

Textual Encounters in the DALN / Composition Forum on the DALN



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Browsing through the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN), I was surprised by how frequently the narrators attributed their desire to read and write in the present with specific textual encounters they had had in the past. In these encounters, the text (often a literary text) helped narrators to mediate relationships: in these tales, genuine literacy emerges from genuine social connection.

Narrators sometimes focus their encounters by dwelling on the text as a sensual object or visual image, or by describing a moment of shared performance, storytelling, and reading aloud. Narrators then use these encounters to memorialize their connections to others but also to acknowledge the complexity of past literate selves. Through these textual encounters, the narrators endow private emotional moments with broader public meaning. For some, the private encounter spurs them to pass on their habits and their books to others in their immediate circle. For others, the private encounter widens the circle as narrators hold competing literacies in equal tension. Ultimately, the DALN offers to me—to writing teachers—the desire to create democratic spaces where dynamic textual encounters can occur.

At home, encounters with texts embed literacy within the intensity of family experience and serve to memorialize family relationships. Often acting as literacy sponsors in these tales, mothers make powerful use of reading aloud. After a day at the library, Natalie Szymanski recalls how she waited for the intimate experience of her mother reading the new books to her on the city bus. Cheryl Harris remembers the textual encounters her mother mediated in her childhood: reciting poetry by James Russell Lowell or reading the *Little Golden Books* aloud. Dads are not wholly absent: Georgia State physics major John Allen recalls, for example, that when he couldn't read by second grade, his dad read aloud to him from *Harry Potter* and launched him into literacy. The narrators cannot disentangle the text from the encounter: as a practice, literacy is drenched with the memory of being related to a particular other at a particular moment in time.

In school, print texts, and especially literature, also connect narrators to their peers and help narrators to memorialize friendships. When Chelsea Geary moved to a new school in Santa Clara, California, she felt an unexpected surge of pleasure and kinship in an alien environment the moment she saw a girl reading a Tracy Brown novel. In the present, Geary writes, the mere sight of the physical text of a Brown novel still evokes this past friendship “made through her book.” Heavily annotated and now missing its cover, *Leaves of Grass*—poetry to which his high school English teacher introduced him—still sits on Wesley Stevenson’s shelf. Whitman’s book memorializes Stevenson’s potential desire to be a writer. That desire was entangled with Stevenson’s friendship in school with Molly and Kristin, whose poems he includes in his account; “poetry,” Stevenson writes, “open[ed] me and my relationships with others.”

DALN narrators sometimes evoke the book as a sensual object that arouses emotion and that, in turn, provokes the author to memorialize an earlier literate self. Gabriella Smith opens her tale of falling in love with Dickens by describing the intense physical presence of *A Tale of Two Cities*: “I crack open an ordinary hardcover book and smell the wear of years, the distinct fragrance of old books that I can’t explain, and the scent of time and worn pages. I finger its cover, rough and royal blue with a smooth brown spine and gilded, golden letters on the front and side” (1). Like Smith, DALN narrators often suggest that in the present they seek to craft a sense of the past self. As an aid to documenting memory but also to discovering it, photography can further preserve encounters with the material text of the past that narrators like Smith re-encounter when they use the book to conjure memory. In this way, visual images that capture the literate self enable narrators to re-read their pasts, and in the process, they acknowledge different versions of the self and pay homage to an otherwise forgotten family legacy.

When she graduated from high school, Hannah Cook combed through family photographs with her mother, and

discovered a forgotten version of her literate self in many family pictures. By her account an indifferent student who largely avoided reading in school, Cook sees another home version of herself that co-existed with the “cool” self that she constructed for school. One color photograph shows a four-year-old Cook comfortably ensconced in a chair on the front porch, a newspaper firmly spread before her in mimicry of an adult reading posture. Around the corner, someone snapped the photo to memorialize this textual encounter that would, otherwise, be lost in time.

Narrating how she grew up in Appalachia, Melissa Costello unearths a black and white photograph of her father cradling, in one arm, her infant self, and, in the other, cradling a thick rolled up newspaper. This photograph, like Cook’s, memorializes an intimate moment that each narrator recalls through the sensuality of the image. Both photographs illustrate how in these private moments the text dwells around the house, on the porch, or in the driveway: pick up the newspaper while you take the baby with you—cradle both together in your arms. These images help Cook and Costello to excavate what Costello calls a “legacy” of the family’s literacy and to make small private moments public as well.

Narrators also describe how performing texts created social encounters that spark a lifelong love of reading and writing. Lisa Phillips used to recite the witches’ scene from *Macbeth* with her sister; on Friday nights, they recited poetry, such as Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, together. Narrators also describe meaningful textual performances in church. LaVelda Charley recalls going to Bible studies on her Navaho reservation where teachers asked kids to perform the stories. In the present, Charley extends this encounter by using bilingual storytelling in her own classes in an Arizona middle school. Other narrators recall how specific English teachers embedded texts within rich performance spaces. In fifth grade, Anne Farmer recalls, Mrs. Wilcox required her kids to perform scenes from *A Midsummer’s Night’s Dream*—an encounter that led Farmer into her lifelong relationship with the Bard.

Like Charley, Farmer develops a literacy practice from this encounter that she tries in the present to pass on to her students. When textual encounters evoke such emotional memories, narrators sometimes stress that they pass on their practices to others—to family members, friends, and, especially for the many educators who post in the DALN, to future students. Mellanie Guess learned to read *Danny and the Dinosaur* at home with her babysitter. She can’t remember the book but the experience of reading was so vivid to her that, Guess says in her interview, she gave the same book to her nieces on their birthdays—and afterwards, she continued to give books as gifts to mark holidays (also: Guess proudly relates that one of those nieces now reads far above grade level in her school). “It’s power,” Guess remarks, to be able to read and to pass on that love of reading through the generations, much as Melissa Costello’s parents did through their home library that remains a poignant physical image in Costello’s account of Appalachian literacy.

Another way to pass on the encounter is to pass on the text’s political call to re-examine one’s private identity in public terms. Robert Ransom recalls that his intense encounter with the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* in the 1960s gave him an entirely new understanding of black identity that he carried with him from the GED to the Ph.D. To this day, Ransom says, he recommends books like Malcolm’s to specific kids he meets as a school administrator. Rahul Bahadur writes that he enrolled in his English class to improve his fluency and “manners” and thus to escape what he calls his uneducated ‘Bihari’ self (“the worst of India”). But after he read a speech by a former president of India, Bahadur resolves to embrace his ‘Bihari’ self: he will return to India and join a teaching corps so that he can fight for equality through education.

Narrators further widen the circle of literate practice when they examine how to hold opposing literacies, beliefs, or identities in a democratic tension. Reading *Essence* at the beauty shop and recoiling at its hyper-sexualized images of black women, Tanisha Jackson realizes that she enters a unique democratic “space of learning and agency.” In this trusted space, Jackson notes, the customers reinforce stereotypical images of black people while they also challenge those representations. In school, Melody Pugh puts her skills of biblical exegesis honed at her father’s church to work when she encounters *The Secret Garden* (and, later, novels by Hardy, Hemingway, Steinbeck). Now, Pugh resolves to hold her two literacies in equal tension because she will remain both “radically rebellious and radically faithful.”

Finally, the circle widens yet again because the DALN spurs us to consider how we can foster public spaces that welcome dynamic textual encounters. Could there be a space that sponsors the trust that Jackson describes at the beauty shop? In her story, Jackson critiques the glossy magazine while an “older woman” listens and acknowledges her voice but doesn’t necessarily agree with Jackson’s comment. Similarly, could there be a space that acknowledges the co-existence of opposing literacies so that individuals like Pugh can be radically rebellious *and* radically faithful? Is it possible, these days, to create spaces like those that Mrs. Wilcox and many nameless caretakers sponsored: active spaces that allow for shared performance, reading aloud, and storytelling?

For me, the DALN suggests that there must still surely be a space where the literary text in particular helps us to memorialize the authentic desire to write, to acknowledge alternative or forgotten identities, and to hold conflicting

values in acute tension. It is a lively space where, ultimately, genuine literacy takes root from the soil of genuinely meaningful social encounters. In this way, the narrator who acknowledges a private literate act is able to craft a public sense of self.

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