The Things They Left Behind: The Estate Sale as Archive

Like Rhetoric and Composition scholars such as Cheryl Glenn, Jessica Enoch, Wendy B. Sharer, Nan Johnson and others, I argue for "letting go of the disciplinary ideal of the kinds of materials that constitute primary and archival material" (Glenn and Enoch 15) and to explore what other, lower-case-*a* archives might hold—archives that don't immediately promise insights into the practices or histories of our field.

The desire to explore the potentials of unofficial archives is shared by some film and cinema studies scholars. As Patricia Zimmerman notes, the "recovery of amateur film artifacts (such as home movies) parallels similar moves in historiography to interrogate the function of the archive itself as a machine of selection and privileging of discourses that requires expansion into new territories" (2). Zimmerman suggests looking beyond "ready-made corporate archives, such as the studio system, unions, and various national cinemas" to a different formation of film history—one that examines "history from below" (2), focusing on "experiences of everyday people," and documenting the "practices and discourses of everyday lived relations"—experiences such as eating, working, and partaking in leisure activities (3).

Zimmerman goes on to suggest "What is saved in archives often determines what gets theorized, analyzed, interrogated, deconstructed, activated." (19) Yet I'd suggest the reverse is also necessarily true—that our theories, actions and methods of investigation, and the kind of things, people, and experiences we are taught to value in the first place, determine what gets saved and what ends up being excluded.

To quote Sharer: "What is selected for inclusion in collections reflects and often perpetuates existing notions of what is valuable" (121). And so what, to paraphrase Sharer, becomes of the experiences, written texts, and other material artifacts associated with the not quite so famous?

In *Time Frames: The Meaning of Family Pictures* (1980), Michael Lesy offers family photos along with the life stories of individuals who grew up in the Midwest in the 1940s and 1950s. In offering justification for this project, Lesy argues that when someone famous dies much is made of the fact that he or she was a great and complex human being. For Lesy, this "didn't make sense because *everyone* [is complex] *everyone* [has] lived a life and [has] a story to tell. Everyone" (xiii). Like Sharer, Lesy. Ayisha Abraham and others, I too am interested in "explor[ing] the lives of creative, yet unrecognized individuals" (168). Since established archives are not likely to have much of what I'm most interested in, I, like Abraham, Johnson, and Roger Odin (to name a few) have begun treating flea markets, antique stores, and estate, yard, and church sales, as a kind of archive, places to frequent in hopes of finding what Abraham calls orphaned artifacts.

The Things They Left Behind: Negotiating Lived Time in Material Form

I first encountered Dorothy and Fred at a local yard sale on Saturday morning in 2011. Dorothy had been dead for 30 years. Fred for 27. Fred's younger brother (dead for only two years) and the local historical society were largely responsible for bringing us together. It seems the six boxes of life materials once belonging to the couple had been held by Fred's brother. After his death, at the age of 99 in 2009, the boxes were offered to the local historical society, which was not able to house them.

The boxes contained death certificates and other personal and financial papers, framed and loose photos, photo albums, trip diaries and also, my focus here, scrapbooks—15 in all—covering a lifespan of 31 years—beginning in 1950, two years after the couple married, to 1981, the year Dorothy died.

I am drawn to these scrapbooks—what Jessica Helfand calls "ephemeral portraits" (ix) that are both "framed by and interwoven with the physical proof of lived experience" (56) because of their material richness and in spite of their ambiguity, their indecipherability. As Tucker et al note: While "scrapbooks hold historical accounts in print and images that tell how events and lives were understood and told to others, these accounts are but partial, and often times highly coded. . .making them impossible to pick up and read as one would a published book" (12). As Katriel and Farrell note, these skeletal texts often "come fully into life only. . .with the living commentary of their owners—thus while diaries might be read, scrapbooks need to be performed" (14). Following Thomas Masters, I'd suggest that scrapbooks, like archival research more generally, involve a reader's constructive, subjective ordering and making meaning out of what he or she chooses to examine" (157). It's about the interpretive frameworks and dispositions he/she brings to the text and the connections he/she forges within them. As Dorothy put it—playfully so—while anticipating the various ways Fred might read and respond to her 1947 ransom-style love letter: "It's all in <u>how</u> you take it. Moo."

As someone interested in literacy, multimodality and remediation, I was eager to learn how Dorothy's scrapbooks represented literate activity and, indeed, given the genre within which she was working—one Helfand credits with being the "original open-source technology—a unique form of self-expression that celebrated visual sampling, culture mixing, and the appropriation and redistribution of existing media"(xvii), to actually create multimodal texts.

The couple appeared to enjoy reading and writing. Images from 1950 show Dorothy in her favorite book corner, Fred writing and in another Dorothy captions "We look like this many evenings or after lunch on weekdays." Also included in her 1956 scrapbook is image of the bookmobile. The books contained still other repurposed texts, many composed of a mix of media. In addition to the ransom-style love letter, her "Sugar Report from St. Louis," she included sketches of seating plans for dinner parties, details of trips taken, plans for their zinna and tulip gardens, an inventory of

Fred's wardrobe, maps, annotated images, and most inexplicably, a plan for garage booby traps.

My interest in everyday lived experience and embodied practice also informs how I read and make sense of these texts. In their 1991 study Katriel and Farrell found scrapbookers often represented "good moments and precious times," with memories of pain or loss down-played or left out all together (5-7).

What struck me was Dorothy's inclusion of mundane processes associated with the life cycle—packing and moving, taking walks, paving driveways, setting tables, baking cookies, documenting what she sees inside and from the windows of her home. Instead of focusing only on "precious times," Dorothy's books include things that appear painful, suggesting something of the fragility of the composing or composed body.

Dorothy had at least two broken arms, one while living abroad in 1950 and one while traveling abroad in 1972. With the '72 break, she includes an image of where it happened and the medical reports. Around this time, Dorothy recalls how, on a trip to Spain, Fred did not see a chain, walked into it, fell down and hit his head. The books offered still other representations of impaired bodies. The removal of Fred's appendix in 1953, Dorothy's foot problems, a dental record, prescriptions, a troublesome spot on a tongue, this playful reference to Fred's insomnia, and then, in 1979, a two-page spread documenting what appears to be her cancer diagnosis. The final images in the last scrapbook represent Dorothy, in 1981, toward the end of her life in the hospital and at home in bed.

Still other bodies figure here—there are the young dancers in Quebec that both liked to watch as well as the "suave male waiters" that served them dinner. Also included were images of friends, relatives, co-workers, their German maid, and their realtor. Here, we see her sister-in-law, Irm, bathing her swollen and infected foot, and this sequence of images of Dorothy's hospitalized mother a few years before she died.

The emphasis on bodies throughout is striking—impaired bodies, working bodies, writing bodies, hungry and thirsty bodies, restless bodies, bodies observing and sometimes judging others. One of my favorite items—a page with flyers for historic attractions in Novia Scotia. Here, Dorothy writes, "I saw these twice"—in the evening and the next morning "looking for a garage to have gas feed line repaired. I wrote to Doris sitting in the car while it was jacked up."

"Any figures we encounter in the archive are ghosts, mere shadows of the past.
The actions are complete, and their original significance will
remain undetermined, open to interpretation."
--Helen Freshwater

Transforming the Things They Left Behind: Inhabiting Dorothy

"to know what something really is. .. we have to get beyond its immediately given state. . . and follow the process in which it becomes something else.
--Michael Shanks

As Helfand contends "to spend any time at all with scrapbooks is to fall a little bit in love with the people who created them," suggesting that "the more you familiarize yourself with the stories, the more you want to know—sometimes forging a path that takes you beyond the scrapbook itself" (176).

Dorothy's scrapbooks and trip diaries have provided me that opportunity—to forge a path taking me beyond the paper, glue, and ink-based nature of the collection itself. In 2011, my partner and I visited an inn in Maine where the couple stayed in 1967. In 2012, we retraced a trip the couple took in the summer of 1963 from Baltimore to St. Louis, Dorothy's hometown. While I've certainly spent time "inhabiting" and reflecting upon these strangers' materials, I've been curious to learn how others might take up and respond to some of these traces of lives led--traces that Dorothy and Fred left behind.

The "Inhabiting Dorothy" project was inspired, in part, by projects where people revisit, re-stage, or reenact their family photos. Unlike those projects, however, this one asks people to recreate, respond to, or otherwise attempt to inhabit images belonging to people they have never met. My hope for the project is to recruit participants who are willing to temporarily "inhabit" some of these rich life materials--particularly so, images taken from Dorothy's collections of scrapbooks and written text contained in her numerous travel diaries--either by voicing some of Dorothy's written texts or by recreating, reinventing, or updating, in whatever ways they saw fit, some of the images found in the collection.

Approximately 40 people have already participated in the project, and my hope is to recruit still others. I conclude with a brief overview of some of the inhabitations received so far, grouped loosely into seven category types.

One approach involved the creation a new photographic image that replicates or updates one of Dorothy's images—here, is what Jackie Bach refers to as a "modernized version" of "Inauguration Day 1961." Here are other inhabitations of this category type. Of her contribution, April Conway writes: "I've attempted to make a connection. . .through a shared pastime, reading in a domestic spot. I didn't feel the need to replicate. . .or reinterpret it, rather, I echoed the image across time by reading in my favorite chair with my constant reading companions, my dogs."

A second approach was to create a hybrid image that merges the old and new, often created with Photoshop, PowerPoint, or another photo-based application. Here, we see inhabitations of an image of Irm bathing her swollen foot, of the image "in 1961," of "photobooth," and, here Joanna Howard brings together various images and

Dorothy's handwritten greeting. Others played with color in their inhabitations, whether taking it away from or adding it to the original image. Unable to realize her original concept of making modernized versions of the photographs, Jackie Bach noted that Dorothy often provided color references in her black and white photos, which inspired her to begin colorizing some of the images. Dorothy's selfie made way for a new idea—Instagram. As Bach writes: "What is Instagram after all? A program that filters current photos to make them look old." Bach decided to Photoshop images to make them look more modern.

A third approach involved using existing photos, ones that resembled or somehow resonated with the images in the collection. Here Debra Journet juxtaposes some of Dorothy's images with her family's photos. "I could have been a child in Dorothy's world," Journet writes. Those pictures evoke much of my grandparents' life. Dorothy's etiquette and taste were my grandmother's to a t.

Yet another approach involved the creation of an original piece of artwork inspired by images in the collection. While attempting to mimic Dorothy's handwriting in her version of "Inauguration 1961," Melissa Slattery said that this second piece came to mind. As she writes, "I felt that recreating her unique hand was as close as I could ever get to a true inhabitation of a long gone person."

Other approaches included inhabiting the images through the creation of a written text, as Christopher Allen Varlack did with his poem, "We Look Like This." Still others, like Bill Derry and Emma and Patrick Berry, created videos that brought together various images from the collection while allowing them to provide movement, backstory and/or sound to the otherwise still, silent collection of images.

A final approach involved the creation of audio inhabitations. Linda Gustafson voiced selections from one of Dorothy's trip diaries and Nathaniel Rivers, offering us this view of his workspace, scripted and then voiced the reaction of a relative of Dorothy's who, as Rivers imagines, received in a letter from Dorothy this postcard/advertisement from a hotel where she and Fred had stayed. A separate but related project that Steph Ceraso and I have begun working on involves asking participants to inhabit the ransom-style love letter Dorothy sent to Fred in 1947. I close with a sampling of some of those vocal inhabitations.

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