen as representing family values in acceptable ways. She explained to her boys, for example, that purchasing products with Disney princesses on them could lead to body image issues for her daughter, and as a family, they agreed that this is not a desired result. Books, however, are valued by Emilie's family and since she has taken on what she calls the "collaborative project" of homeschooling, the choice of which fiction to bring into the home has taken on even more meaning. In her words, "the fiction that we choose has been crucially important in helping us to enact family . . . the ones we bought for homeschooling are a huge central part of the family, the projects we are doing together, which is homeschooling, and it's a big collaborative project." Other learning objects that have helped Emilie and her husband to

enact family values have been art supplies, crayons and paint, and a sewing machine bought for their eight-year-old son. It was a hard decision to buy the sewing machine, as it could be seen as a big gift for such a young child. But in making the decision to purchase the sewing machine, she cited the family value of the "home studying ideal, that you make the things you need." The family uses the sewing machine to make costumes for plays that are part of the homeschooling project. Through the sewing machine, the family also imagines future possibilities for itself, in this case, making their own clothes. Though Emilie says they have not accomplished this goal, imagining is an important part of the function of the sewing machine.

Self-definition through objects. Teo, an assistant professor who was a 35-year-old graduate student at the time of our interview, recounts his mother's practice of back-to-school shopping. Teo grew up in poverty in Brooklyn and was raised by his parents, factory workers who moved to the United States from Puerto Rico before he was born. His mother's poverty level increased in the United States, because she was trained in the agricultural industry in Puerto Rico, and this training did not translate to the United States.

Teo remembers the back-to-school shopping ritual with particular fondness. He liked school, but more than that, identified with being a student, despite various experiences within the school system that denied him access. It was perhaps because of his being tracked early as "gifted" that he developed a sense at an early age as having a strong educational identity, despite later being denied entry into all four of the elite Manhattan public schools. He describes doing back-to-school shopping at a local store that also sold stationary and other goods. His mom would often make him wait until the first week of school, so that they had the official list and did

not buy unnecessary items, another way in which parents who have less access to materials practice the ritual of back-to-school shopping. This process was not accompanied by shopping for clothes. “Forget the clothes,” he said to me. He only cared about the schooling objects. For Teo, objects “symbolize writing and learning.”

The consumption and literacy practices of Teo’s mother and strong kinship community tell an interesting story about his early literacy and the role that objects played in the development of his writing identity (he identifies as both an academic writer and poet), as well as the way in which Teo’s choices about which objects to purchase impacted Teo as he developed an educational identity.

> My mother, with the little that she had, she would buy me—she saw that I liked writing . . . I liked it when she bought me Little Golden Books. She bought me books that I could trace over. She bought me coloring books. She bought me a lot of markers. She bought me a lot of pens, pencils . . . and my aunt taught me how to write my name. And I would practice . . . it was always about my experimenting and perfecting letters . . . the third grade when I was learning longhand script, which also coincided with my affinity for pens. I love pens.

Teo contrasts his interests to his brother’s. His brother was a graffiti artist. He had gold pens and pen cases and other objects that went with this hobby. Teo says, “I wouldn’t write graffiti letters. I would write *letters*.” Teo acknowledges, then, an early sense of how objects correlate to practice and also displays an awareness of himself in relation to his sibling. Teo was provided with the tools to be a student. However, he and his brother did not have toys. His mother made a critical decision about which type of object to provide to assist in the development of each child.

So while Teo had pens, as he says, he did not have Legos. He did not have Play Doh. He "didn't know what the hell Legos were" until he encountered them in a doctor's office when he was in middle school. This illustrates the strong hand that parents have in prioritizing which objects do and do not appear in the constellation of material goods that helps to define them as a family.

Passing Between, Passing Up

My research supports the notion that family identity is relational, social, and constituted by multidirectional forces, such as children impacting each other and adults in the construction and reinforcement of family values. Epp and Price contend that "family consumer researchers and family researchers more generally neglect the complex interplay of individual, relational, and collective identity practices," instead focusing on individual contributions to family consumption (51). For this reason, passing between (and, perhaps, passing up) is as important a concept to the notion of family consumption and identity practices around writing and learning objects as is the notion of passing down. This is expressed in the ways in which children and adolescents bargain for objects within parameters set by schools and parents and the ways in which the objects for which they have negotiated take on, in their lives, social realms, and schools, their own lives and meanings. For example, Emilie talks about how her younger son pushed back regarding the no logo policy and his attempt to understand it through his own desire for certain branded products. Emilie and her husband were unsure of their family policy regarding superhero products. They read superhero products as signifying concepts of nobility and morality, in a grand sense, that appeal to boys. At first, superhero products—mostly given to them by others—were relegated to the private realm of the home. Yet through their son's pushing back, they also saw these products

as enabling their children to relate with other children who value these goods and their symbolic resonance. Over time, Emilie stopped monitoring these products as closely.

Objects and Thought

Holly, who was a senior in the biological sciences at the time of her interview, reflects on the connection between object and task and quite eloquently theorizes the power of the back-to-school ritual:

> In choosing the objects that you want to use you're choosing how you're going to learn in that class. A little decision like doing loose leaf instead of a notebook shows that you're ready to reorganize the ideas as you think they make sense together . . . .
>
> I think your writing utensil is kind of linked to how you're treating ideas. If you're using a pencil you're ready to be changing something; if you're using a pen you're trying to put it down permanently. I had this talk with my roommate once actually—I can't use blue pens because they're all different shades so if I lose that one pen and I'm using a notebook then the rest of it will not be the same blue. It's a problem. . . .
>
> I know I get really bored in physics, and I use colored pens in physics to make it more exciting . . .
>
> I think *your writing utensil can entice you to write*, and if you're using a pen you're thinking more carefully about what you're going to write down. (emphasis added)

Like Holly, my participants told me endless stories about attachment to objects that shifted when they entered a new stage of education (such as becoming an upperclassman or entering graduate school), writing in a different genre, or performing a certain task (such as grading). They rarely talk about this in a one-dimensional way. Color or type of pen, for example, is often, if not generally, tied to three things: generating excitement over the task, the sensory experience (the pleasure/pain in holding certain instruments or the feeling of a certain ink on the page, for example), and the way in which an implement services the task (such as blank pages allowing for more drawing out of ideas, bound pages allowing for them to be found more easily, or Holly's assertion, above, that loose-leaf paper allows for more reorganization than bound paper).

The quotations above speak to the bidirectional agency implicit in the connection between people and the objects they use. One reading of Holly's behavior is that she is choosing objects consciously that will help her to learn or to perform certain functions. This relationship is commonplace: just as a draughtsman needs certain kinds of paper on which to draw architectural plans, writers need certain kinds of implements that service tasks, such as when teachers grade in pencil in order to be able to easily erase their first rounds of comments. To return to a point made earlier in this chapter, however, objects and habitats form a stable frame from which writers choose their implements and act. It might be the case that a writer never writes a poem until she buys a notebook specific to that task. This doesn't imply that the poetry journal is necessary, simply that its existence enables certain kinds of behavior within and around it. A writer who cannot erase a piece of writing or comment written in pen might not want to cross it out and might not be able to begin again. Perhaps the writer simply makes a note on top of the other note, leaving behind a history and pattern of thought.

Literacy studies has also carried on a historic debate over oral traditions, written traditions, the translation of thought to speech and writing, and the power of writing in enabling thought (Flower and Hayes; Goody; Goody and Watt; Ong; Schmandt-Besserat; Scribner and Cole; Vygotsky). Holly's above considerations about the writing implement, and the many others I have recorded, are important in their suggestion that there is a connection between implements as simple as the pencil or as complex as the computer and the way in which they enable people, both through idiosyncratic preferences and internal psychology and also through their utilitarian qualities, to express themselves in writing, and to desire to express themselves in writing. For my purposes, the latter is equally important as the former.

As schooled selves develop, then, what also develops is a connection between objects, their ability to help us perform tasks, their symbolic function, and our awareness not only of how we dictate their use, but how they begin to dictate our use of them. Schooled selves are important to our field because there is a relationship between our identities, our ability to learn, and our desire to learn. Daphna Oyserman and others have demonstrated the various factors that enable achievement within underprivileged minority groups, such as the African American community, finding a connection between ethnic identity, what children and adolescents see as possible for themselves, and their achievement in school ("Possible Selves;" "A Socially Contextualized Model"). What we know very little about is the role that access to objects plays in the development of early schooled selves, identities that later bear down on adolescents, helping them to become people who want to learn and write.

In Part II of this chapter, I look at another ritual, a family-sponsored one, the purchasing of a writing desk, a purchase that generally happens in adolescence and that marks an inward

turn. Adolescents develop a need for privacy and their educational tasks, which are more complex; demand privacy and a place to think and work; and generally begin to migrate from the public space of the kitchen to their bedrooms (shared or individual) in order to write. This shift is accompanied, often, by the purchase of a writing desk. As you'll see in the next Part of this chapter, however, the desk performs many more symbolic and identity-related functions than merely operating at a site at which work takes place. At this desk, schooled selves generally turn into writing selves, as budding writers lean on their desks to help them inhabit, and carve out space for, this identity.

Part II: The Writing Desk, Writing Self

What I have been describing thus far is the way in which institutions, families, and individuals carve a path for *becoming* (a student and writer) that begins in childhood, gathers intensity in adolescence, and ricochets through adulthood. In this section, I introduce the concept of *possible selves* to explain how a schooling self morphs into a writing identity and how writers begin to envision themselves in future writing roles through their contact with the materials of writing and peers who either write or value writing.

Social psychologists and consumer researchers use the concept of *possible selves* to explain the dynamic reality of selfhood (Oyserman et al. "A Socially Contextualized Model" 1995; Markus and Nirius;) Humans are not static, and the self-concept is constantly evolving. Incorporated into this concept is a fluid amalgam of who we've been in the past, how we envision ourselves now, and what we hope for in the future. Markus and Nirius, for example, explain that

> Possible selves provide the specific self-relevant form, meaning, organization, and direction to these dynamics. As such, they provide the essential link between the self-concept and motivation . . . Possible future selves, for example, are not just *any* set of imagined roles or states of being. Instead they represent specific, individually significant hopes, fears, and fantasies . . . What others are now, I could become . . . An individual is free to create any variety of possible selves, yet the pool of possible selves derives from the categories made salient by the individual's particular sociocultural and historical context and from the models, images, and symbols provided by the media and by the individual's immediate social experiences. Possible selves thus have the potential to reveal the inventive and constructive nature of the self but they also reflect the extent to which the self is socially determined and constrained (Elder, 1980; Meyer, 1985; Stryker, 1984)(954).

In Part One, I read the back-to-school shopping event as an institutionally sponsored ritual that promotes learning, object attachment around material goods tied to schooling and writing, and adolescents' projection of themselves into an a schooling self. This section investigates another large-scale ritual, one that is sponsored primarily by families and, later, individuals, the purchase (and use) of a writing desk. My research indicates that this purchase generally happens in adolescence, around age 12, when young adults migrate from working in the common space of the kitchen—often with siblings and their mother—to the private space of the bedroom, whether shared or not. Adolescents engage in identity work, the fashioning of an identity, and all of this occurs with and around objects. This section looks, then, at how the

writing desk, as one object critical to doing school and becoming a student and Writer, participates in this identity construction. Much as is the case with back-to-school shopping, parents communicate ideas about what it means to be a student and writer through the purchase of a desk at which the performance of school and writing takes place. More often than not, however, the desk is used in other ways, such as to demarcate valuable space in shared rooms, to articulate one's identity to family and peers, or to begin to understand and articulate one's writing self.

In "The Storied Life of the Singularized Object: Forces of Agency and Network Transformation," Amber Epp and Linda Price demonstrate, through the example of a kitchen table, how "Objects become singularized (imbued with meaning and use) and caught up in networks of existing spaces, objects, and identity practices that implicate the object." "When an object is caught up in the network," they assert, "it is *active*; individuals, relational units, and/or the collective enlist the object, such as a table, in identity practices" (824). Through singularization, people transform commodity goods into personalized objects that have significance and value. I explore here, the significance of the writing desk in adolescent identity practices, including the ways in which families carve out space for objects that are seen as having this strong connection to identity and schooling. In some cases, as I've already observed above, objects have agency; they direct movement and practices around and on them, they dictate certain types of performance, and they are weighted objects that carry a cultural significance that is readable by a culture (for example, that a writing desk is a place for serious work). For the purposes of this chapter, I borrow Epp and Price's notion that object agency suggests "not that objects demonstrate purposeful intention but rather that objects are active, or

mobilized as part of a network and nested in a set of practices that may be intentional or embedded in the habitus of everyday life" (822, paraphrasing Bourdieu 1977; Latour 1999).

In discussing the identity work initiated and performed through the purchase and use of a writing desk, I will begin with a brief outline of notions of the individual and of interior space. Theorists locate the emergence of the notion of "interiority," or the experience of an internal, subjective self, with the 19th century (Fuss 8-11; James 43), which also saw the emergence of houses that, instead of being comprised of one or more multipurpose rooms, had "specialized rooms, corridors, hallways, closets, and back-stairwells." The Victorian dwelling is notorious for its fragmentation of space into individualized rooms, a conceptualization of private space that was exploded in the mid-20th century with the emergence of the ranch home and rooms that, once again, unified spaces such as the kitchen and living room. In the Victorian dwelling, subjects began to read silently (as opposed to reading as a family or group) and people began to migrate, when economically and otherwise possible, into private writing spaces. My research tracks the development of a self who writes first in public, and generally in the (female) gendered and public space of the kitchen, and most often at the kitchen table, to one who takes an inward turn in adolescence to write in the private, but often shared with siblings, space of the bedroom. This inward turn is often triggered or accompanied by the acquisition of a writing desk that is often not even used for working at, but marks a writing identity that requires a designated, symbolic space in which to perform one's work. The desk is often used to claim space in a room shared with a sibling, but also often as an identity marker, as something that helps budding writers to establish themselves as writers, often against siblings or peers.

Charles, who is currently a Ph.D. student, and was a first-generation college student, remembers and expresses attachment towards an event that was a rarity in his household. On his 12th birthday, his father—who for the most part disappeared from his life very near to this day—gave him a writing journal and built him a writing desk. The desk had a hutch and connected to his bunk bed, and Charles points out that his father had very specific ideas about how a desk needed to look, despite never having been a student himself. His father built the desk on a slant, like an architect's desk. Charles describes conflicting feelings about this event memory. He connects it with his emergence into a writing identity and with a developing understanding that—in contrast with his parents, siblings, and other family members—he was good at school. At the same time, he feels guilty over the desk and the journal. His father did not build a similar desk for his siblings and he really did not encourage them scholastically. Charles was earmarked as the student in the family, hence the receipt of this individual attention and these gifts. Despite the tension in this memory, it is clear that Charles sees the desk and the journal as a remarkable gift; his father had never given a gift of this magnitude before and wouldn't do so again. In spite of, or perhaps, because of the tension associated with these objects, the desk and journal came to represent, for Charles, a movement towards inhabiting a scholarly and writing identity. Put another way, the desk and journal are two objects that made it clear to Charles that he had a future as a learner and writer and that others saw him as someone who could embody this identity.

Valerie, who was a Ph.D. graduate student at the time of our interview and now works as a historian for a government agency, also remembers the production made over the buying over her first writing desk. Her father championed the idea that if one wants to be a student, one needs

a desk. This is a direct manifestation of the idea that materials are not only important to practices, but also to our conception of what we may possibly achieve in a certain realm. Valerie's father also practiced this idea; they moved around a lot as a family, but at each house, he'd establish a separate office with a heavy wooden desk, even after he'd retired. Valerie noted that her father did not work at home—she surmised, instead, that he saw having an office and a desk as symbols of his working life and of being a productive member of the family and society, even after he retired. Since he did not work at home, the desk was performing a function beyond that which it signifies. Valerie's father passed down the idea that work needs a central site and that everyone needs her or his own space by, in her words, making a "huge deal" over purchasing a desk when Valerie was an adolescent (and also one for her younger brother). Valerie's father and mother, then, supported her scholastic identity—which emerged early—by always providing her with the tools she needed in order to write. Valerie and her brother were allowed to pick out the desks they wanted. Valerie's desk was made of cheap plywood, but that did not hinder her attachment to it, and she can describe her desk in exhaustive detail.

Valerie worked well at this desk throughout her childhood, but one of its early important functions was to house memorabilia that she linked with her identity. In particular, she began liking panda-themed objects at a young age, and seeing how much she loved to do school and write, her mother bought her panda-themed writing objects such as a sharpener, pencil holder, etc. as well as writing materials with her name inscribed on them. This desk housed Valerie's early writing journals, which she kept separated by genre (one for poetry, one for stories, one a diary, and so on). The desk is then a space to house materials that figure in the identity

development work that children and adolescents perform by attaching positive values to the *things* that accompany schooling and writing practice.

Valerie also remembers her younger brother's desk in vivid detail, and this is significant because her brother's desk was a site of play, and particularly playing school. This is an example of how children try on identities through objects; Valerie's brother was not scholastic; he had a desk because her father emphasized that no matter whether one's identification with school was strong or not, one needed a place to work, as symbolized by a desk

Valerie's early introduction to a centered writing space appears, by her account, to have impacted her writing practice profoundly. Of the people I interviewed, she was one of the few who worked consistently at a desk and who had very regular writing habits. Valerie's story, though, contributes to an understanding of how parents pass down ideas about schooling to their children, and in particular, ideas about how objects are used in the pursuit of both learning and an educational identity. It also displays how important objects are in the development of early literacy, adolescent literacy, and in the play that accompanies educational development.

David, a writing program administrator who was a graduate student at the time of our interview, narrates an early desk experience that—similar to Valerie's—points to the importance of sibling relationships in the early construction of writing identity. This is consistent with Kleine et al.'s assertion that the social is a neglected and critical factor in identity development. David recounts getting a clapboard desk at age 12 and shares his motivation:

> The motivation was just trying to claim more space than my brother had in the room. He was in high school at that point and so we shared a room until he went to college. And so when I got this massive piece of furniture that was mine, I at

> least had a corner of the room, you know. So I think that was part of it, just actually having some territory.

David uses a writing desk to demarcate space in a shared room. His desk also performed an additional function: it signified the formation of his writing self. His brother was a musician and his musical equipment dominated a corner of the room. David saved up for a computer as a young adult and that object sat on the desk. Because David's brother was defining himself as a musician and did not share his passion for school,

Where do we get these ideas about what a desk signifies and how it should be used? It has, of course, much to do with what we see and the ideas that are passed down by family. Objects accompany us throughout our lives and are instrumental, in both senses of the word, to our practices. As Warde notes, "Activity generates wants, rather than vice versa. Practices, rather than individual desires, we might say, create wants," for "consumption" is "a moment in almost every practice" (137). If it is the case that our families generally aid in the moment of consumption involved with buying a writing desk (or other writing objects), we then learn the extent to which practices and objects are linked and that they signify about our participation in a practice.

We see this in adult narratives about the purchase of a desk. For example, we can return to Teo, whom I discussed at the start of this chapter and whom I would call a writer with a fairly decentered, mobile writing practice, in the sense that he moves, as many writers do, from habitat to habitat in search of the perfect environment in which to write.

Teo owns two desks. A writing desk gifted to Teo by his uncle plays a large role in his imagination, if not always his practice. The desk was Teo's cousin's desk. It wasn't being used,

so Teo's uncle gave it to him. This desk became even more weighted in Teo's imagination—an object that he'll never completely part with—after his cousin died at a young age. Teo describes retrieving the desk and reincorporating it into his writing life after having loaned it to his ex-girlfriend:

> I finally got my desk into my office . . . it was at my ex-girlfriend's place, but I had to go get it . . . I swear it felt like some—like we were reunited after, I don't know. I must have—I should have gotten on top of it and embraced it for a little bit. I love that desk . . . It's just unbelievable, that desk is.

You can hear an extra something in his personification of the desk, in his view of it as something with which he is "reunited" after parting. In other words, the writing desk, in more than one way, became "indexical" for Teo. As Epp and Price note, people "often view indexical objects as irreplaceable due to their ability to 'verify important moments of personal history'" ("Storied Life," citing Grayson and Shulman 2000, 822). In this case, the desk not only functions as an indexical sign, one that has "factual associations with experiences or people" (in this case, Teo's cousin), but it becomes even heavier in his imagination as a symbolic object because he worked for many periods at that desk, even finishing his Master's thesis and dissertation on it (Epp and Price, citing Peirce 1867–1914/1940, 822).

I mention that Teo's desk plays more of a role in his imagination, at times, than practice, because he parts with it at various and critical moments, such as when he gives it to his girlfriend so that *she* can write. He also struggles mightily with writing, and in particular, with viewing his academic labor as *labor*. As a first-generation college student and son of factory workers who moved to the U.S. from Puerto Rico and do not understand higher education as labor per se, Teo

struggles with what it means to work, and as a result, spent much of his graduate school years working in kitchens instead of on his writing. I read this as an attempt, on his part, to perform the kind of labor that his family was familiar with and that was expected of him and to feel economically valuable to his family, who enabled his early literacy and educational and writing identities, despite their having lived in poverty. In his words, it was "never in his reality *not* to work." Working in kitchens and other odd jobs, however, stalled and fragmented his writing process, prolonging his graduate student career. This was compounded by a feeling Teo had that because of his Puerto Rican identity, poverty, and first-generation status, he was always on the outside of academia looking in, trying to understand indecipherable rules of the game. He describes his identity as being like an onion, each layer of it contributing to a different feeling of exclusion, especially in relation to his adviser, who could never fully understand how Teo's background and ethnicity contribute to his writing practice and academic life. So it is both in keeping with Teo's practice and somewhat funny that he gives his beloved, indexical writing desk to his girlfriend at one point so that *she* could write.

The urgency with which Teo reintegrates his writing desk into his life signals his awareness of the object as indexical, more in the sense that he completed the Master's degree on it and—therefore—can rely on it as a sort-of totem object, a magic feather,[15] if you will, that can help him to finish his dissertation (which he did).

However, Teo buys a second desk during the dissertation-writing stage, a purchase that supports the idea that activity generates want and that every practice involves a moment of consumption and emulates the adolescent/family writing desk purchases I've described so far.

[15] This is a reference to Dumbo's magic feather, which Dumbo discovers he really doesn't need in order to fly. I am indebted to my interview participant Valerie for reminding me of the magic feather and its importance as a concept in writer's belief in totems that help to propel and support writing.

This story also exemplifies the way in which objects denote what is possible, and how people turn to objects to help them not only envision, but enact, a self they wish to occupy in the future. Teo is furniture shopping with a friend when he finds a desk that enthralls him:

> It was one of those old style and it was literally a writing desk . . . you know roll the top up and inside they have the sections for envelopes, clips and pens and it had a little drawer here and another drawer in the bottom . . . And you can't fit a computer on it. *It is a writing, like, longhand pen—something that you would use to write letters to somebody* . . . I remember when I sat in front of it—now, my friend is over there looking at mattresses and stuff. I pulled up a chair and sat in front of this desk and I thought, 'this is mine' . . . It was just—*it was riveting. It was this feeling* like, you know, I still handwrite stuff a lot. I still write poems on occasion and it was something that— and I finish and I polish on my cousin's desk.

This narrative is striking, revealing, and beautifully illustrative of the complicated and intense role that objects play in the writing process, and specifically desks, and also of the complex relationship between people and things throughout the writing process. Teo is attracted to this desk because he associates it with an idea about what it means to write, the type of desk (creative, exploratory) writing happens on, and because it is a desk constructed to house the materials of writing. It is directed towards a purpose and so has an agency in reconstructing not only Teo's writing life, but his physical life in his apartment, as he moves this desk in. He chooses a desk that a computer does not fit on, thereby ascribing to this desk a particular form of writing, longhand—and he acknowledges the iconicity of this desk in signifying longhand,

epistolary writing. This desk is one that connects him to a writing genre (poetry) that he often feels estranged from as an academic and with other people (through the writing of letters). He displays something not idiosyncratic, which is an attachment of an object to a genre; he divides his writing practice into composing or beginning on one desk and then finishing and polishing on the other. This is a common shift: an object is selected for its ability to help a writer channel a specific genre or form. In describing this desk as "riveting," as a "feeling," he transforms the desk from a physical object into a sensation, highlighting how much aesthetic experience people achieve through physical objects. His movement between desks is about genre, nostalgia, and prior practice, but also aesthetics: the feeling we have about an object (or habitat) is what compels us to be there.

Collective Writing Ritual and the Production of Writing Selves

Objects play a key role in the construction of possible selves and the link between possible selves and identity or self-concept and, even more particularly, writing objects play a prime role in the negotiation and maintenance of writing identities. The stories I have shared illuminate how children attach to materials throughout the schooling and learning process; move into new spheres (such as the bedroom) as they enter adolescence and further develop their schooling identities; and use objects to project themselves into more carefully crafted or experienced roles or identities as they move through adulthood.

Teo, for example, needs desperately to move closer to a goal of becoming an assistant professor (a goal he achieved) and an academic laborer, and he uses one desk that helped him in the past to achieve a writing task (completing his Master's) to complete another, and purchases

another desk with the specific purpose of reconnecting himself to a genre of writing, or an idea of himself as a writer, that the desk embodies and makes possible. It is less useful, I think, to argue that many desks could have done this; instead we should look at how the particular desks he worked with captured something about an imagined self that he wanted to be and directed that self into action (and being).

From a young age, Valerie's parents gave her a work site and a sense of herself as a scholar and writer. The idea of herself as a scholar held steady throughout her academic life and into her current life as a government employee in the discipline in which she earned her Ph.D. Valerie, having grown up in a stable, socioeconomically comfortable household and without some of the "onion layers" that dominated Teo's internal struggle with being an academic, was freed from some of the concerns and struggles and developed a very stable writing practice that enabled her to move through her academic work more quickly. This is in no way meant to intimate that ethnicity and socioeconomics (in Teo's case, being Puerto Rican, growing up in poverty, or being a first-generation student) are negative factors that inhibit one's ability to become, but more to suggest that in order to understand how we achieve what we want to become, we have to look at the role that access and sponsorship have in the construction and maintenance of identity.

Charles, for example, had no family models for what it meant to be a successful student and writer. At a critical moment, he received some support in the form of a desk and a journal that—at the right time—helped him formulate an idea that he would someday become a writer. He struggles intensely with writing and with being a scholar, a common experience (as is having feelings of guilt) for many first-generation students.

I have demonstrated how collective writing rituals sponsor, on a more massive scale, the socialization of and induction of students into educational and, later, writing identities that are marked by the distribution, procurement, possession, and use of material goods and how those who sponsor these rituals, including school districts, schools, teachers, parents, and businesses, pass on important information about what it means to be a student and person, as these things are expressed through material goods.

Chapter Three

Object Lessons

> Human agents, individually and collectively, mediate literacy practices whenever they take them up – imbuing them with local intentions, resisting their often hegemonic currents, recrafting them to fulfill needs at hand. Latour, we are sure, would agree with this characterization. But he also asks us to see that objects are doing the same or possibly other things. They also are active mediators—imbuing, resisting, recrafting.
>
> --Deborah Brandt and Katie Clinton

This chapter explores the role of mediation within the dyad of writing and object. It dives into and probes the "possible other things" that objects are doing in writing, in the development of schooled and writing selves, and in literacy practices (Brandt and Clinton 346).

One of the research questions that grounded this study from its inception is, "How do objects mediate writing?" Mediation is a complex concept, meaning everything from "To serve as a medium for causing (a result) or transferring (objects, information, etc.)," to "occupy the space between two things or times," and to "intercede or intervene" (OED). In psychology, as early as 1899, the word "mediate" was used to talk about how recollection and memory are mediated by images (OED); in a current scholarly article, two psychologists use the term mediate to discuss the role that objects play in the mediation of memory (Reavey and Brown). In the sciences, a mediator can be seen as the "medium for, or means of bringing about (a force, reaction, etc.)(OED). To get at the specific role of objects' mediatory role in writers' practices and lives, I asked questions such as, "How do objects assist in the formation, maintenance, negotiation, and expression of writing practice and writing identity?" and "How do objects help writers to push through writer's block, to stymie writing anxiety, and to fuel writing desire?" In

this chapter, I present what I found: a catalogue of the many ways in which objects interceded in my participants' practice, the way they acted as intermediaries, the way they caused reactions and transformations, and the many ways, in the words of one of my participants, objects help writers "cross the threshold of getting serious about writing."

What I did not expect to find was the reverse: that as much as objects mediate writing, writing mediates objects. Writing intercedes in objects' lives and histories; writing changes writers' relationship with objects; and the practice of writing has intense transformative power, weighting objects with an accumulation of biographical, cultural, and physical memory. In this way, as you will see throughout this chapter, many objects become containers of writers' histories, objects that carry a special charge. In this way, a cloisonné pen is not a cloisonné pen, valued for its object qualities, but a nostalgic object that helps a writer who saw her grandmother write with such a pen take up writing herself (Brandt, "Remembering Writing"). This transformation begins simply. Someone picks up a new brand of pen, perhaps because of its aesthetics, perhaps because its ball point tip promises to help a writer write a little more neatly. Then, each time the object is used, it becomes charged, heated up with positive or negative associations and memories, with recollections of writing success or writing failure. The object moves from being inert, cold, to being hot. As the writer continues to work with this pen, the pen takes on more meaning and is invested with greater power. In other words, "These possessions attract psychic energy—consumers cultivate and invest attention and layer meanings on these objects" (Curasi et al. 609). The pen becomes totemic, perhaps, like Dumbo's magic feather, infused with the mystical, wishful thought that it has the ability to help us write.

In this chapter, I trace the movement of objects from "cold" to "hot"[16] and look at how objects get charged, weighted, and take on a meaning greater than the sum total of what writers use them for. In the literature, this is often referred to as "cultivation": as Marsha Richins notes, "the development of an object's private meaning involves active processes in which meaning is 'cultivated' over time through repeated, often purposeful interactions with the object" (523). I have chosen not to use the term cultivation to connote this phenomenon, as it implies a degree of conscious behavior—as one has when cultivating a garden or a relationship—that on the whole I did not observe writers wielding as the objects they work with were invested with ever deepening meaning and significance. The terms "cold" and "hot" allow me, instead, to imply that external forces, or extra-conscious forces, work on writers as these objects become repositories of layered meaning.

In the first part of this chapter, I look at examples in which objects mediate writing, when objects transform, facilitate, or intercede in the writing process. In part two, I look at how, as objects become hotter and take on totemic power, writing begins to mediate objects, changing their natures. My use of the phrase "*writing* mediate objects is purposeful;" to say that *writers* mediate objects, though at times they do, contradicts what my study has revealed: that writers' practices in many ways are not conscious, that their reasons for doing x or y or using x or y tool is often buried deeper than their conscious awareness. At least, this is how they talked about their object use in my study, as if it were something beyond, frustrating, or even—at times— amusing

[16] In "The Storied Life of Singularized Objects: Forces of Agency and Network Transformation," Amber M. Epp and Linda L. Price use the words "warm" and "cool" to describe the movement of objects from the commodity sphere into the home and back out again. They note that in the literature, objects are seen as "warming" an environment to make it more like a home than a house; similarly, they note that objects are cooled when people put them in uncharged environments (such as a basement or attic) before returning them to the "commodity sphere" (821).

to them that was a little out of their control. In my study, for example, writers very commonly told me they had no object attachments, and then revealed, in the next breath, wonderful and complicated stories about their object attachments that often illustrated the totemic role objects play in their writing lives. For example, Charles, a 42-year-old graduate student, initially says:

> All objects, every object since I became an academic writer, they all just seem like annoyances. The objects would have been back when I was primarily a letter writer. A writer of letters, and then a pen that had gotten me a good letter, particularly with respect to Annabelle . . . The handwriting worked somehow, it was like my real handwriting. I have this thing that sometimes my real handwriting isn't coming out. It's that I'll have these big blocks or something.

Yet after this proclamation of both the power objects once held for him and their coldness to him now, he cites his adherence to having worked with the Moleskine notebook, and no other, since 2003 or 2004, and says:

> I like the way my handwriting looks in them. Maybe it's the lines . . . the space . . . the way the lines are spaced out. It's something about the soft, it feels soft. It feels soft and neat at the same time. They're very shrewdly put together. I don't know what . . . it's very smart marketing, very smart packaging. Not packaging, but design . . . It now is that these have worked in the past and I don't want to try to something different because there's not enough time left.

Charles also admits that when he's being honest with himself, he, like another of my study participants, doesn't think it is possible to write his dissertation without going back to smoking. Smoking, in this case, is less a habit and more of an instance of object reliance, something

infused with totemic charge. His description of pens (as enabling a good letter), his insistence on the importance of aesthetics to writing pleasure and productivity, and his ritualistic use of Moleskines because *they* "have worked" all point to the object's agency in the writing process, the way writers subconsciously feel that it is the objects working, the objects compelling the writing, and not the reverse.

In the above example, the object is still mediating writing, is still *working*. But in many other complex cases, I see objects mediating writing and then writing mediating objects in a complex chain, what I think of as *mutual mediation*. As Epp and Price note, "The central idea is that, as people and objects gather time, movement, and change, they are constantly transformed, and these transformations of person and object are tied up with each other" ("Storied Life" 821). Section three of this chapter looks at three instances of mutual mediation, situations in which it becomes impossible to separate the impact that both object and writing are having on each other. I focus here on a household object, a place that clusters objects and that is a three-dimensional object in its own right, and a technological tool often conceived both as an object and a space: the kitchen table, the coffee shop, and the Apple computer, respectively—and show how object and writing undergo continual transformation in the practice of writing.

How Objects Mediate Writing

For the participants in my study, objects both facilitate and constrain the writing process and writing identity. One of the first objects schoolchildren work with that illustrates this is the cream-colored, lined handwriting paper they learned to write letters on, an activity that generally begins in first grade and continues throughout grade school, though some of my participants

traced this paper to kindergarten. This paper came up in almost every one of my interviews and forming letters on it was most frequently my participants' first memory of writing. In terms of facilitation, this paper—and the writing performed on it—is important for its introduction of children to the regulations of school (writing between the lines, learning how to hold the pen, learning how to sit, and being corrected by the teacher, for example). This cream-colored paper performs more than simply a regulatory function; on this paper, children begin to form and practice an iteration of self through handwriting, which is one of the greatest extensions of self (Belk) that exist. Via handwriting, and our signature, our internal thoughts are eventually translated to the page and given some form of permanence. Handwriting extends the self; people understand its self-communicatory function and its ability to make them publicly recognizable and grant them access to public services; as a result, the writers in my study generally felt an attachment to its extension of self or a discomfort in the gap between their self-perception and the way their handwriting reflects the self. Nika, a 55-year-old university employee finishing her Bachelor's degree, connects her memories of handwriting paper with learning how to sign her name for the purpose of getting a library card:

> Penmanship, you know, I remember writing the actual letters on paper by the time I was six-years-old. My teacher was Mrs. Carlotta and so that's the first time I remember actually writing. Oh, this is important, I had to be able to write my name on the library form to get a library card. And that was so important to me, I wanted a library card, because my mother would go and check out books, and I wanted to be able to check out my own books.

Nika explicitly connects her memories of the paper with the privileges learning how to sign her name afforded and with the teacher who, along with Nika's mother, was formative in learning how to write (in a couple of years, Nika would begin a life-long process of journaling and—later—writing stories).

This cream-colored paper's stronghold on my participants' first memories of writing also signals a developing awareness of hand-motor coordination and, more profoundly, the physicality of writing, the way in which the body is situated, and performs, during the writing act. People remember this paper and remember learning how to write letters because they were asked to repeat this task on the same paper and with the same pencils, often "fat red ones," as my participants repeatedly referred to them, throughout grade school.

Nika makes another important connection, however, one that supports my contention that this early formative experience has much to do with the genesis of implement preferences and sensory experiences with writing that emerge throughout adolescence when she says

> I remember what the paper looked like, that long paper with the green lines on it, the feel of the paper, the texture of that kind of grainy paper, *I love the smell of paper now even*, when the teacher would be passing out paper, *I love the feel of new paper*. (emphasis added)

What strikes me here is not just that Nika's writing pleasure can be traced back to this formative memory, but the way that in her telling of this memory, she fuses past and present in the recollection and utterance of the power of this event and object. This demonstrates the way that heat is stored in an object (and in memories of it), the way that the object seems to carry Nika's writing history inside of it, performing chronotopically (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*). The

idea here is that, as Melanie Wallendorf and Eric J. Arnould assert in "'A Few of My Favorite Things': A Cross-Cultural Inquiry into Object Attachment, Possessiveness, and Social Linkage" that "object preference is built up . . . through a dialectical process in which meaning and affect are transferred between individuals and objects over time" (543). Charles, the graduate student referenced earlier, also connects learning to write with this handwriting exercise and paper:

> My earliest memory of writing something . . . it's doing writing exercises on dotted paper with red pencils . . . thick red pencils . . . and learning cursive, which I found very difficult.

A little later in the interview, Charles tells me that he prefers "Lined paper without holes in it. So, I guess the kind that comes, that looks, not legal paper. Not yellow, white, that isn't too bright." Charles also communicates a common ambivalence and intensity of connection with handwriting and its extension of self:

> And, I have always . . . I have a weird love/hate . . . sometimes I look at my handwriting and I'm outraged by what looks like childish scrawl and other times I really like my handwriting. My handwriting attracts a lot of attention. A British woman, I was writing a letter at a Starbucks, and a British woman looked over my shoulder and she said "You have beautiful handwriting." She was about 65-years-old, and I was astonished by this, but it's interesting. Sometimes people will compliment my handwriting a lot. So, I think sometimes I've liked that . . . that the recipient likes it.

Handwriting paper, and the experience of learning how to forms letters, together mark a liminal moment of becoming: in whatever way children are beginning to imagine possible future selves

and beginning to embody schooled selves (see Chapter Two), this handwriting exercise is helixed into this becoming. This is another way that paper, as the intermediary and facilitator between two states of being, functions. It is an example of how objects are mediators of key literacy events (Heath "What No Bedtime Story Means;" Barton and Hamilton 2000) that exist long before the development of a writing practice.

Paper, in many forms, also mediates between the writer and writing. By adolescence, people begin to experiment with different preferences and with buying different objects that reflect the self. As I describe in Chapter Two, parents *pass down* critical information about which objects are valuable and which objects reflect family identity and values through the ritual of back-to-school shopping. But most of the these objects, at the start of schooling, are "cold;" they have not yet been imbued with the type of physical, locational, and cultural memories that later charge them. Students begin to look to various iterations of paper products as ways of both understanding and expressing their selves (Belk, "Possessions and the Extended Self;" Kleine et al.; McCracken, "Culture and Consumption"; Rook; Wallendorf and Arnould, "A Few of My Favorite Things") and of relating to others (Kleine et al., "Mundane Consumption"). Three of my male participants remember a fascination with Pee Chee folders, simple paper folders with unbranded images of athletes imprinted on them. One, a 41-year-old teacher named Jacob, refers to the Big Chief notebook (as a person with a strong American Indian identity, he notes the problematic nature of the Big Chief's logo of an American Indian in headdress, as well as the irony of his attachment to it):

> My best memory of writing is the Big Chief notebook, real thick paper. I couldn't wait to get that notebook. It was a tablet. And get my pencil. And they were the

> bigger pencils, like this big [he illustrates the size] not the little thin ones. And I loved writing in it, just anything. But like I said, the very first experience I guess, the real experience I ever had or felt—I think it's more with emotion and feeling is that nostalgia for that Big Chief notebook, with my pencil and the brown paper and the wide rule lines and just wanting to put my name in it and just, I don't know, tell stories.

This is a memory of possibility, of what the notebook promises to help him achieve. The notebook, as intermediary, opens up a space for writing and serves as a facilitator and instigator of thought and the desire to write. It is clear, here, that the object has a stronger role than it has been given in writing studies and that inspiration has as much to do with objects as facilitators as it has to do with internal forces.

The Mead Composition Notebook also pervaded my interviews. Its prevalence as a preferred journal in many writers' practices is significant, as the people who use them were generally first given them in grade school. Peter, a 31-year-old graduate student and former teacher, is a devoted user of the Mead, citing its cheap cost, which allows him to buy the notebook in multiples and fill them up, mostly as a means of processing internal thoughts; he also uses them to note exercises which might be useful in the classroom. When he taught journalism, he kept a small journalist's notebook in his back pocket, which he could easily pull out and record teaching exercise ideas.

In a similar fashion, my participants highlighted many cold functions of pens: a pen that feels good in the hand and that is easy to write with makes writing more pleasurable and easier to do. Options in colored pens are useful to teachers because they allow teachers to vary from the

standard red pen and its connotations. A 49-year-old schoolteacher named Diana says, "I started using colored pens in my junior year of high school, because I started to take more notes then. I like to color-code. I'm a visual learner. That's how I remember." Besides their utilitarian functions, that pens and other implements promote pleasure in writing is important, as positive aesthetic experiences around writing facilitate the desire to write (and, more totemically, as we will see later, begin to inspire writers for less cold reasons).

Although there are many other examples of objects playing facilitative roles in writing, ingestibles are the last ones I'll discuss here. In a simple way, the first cup of coffee a person drinks while writing—while it might come with cultural associations (Richins) regarding connections between coffee and writers—is on the cold end of the spectrum, perhaps unless coffee-drinking is a family practice with and coming to drink it carries with it emergence into a new life stage. Coffee, tea, water, and food all lead to physical comfort (not being hungry while writing, one of my writers asserts, is the only reason why she cares about eating before she sits down). All of these substances also play more hot, totemic roles.

What happens when objects are used routinely in the course of writing is that they accumulate physical, biographical, cultural, imaginative, and other associations. So far, I've talked mostly about objects' facilitative mediational roles, but they also play constraining ones, for another sense of mediation is of intervention and intercession. As the relationship between object and writer gains heat, the relation between writer and object becomes more totemic, more magical, and also, at times, more complicated and constrained. This explains the negative charge that handwriting paper, for instance, has for so many writers, because almost every writer in my study fell into one of two camps: those whose excitement over schooling and learning and

aesthetic experiences with this paper was remembered as a positive, enabling event, and those who remembered this experience a pained, torturous struggle through which they learned to fit their writing and behavior literally and metaphorically between the lines and space provided. Hence Holly, an undergraduate in the biological sciences, remembers learning how to write "vanilla-colored handwriting paper" and associates it with "learning how to hold the pencil right and getting scolded when you do it wrong." Luke, an art historian and curator, says:

> I definitely remember learning cursive, which was in the third grade, because that was really hard for me . . . I remember those big lined papers, you know? You know the big lines where you have to write your name? It was horizontal, not vertical. And there'd be two lines in each part and then the dashed line between them, which was for capitals and non-capitals. The cursive thing was a pain. The first paper, I think, I remember, because it was so frequent. I haven't thought about this, but I think we must have done it every day. I remember that paper being handed out . . . The cursive, I remember because, it was one of the first things I had a lot of trouble with mastering. Doing the alphabet in cursive was hard. And I was pretty bored or impatient or something. Because you just had to copy it, you know? And I just, I don't—I think I didn't like, like, just copying. And I was bad. I was bad translating what I saw into a line, you know.

These object-memories, these instances of objects mediating writing in constraining ways, are important, for along with the institutions that support and sponsor such exercises and such reliance on supplies, these form the establishment of the complex, charged, relationship writers come to have with writing, with writing objects, and with writing identities, and with schooling.

And the relationship is complicated, for woven into this memory is also a positive association for Luke. He says, “I remember signing my name a lot and I got pretty into that, creating a signature. Because that was one of our assignments.”

Every object that was referenced as facilitative also comes to gather and accumulate heat, and with heat, constraint, as well as possibility. Although Diana enumerates the many positive, enabling functions of pens, she also tells me about other ways in which they begin to both inspire and inhibit her practice at the same time. About traditional pencils, she says, “If there’s a Ticonderoga, I’ll take a Ticonderoga.” The same goes for Bic pens. She explains that these objects are meaningful for their nostalgic, totemic value: they were the objects she began to use and prefer as a child. She laments the loss of a mechanical pencil she used throughout college; she shows me the replacement of the same object that she bought when it broke. About having the right pen, she says:

> I like the way it feels, and I like the way it rolls on the paper. And these, it's the same thing. I like the way, I like to have a little softness here, and just the way it rolls. If it's too thin, it doesn't flow. It's scratchy, and I'm concentrating on moving the pencil instead of my thoughts.

One can argue that this is still non-totemic use of the object. Diana is concentrating on how the object promotes “flow” (Czikszentmihalyi), an important dimension of the writing process, as it illustrates not only how objects promote it, but how flow is both a literal and a metaphoric concept that describes so accurately the physical and the psychic dimensions of what it feels like to write (and, hence, why—despite so many protestations to the contrary by teachers irritated

with the word's precision—the word "flow" belongs in not only in students' description of the writing process, but scholarly conversations about writing).

The heat in Diana's pen attachments grows stronger when she talks about the objects she brings with her when writing in public, whether at school or in the library (she was working on an advanced degree at the time of the interview). She tells me that she has two identical sets of pens, each kept in its own case. She likes to have one at school and one wherever else she is working:

> I don't want to take it back and forth, and I don't feel comfortable without it. And if I don't have it, I'll probably end up going back to school and getting it, or going back home and getting it. It's like the sitting down and getting started. To know that you have everything and you can just start thinking.

She says corollary things about paper: "I can't write—some people can grab a piece of scratch paper, or a piece of printer paper. I need something with lines that are light blue, and I'm okay." The light blue lines that appear on handwriting paper appear once again in adulthood, influencing adult writing practice. Diana is not alone. Another graduate student only uses notebooks with graph paper. Charles, as you heard, only uses notebooks with a certain paper tint. Several of my participants care that their writing is "contained" or "bound;" that is, they will not use loose-leaf paper, which is not surprising, since loose-leaf paper is also associated with school rules and regulatory use of objects. Although having work bound is certainly as practical as it is totemic, many of my participants speak of containment in more totemic terms, as if by being contained, bound notebooks might keep their writing and thoughts from wandering away from them. Being bound adds an extra dimension of presence.

What begins to happen is that writers conscribe, as they progress, an ever-narrowing set of objects that they can and can't work with; although, admittedly, writers will try new products now and then and either integrate them into their practice or reject them. This generally happens when writers are entering a new stage of education, beginning a new project, feeling "blocked," having writing anxiety, or looking for another means of inspiration. Whatever the reason, this narrowing circle reflects the heat, intensity, and totemic function that begins to gather around objects, as well as the cultural and biographical memories that are stored inside them and which we access, often unwittingly, throughout the writing process. And as objects get hot, a reversal begins to happen. They become less important for their functions as objects, per se, and more important for what they represent. They take on mystical, magical relationships within the writer's interior life and writing process that can no longer be described through purely, or even mostly, utilitarian functions. In this way, writing begins to mediate objects. A blanket that belongs to Holly's boyfriend and that she uses to keep warm while writing during winter (her mother, Diana, interestingly also uses such a blanket) starts off being a comfort object. When her boyfriend studies abroad for a semester, she continues to use it, and it begins to take on synecdochal power, representing both his absence and a part of him left behind. It begins to signal two dimensions of comfort: the physical and the emotional and for writers, these two things become increasingly difficult to separate.

How Writing Mediates Objects

Much of the time, a man acts only indirectly upon the environment from which the ultimate consequences of his behavior emerge. Instead of going to a drinking fountain, a thirsty man may simply "ask for a glass of water"—that is, may engage in behavior which produces a certain pattern of sounds which in turn induces someone to bring him a glass of water . . . .The glass of water reaches the speaker only as the result of a complex series of events including the behavior of a listener.—B.F. Skinner, *Verbal Behavior*

Recently I was talking to a writer who described something she did whenever she moved to her writing table . . . . [W]e began to talk about little rituals that one goes through before beginning to write. I, at first, thought I didn't have a ritual, but then I remembered that I always get up and make a cup of coffee and wait for the light to come. And she said, well, that's a ritual. And I realized that for me this ritual comprises my preparation to enter a space that I can only call nonsecular . . . Writers all devise ways to approach that place where they expect to make the contact, where they become the conduit, or where they engage in this mysterious process. For me, light is the signal in the transition. It's not being *in* the light, it's being there *before it arrives*. It enables me, in some sense.—Toni Morrison

The above quotation captures the spirit of mediation that emerged in my study as a way of describing and understanding the relationship between people and things throughout the writing process. Writers get results through behaviors that very often are only indirectly tied to the actual act of writing: drinking, eating, performing physical acts before and after writing, watching television, giving themselves rewards, buying objects in order to generate excitement about writing, creating habitats to work in, and so on. But through the act of writing, the objects themselves, as revealed in the above quotation, are transformed. Writing changes the context of objects, how writers see and relate to them, and how they are understood in the particular iterations of the writing habitat the writers build and exploit. In this section, I explore three examples of how writing mediates objects, moving from the more simple examples to the most complex or transformational. Mediation in this context refers to the result or transformation that occurs because of how the act of writing re-works the object.

Mason, a graduate student, discusses his practice of getting ready to write. First he checks his email, surfs the Internet, and gets distracting digital activities out of the way. Then he makes tea; about this process, he says:

> And the tea is actually a big deal. The tea serves two functions. One, it wakes you up. I need some caffeine to get me going. But I do feel like it's *the thing that signals to me* that I'm at the *threshold of getting serious*, you know, and not just writing e-mails or surfing the Internet. Now I've got the tea and I'm going to write. And the weird thing about it is that it forces me to do it because—this is going to sound ridiculous, but I feel like okay, boom, I'm drinking the tea. I'm going to get a little wired off caffeine. And I'm going to have a good two-hour window where I'm firing on all cylinders. My brain is going and I'd better use that to write. So it's like once I drink the tea then I'm in writing mode. And I don't know how true that is or not, but it's good because it makes me feel like now I'm in prime writing time and I'd better maximize on that.

I could replace "tea" with "coffee" or "food" and use this statement to describe the behaviors of nearly everyone in my study. At the most basic level, coffee and tea are actually working on the body and giving it a jolt. Taking this part of the writing process seriously is important, as a few of the writers in my study expressed problems with monitoring what they drank or, more frequently, what they ate as they wrote, with one participant connecting her snacking habits with unhealthy tendencies to gain weight from stress-eating while writing. In another important way, the body is implicated in the writing process through the act of eating and drinking. Smokers understand that smoking is as much a comforting act of physical habit as it is one of addiction.

Something similar goes on with the ingestion of liquids, which involve the body even more heavily in writing, adding moments of pleasure in what is often a stressful, anxious situation.

At a more abstract level, the coffee mug we hold and the liquid we drink become our company. Things become company, becoming one element of the stable frame (Brandt & Clinton) in which we write. To posit objects as company might not be as ridiculous as it first sounds, since they generally have been so since adults were children; American adults have a history of giving comfort objects such as security blankets to children (Passman; Passman and Adams; Passman and Halonen; Passman and Longeway; Weisberg and Russell). One of my study participants, an undergraduate named Jonathan, described how after his parents divorced, he migrated to his bedroom throughout grade school and middle school years when writing or reading at home, because that is where he felt safe, surrounded by the stuffed animals and other objects that gave him a feeling of stability. Music, too, is an important aspect of bringing an element of the social into the writing process. Just as "accompaniment" is an important concept in the musical realm, it describes music's function throughout writing. Through the act of listening, we bring into our sphere the existence of others. This helps to explain, in part, the dependence on music that some of my participants exhibited; two of my study participants, for example, could list the specific albums and even concertos that they listened to while writing particular papers. This is certainly also an aspect of how writers attempt to "be in the world," as one of my study participants phrased it, while writing. Listening to music is a pleasurable, sensory act of accompaniment; it also extends our emotional writing space from where we are sitting into the figurative aural realm. The extraordinary particularity with which the participants in my study who listened to music while writing described their preferences marks the way in

which they use choice of music as much as other objects to extend and express the self while writing, exerting control over it.

Lastly, the routine of making coffee and tea seems as critical here in crossing the threshold of getting serious about writing as the act of drinking; both are part of the "chronotopic lamination" that writers engage in and experience while they write (Prior and Shipka). They are also examples of "'boundary-crossing rituals' that facilitate the traversal of a liminal zone between two states . . . by allowing separation from an old state and incorporation into the new state" (Lastovicka and Fernandez 814).

Writing, in all of these cases, causes a transformation in our relationship to these objects, to the point that Mason, for example, can acknowledge that he makes tea not necessarily because it physically acts on him, or because it has any impact on him at all, but because this activity, and the meaning of tea has become hot; it now carries a totemic power that he cannot separate from the physical performance of beginning to write.

Luke, whom I referenced above, describes a related morning ritual that involves six main objects, or an *object cluster* that supports his writing practice.[17] I have found that within each writer's habitat, clusters of objects emerge and become significant parts of that writer's practice. These objects are sometimes writing implements, but very often not. In "Mundane Consumption and the Self," an article about the role objects play in identity salience and maintenance, Kleine et al. argue that sets of objects tied to a particular activity are important to an individual's

[17] In Chapter Two, I explain Kleine's notion of the "cluster of products." In this chapter, I use the term "object cluster" to refer to the groups of materials or objects upon which my participants rely in the construction and performance of their writing identities. Although the groupings I refer to similar in nature to Kleine's clusters, I use the term "object cluster" because my purpose is to explore the use of these items, rather than their status as consumer goods. Furthermore, the items that comprise my participants' object clusters enter their lives through various channels, only one of which is direct purchase.

performance and identification with that identity. The college students in their study who claimed the identity "athlete" emphasized the importance of having not just one object tied to that identity, but several that operated together. My work uncovers that these objects do not necessarily have to do anything with that particular identity, in this case writing, as they come to have a relation to that identity through its performance. The object cluster that Luke, for example, works with each morning are his dogs, a baseball bat, a pipe, a file cabinet, and Post-it notes. We can see this cluster as individual expressions within the larger stable frame (Brandt & Clinton, referencing Latour) of his home writing habitat. In Wallendorf and Armould's words, "Objects serve as beacons or guideposts to orient the individual in, and personalize, both space and time" ("Favorite Things" 538). Only one of these objects clearly functions within its realm of intended use: the Post-it notes. Luke, for some time, developed a practice of writing Post-it notes to himself at night and sticking them on his file cabinet; he reads them each morning, before he begins to write.

The other objects in Luke's cluster, however, are only correlated to writing through being used together, and it is writing performance that binds them into a cluster that supports his practice. Like Mason, Luke describes a morning ritual that is about physically stepping into the writing process, crossing the threshold of getting serious about writing. He characterizes his emotional and physical state around his personal academic writing as "anxious." In some ways, the objects he uses are facilitators, helping him to manage his writing anxiety. So, he says, he wakes up, walks his dogs, gets dressed, and walks into his writing place. He often stands next to his file cabinet for the first half-hour, until he senses that his body is engaged with the process. He also connects standing with becoming alert. Similarly, he swings a baseball bat that was a gift

from his wife upon completion of his dissertation. He sits with a pipe in his mouth, which he does not light.

The walking, swinging of the bat, and standing at the file cabinet are all physical means of combating anxiety. But something else happens as his repertoire builds around these objects. For example, he explains some of this behavior as "being stiff," which relates the physicality of writing with the mental preparation of writing in unexpected ways. "Being stiff"—a phrase normally used in conjunction with the performance, or lack of readiness to perform, a sport comes to be used in the context of writing. But more than this, these objects are inscribed with a history of use that begins to work on them in novel ways.

The baseball bat, for example, was a gift from his wife upon completion of his Ph.D. Inscribed on the bat is his name, preceded by "Dr." It is significant that Luke rises each day to write and—in preparation for writing—swings the bat that represents completion of another writing task. In our first discussions regarding the bat, Luke did not mention this inscription; he simply locates the bat in the cluster of objects that he writes around, and prepares to write with, each day. But he later reveals this bat as a hot object; both below and on the bat's surface, completion is symbolized. Writing is literally inscribed on the surface of the bat; but the practice of writing that develops around the bat takes it out of its usual frame and allows it to become a stabilizing force in his daily writing routine.

The last example of writing mediating objects also deals with inscription. Mason discusses at length the heavy amount of writing on objects that takes place in junior high school, which correlates with the time period both when writing selves are emerging (or schooled selves are particularized into other salient identity categories) and when adolescents begin to express

themselves through goods (see Chapter Two) and in relation to their social peers. As adolescents try on identities, they use writing to inscribe these identities on *things*. Mason reflects on his friends' practice, during junior high school, of writing on

> jeans, shoes, totally, yeah, sometimes walls—if you had a big thick marker. But your personal—there was a sense of wanting to personalize everything. And it was usually through drawing pictures or writing things.
>
> And you became an expert on that kind of bubble writing . . . clearly teenager writing . . . And we were just drawing on everybody's other stuff all the time. And it was a combination of sort of personalizing everything. And—this may be reading too much into it, but I don't think it is actually. It was a combination of, clearly it was personalizing everything, and I think it was also sort of flaunting consumer culture, countering this sort of homogenization of all this mass produced stuff . . . on the one hand, personalizing objects and fetishizing them, and on the other hand showing that you weren't materialistic because, you know, I have a brand new binder and I don't care if you draw all over it, because I'm not attached to it.

This phenomenon is neatly described by Wallendorf and Arnould, who observe that "favorite objects most often serve symbols of, rather than replacements for, close interpersonal ties. These objects provide individual solutions to the homogenization of value and emphasis on socially integrative meanings inherent in mass-produced objects, as well as the need for individual expression. Individuals singularize things through the mutual transfer of meaning and emotion between the objects and the individuals" (542).

Once again, we see the physical inscription of objects, this time, the inscription of the self through handwriting, a performance of self through writing on things. Mason is also talking about the purposeful ways in which we write ourselves into objects and into social spheres, while at the same time transgressing against societal conventions. Goods are singularized and personalized as they are removed from the commodity realm and as communal practices form around them, in this case, communal literacy practices (Arnould and Thompson, "Consumer Culture Theory;" Kopytoff; Epp and Price, "Storied Life"; Wallendorf and Arnould, "My Favorite Things"). At once, these goods mark individual personhood and relations to others with whom we use them to bond. In the 80s, objects like Converse sneakers—plain shoes sold in different colors—were marked up, singularized; at the same time, purchasing and marking up a pair initiated one into a social group and a social writing practice. I want to distinguish here the kinds of marking up kids do as they explore the boundaries of what writing is for and which objects are designated for writing (such as when one of my participants crayons the wall in her room, an exploratory identity act, but not yet a transgressive one, as she does not yet know the rules) and the type of transgression Mason notes, which is an intentional transformation of the object and use of it to mark and extend the self and to extend the self into a social group.

Writing on things in the context of school also connects people—through the physical act of writing and being together, as well as through the remnant of self located in handwriting—in social space. The sneaker, the locker, the notebook, all inscribed objects, are chronotopic (Bahktin; Basso) markers of the language acts that occur through writing and in school.

This example is different from Luke's objects cluster, as those objects are, for the most part, not used at all for the activities for which they were made and designated (this is also an

expression of the individuated ways that people not only singularize, but transform, commodities into items of personal value, using them for many things other purposes than those for which they were designed). In Mason's example, shoes, walls, lockers, and all of the other objects that are written on still retain their initial purpose. As these objects get "hot," their totemic role develops as they take on social meaning, representing group dynamics and group belonging in the context of school. They are also transformed from simple objects into symbolic expressions and manifestations of self that travel through multiple locations: home, school, church, and so on. That they move around with us explains some of the special charge they take on as we bind to them.

These notions of movement with and around objects, that writing is mobile, and that space is involved with writing practice permeate the next section of this chapter, which focuses on mutual mediation. In this section, I look at relations between writing and objects that defy the above categories.and illustrate cases in which this relationship becomes mutually determinate.

Mutual Mediation

In the examples I have provided above, it is definitely the case that one can push back on the categories I have delineated, asking whether writing or the object is playing a stronger mediating role. But through these cases, I have tried to show not only the mediating roles that both objects and the act of writing have on each other, but also the way in which it is impossible make simple observations about human-object relations.

In this section, I look at three examples of strong mutual mediation, cases in which objects and writing perpetually redefine and come between each other, acting as the mediator and the mediated.

The Kitchen Table. The kitchen table was one of the most charged objects in my interviews. It came up in almost every interview as an important early writing site at which my participants practiced their emerging literacy, as a site of family literacy practices, and as a social space. In most cases, the significance of the kitchen table persisted stable throughout my participants' lives and figures as a site of unblocking, comfort, and stability to which they return for challenging writing tasks or for more facilitative aspects of the kitchen table, such as the space it affords, the connections it provides to others working at or near it, or the sensory qualities it affords. The kitchen table is an object that is situated, for most of my participants, in the gendered space of the kitchen, near the mother whom they remember cooking while they did homework, wrote letters, or performed other tasks, alone and with siblings, in this place[18].

In common parlance, the kitchen is notorious as a site of family practices. Henry Louis Gates Jr. writes about it as a definitional and contested space for African-American identity, identity practices, and family relations ("In the Kitchen"); Ann Ruggles Gere writes about kitchen tables and other spaces as the "extracurricula of composition," important sites of

[18] Many of my participants referenced their mother's constant presence in the kitchen; none of them referenced their father's presence in this space and, consequently, no one referenced learning to write near their father. This held true even for Jonathan, who continued to live with his father after his parents' divorce. At that same, his writing and other literacy practices migrated to his bedroom and to the kitchen of a friend, where he and that friend's mother were a constant presence. Although I do not address the implications of this in much depth in this dissertation, it certainly merits future study.

informal literacy practices; and Amber Epp and Linda Price write about the kitchen table as a site of family practices and a site at which family identity is both defined and transformed ("Storied Life"). In my study, the kitchen table emerged as a mediator of writing, sibling relations, and social space. It provided space for my participants to do their homework and other work near the person who watched them after school or after dinner. It provided space for siblings to work together. It provided space to spread out. It is likely responsible for the way in which writers—as evidenced by my study participants—intermittently seek out, as adults, not only kitchen tables as worksites, but public work sites at which they can write near, if not with, others. It is also responsible for my participants returning to the kitchen table as a site of comfort, the place at which they perform difficult writing tasks.

The kitchen table becomes hot as—through each use—it becomes a repository of cultural and biographical data, as "storehouses of personal meaning" (Wallendorf and Arnould, "My Favorite Things," 532). In this case, the subject is how each writing act performed at the table changes the way the table is used, located in space, and understood. It is transformed into a totemic object the meaning of which far transcends its nature as a table. Diana illustrates this through her first memory of writing. Unlike most of my participants, although she remembers the handwriting paper, a much hotter object for her is a chalkboard that hung by the phone in the kitchen on which she and her siblings learned how to write and on which the family left notes for one another.[19] (The telephone's physical location in many kitchens, and the fact that many households historically only had one phone, strategically placed in the social space of the kitchen—might have played a strong role, as well as the mother's figure as cook, with defining

[19] As interesting angle for research would be to examine ways that the telephone and cell phone have affected literacy practices, particularly in the kitchen. Thanks to Megan Adams for reminding me that many households located their primary phone in the kitchen.

the kitchen as a social, conversational space. The kitchen, then, is not only into a space for writing performance and conversation with family, but communication with others. The space of the kitchen in this way extends far beyond its physical boundaries.) Diana knew how to write before she entered school, largely, in her mind, because of this chalkboard. Her mother's constant presence in the kitchen made the kitchen table an object marker that holds key memories of writing, learning, kinship, and comfort that Diana associates with writing and with success in pushing through difficult tasks. As she says:

> But if we were having troubles, we always came to the kitchen to kind of talk about it. And if you couldn't write, then you sat there and mom would be cooking or baking and she'd, you know, 'Well, think about this,' or 'How about if you wrote it this way?' Or, 'What did they say in class about doing this math problem?' It helped to talk. She was always there."

In her home, Diana has constructed two writing habitats. Her primary site is the kitchen table, at which she spreads out her work, writes papers, and performs most of the preparatory tasks she needs to in order to write. Diana's secondary site is a desk with a desktop computer in her dining room/library, at which she types up her work. But, as she explains, her early literacy practices and writing memories at the kitchen table impact her adult writing practices:

> This is why I feel the most comfortable in the kitchen . . . I always do my best work, whether it's correcting papers or just doing the grocery list, it's at the kitchen table. And if I'm really stuck, I'll come at the kitchen table and then go on the computer and write."

About the table, she says, "You know how you just feel right, it's like a glove? You just sit in that kind of chair and just—I guess it gets things flowing and going." This notion of the kitchen table as a precursor or generator of "flow" is critical in understanding not only why writers move between habitats, but also how objects have a special power or agency that contributes to writers' identities and practices. The kitchen table carries a history and memory beyond that which Diana is immediately aware throughout the writing process. For this reason, the table calls her back to it and she invests it with the totemic power of enabling her to work through difficult tasks.

Beyond this, however, the kitchen table, through Diana and her family's use of it, is transformed. It is no longer a simply place at which eating occurs. It is, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Epp and Price, and Ann Ruggles Gere also note in various ways, a key site of group and family identity practices, often around literacy, and writing in particular. Reading, as my participants also note, rarely happens at the kitchen table. Even at a young age, my participants traveled to their bedrooms, the living room, or another site when reading, partially because it is associated with comfort, but also because reading, even when performed near others, is conceptualized as an individual and not a social act. Writing remains a social act through adolescence, at which time, students begin to understand it in dualistic ways: as an activity that transpires in private (such as diary writing in the bedroom), and as a social activity that is performed with and around peers, which I discuss later in this chapter. In this sense, it is perhaps more important for scholars to investigate what writing does to the kitchen, and the kitchen table, than what the table and the kitchen do for writing.

In particular, Diana's example allows us to think about how the writing that is performed at the kitchen table—and the experience accumulated from writing and being in the kitchen—is

dispersed through the rest of the house, through the homes people later occupy, through individuals' writing practices, and throughout their writing lives. By recognizing the kitchen table's presence as a motif throughout the participants' early memories and directing my line of questioning that way, I was able to uncover memories of writing which other studies of early literacy have not yet revealed. Although my research supports Deborah Brandt's findings that memories of reading with parents is more pervasive than writing with them; that writing to read is a more commonly taught and practiced event in school than writing as an end in itself; and that when writing appears in early literacy memories, it is generally wrapped up in memories of struggle and conflict, my data also pushes back on her findings, as asking pointed questions about objects uncovered, amongst my participants, many memories of writing with or near parents ("Remembering Writing"). The kitchen, as a key early literacy site, is one that houses many memories not just of doing homework, but writing and learning to write within the proximity and with the help of parents and siblings.

The existence of these early memories and the differences between the memories of reading and writing necessitates a distinction in the way we conceive of both acts. From my participants' narratives, many reasons for comparing the two have emerged. Most of my study participants can cite memories of reading with parents, but they are not able to pinpoint how they learned to read. By the time they entered first grade, they could read, and reading becomes a hot family practice that is culturally and institutionally sponsored. Similarly, the difficulty with which my participants (and Brandt's) defined writing signals the complexity of learning the various components of writing, learning how to form letters, learning how to use symbols to communicate, learning how to translate ideas into sentences, learning various writing genres, etc.

For example, when I asked them for their earliest memory of writing many of them not only moved between viewing it as putting pen to paper/learning how to form letters and a sense of writing as creative writing the dominant form they practiced in grade school, but they wrestled audibly with this definition, showcasing attachment to how culture defines writing and how they do or do not see their own writing practices inscribed within this definition. It is undeniable that kids were learning how to "write" with crayons and other implements before attending school; that exercise of learning how to write cursive was so intensely practiced that it seems to have wiped out many of my participants' other memories of learning how to write. This, combined with the difficulty of remembering before kindergarten and sometimes even before first grade, made remembering both writing and reading challenging exercises for my participants, whose key memories seem to pipe up after the age of five or six.

The Coffee Shop. The second example of mutual mediation relates intimately to these early practices. It is the way in which the coffee shop—which has emerged as a site in which people travel to write—mediates writing and the way in which writing has, in turn, mediated coffee shops and coffee shop culture. I am looking at the coffee shop in two ways: first, as an object in itself, a physical, tangible place; second, as a habitat that houses various object clusters, both those that exist within (tables, chairs, outlets, etc.) and those that people bring with them.

Although it is not my purpose here to trace the historical development of the coffee shop or large-scale trends in coffee consumption, a very brief overview of the history of the coffee shop and the proliferation of coffee shops and coffee consumption in the United States will help to explain the emphasis that the coffee shop occupies in this chapter.

It is traditionally believed that coffee houses emerged in Europe in the 17th century, along with a new public sphere; the coffee house allowed for a neutral meeting ground in which people of various social classes could meet and debate. For this reason, they fascinated Jurgen Habermas, who writes about them in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, as well as Ray Oldenburg, who in *The Great Good Place* reads coffee shops, as well as other physical sites such as the neighborhood bar, as "third places" that allow community members to convene and engage in meaningful dialogue. Studies are emerging, as well, of the way that WiFi technology is used in coffee shops. These studies generally note the conflict between the way users wish to organize themselves and behave in them, versus the way in which coffee shop owners must curtail certain behaviors. Laptop users, for examples, are seen as Internet poachers who drain shops' financial resources by taking up space for long periods and infrequently making purchases (Gupta). Engaging in public discourse in coffee shops is not new; Turkey and Paris both famously housed strong coffee shop traditions, with coffee shops providing space for political, intellectual debate, as well, in the case of Paris, as places for authors to write.

In the United States, the large-scale commodification of coffee—and the emergence of coffee shops as social spaces—can be attributed to the growth of Starbucks, which transformed the retail experience of drinking coffee (and what people are willing to pay for it) and which also proliferated across the U.S. and world. Starbucks, according to First Research, "dominates the industry" ("Coffee Shops—Quarterly Update, 3/12/12"). The retail chain opened its first shop in Seattle in 1971, and as of October 2011, there were 17,000 in existence (Starbucks Company Profile), in every U.S. state and in 55 countries (and the European market now comprises 50% of

its revenue). This has happened in coordination with the growth of the Internet, WiFi technology, and increased use of the laptop computer, all of which have promoted writing mobility.

Alongside Starbucks, coffee shops have proliferated more generally, as has the consumption of coffee. Each year, coffee shop chains grow 10%; 66% of Americans buy their coffee in public places; "the market size of coffee grew from $7.53 billion in 1999 to $8.96 billion in 2003;" coffee shop patrons are 70% more likely to have a postgraduate degree; and though more than half of the adult population across the world drinks coffee, the United States accounts for more than half of those coffee drinkers (SBDCNet, "Coffee Shop Business Overview). "The top 50 companies generate more than 70% of sales," according to the "Coffee Shops—Quarterly Update." In this context, it is not surprising that many of my participants, mostly the undergraduate and graduate student participants, reported shifting their habitats between their home and the semi-public space of the coffee shop.

Coffee shops—and the object clusters within them—both facilitate and constrain the writing process. Through my participants, I observed several phenomena: that writers sought out coffee shops for very particular design-based and aesthetic reasons, and usually, and humorously, coffee in no case appeared on the list of their reasons for choosing a café. This accords with favorite possessions research, and in specific, that conducted by Wallendorf and Armould, who note that for participants in two cultures they studied (the U.S. and Niger), "when respondents were asked why they chose a particular object as their favorite, they did not focus on functionally based performance attributes" ("Favorite Things" 537). Instead, in every case, they referenced first the layout of the shop; second, the availability of the particular chairs and tables they like to sit at; and third, the ability of the shop to provide essential conditions of their writing

environments (quiet/music/light/etc.). In every case, as well, my participants noted that although their preferences regarding the shop were very specific, their preference for that shop generally shifted. Reasons for this included the shop's inability to continue to provide essential conditions or how, more totemically, sites dwindled in their ability to inspire, for aesthetic reasons. No participant used only one shop. Each moved between several and they moved according the genre in which they were writing, their educational stage, or in order to work near or with others. There was no one in my study for whom coffee shops were solely productive, either. Instead, their movement in and out of these places, and even within them, can be characterized by a rotating axis of facilitation and constraint. What I found in coffee shop behavior was a little different than with objects. People tend to attach to certain objects and object clusters within a coffee shop, as well as the object's general design, more than to the experience of the place as a whole. But even though these specific objects gained heat, their frequent lack of availability (such as a preferred table being occupied) and the writer's lack of control over the general environment, are likely responsible for their lack of intense attachment, over long time spans, to particular shops. Charles, for example, tells me:

> Michelangelo's was a real big place for me for about two years. I don't know what happened, I just started liking Fair Trade. It was my least favorite for a long time and I stopped going to Espresso Royale because they were playing the music too loud. That used to be my favorite.

He has now frequented a particular coffee shop, one of the above, for several years. He tells me that he is trying to break this general habit, because coffee shops are always rife with distractions that inhibit his writing practice. For example, coffee shops, he says

> are getting, in recent years just more distractions as people have more electronic devices with them, especially cell phones, which I find difficult to . . . and it's very annoying. And, it's just become annoying in other ways, too, that has to do with . . . I mean, people watch television in coffee shops now. They sit there, they open up their laptops, and they watch television. And even if I can't hear it, it bothers me. But I, you know, I still find it very hard not to go every day to Fair Trade.

In this narrative, you can hear both desire to be in this place, as well as the constraining role that certain objects have on Charles' public writing practice, including technological objects, one object cluster that patrons generally bring into the coffee shop. The objects people bring could be characterized as "unexpected" objects that writers that change the nature of the space on a daily basis, singularization it, and which writers cannot anticipate before they make a choice to go to that place to work.

Although when I first asked Charles about his object preferences within this particular coffee shop, he said he can sit anywhere, he tells me:

> I'm not as stringent as some. I have to sit against the wall, as most people like to sit against the wall. I like that back area. With the fireplace, it's a bit more secluded. There are fewer people walking by. It's a bit less like being at a coffee shop. I don't know why I go there, but you know, I like those two back tables that are against the wall, in the back room, but those will be my third choice. I would move forward as those wall tables fill up.

I should note that although the reader will likely find these narratives humorous (and my participants generally laughed when they hesitatingly told me about these preferences that seem so idiosyncratic), they repeated across the coffee shop users I interviewed. A graduate student named Natalie, for example, is equally cognizant of objects and shop geography, though for her, proximity to outlets (Charles generally writes by hand or reads in coffee shops), lack of proximity to others, yet the ability to people-watch and overlook the general action of the shop dominate her coffee shop practice. She detailed her trajectory through one particular coffee shop when hunting for a table if her preferred one, upstairs, by the railing in the corner, was taken. Valerie—and every other I studied who writes in public—describes the urge to write in coffee shops as a means of "being in the world" (another participant's words) while performing the challenging, often isolating practice of writing. Yet she would shift her geographic location for any number of reasons, including if the shop was noisy or if she could not locate herself near a computer outlet. Teo, a graduate student, details driving 20 minutes across town to work at a particular coffee shop. If one table were occupied, he would leave and drive 20 minutes across town to another one. In a third shop, he preferred one long table in the back; he would leave if it was occupied.

These examples are meant to illustrate the ways that objects—both in terms of coffee shops themselves and the object clusters within them—inspire and promote writing, and also intervene in the writing process at the same time. In a very simple way, my participants' narratives detail how their specific needs, along with their movement within space, rearranges its social architecture. They move within a coffee shop, often changing tables, looking for outlets and trying to get away, as Charles does, from distraction. They sit near or away from others,

move chairs around, and plug in computer cords, each day creating different combinations with the object clusters that comprise that shop. In some ways, this is another example of individual performance within a given object frame.

While it is clear that objects, in their many forms, direct and mediate writing practice within coffee shops, I found it difficult to ignore, in my participants' narratives, the way in which writing (as well as other activities that are not my focus here, such as business meetings and studying) pushes back on the space of the coffee shop, changing its social function, demanding an awareness of users' needs in terms of design and construction, and inscribing the space of coffee shops with certain practices that come to define what a coffee shop means. This pushing back by coffee shop patrons has a real impact not only on existing coffee shops, but the definition of what a coffee shop should be, what it should be used for, and what new coffee shops will look like. You can hear this when Charles says:

> I've become much more picky as the cell phone thing has become more popular. I don't mind people talking. If two people come sit next to me at a table adjacent to mine and they have a lively conversation next to me I like that; it's distracting, but I like it. It's just the cellphone thing I can't take.

Charles is wrestling here with the way in which technological objects have changed the nature of the coffee shop. He is upset by the presence of cell phones and television vis a vis the computer in the café at the same time that other writers designate the coffee shop as a place in which it is correct to watch converse with remote others or watch television. People's various practices, and particularly literacy practices, participate in the dynamic, constant revision of what semi-public places such as the coffee shop are for. It is no longer rooted predominantly in creating the kind of

political and conversational public arena that Habermas and Oldenburg envisioned for it. Now, the laptop designates this space as one not only for talking, reading, and writing, but also for watching television. People participate, through their use, in the redefinition of what a space does and can mean.

The latter is perhaps best illustrated through the example of the never-ending battle between patrons who demand Wi-Fi and see the coffee shop as a place to spend long periods of time working and writing, and coffee shop owners, who need users to purchase more coffee, stop draining their wireless networks, and move through the shop more quickly. In "Grande Wi-Fi: Understanding What Wi-Fi Users are Doing in Coffee Shops," Neeti Gupta discusses an example of a "Wi-Fi battle" at one Massachusetts coffee shop. One of Gupta's study participants, a university lecturer, was a frequent patron of this cafe. After being away for winter break, this participant, Maria, returned to the coffee shop, attempted to plug her computer cable into her usual electrical outlet, and found that all of the computer outlets had been removed. Gupta writes,

> Later, I learned from a barista at Trident that Trident management had recently decided to remove all the power outlets, in order to maximize customer turn-around time and minimize the time these "laptop-toting web-surfers" spent in their coffee shops (10).

But to illustrate the mutual mediation that takes place in coffee shops, I cite one more example from Gupta's text. She references Michael Oh, who created a free wireless network all along one popular Boston street that a Starbucks was located on, in order to challenge Starbucks' practice of charging patrons by the minute for Internet use (11).

A more writing-centric example of how writing mediates objects, however, is the way in which writers use the space of coffee shops, the way their physical bodies move through and occupy them, and the way in which coffee shops have now come to be defined not as places where one drinks coffee, necessarily, but places in which people socialize, write, work, think, eat, drink, and do a range of other activities. Writers, of course, are only one group of people who frequent cafes. But their occupation of them reinscribes the coffee shop as a space where literacy practices take place—and belong.

The (Apple) Computer.[20] Where the computer turned up as an object of desire or an object that my participants were attached to, the computer was an Apple, and most frequently, a laptop. It became clear to me very quickly that the computer is seen by attached Mac users not as a simple tool, but as a complex space that they enter. Luke, for whom his Apple computer was a relatively cold object despite frequent use, says that he likes to see his Mac's green power light flashing on an off, because it reminds him that the computer is "animated," that it is "secure." He likes knowing that "it is alive." The personification of the Mac as a living, breathing creature is not surprising, as many people feel less control over the computer than they do working with pen and paper, the writing technology they grew up with. Hence, whereas they know they exert control over pen and paper in familiar ways, the computer is often an object that feels outside of

[20] I spend less time in this section on the computer than I do on the kitchen table and the coffee shop, because computer use and attachment to computers needs to be studied in more depth than I was able to in my study. I interviewed a range of participants, and my data suggests what we might expect, that children who experienced either early introduction to the computer at home or school, children whose technological sponsorship (Brandt, *Literacy in American Lives*) was greater at an earlier age, had more facility and displayed more attachment, in general, the computer. Of the people in my study who expressed computer attachment, all were Apple computer users. I have enough data to include only some preliminary findings here.

themselves, at the same time that they become proficient with using it and become attached while doing so.

I included the computer in the mutual mediation section because of the demands that both object and writing place on each other in its context. When a computer is purchased by most users, it demands a certain type of use. One has to learn how to register it, buy and download software, and learn how to navigate the computer's user interface and varied functions. Even a savvy user has to continually spend time mastering ever-changing and ever-updated software and hardware. For example, Emilie, a college writing teacher, tells me that she is intrigued by writing program software named "Scrivener" that her husband composed his dissertation on. She expressed excitement over what this program can do, such as offering writers the option of working on virtual notecards instead of in the more traditional vertically linear framework of Microsoft Word. Yet at the same time, she laments that although she has had the software for some time, she has yet to use it extensively or to master any of its functions.

At the same time, however, computer users singularize not only the physical computer itself, adorning it with writing, stickers, cases, and other paraphernalia, but also using the computer's proffered software and functions in a variety of ways. My participants who displayed strong computer attachments detailed the various singularizations they performed on their computers, as well as the individual ways they approached both writing software and computer writing practice. Jonathan detailed his practice of using Word. At all times, he kept two documents open: one was the document he would use as a working draft of his paper; the other, he termed the "operating table." On the operating table, he wrote snippets, ideas, anything that he thought might be relevant to the project at hand. Yet he wanted to keep what he saw as two

different texts separate; he did not want to sully the working draft with his initial, less cohesive writing. Holly always keeps the Oxford English Dictionary, available through her university's library, open on her Apple computer. She sees the OED as a totemic object, though intangible, with the power to inspire her to write. In her words, "It can help you when you've gotten so close to the words that you're using you can just kind of hone back to what it means to your audience or to the authorities."

Beyond singularization, it is now commonplace when a computer program crashes or otherwise underperforms that users are prompted to send information to the software or hardware's programmer, which triggers programmers and engineers to change the software in response. Apple support forums in which users contribute their experiences, ask questions, post responses, and submit product and software requests proliferate as well. Computer users, and writers, have participated in the large-scale reconstruction of programs such as Word, have helped with the creation and demand for open-source software such as Open Office and have reorganized the blogosphere through the prolific literacy practice of writing blogs.

If we examine, however, writing's mediation of the computer, we see how people have come to see and use it not only as a tool, but as a place. It, like the novel, performs a chronotopic function as a thing in and through which time and place merge. The computer, like the telephone, also performs the function of connecting people through (invisible) space.

That people think of the computer in this complex way unites it with the two other examples above, the kitchen (and the kitchen table) and the coffee shop. Mutual mediation begins to occur when an individual is able to exert control over an object or cluster of objects located in space, yet also when some aspects of that object's use is controlled by others. This is

different from using a pen, for example, which is a private, individual act that only in rare cases happens with others. My data lead me to conclude that just as Belk notes in "Possessions and the Extended Self" that extension of self through objects is correlated with the degree of control which people have over those objects, the intensity of mediation is also regulated by control.

Associative Objects

The final category of objects I'll present here are ones that—on the surface—have nothing to do with writing. These are objects that my participants substituted for writing objects when I asked them which material things were important to their early writing process, to their literacy development, and to the development of both their schooled selves and writing identities. These objects are important—just as Luke's cluster of objects are important—in their illustration of the tied-togetherness of selfhood, of objects use, of the expression of self, and our ability to learn. In some ways, I found these objects the most interesting ones in my study, since my participants forced these material things into the interview and demanded their relevancy to the study of the ways in which objects, and material culture, impact their writing.

Emilie, the college teacher I mentioned above, discusses an early memory of exclusion—one she grappled with even at the time, around the age of eight—when she was about to play with a school friend whom she admired and who possessed social capital through clothing that Emilie was supportively envious of. This friend was someone whose social persona meant something readable, someone who, in Emilie's words, had all of the right clothes and all of the right accoutrements for school. Each year, each of the six siblings in Emilie's family got one new pair of shoes that was an all-purpose shoe for the year. Emilie had, for years, pined for a pair of

boat shoes popular at the time, and her mother acquiesced and bought them. This meant that on the particular morning that Emilie was scheduled to be picked up by her friend and her friend's mother for church, Emilie—dressed in church clothes—had only one choice of shoe to wear, the boat shoes. She wrestled with this decision, knowing that she neither looked nor felt right. At the same time, she felt that however she looked, she could probably feel okay. This memory of feeling out of place in regard to fashion and this sort of utility vs. image decision in regard to products are ones that Emilie thinks and cares deeply about. She contends with them as a parent as she and her husband define family identity around goods and as she passes down to her children similar ideas about how clothing purchases reflect their family values (I discuss Emilie in more depth in Chapter Two).

Similarly, jeans, and particularly Levi's and Girbaud, figured in two male participants' narratives about significant schooling objects, mostly as objects that came to be important to social acclimation and peer relations in junior high. Jacob, the teacher I discussed earlier, talks about the importance not only of jeans, but of the purchase of a duffel bag:

> When I was in high school a duffel bag with a white buffalo mattered because our mascot was a white buffalo. And people would carry around these duffel bags, not with a shoulder strap but just like this, you know? And I thought God, I always wanted one because you could carry your books from class to class instead of having them here or going back to your locker all the time. I thought that was the coolest thing. And I worked for it, and I finally got one.

Jacob, as well as several other participants in my study, also emphasized the importance of school lunch to their desire to go to school. For these participants, school meant that they would

get fed, something they had to worry about when school wasn't in session. It is not difficult to see the import that such objects, though they bear no obvious connection to writing, have on the development of a schooled self, through a feeling of comfort and belonging within the schooling and learning context. These early schooling memories, as I have labored to show throughout this chapter, have a visible, tangible impact on the way writers come to see themselves as writers and to develop adult writing practices.

Conclusion

I began this chapter by promising to probe the "possible other things' that objects are doing in writing. My probing led me to see how, as Latour asserts, objects mediate writing and, in consequence, writers. As Brandt and Clinton assert, Latour shows how objects

> especially provide for and speak to connections beyond the here and now. Manufactured, delivered, positioned, still there when the talk around them or about them or through them has stopped, objects mediate our interactions with other places and other times . . . Objects are animated with human histories, vision, ingenuity, and will, yet they also have durable status and are resilient to our will. Our objects are us but more than us, bigger than we are; as they accumulate human investments in them over time, they can and do push back at us as "social facts" independent and to be reckoned with. (345)

Throughout this chapter, I have illustrated how objects persist; how handwriting paper, for example, hovers inside of my participants' memories of learning how to write, cramming out other memories of forming letters, but also forming binding aesthetic relationships between

writers and paper. Handwriting paper, through my participants' narratives, is given a body and a history that persists, one far greater than the sum total of its parts. Handwriting paper, as well as many of the other objects in this chapter, are "more than us, bigger than we are."

Brandt and Clinton build on Latour in order to draw a parallel between the way objects are functioning at a both the global and local level and the way that literacy operates. Literacy, they imply, "pushes back at us as [a] social fact independent and to be reckoned with." My research has uncovered one dimension of this operation of literacy: that of writing practice. Writing, as I have shown, is not just an inert operation being worked upon by writers wielding objects or objects directing it. As objects gain heat, the act of writing begins to complicate objects' natures, itself transforming the object and persisting. In the context of school, writing is used to negotiate identity expression and the forging of social connections. Writing inscribes objects with social meaning, dictating new readings and purposes for them. Converse sneakers still advertise themselves, perhaps, but they also advertise the emergence of writing used to transgress the artificial boundaries of school. This accords with the idea that "literacy acts as a social agent, as an independent mediator (i.e., literacy, itself, in action)" (Brandt and Clinton 349). If the converse sneakers are sold at a yard sale or given to a charity and another person picks them up and puts them on, what happens to the traces to writing and identity that are left inscribed on their surface?

Mutual mediation asks us to keep considering, where social objects and places are considering, the way that objects and writers continually influence each other. Writing, as well as objects, persists, hangs around, allowing us to examine it, revise it, and encounter it across multiple contexts, places, and time.

The greatest challenge is to understand the force that associative objects exert on writers, writing, and literacy, as they are easy to ignore for appearing unrelated to its primary purpose. Yet anyone who has been to school understands how learning is promoted, disrupted, and interrupted by social circumstances, which include contextual factors such as having the right clothes, coming to school hungry, and feeling out of place. This is perhaps why my study participants forced stories of memories of inclusion and exclusion related to objects besides writing and related implements into our conversations. These objects, in many cases, were more tightly woven into their earlier schooled selves than other ones.

Associative objects also "awaken analytical curiosity in any objective trace of literacy in a setting (print, instruments, paper, other technologies) whether they are being taken up by local actors or not" (349). As an object that appears ubiquitously in every cinematic and literary rendering of high school that I have ever seen, the school locker is an understudied trace of literacy, in several manifestations, that supports and maintains literacy practices and social relations while it sits, inert, in space, directing human action around it. It—and the school desks and cubbies that precede it—are to be the focus of my next object research in the context of school.

Conclusion

I did not aim to study *writing* identity when I began this project. Very early on, however—in the pilot interviews I conducted, in fact—my participants raised the issue of their discontent with their life's work: writing. Most of my participants were graduate students, undergraduate students, and teachers, and so I studied only a very small subset of the people in this country who write on a daily basis. It was clear that for this group of people whose daily labor suggested that they are Writers that they not only did not conceive of themselves as such, but also that they disliked the majority of the writing they performed, largely academic writing. I talked with my participants about how their perceptions of themselves and their work, as well as how writing fits into their self-concept. I had also built into my study questions about how other activities, such as reading, fit into their self-concept. For most of my participants, a sense of themselves as a "reader" developed early and persisted, even in light of the challenging reading tasks that accompany scholastic work. In this way, their experiences accord with Deborah Brandt's assertion that while the label "reader" is widely accessible to most individuals, the label "writer" is not.[21]

The writers in my study conceptualized writing as a struggle and saw themselves, on the whole, engaged in a daily wrestling match with their writing practice. I immediately traced a connection, expressed through my data, between their inability to inhabit the identity role of Writer, their discontent with writing as an activity, and cultural narratives about who is permitted

[21] "Remembering Writing, Remembering Reading."

to inhabit this identity label. At the same time, my study participants narrated writing practices filled with rich relationships with objects and object clusters associated, from childhood on, with writing, and with literate development in general. In many ways, then, even if their writing identities were troubled, their relationships with the goods of writing were largely pleasurable and connected to their senses of selfhood. This is not to say either that their relationship with objects was not troubled, for it often was, or that their relationship to writing was always troubled, which it was not. But the interviews in toto drove me to ask new questions about the interrelatedness of self-concept, writing pleasure, writing anxiety, writing identity, literate identity, and material goods.

What does it mean to be a writer? To whom is this identity label important or accessible? What does it mean that so many in my study rejected this identity category? I struggled with this question, because at the same time that I began to understand that if most of my study participants would not call themselves writers, why was it so important to continue to hold the importance of this identity label stable? Was I attributing to the category *writer* the same mystical qualities that I was rejecting in its application to more "creative" forms of writing?

Although this problem still persists, my participants made clear a phenomenon through our discussion of their writing habits, histories, behaviors, objects, practices, and attachments: even if they did not conceptualize their work as writing proper, they used objects, and set up writing habitats, in pursuit of this elusive descriptor. One of my participants who showed the least object attachment and habitual behavior around her writing practice, an undergraduate student named Gretchen, was one of the few academic writers in my study (which was dominated by academic writers) who expressed enjoyment of this genre. At the same time, she

referred continually to an urge to write non-fiction and was torn between a desire to pursue graduate studies in composition and rhetoric and to write for a more public audience. Virtually everyone in my study at some point distinguished between the more creative forms of writing they pursued in the past or in spare moments on the side and the work that they produced on a daily basis. This led me to suspect that even if this study served to glorify the label *writer* in problematic ways, it was doing so in service of the majority of people I studied, who wished to be described by this label, even as they rejected its application to their practice.

For example, many of my participants harkened back to a time in their lives when they saw themselves as writers. This was a time, generally in grade school and particularly in middle school, when they used journals, pencils, and other objects not only to fantasize about being writers, but to write, in their own words, "creatively," by which they meant writing poetry or prose. At some point in their post-secondary careers, this activity stopped, as the demands of school or work pressed on them and they had to give up this practice, which was seen as a luxury. Although my participants talked about writing and defined it for me in varied ways, and although the teachers in particular encouraged their students to define writing and their ability to do it expansively, they had themselves internalized culture's conception that creative writing is always poetry, prose, or popular non-fiction. Most of my participants no longer saw themselves fitting into that conception, and their relationship both to Writing and to the identity label Writer shifted. One of the most deleterious impacts on my study participants was generally dissatisfaction with writing, which any outside observer could see as these people's life's work. These students, graduate students, and teachers—many of whom are now professors, graduate students, administrators, and others whose daily work mostly or largely consists of writing—not

only dislike the activity that constitutes their discipline or work, but do not see themselves as inhabiting a label that very aptly describes their practice. I found through discussions of this topic with these and other writers (workplace writers, creative, writers, and so on) that the more one sees oneself as a writer, as producing work that is valued by and visible to the public writ large, and the more that one is able to identify with one's identity, the greater the sense of well-being people have. I wondered what helping people see their academic writing as *creative* writing could mean for our field, but—in line with my study—I pursued questions related how my participants were using objects and habitats to manage, negotiate, and express these anxieties over writing and regarding their self-concept. I became interested in self-concept, identity, and the psychology of writers and writing for another reason: because so little scholarship in our field addresses it, yet just as we know that practice of a sport over time increases one's ability to perform it and that people who begin at a young age to have a positive self-concept related to that sport (and who enjoy it) will continue to play it, it is important to the project of Writing as a whole that we understand what it means to develop a positive self-concept around writing and to help writers maintain it.

One of study participants, Nika, is a good example of someone who has maintained a positive self-concept around writing, and not coincidentally, she is one of the only people in my study who continues to write and perform poetry prolifically. When we met, she was finishing college as a returning adult student and worked as a university administrator. For Nika, the identity marker *writer* was extremely viable and it comprised a significant, accessible part of her self-identity. She fixed an origin moment this identity label's adherence, an experience as an adult when, in an addiction support group, she wrote stories that her peers enjoyed and gave her

positive feedback on. “You are a writer,” they told her. The label stuck. Nika had a rich relationship with objects since childhood despite growing up in relative poverty; she worked with pencils, notebooks, and other materials her mother procured for her in her work as a church secretary. Her early hot, positively charged relationship with writing objects persisted throughout her life, and she used these objects purposively to express what she conceived of as her writing identity. The identity marker “writer” persisted even in times when she experienced scholastic disappointments. She labeled herself as someone who has trouble finishing tasks; each time she went back to school, she would quit, only credits away from a degree. Throughout this time, possession a positive self-concept of her ability to write gave her a sense of self-worth that floated her through challenging times, as she continued to journal and write lyrics and other poetic/prose forms.

Nika’s writing history intrigued me not only because she had maintained a positive identity around writing, but also because she had such a personal, intense, and expressive relationship with writing objects. As I cite elsewhere in this dissertation, Nika is one of the people whose first encounters with handwriting paper were sublime, as it allowed her access not only to services and experiences connected with self- and family-identity (such as getting a library card, which required her to be able to sign her name, so that she could not only check out books, but join her mother in doing this), but it also signified her tactile, sensory, pleasurable contact with the paper itself. As I’ve remarked throughout this dissertation, we do not have a deep enough understand of the role that writing pleasure, that ineffable thing that happens when we interact with writing objects and object clusters related to our field and our work, plays in both writing practice and the development of a writerly self-concept.

Hence, my study has used scholarship in social psychology and consumer research to argue for attention in writing studies to the connection between (writing) identity and possessions. Just as mechanics or athletes rely on particular possessions in the performance of their practices, writers rely on object clusters to perform their daily work. But more than just using objects simply to perform their work, people in all disciplines form connections with them and attachments to them that enrich their daily work. I want to emphasize that writing is hardly alone in this; talk to bicycle mechanics about their work and they will tell you about their favorite tools, preferences that travel far beyond mere utility; talk with chefs about kitchen implements and you will likely find that each one values possessions for a combination of reasons, including utility, nostalgia, quality, and experience. If we could peel a knife or a pen layer by layer to see what experiences and memories it lodges, we would learn much about the person who wields it, as well as the network or community of those who develop around it.

In Chapter One, I showed how one particular object, the Moleskine notebook, has come to symbolize the identity marker *writer* for thousands, possibly hundreds of thousands, of writers and potential writers. The object performs more than one function: at one level, people internalize this product's branding and it often becomes an important component in the development of their writing practice. On another level, those who write use this object in their daily practice, forming a sensory, experiential relationship with it that transcends branding and incorporates the object not only into their practice, but also into their self-concept. We form attachments to the objects we use; but more than that, our objects come to extend our selves, and we project onto them hopes and desires for the possible selves we wish to occupy. In this way, they operate on us as much as we operate with them.

Moleskines are used so widely that it would be wrong to say that only writers or potential writers are using them. This is why, in the first half of Chapter One, I trace the Moleskine's cult community online, where it has gained torpedic popularity. Tech communities contribute to various hacks that help those in the workforce to GTD or participate in David Allen's notion of "getting things done." For these users of the Moleskine, there is sensory pleasure in manipulating, or singularizing, the Moleskine to suit their needs, at the same time that Moleskine use (and being a part of the GTD phenomenon/community) contributes to social identity and well-being. Singularization is one step in connecting with the object; the second step is sharing that customization online. That Moleskine is aware of these trends and continues to promote them through increased product branding, support of online blogs and other communities, and alterations to the object showcases its saavy marketing and awareness that communities build and support communal object attachment (and object popularity). In future research, I wish to target these communities through interviews and observations to see what work writing is doing as these businesspeople, Internet Technology workers, and others who don't claim the identity *writer* use writing objects and contribute to writing object networks.

The second half of Chapter One follows three academic writers as they use this object in their daily lives and incorporate it into their self-concept. For these three writers, who possess varying notions of themselves as writers and the kinds of writing they will perform in the Moleskine, the object takes on a different life than what I observed online, or, rather, being able to interview people who use Moleskines revealed a complexity of use that comes through mutual dialogue and questioning. These three writers display the emotional, psychological impact of long-term use of a writing object. The object plays a significant role in the performance of self

and writing self that develops over time.

Chapter One, then, illuminates some of the charged behavior that develops around objects such as Moleskines that become hot for writers, whether this heat is productive or unproductive. It shows how a hot object can manifest, as it did for my participant David, feelings of failing one's possible self: it remains, in a sense, a transitional object marked with the possibility of helping writers to achieve goals, even if it is ineffectual. One could ask whether—in David's case—the problem is not the object, per se, but David's feelings about himself as a writer, scholar, and thinker, whether the Moleskine is just one manifestation of David's interior struggle with defining his self-concept as a whole. Yet in my discussions with David, it became clear that the Moleskine was not just one object in his writing repertoire in which he inscribed his desires to be a productive, creative writing self—it is *the* object. David was introduced to the Moleskine notebook at a critical juncture in his adolescence, and with it, he was presented with a tabula rasa for writing identity play. In that notebook, he would become a *writer*. It is an interesting question how an object takes on this role. At what juncture does it need to enter a person's life? How many experiences with and around it need to take place for it to become so meaningful and bound up with self-concept?

The two other writers in this study illustrate the object's trajectory on a continuum of hot and cold (if hot/cold is the x axis, say) and productive/unproductive (y)(i.e., the four measures work together so that an object can be hot and productive, hot and unproductive, cold and productive, or cold and unproductive). Fiona developed a practice of using journals as a place to scribe her most private thoughts in stream of consciousness format. This practice developed earlier than David's did, when she was in third grade. By the time she chose the Moleskine as her

journal, and when it became a hot and sacred object in her writing practice, it was not being used for the identity creation function that it was for David. Her self-concept both as a writer and as one who uses journals (and, now, solely and religiously the Moleskine) to process her most interior thoughts was established before she encountered the object. This might help to explain why David, who first encountered the Moleskine as a teenager, might have a more complicated, though not less meaningful or hot, relationship with the object. Fiona's use of the Moleskine is also less complicated because she reserves it for one writing task, whereas for David, the object has always and continues to house hope for using it for undefined purposes that, in his mind, he is unable completely to master and express.

For the third writer, Lily, the Moleskine is cold; she rejects its promises and its branding and uses it as a site for her flourishing writing practice. By the time she encounters it, almost any object would do. She develops a cold, productive relationship with this object that sustains. It could be argued that the Moleskine is a conduit for her encounter with her academic self; she interacts with herself, in the Moleskine's pages, even more than with the object. She is the only one of the three who repeatedly reviews the work she produces in the Moleskine and incorporates it into her academic and workplace writing.

In Chapter Two, I look to back-to-school shopping as a widely practiced and cherished, institutionally and family sponsored ritual that supports the development of *schooled selves* and of being able to *do school*. I argue that a general educational identity develops around goods and largely in concert with this ritual, which is supported heavily both by schools and parents. Kids learn what it means to be a student as they learn how to wield learning tools and other implements, such as pencils, pens, crayons, and protractors. These tools are as critical to the

development of their selfhood (and their ability to do and perform in school) as are their habits. It was clear to me from my interview data and, later, from consumer research and social psychological scholarship that around adolescence, a transformation occurred. At this time, this generalized educational identity, or schooled self, morphs. In order to distinguish themselves from parents, siblings, and peers, or in order to express similarities with these groups, adolescents begin to think more consciously about and experience social anxiety around material possessions. At this time, most of my interview participants who grew up in poverty (three of them in fairly dire poverty) became aware of their socioeconomic status for the first time. This wasn't even a matter of attempting to "pass" on the part of their parents; rather, their families had provided some form of stability or well-being, and enough borrowed or thrifted goods, that my participants were not markedly aware of their socioeconomic differences. They each expressed creativity and know-how on the part of one parent (or family members) that both sheltered them and promoted the development of their schooled selves.

Questions of access to material goods came up throughout this study and raised more questions than I was able to answer. My participants were, in many ways, success stories: my participants who grew up poor, or in single-parent homes, or who were first-generation students, had experienced some degree of school success and had found creative ways to navigate educational and social institutions. This is not to diminish their very varied and difficult childhood and adolescent experiences. Yet I did not observe differences in object attachment or satisfaction with childhood and adolescent experiences around learning and goods. What I did see was invention on the part of parents who had to juggle multiple, shifting jobs and economic landscapes in order to provide. However, my study population, as I have noted, was homogenous

enough in terms of occupation that more research must be conducted in order for me to understand just how much access to material goods, or lack of access to traditionally conceived family dynamics, impacts both the development of schooled selves and self-concept, and especially one's sense of what is possible. Daphna Oyserman conducts works in this area with low-income, minority youth in Detroit and looks at how an understanding of *possible selves* impacts educational success. Further iterations of my study will address questions of access directly. At an institutional level, what are the support systems in place for access to goods? What happens when material goods are not available? How does this impact educational development and identity?

I came up against another descriptive and ideological problem at this juncture of my study. While almost all of my participants identified with the label "student" or with aspects of the school system (such as liking going to school, looking forward to being fed at school, enjoying reading, looking forward to back-to-school shopping, expressing the self through goods, connecting with others through goods), only a few of my participants began to develop or seek the identity label "writer." Once again, this hearkens back to Deborah Brandt's assertion that it is much more difficult to embody the term "writer" than "reader." As New Literacy Studies and related work has made it abundantly clear, cultural narratives around the practice of reading, and institutional support of reading for its own sake, are so vast and widespread that mass society generally does not challenge the importance of being a *reader*. Amongst many populations, it is something of a social, intellectual, and even moral sin to express distaste for reading. This does not hold for writing.

For many, like the family of my study participant Teo, writing is seen as a luxury that only people with money or leisure can afford to practice. This is interesting on two counts. First, Teo's mother, a poor factory worker who moved to the U.S. from Puerto Rico and struggled throughout Teo's childhood to make ends meet, supported Teo's emerging and prominent schooled self and literacy skills (and his brother's emerging skills as a graffiti artist) by buying him tools for becoming literate, including crayons, workbooks, and the like, which she found through bargain shopping. At the same time, Teo is a good example of pervasive cultural narratives around the benefits of reading over writing. He remembers writing around his sibling and cousins, but not his mother; on the other hand, he remembers reading with his mother and in particular, the Golden Books she handpicked for him. Yet post-college, Teo could not dispel the notion that his family expected him to be laboring in more traditional, culturally supported ways, by going to "work" and laboring physically in ways that they understood. Teo worked in kitchens throughout graduate school, often stalling his academic work, not only out of a need for making money and a desire to provide as he could for his family, but also because laboring in this way felt like he was performing valuable labor, labor in line with his family's identity. As I show in Chapter Two, then, family identity is a major source of self-concept that people navigate from childhood on and that, as writers, they navigate in particular ways that our field does not yet understand. I was able to get at many of these issues of self- and family-definition by discussing objects, childhood homes, and habitats with my study participants, who displayed quite readily that their adult practices were bound up with their childhood ones. It is not surprising, then, that Teo's story reveals that for some, attached to the notion of academic labor, then, and particularly academic writing, is the notion that such work is idle, meaningless, a

luxury, at the same time that it is a struggle.

This presents a crossroads once again: it is conceivable that much good could come from investing the word "writer" and the discipline of "writing" with the same quasi-mystical, culturally sponsored, often invisible, and yet perpetual power as reading. Making such an identity marker available more readily, and helping people such as Teo value their work, could critically and positively impact both feelings of self-worth and enjoyment of life's work. On the other hand, doing so raises some of the same problems that composition and rhetoric has battled over regarding claims of what reading does for people, especially without a nuanced understanding of local and global contexts of literacy and literate development.

One limitation of this study that could be addressed by asking such questions is once again my study's population. By recruiting children who are in the process of developing schooled selves and adolescents who are developing other identities (some, perhaps, who are beginning to think of becoming writers, and others, who are taking on other desires identities, or imagining them), this study address more purposively what work these identity labels are performing and what objects have to do with this. It also could serve to separate the notions of "writing selves," i.e., those who find themselves writing for a living, but do not necessarily inhabit the identity label "writer" and "writers," who might emerge as a category of people who have claimed this identity marker purposefully (though, once again, to claim an identity has as much to do with its availability and possibility as its being desired). That one might not feel an identity is possible at an early age is worthy of investigation; how many adolescents, for example, see being a "graduate student" or "academic" as a viable or desirable writing career, versus the number who might imagine being physicists? The work of Kleine et al. and many

others in consumer research also makes it clear that possessions are tied to well-being and self-concept, and that performance of any identity or practice requires a set of tools (what I refer to in this chapter and elsewhere as object clusters) that become intimately linked to both identity and practice. Work with children and adolescents can sharpen and particularize my findings and connect these two veins of study, looking at how families help children to envision possible selves through family value communication and family identity performance (through consumption and other practices), how community functions in the construction of possible selves, and how self-concept and identity do or not link both for people in general and for writers.

The data that led to Chapter Two, "Schooled Selves, Writing Selves" also suggests that composition and rhetoric should attend to the family's impact on the construction of values around goods related to the development of both types of selves. In asking questions of my study's parents around family values, I learned that parents were making tough and important choices daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly about the purchase and use of goods related to literacy development. If we are sensitive to notion Brandt presents that families do much more reading together than writing (or, perhaps, that it is remembered differently), what work can be done with parents to promote the purchase and use of writing implements in the home so that children and adolescents are development a sense of themselves as people who not only value reading, but writing? Or that writing for its own sake, for the tactile pleasure and communicative functions involved, is worthwhile? In casual conversations and in my interviews, parents have expressed confusion over cultural values associated with writing and lack of understanding of how best to teach their children how to write. This at a time when technological tools such as the

computer, smartphone, and tablet are gaining prominence in both schools and homes, and much more "writing" in various forms is being performed by schoolkids on a daily basis. Our field should be compelled to understand the link between these writing performances and this object use and not only literate development, but also the development of positive self-concept with and around these tools and family members.

What is evident besides family members helping to generate excitement over school and participate in family consumption rituals related to schooling and learning is that my study participants saw "associative objects," the category I developed in Chapter Three ("Object Lessons") for goods related to writing, but not necessarily writing implements in themselves, were some of the richest objects to study precisely because they might be overlooked in an analysis of the relationship between material goods and the development of schooled and writing selves. In Chapter Three, I presented a few of these objects, such as clothing. A few of my participations referred to the importance of Levi's, Converse sneakers, and other garments, for example, in their adjustment to high school, in their social groups attached to school, and in he development of their adolescent and teenage self-concept. It is undeniable that well-being and positive self-concept are linked to performance in school; an understanding of the material possessions and goods that enable or disable well-being, belonging, and self-concept could be instrumental in understanding how children learn. It is possible, despite broad questioning and particular questioning around such things, that my study participants might not have been thinking about objects so tangentially related to writing, or so seemingly separate from writing (such as calculators, family possessions, bedroom adornments) that they were not mentioned during interviews.

Although I interviewed most of my participants in their homes and not only photographed, but walked around, their various habitats, I could not do this for all participants, and I did not conduct participant observation of their writing (and being) practice. Incorporating participant observation is a goal for my future work. In her dissertation, Susan Wyche, for example, references watching television while writing as a "ritual" implicated in writing practice; and Prior and Shipka ask their participants to sketch and narrate their writing practices in their home habitats to illustrate some of the associative objects (such as washers, dryers, and alarms) that participate in writing practice. Participant observation could enrich not only my study, but studies such as theirs, allowing researchers to observe writers, children, adolescents, and families as they engage in daily practice. Participant observation carries with it the danger that behavior often changes when people are watched by outsiders. Yet careful attention to associative objects in the home is likely to enrich our understanding of the interconnectedness between possessions and practice.

One area of study that I have referenced in this chapter already and throughout the dissertation, pleasure in using writing objects, demands careful attention and was revealed through attention to associative objects. Several of my participants highlighted the inscription of associative objects into their schooled selves and writing selves. Jacob, for example, discusses a duffel bag that kids in high school carried their books in, tossed over their shoulders. This became a desired object as it traversed his school, building up social presence and capital. Jacob saved up for such a duffel bag and expressed the satisfaction that he received once he, too, could walk across campus with one. This interaction reveals some of the experiential pleasure invested both in objects and in having a recognizable schooled self that relates to others. This object may

have no observable relationship to writing or to learning, yet for Jacob, being a student, one who learns, is deeply connected to all of the objects he brings with him to school and carries around with him at school. Belonging, an interesting word in that it holds within itself notions of the longing that accompanies desire for objects, as well as their social capital and consequence, plays a significant role in schooling, identity formation, and learning.

This is exemplified as well in Mason's story about how teenager writing, which took place everywhere in his middle school experiences, on shoes, lockers, books, etc., plays an instrumental role in the construction of both self and group identity. We can metaphorize how Jacob and others students' experiences inscribe, or write, a history and new use onto an object; in Mason's story, we see how writing lives its own life in schooling. Part of what Mason expresses, though, is the pleasure teenagers experience writing, all the time, on everything. This is a part of the tactile pleasure that we all get from working with objects and using them in the tasks of singularizing both commodities and selves. Although writing pain has been clearly documented in our field through the work of those like Mike Rose who study writer's block and others like John Daly who study writing apprehension, writing pleasure, and specifically the pleasure contact with objects and habitats affords, remains underdeveloped. Back to school shopping seems a likely starting place for explorations of this pleasure, as for my study participants, it was clear that this ritual, more than any other, catapulted them into a memorable, nostalgic, and playful relationship with the materials of learning (and writing).

***

Despite the tensions and potential for new avenues of research I outline above, in this dissertation, I hope to have clearly argued three things.

First, that every person who writes on a daily basis has a *practice* bound up with goods, and that in order to understand it, we have to take a closer look at how writers use possessions to stabilize, negotiate, and manage writing anxiety, writing pleasure, and writing identity. By looking at seemingly simple objects such as the Moleskine notebook, we can uncover rich interactions between writers and possessions, from childhood on.

Second, rituals that support literacy development, such as back-to-school shopping and the purchase of a writing desk, are keys to understanding how children learn to *do school* and develop both a *schooled self* and a positive self-concept around learning (and writing). Through these rituals, schools and families *pass down* critical information about what it means to be a student, writer, and family member.

Lastly, objects and writing engage in a process of mutual mediation whereby each continually works on the other. On the one hand, objects mediate writing; a computer, for example, changes the way that writing is performed, understood, and experienced. On the other hand, writing mediates objects. When teenagers write all over their clothes and notebooks in middle school, this writing transforms not only the objects themselves, but also social relations within school walls.

This dissertation argues, then, for a material perspective on literacy. It argues that when see the importance of *things* in writing lives, we better understand how literacy and selfhood are

bound up in them. In other words, we can never fully understand literacy, selfhood, and writing identity and practice without them.

Appendix

Interview Protocol

Demographic Questions/Family History

What is your full name?

Date of birth?

-How old are you?

Where were you born?

In what cities have you lived?

Where do you reside now?

Occupations, current and prior?

Who raised you?

What are the ages of the people who raised you?

-What were their schooling histories and occupations?

Do you have any siblings?

-Names?
-Ages?

-Schooling history/occupations?

Are your grandparents living?

-Schooling history/occupations (if known)

How far back can you trace your family tree?

-Do you know what other family members did for work?

How would you describe your family's economic status?

-Did this shift at any time prior to adulthood?

How would you describe your race?

-Gender?

Participant Schooling History

Did you go to college?

-If so, where?

-Were you are first-generation student?

Did you have any other schooling experiences?

Did your parents go to college?

-If so, where?

-If you weren't a first-generation student, was either of your parents?

Writing

When you think of the word "writing" what comes to mind?

What is your earliest memory of writing?

-Can you describe the scene/setting of this earliest writing?

Where did you live when you first learned to write?

Can you remember the earliest room/space you wrote in, and if so, can you describe it?

Who are the people who taught you how to write?

Which person who taught you how to write was most influential?

Do you remember writing with or near your parents?

Did you have pen pals?

When you were little/an adolescent, were you given your own space to write?

Did you have to share workspace with others?

Did you write in a journal? Was this writing kept private, if so?

Do you write lists?

Do you write e-mails?

Do you write for work?

Do you write for school?

Do you write at home?

Do you write in private?

Do you write in public?

Do you write for pleasure?

Do you have a blog?

What type of writing do you do most frequently?

What type of writing is most pleasurable?

Do you struggle with writing?

-What aspects of it do you/don't you struggle with?

Do you experience writer's block?

How do you overcome writer's block?

Do you experience writing anxiety? If so, how do you manage this anxiety?

Can you walk me through a consequential writing episode?

Do you associate any particular media with writing?

Any other important writing memories, such as writing letters at camp?

Reading

To what extent do you link the act of writing with reading?

-In your experience, are these two activities separate or linked?

What are your earliest memories of reading?

Did you read alone?

Did your parents read to you, and if so, until when?

What are your reading habits like now?

Do you read for pleasure? What do you read?

How are your writing practices impacted by reading?

Objects/Materials

What is your earliest memory of an object associated with the writing process?

What objects did you use to write with when you were younger?

Do you remember buying back-to-school items?

-Can you describe this process?

-Who took you?

-What did you buy?

At what age would you say you developed attachments to particular objects preceding/during the writing process?

Do you remember where you sat when you wrote at home?

-At school?

-At a relative's house?

-Can you describe your writing desk/chair/workspace?

What is your earliest memory of an attachment to an object that you associate with writing? Who bought/gave you this object? Do you still have it?

What objects do you surround yourself with when you write?

Do you write in public? If so, at which sites?

-What motivates you to write in public?

-What reasons would compel you to switch to a different public venue?

When you write in public, which materials/objects do you bring with you?

Do you wear particular clothes when you write?

Do you have preferences regarding the instruments you write with?

Do you write in pen or pencil?

-What motivates your choice?

Do you remember the shift from working with pen and paper to working with a typewriter or computer?

-Can you describe this shift and its impact on your writing?

Do you have a desktop or a laptop?

-Apple or PC?

Are there particular chairs you like to sit in?

Do you write at a table? Or tables?

If in public, are there certain tables or areas that fuel your writing?

Do you write to music? If so, what music do you write best to? What objects do you use to play music on?

Are there any objects that you assign somewhat magical qualities to in their power to help you write?

To what extent do you associate objects with writer's block? Or anxieties about writing?

Environment

Where do you write most frequently?

-Why?

Do you feel your writing is different based on where you write?

Do you write different genres in different places?

Are there conditions that are necessary for you in order to write?

What is your workspace like?

-Is it messy? Clean?

What is the lighting like in your writing environment?

Do you feel you have your own space to write?

Do you have to share writing space/work space with others?

How do your roommates/husband or wife/partners, etc. feel about your writing?

What is the most essential condition of your environment that is necessary to the writing process?

Writing Process/Habits

How do you go about preparing to write?

Do you write out your text first, or do you begin on the computer?

Do you work from outlines?

Are there any rituals that you perform before writing?

Do you eat when you write?

-Before? After?

-Do you snack?

Do you drink when you write?

-If so, what do you drink?

What do you wear when you write?

Are there things you have to do in your household before you can write?

Do you keep a journal? Is this journal necessary to your writing process?

Computer

How do you see your computer?

-Are you attached to it?

-A tool?

-Other terms you would use to describe it?

How do you go about writing on your computer?

What software is essential to your writing process?

What windows do you keep open while you write?

Do you surf the Internet?

Any other computer practices that you would like to discuss?

Family Identity

What values were important to your family growing up?

-We were a family that valued . . . (participant can give multiple responses)

What activities did your family do to express these values?

-What objects helped your family to express these values?

What learning (writing/reading) objects are important to your family's identity and expression/performance of these values?

How would you describe your values now?

-I am a person who values . . .

-What objects do you use to perform these values?

-Learning (writing/reading) objects?

If you have a family, how would you describe your family's values?

-Which objects do you use in the articulation of these values?

-Learning objects?

If you have children, how do you communicate, through objects, your family's values?

-Any rules/practices that you set with your family regarding object purchase and use?

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