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Author(s): Deborah Brandt

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## ACCUMULATING LITERACY: WRITING AND LEARNING TO WRITE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Deborah Brandt

**G**enna May was born in 1898 on a small dairy farm in south central Wisconsin, the eighth of nine children of Norwegian immigrants. She spoke no English when she enrolled at the age of seven in a one-room schoolhouse built on land donated to the school district by her parents. Although Genna May would eventually go on to complete high school (as one of a graduating class of thirteen) by boarding in a town ten miles from her farm, she started school at a time when Wisconsin required only that young people ages seven to fifteen attend a local grammar school for twelve weeks a year (Landes and Solomon 56). As a student in "the grades," as she calls them, Genna May wrote spelling lessons on slates, erasing with a wet cloth to go on to arithmetic lessons. She remembers a home with few books and little paper, and she said she would have had no reason to write as a girl except to compose an occasional story assigned by her teacher. After high school graduation in 1917, she enrolled for several months in a private business college in the state capital, just long enough to learn typing and shorthand and win a certificate in penmanship before being placed by the college in the office of a local business that was manufacturing disinfectants for dairy farms. In 1994, Genna May was using writing to record recipes, balance her checkbook, and send holiday and birthday greetings to family members.

Genna May's great-grandson Michael May was born in 1981 in a sprawling suburb east of Wisconsin's state capital. In the early 1990s he was attending a middle school equipped with computers. The first of four children in his family, Michael remembered that his earliest composing occurred at two years old, when

**Deborah Brandt** is an associate professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she teaches undergraduate writing and graduate courses in composition studies and literacy. Her book, *Literacy as Involvement: The Acts of Writers, Readers, and Texts* (Southern Illinois UP, 1990) won the 1993 NCTE David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English. Earlier versions of this article were presented as talks in April 1994 in the Department of English at Kent State University and at the Center for Writing Studies at the University of Illinois-Urbana.

his parents helped him form simple words with magnetic letters on a metal easel and chalkboard in the family's TV room. As a participant in a grade-school enrichment program called Future Problem Solvers, he wrote a letter to his principal arranging to correct erosion on the school playground. In the bedroom of his eight-year-old sister Rhonda was a manual typewriter that their father had bought and used while attending a local technical school, a typewriter that Rhonda was now using recreationally. One weekend Michael's mother brought home a personal computer from her job as a data processor at a national insurance company so that she could learn a new program, and, Michael remembered, she allowed him and his sister to type messages back and forth to each other on it. Asked what made writing important to him, Michael responded that it "has a lot to do with speaking," with "seeing correct words."

These accounts by two members of the same family capture many of the economic and social transformations of twentieth-century America: population movements from farms to urban centers to suburbs; shifts in the economic base from agriculture to manufacturing to information processing; the rise of big business; a rapid escalation in educational expectations; revolutions in communication technology; and the growth of a print culture so saturating that it has become a principal means by which some children learn to talk. Against that backdrop we see the dramatically different social contexts in which Genna May and her great-grandson learned about literacy and its relationship to the world. In the sparse setting of Genna May's prairie farmhouse, paper, hard to come by, was reserved for her father's church work. In Michael May's print-cluttered suburban ranch home, his parents introduced him to writing and reading amid the background chatter of network television. For members of the community in which Mrs. May grew up, the ability to write the words of everyday life often marked the end of formal schooling, while for Michael May these same experiences served as a preparation for kindergarten. In the social dynamic of the rural school district of the 1890s, it would not have been unusual for a teacher to board with her students' families while school was in session. Three generations later, in a twenty-five room middle school, students learned to address their principal by formal letter as a lesson in bureaucratic action.

These accounts complicate the argument that the demand now is simply for more people to achieve a kind of literacy that used to be achieved only by a few—or, as Lauren Resnick has put it, that everyone now has to develop reading and writing skills that used to belong only to an elite. (See Randall Collins for a critical treatment of rising educational standards.) However, to say merely that social changes dictate that Michael May achieve a higher level of literacy and education than his great-grandmother is to miss how the same social changes that demand higher eventual skills are already tangibly present at the scene of his literacy learning, part of the way a two-year-old in the 1980s learned what literacy is. Not even

elites of the past have encountered the current contexts in which literacy in its many forms is being practiced and learned.

In fact, these accounts suggest that what is unprecedented about literacy learning (and teaching) in the current climate is not so much a demand for literacy that seems chronically to outstrip supply, but rather the challenges faced by all literacy learners in a society whose rapid changes are themselves tied up so centrally with literacy and its enterprises. If Genna May carved out an early life amid a scarcity of print, her great-grandson must carve one out amid a material and ideological surplus. The setting in which Michael May first encountered the ABCs is layered with discarded and emergent forms of literacy and their histories. With his magnetic slate, he recapitulates in eerie ways a rudimentary ritual of the nineteenth-century schoolhouse at the same time that he must absorb from his parents the meanings that literacy and education have for middle-class families of the late twentieth century. (For ethnographic accounts of how values and techniques of upward mobility are translated into school-oriented literacy practices among parents and children of the mainstream middle class, see Cochran-Smith; Heath, chapter 7.)

The piling up and extending out of literacy and its technologies give a complex flavor even to elementary acts of reading and writing today. Contemporary literacy learners—across positions of age, gender, race, class, and language heritage—find themselves having to piece together reading and writing experiences from more and more spheres, creating new and hybrid forms of literacy where once there might have been fewer and more circumscribed forms. What we calculate as a rising standard of basic literacy may be more usefully regarded as the effects of a rapid proliferation and diversification of literacy. And literate ability at the end of the twentieth century may be best measured as a person's capacity to amalgamate new reading and writing practices in response to rapid social change.

This argument grows out of my reflections upon a set of interviews I conducted during 1992 and 1993 with sixty-five ordinary Americans. I collected their accounts of their own literacy development. Participants explored with me the institutions, materials, and people they believed were most influential in teaching them to write. We also discussed their motivations for learning to write at different stages of their lives. The sixty-five people were selected to represent a stratified sample of the population according to 1990 U.S. Census Bureau categories of age, region of birth, race and ethnicity, education, and occupation. Interviews typically lasted between one and three hours and normally took place in the participants' homes. To protect identities of participants, I refer to all of them throughout this article by pseudonyms.

The interview project is still ongoing, but my aim here is to begin to identify several of the major effects of "accumulating literacy" that are especially pertinent to teachers of writing and reading who are trying to think more broadly about the historical context in which we are carrying out our work. We might visualize these

effects as developing in two directions—vertically (a piling up) and horizontally (a spreading out).

Literacy “piles up” in the twentieth century, among other ways, in the rising levels of formal schooling that begin to accumulate (albeit inequitably) in families. It is useful to consider the impact of rising levels of schooling on the way that new generations of learners encounter and interpret literacy. Literacy also “piles up” in the twentieth century in a residual sense, as materials and practices from earlier times often linger at the scenes of contemporary literacy learning. As I will explore more fully below, the history of literacy in the United States has involved a series of transformations in the ideological basis of its practices, transformations that gradually coopt and eclipse earlier versions. However, because changes in the twentieth century have become so much more rapid, the ideological texture of literacy has become more complex as more layers of earlier forms of literacy exist simultaneously within the society and within the experiences of individuals. When Genna May and her great-grandson exchange written greetings at birthdays and holidays, we can appreciate how the complexity of contemporary life derives in part from the fact that so many generations of literacy, so to speak, now occupy the same social space. As will be explored more fully below, this residual character of literacy can serve as both resource and barrier for learners.

In addition to this vertical accumulation, literacy has literally spread out across the century, reorganizing an array of economic, legal, political, and domestic activities. The increased powers accorded to print have sharpened the need for reading and, increasingly, writing to navigate life. For one thing, the mass of American workers has had to shift from growing food to manufacturing goods to, principally, managing information. Consequently, as James Beniger, Manuel Castells, and Peter Drucker, among others, have demonstrated, the ability to earn a living has become increasingly bound up with the ability to read, document, and traffic in symbol systems generally. Documentary practices have penetrated banks, courts, hospitals, schools, social service agencies, and other public and private organizations. As a result, the capacity of citizens to protect and exercise their civil rights and to claim their fair share of public resources depends critically on the skills of reading and writing. (See Edward W. Stevens for a fascinating look at the developing relationship among literacy, contract law, and justice in the twentieth century.) We live, as Dorothy Smith has observed, in a “documentary reality” (257), by which she means that so much of what passes as the raw data of the world has already been processed through socially organized (often print-based) systems of reporting and recording. This is what is so politically disenfranchising about present-day illiteracy: one’s world is almost totally organized by a system in which one can have no real say. (“Documentary reality” began developing, of course, even before mass literacy: Brian Stock traces the gradual textualization of social practices already going on in the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Europe; Walter J. Ong discusses the gradual

evolution of “chirographic man,” through the development of the alphabet, the manuscript, and the printing press.)

It is beyond the scope of this essay to examine in detail the processes of economic and political change brought about by the growth of documentary forces over the last one hundred years. Rather, my interest is in how the proliferation of print across the twentieth century affects the occasions and motivations for learning to read and write. Of even more interest is the way a proliferation of print multiplies the methods of contact that learners have with literacy and its systems (Kaufer and Carley 50). As with the “piling up” quality of literacy, its spreading out seems to promote an easy access to print at the same time that it sets up interpretive problems for people learning to write.

My aim, then, in the following sections is to trace the effects of accumulating literacy through the contours of individual lives. I will focus on the lives of two middle-class American men: Sam May (the son of Genna May and grandfather of Michael), whose birth in 1925 between the two world wars placed him between a fading literacy of midwestern rural gentility and a quickly emerging literacy of industrial technology; and Charles Randolph, born in 1948, the son of a Southern C. M. E. minister, for whom a legacy of liberatory religious literacy enhanced secular advances during the civil rights era of the 1960s and beyond. These two extended examples will demonstrate several of the key qualities of twentieth-century literacy learning recounted in the interviews overall, particularly the way individuals transform and amalgamate literacy practices in response to—or as part of—rapid social change.

In order to place this process in a useful historical and theoretical framework, we will make a brief detour into a discussion of the concept of transformation before moving specifically to the accounts of Sam May and Charles Randolph. In the end, I will explore the implications for contemporary teachers of reading and writing.

#### RESIDUAL LITERACY AND ITS TRANSFORMATIONS

Many historians of U.S. literacy have appealed to the notion of *transformation* to characterize the changing ideological climates in which mass literacy has been developing. In *Literacy in Colonial New England*, Kenneth A. Lockridge, for instance, describes how an association between literacy and high social status rapidly declined as the link between literacy and religious salvation intensified. This shift in the ideological basis for literacy democratized reading and writing among free, white Protestant males (and, to a lesser extent, females). In *The Rise of Literacy and the Common School in the U.S.: A Socioeconomic Analysis to 1870*, Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens trace the gradual transformation from a religious to a secular basis for literacy following Independence, as the ability to read came to signal a moral com-

pliance with the duties of citizenship in a society ruled (for some) by representative government. In the late nineteenth century, as systems of public education spread and economic activity grew more complex and integrated, literacy became associated less with citizenship duties than with economic competitiveness and upward mobility. (Gregory Clark and S. Michael Halloran recently theorized this period of transformation as one from oratorical to professional culture; see their introduction to *Oratorical Culture in Nineteenth-Century America: The Transformation in the Theory and Practice of Rhetoric*.) In “Literacy and Schooling: An Unchanging Equation?” Jenny Cook-Gumperz picks up the thread in the twentieth century when, she suggests, a growing standardization of schooling and the entrenchment of a bureaucratic, technocratic economy transformed literacy into a seemingly neutral and nomadic cognitive skill. (In making this argument, Cook-Gumperz recognizes that the democratization of literacy also has been taking place within fairly strict stratification of literate experiences within schools, a system that tends to preserve inequities in education and earning potential between economic classes.)

What is common to these various treatments of transformation is that they account for the way ruling institutions control literacy and use literacy to control the population in different historical periods. They also point up how the means and materials through which people acquire literacy (or are excluded from it) will always be an expression in some way of prevailing ideological climates. Further, the concept of transformation explains dynamic shifts in literacy standards as well as changing connotations of illiteracy across time. Most important, these models stress continuity in the process of change surrounding literacy. Emergent practices take their place alongside fading ones and often coopt elements of the older forms. In *The Literacy Myth*, Harvey Graff, for instance, exposes a subtle transformation in the ideological basis of nineteenth-century literacy in Canada. In a church-dominated society, reading was used as a medium for moral training; one read in order to learn right behavior. Eventually economic and state interests eclipsed religious ones, yet moral connotations continued to cling to literacy. By the end of the nineteenth century, the ability to read was no longer regarded as an avenue to morality but rather as an indication of moral behavior itself (just as illiteracy became—in and of itself—an indication of antisocial or immoral behavior).

Transformation models reveal how older and newer incarnations of literacy may be operating simultaneously at any historical moment, usually—but not always—in a complementary relationship. Soltow and Stevens suggest that a literacy of upward mobility could coexist quite well with both religious and civil models of literacy. However, in Thomas Laqueur’s study of the working-class Sunday School in England, we see how, by the mid-nineteenth century, church school instruction in reading and writing became an ideological battleground. Conservative church leaders wanted to maintain a circumscribed bible literacy (which included adherence to one’s God-given station in life) while working-class parishioners demanded

instruction in writing and arithmetic as well as reading in hopes of improving their economic chances. In *“When I Can Read My Title Clear,”* a study of African-American literacy before and just after the Civil War, Janet Cornelius shows how an ideological entanglement of bible and civic literacy in the antebellum South contributed to untenable contradictions in the regime of slavery. On the one hand, encouraging people in slavery to read the Word was part of Christian duty, yet, in the secular scheme, an ability to read was an emblem of human rights and citizenship—just the kind of identification that had to be withheld from African-Americans to justify slavery. This contradiction in ideology led to a series of laws in several states forbidding the teaching of reading to slaves—laws that were widely resisted by blacks and whites. As these latter studies suggest, transformations in literacy can be contentious, complex, and far-ranging in their effects. As these studies also suggest, there will be resistant strains of literate practice in any particular period.

#### “IT WAS ALL DONE WITH WORDS”: LITERACY LEARNING BETWEEN THE WORLD WARS

To consider what these dynamics of accumulating literacy actually have meant to ordinary Americans, we now rejoin the May family, this time focusing on Sam May, the son of Genna May and grandfather of Michael. At the time of our interview, Sam May was nearing retirement from his position as an electronics technician in a science laboratory in a large state university. Born in 1925 and raised as part of an extended family in his mother’s rural homestead, Sam May attended the same sparsely equipped schoolhouse as his mother through the eighth grade. He also attended the same high school as his mother had (this time making the ten-mile trip by carpool) and graduated in 1942, at a time when graduation rates in American high schools were doubling with each generation (Cremin 230; also see Daniel Resnick).

At home, Sam May was raised into a literacy of gentility and upward mobility promoted especially by his aunt, an invalid and autodidact, who had left school after the eighth grade yet wrote columns and editorials for a local newspaper. She had taken classes through the Palmer School in Iowa, becoming “famous for her fancy hand,” and gave Sam and his two siblings penmanship lessons on rainy Saturday afternoons. “My mother’s sister was always chiding us to read better books and practice more writing,” he explained.

In many of Sam May’s recollections of early literacy learning, one detects still influential associations between language correctness and good breeding so prevalent in nineteenth-century ideologies of the upwardly mobile middle class—a literacy that was also designed to express a local identity and community ethos. Above all, literacy learning was part of acquiring manners. “We had to have manners,” Mr.

May explained. “If the minister was to be at the table on Sunday we all were supposed to be able to talk a little bit to anyone who was there, or if someone important was there.” Mr. May described the impression made on him by the language habits of older, wealthy people who lived in his village, people for whom he would do occasional yard work:

I was exposed to some pretty high class people early in life—people who had thousands of bucks and mansions—and they took me in. They used proper grammar in their talking, their speech, and their actions were geared such that you felt comfortable with them. It all had to do with words. If they wrote a note for you, it was beautiful handwriting, and, gosh, I wish I could have done that. [They] had a cultured way about them which we little farm boys would try to emulate. At the time. I’ve since given it up!

While early school experiences seemed to reinforce many of these values (“spelling and neatness were very important to the teachers”), other influences pressed in—and were brought in by new technologies. Sam May recalled frequent writing in connection with outdoor boyhood play, such as leaving messages for his friends on the sides of their forts and developing a “code machine” (“two papers that slid around”), inspired by the decoder rings promoted on the radio show “Little Orphan Annie.” He also recalled collaborating with large groups of children on “sideshows” that they wrote and performed in connection with weekly outdoor movie nights that started up in the village during the warm months. The children would charge people a few cents each to watch their skits, which were organized in circus-like or vaudeville fashion yet were also inspired by the celluloid action:

When I was from the age of ten on they had weekly outdoor movies. On Thursday night five hundred people would come into this little town, sit down on the grass, and watch a western. It was put on by the businesses. So it was like carnival night. . . . Well, there weren’t any live people up there so [we figured] let’s make a sideshow. We had to write these flyers, and we would have to write these scripts, and there had to be a master of ceremonies [who would] have to organize this thing, and maybe even write down what he had to say, at least the order in which the show was going to come off. Then we’d have a little dance and there would be someone singing. It was all fun. It was great.

As Mr. May explained, with the Depression, large families were moving to rural communities like his, where vegetable gardens could be grown and barter was more acceptable. Composing skits, plays, circus routines, and secret messages was a way for children to build and maintain community during this transient time. Collaborative writing developed as a necessity (“If you had a neighborhood play and there was only one person organizing it all,” Mr. May explained, “the rest of the kids would quit!”).

Yet Mr. May’s memories also address in interesting ways how intrusions of new technologies of film and radio stimulated writing and altered recreational literacy.

For example, the converging of farm families to watch westerns on Thursday nights created a new, public audience beyond family or school for whom Sam May and his playmates could perform, as well as new visual genres to fuel their imaginations. The film nights also created an economic niche in which children could write and perform for money.

New technology stimulated writing in other ways too. Radio shows such as “Little Orphan Annie” and “Jack Armstrong” encouraged Sam May and his siblings to write letters to distant radio stations to acquire decoder rings. And the radio became an additional forum for communicating standards of correct or finer speech—a matter that continued to draw Mr. May’s attention:

So to listen to those stories of “The Shadow” or “Orson Welles Theatre” or “Mercury Theatre.” God, you could get right in. I mean, you could picture this whole thing going on and it was all done with words. In our neighborhood plays we would try to reconstruct that or if you were entertaining some relatives or a friend. Or if you got a little poem that your mother wants you to read in front of them, a dozen relatives, because they think it’s good and you want to show off. And you read this dumb thing and you realize how really limited you are compared to Orson Welles. You were always comparing yourself to Orson Welles.

We can gauge in Mr. May’s recollections a more complicated, even contradictory literacy landscape in comparison to what his mother remembered. In a period of rapidly rising educational expectations and painful economic dislocations, Sam May was still being oriented to a legacy of nineteenth-century rural literacy practices based on oral performance, piety, manners, and communal expression—a legacy transmitted principally through the self-education of a member of the previous generation. This legacy in turn was mixing with the influences of new media that to some extent were incorporated into the conservative aims of this genteel literacy, but also, as we shall see, foreshadowed a radical transformation in society and in Sam May’s literacy development. Initially, for the young Sam May and his associates, the arrival of radio and film inspired and enhanced writing for purposes of local, oral performances that resembled the old-fashioned circus (“there weren’t any live people up there”). At the same time, though, technological innovations brought into the village from the outside new, more abstract genres, new audience configurations, new channels of communication, and new ways of hearing oneself (“You were always comparing yourself to Orson Welles”).

As a teenager Sam May set up a “little workshop” in an abandoned garage where he began to build crystal radio sets and where he often recorded thoughts and ideas for inventions in a notebook that he carried with him constantly. Radio was taking on yet another kind of meaning for Sam May—and the country. In 1941, only seventeen days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, a correspondence school called the Army Institute was established nearby in Madison, Wisconsin, as part of what Harold F. Clark and Harold S. Sloan describe as an “explosive” growth in

technology and military education brought on during and just after the war (22). In a span of a few years, the development of radar, the jet airplane, the first digital computer, and the transistor (not to mention the atomic bomb) created nearly instant need for new knowledge and skill, much of it literacy-based. (See Ginzberg and Bray [39ff.] for an account of how male illiteracy was constructed as a social problem at the outbreak of World War II.)

Graduating from high school in 1942 and planning to enlist, Sam May took courses through the Army Institute, becoming a certified radio repairman by the time he was eighteen. Soon after, he joined the armed services and was assigned to the Army Signal Corps, but, because of a surplus of radio repairmen, he eventually became a fourth-echelon radar technician stationed in Europe. Like other military veterans I have interviewed, Mr. May described his service years as a period of intensified writing, a period especially when learners of new technologies quickly turned around and became the teachers. (See Clark and Sloan for descriptions of classroom education in the military during and after World War II.)

For Mr. May's part, he began writing service manuals and also weekly reports back to the factory where radar equipment was being manufactured. These reports described changes he was making to the equipment. "We were engineering out the mistakes," he explained. While confident of his technical ability, Sam May said he was less satisfied with his ability to write reports, describing his efforts as "perfunctory." "I'd say 'I changed this resistor to that.' [The form] would ask, 'What was the reason for the change?' and I'd write, 'Because this other one is a mistake.'"

Sam May then went on to describe a strategy he developed for acquiring a new kind of technical literacy that his position was demanding. Just as he often had to improvise to keep the radar equipment working, Sam May improvised a method of learning report writing, modeled in fact on his earlier ways of appropriating "manners" in boyhood:

Other people used to ask my advice a lot, people who were better at phrasing things than I was, and I'd listen to them, especially the officers, I'd listen to them. Or I'd have to discuss what I wanted to do with, say, a lieutenant or a captain. I was just a mere sergeant. These were all college guys and I was, of course, just a high school brat. So I'd listen to how they'd talk with each other and how they would talk to their peers and their minions. So you could sense the correctness of how they phrased things and how they put things. They always knew how to stay on the subject, not get sidetracked. That had something to do with writing.

Sam May eventually became a "college guy," enrolling for four years under the G.I. Bill in the engineering school of his state university. Now an electronics technician, Mr. May said he devotes about 30 percent of the work day to writing, mostly making circuit diagrams (often on blackboards) and writing footnotes or captions for science reports produced in the labs to which he is assigned. At the time of our interview, sixty-seven-year-old Mr. May indicated he did not use a computer avail-

able to him at work. “I haven’t had time to learn but I plan to,” he said, “because it is very useful. Saves a lot of drafting time.”

This partial account of one man’s literacy learning between the 1920s and 1940s shows in very particular ways how transformations in literacy accompany large-scale economic, technological, and cultural changes and how these transformations are felt within individual lives. We can gauge this change most interestingly in the two episodes in which Sam May recalls emulating the language of the elite: the first, as a farm boy in a context of manners and noblesse oblige in a socially stratified rural village; the second, as a subordinate army officer in an emerging military-industrial context beginning to require even of “mere sergeants” an ability to render technical know-how in professional prose. These scenes speak to the enduring power of dominant classes to define language standards (a power Pierre Bourdieu has explored in detail); they predict the emerging power of a highly educated, technocratic elite after the war. Most interesting, these accounts also indicate how much the meaning of education and educated language had begun to change by mid-century—shifting from the cultivated talk of the well-bred to the efficient professional prose of the technocrat—thereby altering the paths of upward mobility for people like Sam May.

Many of the materials and strategies that Sam May identifies as part of his literacy learning also appear frequently in the stories of others I have interviewed. The accounts suggest that while a society’s older forms of literacy may be superseded by new ones, the old ones don’t disappear. Print lasts and artifacts accumulate—that is their appeal and power—littering the material sites of subsequent literacy learning and shaping future interpretations of reading and writing.

This holding on or holding over of older literacies is actually an integral part of the way that one generation passes on the fruits of its education to subsequent generations, a process that is at the center of what we think of as the educational advances of the twentieth century and a process that can have both a conservative and a propelling effect. Schooling typically brings into a family’s possession books, manuals, typewriters, and the like that then become the first forms of literacy that the next generation encounters. So Sam May recalled how he would “beg a book” from his aunt’s collection and how she would reenact her Palmer School handwriting lessons around the dining room table of the family farm. In an interview Sam May’s son, Jonathan, indicated that some of the first books he recalled encountering as a boy were the college textbooks and technical manuals of his parents. The influence of other people’s literacy and artifacts of their literacy move back and forth across generations, sometimes from younger to older. At the time of our interview, for instance, seventy-nine-year-old Emily Staubach had recently acquired the first personal computer of her life, a “hand-me-up” from her professional son, which she was using to write family memoirs. She in turn had passed her old manual typewriter on to her grandchildren to play with. When I asked thirty-four-year-

old Jonathan May to recall how he learned to write reports, he replied, “Well, I think I’m learning more now with my own kids going through school.”

It is through such material channels that literacy traditions of previous times appear in the present and that formal education accumulates as a resource in middle-class and working-class households. Reading and writing strategies acquired from older (or younger) generations are then reinterpreted and transformed for use in new and different circumstances—as Sam May’s search for writing “manners” demonstrated. In fact, the transformation of literacy obtained in one context for use in another was a principal strategy of literacy learning among the people I interviewed and a hallmark of advancing literacy. Sometimes I think what I am seeing and trying to describe are merely diffusions of education and upward mobility in action, the means by which those resources and aspirations translate into specific experiences with literacy. I also think what I am seeing and trying to describe are the things that bring such complexity to contemporary literacy acquisition. Whereas at one time literacy might have been best achieved by attending to traditional knowledge and tight locuses of meaning, literacy in an advanced literate period requires an ability to work the borders between tradition and change, an ability to adapt and improvise and amalgamate.

#### “HOW IT MANIFESTS ITSELF ON PAPER”: LITERACY LEARNING IN A CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

To see how similar strategies play out in a different set of circumstances, let’s take up the example of Charles Randolph, an African-American man who was born in 1948 in urban Mississippi and spent most of his growing-up years in a mid-sized city in Tennessee, where his father was the pastor of a renowned C.M.E. church. Both of his parents, who had themselves been children of small-scale farmers, attended college for a few years, and his father had also done some seminary work. In the Randolphs’ home was a collection of the father’s theological texts, concordances, and various versions of the Bible, as well as a dog-eared volume of *Poems for Life* that Charles Randolph’s mother had bought in the 1940s from a door-to-door salesman.

Many of Charles Randolph’s earliest literacy experiences revolved around the institution of the church, beginning at the age of two with the memorization of an Easter pageant speech. He and his four brothers were coached throughout, he recalled, by a mother who was “steeped in the Southern tradition of memorization.” Charles Randolph also has vivid memories of watching his father compose sermons in the parsonage by pacing the floor, often with a baby son on his shoulder, rehearsing under his breath. “You could hear the tremor of his voice,” Charles Randolph remembered. “His eyes would be fixed and he would just be walking around in circles with this sleeping child on his shoulder preaching these sermons. And

then at some point he would go to his old Underwood typewriter and start hunting and pecking about.” Charles Randolph named this composing technique “clouding up and raining,” adding, “I use the same technique that he used when I do presentations.” He had equally vivid memories of helping his mother, the church secretary, crank out church bulletins that she composed each week, including the full worship service and responsive readings, on a mimeograph machine that was kept on the porch of the parsonage. Charles Randolph described in detail a process of cutting out and pasting stencils and, later, with an electric mimeograph, hanging up sheets of fresh print to dry.

Charles Randolph earned a reputation early in life for his essay writing. As an eighth grader he entered a writing contest entitled “On My Career” held among all the black schools citywide. He wrote an essay on why he wanted to be a minister like his father:

And I won it. I think the top prize was five or ten silver dollars, which in those days was big stuff. There was an article in the paper and they had my picture and the other winners from the other grade levels. And my father kept that essay in the Bible waiting for me to become a person of the cloth until the day he died.

Later, as a college student in the late 1960s, Charles Randolph took top prize in a national writing contest on “My People and Power” sponsored jointly by *Reader’s Digest* and the United Negro College Fund. In accounting for his success as an essay writer, Charles Randolph mentioned vague recollections of grade-school lessons on essay structure and topic sentences. But he was “confident” that his father’s sermons served as a model for his own writing. In the following excerpt we see how a style of sermon writing that Pastor Randolph would have developed during his seminary training impressed its form in dramatic ways on his young son:

[My father] did neat sermons. And neat means he would always begin with a text and he would actually have a theme for it. So he would say, “Our sermon for the day is entitled,” and he would have an actual title for it. And, in the church—this was very profound—the ushers who served in the church would be lined along the walls, two down front, two in the middle, and two in the back. . . . And I remember on [my father] giving the text, the ushers would all turn and all move to the back of the church to be seated. So very profound, dramatic moments. [My father] did not like people who just got up and started preaching without having thought about both the Scripture, typically both an Old and New Testament scripture, a theme for it, and there would be a beginning, a middle, and an end. What he would do would be to start off with the written word, he’d have the sermon written out. In most of his sermons you see dot, dot, dot, which meant that by that time the spirit had taken over. He didn’t need the text anymore, he’d just go off. And that’s when he became the black preacher.

This scene of literacy transmission—from father to son—is layered with a legacy of literacy, race, and religion. By the mid-nineteenth century in America, the ideological connections among religion, literacy, duty, and personhood

helped to expose the morally untenable foundations of slavery to the white population. At the same time it sowed the seeds of a liberatory literacy spread through a growing network of African-American churches, mostly Baptist and Methodist, as well as church-sponsored schools and seminaries (Frazier and Lincoln; Cornelius; W. A. Daniel). For generations the ministry was one of the few careers comfortably open to educated African-American men. As a descendent of that tradition, Pastor Randolph integrated his formal education, with its lingering classical roots, into the worship service of his congregation, impressing exegesis, thematic development, and—in the about-face of the church ushers—a vivid topical structure on a young son watching and listening in a church pew. (See Daniel's *The Education of Negro Ministers* for a description of seminary curriculums at the time that Charles Randolph's father would have been attending. For contemporary treatments of the composition of sermons by African-American ministers, see Mitchell; Moss.)

As a young writer, Charles Randolph could begin to translate a sermonic style learned from his father into secular channels of expression being opened up for African-American students by such newly emerging organizations as the United Negro College Fund, which had been established in 1944 as part of a rapid expansion of literacy and educational achievement among African Americans during the first five decades of the twentieth century. (For a profile of African-American literacy and educational achievement during this period, see Smythe 172).

Charles Randolph also identified an "enriched vein" of literate experience in the language arts lessons in his segregated schools. Many of his public school teachers had advanced degrees from northern universities, underwritten by southern states that preferred paying out-of-state tuition for black students to desegregating their university systems. He remembered especially poetry lessons and his love for imagery, alliteration, and metaphor. He also learned the debate process during the Kennedy-Nixon presidential campaign, researching and defending Kennedy's position before a schoolwide mock vote. And, he recalled, he wrote an occasional speech as a student government leader.

Charles Randolph described his adolescence as a period of intense writing that coincided with civil rights activities in his city. By the mid-1960s his father was hosting training sessions at the church, organized by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and the Southern Christian Leadership Council, in preparation for picketing at downtown stores. Charles Randolph recalled how he and his brother composed messages for picket signs, jazzed up with tempera paint and glitter. "My brother and I did nice work," he smiled. Charles Randolph also wrote constantly in private during this period. "Thoughts, ideas, essays," he described. "Obviously in those times I was concerned with the apartheid racism we were experiencing. Everybody was angry about it, frustrated about it. . . . It was an emotionally charged time and you had lots of things to say." Writing for Charles

Randolph became “a vent.” “It did not hurt later on to have had those experiences but at the time you’re not thinking of practicing. . . . You used whatever means you could to work off these frustrations,” he explained.

With his father still waiting for him to become a minister, Charles Randolph enrolled in one of the colleges founded by his Methodist denomination and soon found a truer calling in a class in transformational grammar. “The system of language,” he extolled. “To find out that it was much more scientific than I had thought. . . . It was just a wonderful, wonderful thing.” He graduated with a degree in English and, migrating north, became an English teacher in a public school. Then, in the early 1970s, he became the first affirmative action officer in a predominantly white metropolitan school district while pursuing a PhD in school administration at a midwest research university. It was then that the “flowery English major with the Ciceronian writing style” was put to work writing an affirmative action plan and training manual in a field that never existed before. “There were no prototypes,” Charles Randolph explained. A district consultant provided some advice; the rest was trial and error. As he described his new identity as a public-sector bureaucrat, it was clear that there was more than a little of the black preacher in Charles Randolph: “My memoranda were very long and pretty or piercing or whatever, but they were not typical,” he said. Some tension developed with the “hard-nosed administrators”:

I never wanted to write anything that was so dull and deadly that you couldn’t flourish every now and then but the manual was tough for me. . . . The interplay between what I wanted to write and the way I wanted to write it and what they wanted me to write was pretty hard. I remember a couple of times having the writing reviewed and having been told they didn’t particularly like it—which also frustrated me because I didn’t particularly like the way they wrote.

Charles Randolph encountered similar tensions with his dissertation committee of four white male professors. “I was tending to have all these Ciceronian flourishes and lots of words and lots of analogies and lots of imagery and the professors kept saying, ‘You’re bleeding on the paper. Stop bleeding on the paper. This is a scientific piece of work.’ ”

Charles Randolph learned how to compromise, earning his doctorate and serving for several more years as an educational administrator. He then left the public school system to found his own consulting firm. He now writes on virtually a daily basis, preparing presentations in connection with his work as well as speeches, letters, and occasional grant proposals in connection with his membership in a local civil rights organization. At the time of our interview he was in the midst of writing a book manuscript on current civil rights issues. Charles Randolph explained that he works on the book during odd moments in his frequent business trips, “clouding up and raining” in airplanes and hotel rooms on a laptop computer that he taught himself to use. He said his fascination with writing throughout his life

has resided “in the power of it. A lot of times I was surprised and still am surprised about what I just wrote, how it manifests itself on paper.”

Charles Randolph grew up in a period of rapid social change among African-Americans, during which the educational and liberatory tradition of black religion began to find greater secular expression through the civil rights movement. This transition registers vividly in Charles Randolph’s formative literacy experiences. His account helps to underscore that change is comprised not merely of the pull from the future but also the push from the past. The orbit of the Protestant church, so instrumental in the dissemination of basic literacy among white and black Americans in previous times, continued in the mid-twentieth century to influence Charles Randolph’s writing development as he saw church-related work being done in his household and as he absorbed the oral and oratorical traditions of black preaching. It was a tradition that he was able to translate into literacy success in his segregated schools (and uses now in his professional presentations). As in the case of Sam May, Charles Randolph’s earliest literacy memories exhibit residual influences of the educational experiences of previous generations, including his parents and other adult teachers—classical motifs, memorization, poetry, debate, and sentence diagramming mingled with emergent studies such as transformational grammar to form Charles Randolph’s orientation to writing. Although school segregation left many African-American students in poor schools with poorly educated teachers, Charles Randolph experienced another aspect of this constriction: a concentration of talented and highly educated teachers produced especially in the last, most desperate years of legal segregation. (See Ginzberg and Bray 192ff. for an account of the relatively large expenditures some southern states approved for segregated black schools in the years just prior to *Brown v. Board of Education*.)

As the radical successes of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s were domesticated in the 1970s by federal legislation and government oversight of education and employment, new bureaucratic genres like “the affirmative action plan” began to emerge. Amid racial and regional tensions, the adult Charles Randolph found himself trying to integrate his southern, black, sermonic literacy style into a northern, white, bureaucratic and scientific style—a quintessential demonstration of the political struggle still at play as an aftermath of official integration. Now an independent human-resources consultant primarily in the private sector, Charles Randolph continues to work on developing a professional language that leaves room for the part of himself he calls “the artist.” Boxes of his informal writings continue to pile up in the basement of his home, along with a collection of his late father’s sermons.

#### ACCUMULATING LITERACY: IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY

In *The Importance of Illiteracy*, a wise little book written at midcentury, M. M. Lewis suggested that sharply rising concerns about illiteracy around that time were actu-

ally indications of the success of literacy in spreading and escalating in value. He pointed out how the social significance of literacy is itself a contributing factor in illiteracy, as spiraling expectations for achievement contribute to the shame and frustration of those who fall below the standard (98). Lewis's book is intriguing because it draws attention to the effects created by a surplus of literacy in this century, even when contemplating the phenomenon of illiteracy. That is, Lewis asks that we entertain the paradoxes that an advancing literacy presents, including the possibility that achievements *and* failures in reading and writing are caused in some ways by the same conditions.

While this essay has focused on successful responses to an advancing literacy, the interviews I have conducted overall confirm that attempts to acquire reading and writing—unsuccessful as well as successful—take shape in response to a burgeoning of literacy and its enterprises. This accumulation of literacy provides an increasingly intricate set of incentives, sources, and barriers for learning to read and write, the negotiation of which becomes a large part of the effort of becoming (and staying) literate. We are familiar enough with some aspects of this accumulation: it is easily apparent that both Sam May and Charles Randolph, for instance, were swept up educationally and economically into the growth of a technocratic, documentary society after World War II—a kind of second phase of mass literacy that has been creating a higher demand for producers (and not just consumers) of writing. This aspect of accumulating literacy plays heavily in the anxious talk about “the literacy crisis.”

What we have paid less attention to, however, are the specific contexts that allow rapid changes in literacy and literacy standards to take place, particularly the contexts that provide interpretive materials that people use to respond to (and resist) such changes. These contexts are characterized by latent forms of older, residual literacies that are at play alongside emerging ones. Rapid changes in literacy and education may not so much bring rupture from the past as they bring an accumulation of different and proliferating pasts, a piling up of literate artifacts and signifying practices that haunt the sites of literacy learning. These complicated amalgamations of literacy's past, present, and future help to formulate the interpretive opportunities and complexities facing current generations of literacy learners.

These characteristics of accumulating literacy could be better accommodated in school, simply by beginning to recognize the historical conditions of literacy more fully and consciously. Traditionally, schools have seen their mission as disseminating literacy to each new generation, but what does that mean in a culture where sources of print and literacy—not to mention education itself—are so ubiquitous? Lately there has been more understanding of how particular forms of school-based literacy compete with popular forms, yet the interviewing I am conducting suggests a more complicated picture than that. Whether it be the penmanship lessons Sam May received in his farmhouse, the Orson Welles inflections in his poetry recitations, the office equipment on Charles Randolph's porch, the

black southern sermonic style that showed up in school administration memos in the north, or the old engineering manuals that Jonathan May found on the bookshelves in his home, there is much more interpenetration and overlapping of influences as people criss-cross among various literacy-based institutions in the course of their normal lives. From this perspective we might begin to see how both “school-based” and “home-based” literacies form and function within larger historical currents. We can also begin to see how the role of the school in an advanced literate age can be reconceptualized to help students at all levels detect the residual, emergent, often conflicted contexts of literacy that form their world.

Especially important is the ideological potency of literacy materials that come into people’s lives and into the scenes of their learning. Materials to some degree always will reflect how individuals, including students, are intersecting at a certain time with the ongoing, official history of mass literacy and the institutions that have controlled it. Because written materials tend to accumulate as household possessions, as forms of inheritance, and because they accumulate as well in the form of remembered readings or writings, these intersections with the history of literacy can be quite complex processes of projection and retrospection. And, while written materials always carry traces of the grand history of official literacy, they also can be infused, as we have seen, with family histories and autobiographical constructions.

Important too is the realization that the history of literacy at any moment is always carrying along a complex, sometimes cacophonous mix of fading and ascending materials, practices, and ideologies. Literacy is always in flux. Learning to read and write necessitates an engagement with this flux, with the layers of literacy’s past, present, and future, often embodied in materials and tools and just as often embodied in the social relationships we have with the people who are teaching us to read and write. Indeed, as changes in literacy have speeded up in the twentieth century, literate ability has become more and more defined as the ability to position and reposition oneself amidst literacy’s recessive and emergent forms.

This essay has only begun to scratch the surface of accumulating or advancing literacy. Yet to be treated, among other things, are the profound effects of electronic media, including television and computers, as well as the meanings of language diversity and immigration in an advanced literate society. But at this point in the investigation I lean, with M. M. Lewis, toward the proposition that problems with reading and writing are less about the lack of literacy in society than about the surplus of it. Being literate in the late twentieth century has to do with being able to negotiate that burgeoning surplus.

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