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Scrapbooks as Cultural Texts: An American Art of Memory

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"Whenever I make my scrapbook, I always keep the thought in the back of my mind that I'll be able to show my children exactly what I was doing in the Summer of '87 . . . That's my motivation. Because it's so much nicer for the memory of certain situations to get the pictures and memorabilia in an organized place where you can reach it, look through it, and put it back. Not like in a box under your bed, collecting dust, and they're not organized. It's much better to have it in a book . . . It's almost like a movie. You can flip through the pages and you can just remember. It's like a spark to my memory—remembering the things that we did and said."¹

Scrapbook keeper, 1987

"If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement. Booksellers would consider it quite a novelty; critics would murmur, yes, but is it art; and I could trust a majority of you to use it as you would a parlor game."²

James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

I. INTRODUCTION: SCRAPBOOKS AS A GENRE OF SELF

The traditional interest of folklorists, anthropologists, historians, and other social scientists in elicited life-histories as a topic and method for scholarly inquiry finds its counterpart in studies which focus on indigenous processes of life-review. Spoken and published autobiographical renditions are prime examples of culturally sanctioned forms of the self-told life, and these have been subject to both empirical and theoretical investigations.³

The underlying assumption concerning all autobiographical creations is, in Oring's words, that

. . . lives are not transcriptions of events. They are artful and enduring symbolic constructions which demand our engagement and identification. They are to be perceived and understood as wholes. They are texts. . . . A text demands organization and coherence even when a life does not. And it is only to the extent that we can

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conceive of life as organized and somewhat coherent that we can even begin to conceive of a life at all. Life history, therefore, is not only one of the genres of literature; it is one of the genres of self.⁴

It is our contention that the scrapbook provides an exemplary case of such a "genre of self." In mainstream American culture, scrapbooks represent an established mode of self-narration commonly found among young people.⁵ But given their generic standing, our more specific question is what are the distinctive characteristics of this indigenous practice of "life review"? A close reading of the scrapbook as an assembled "text of identity"⁶ has convinced us that this mode of life-review is fundamentally rhetorical and performative in character.⁷

As autobiographical texts, scrapbooks articulate a sense of coherence and significance. The particular images of order and value presented by scrapbooks, as well as the occasions provided for contemplating these qualities, can offer important clues to the cultural construction of a sense of self in the American context. In order to decipher these clues, we now consider the types of scrapbooks informants have described, conventions governing the selection and inclusion of items, the temporal orientation implicit in scrapbook construction, and the aesthetic principles governing the assembly and performance of scrapbooks.

This attempt to understand the meanings and uses of scrapbooks as cultural forms presupposes, in other words, an ethnography of communication perspective.⁸ This perspective was originally developed for the study of verbal performances, which were viewed as culturally situated and rhetorically oriented sets of human practices. We propose now to apply it to the study of scrapbooks, an unusually challenging text for this method. We are encouraged to attempt such an ethnography by recent studies that have considered the role played by non-discursive forms and a wide variety of expressive media in autobiographical creation and in the articulation of subjectivity.⁹ Of particular interest in our contemporary setting are the various forms of "memory objects," constructed through the assembly and recycling of everyday cultural products. In different ways, all of these highly personalized aesthetic artifacts can illuminate "the social construction of the self through time and the transformation of experience through material readily at hand."¹⁰

Scrapbooks are distinguished by their principle of aesthetic organization. According to this principle, presentational arrangements of collage and metonymic assemblage are superimposed upon the linear form of narrative unfolding which tends to dominate life-stories.¹¹ A full exposure to these richly textured resources argues strongly for the scrapbook as a fascinating individuation of epideictic discourse: the rhetoric of display.¹²

This is the aim of our preliminary study: an account of scrapbook making and using as an American art of memory *and* as a rhetorical practice of construction and performance of self. Our analysis draws upon 55 taped interviews with middle-class American informants, who were keeping scrapbooks at the time they consented to show and discuss them. Along with this, there is of course much anecdotal data from less formal encounters and discussions over this subject.¹³ Indeed, all middle-class Americans we have probed about this issue have had some experience—either direct or indirect—with the artifact of the

scrapbook. It may be worth noting, therefore, that this mode of life-review is not shared cross-culturally. Moreover, even in its native habitat it tends to remain invisible to cultural outsiders—so much so that many non-Americans who have spent several years living in the United States are completely unfamiliar with this practice, and often with the word *scrapbook*.

II. PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: SCRAPBOOKS AS RHETORICAL ARTIFACTS

Although every scrapbook owner consulted stressed the uniqueness of her scrapbook—and, clearly, no two scrapbooks are identical—these same persons recognized that their scrapbooks represent a personal inflection of a culturally shared genre. Further, there seems to be a standard pattern of engagement with scrapbooks relative to the life-cycle.¹⁴ “Baby books” kept by parents for their children are sometimes mentioned as predecessors of self-made scrapbooks. Indeed, scrapbooks themselves are heavily influenced by adult prompting, and interest seems to develop through the socialization process.

In the engagement of younger children with scrapbooks, the figure of ‘the Mom’ looms large as either the stimulus or an active collaborator in the practice of assembly. Even those informants who said that their interest in starting a scrapbook was triggered by a school project noted that they persisted in the practice through the efforts of their Mom. Surrogate Moms seem to serve a similar function in later years. Thus, some of the informants who displayed their college scrapbooks noted the role of their ‘pledge Mom’ in their sorority in beginning their freshman-year scrapbook. Other role models and instigators for beginning a scrapbook were mentioned by informants. These included older sisters, other (usually female) family members, friends, or neighbors.

The factor of gender thus seems to suggest itself as a relevant cultural consideration for the scrapbook practice.¹⁵ Among our informants themselves, a sense of general agreement emerged to the effect that scrapbook keeping was a gender-specific activity and that boys did not keep them. This became readily apparent when informants were shown a scrapbook over a century old found at a flea market in Texas and were asked to comment on it. They invariably talked about its maker as a “she,” indicating in subsequent discussion that this assumption was widely shared. One woman, a college senior, said:

I have never seen a scrapbook by a male. I don't think men have the time first of all, and secondly, well, perhaps in highschool or college they'd have the time. I don't think they have the forethought to think that my kids are gonna see this. Or it's just not important to them.¹⁶

It is tempting to speculate about why scrapbook keeping would be a gender-specific activity. The traditional feminine role-assignment as custodian of matters private and familial comes to mind, along with Arendt's distinction between *having* in the realm of the private and *being* in the realm of the public.¹⁷ Certainly the above informant subscribed to the assumption that scrapbooks contain private treasures, to be handed down, as it were, to subsequent generations. Still more stereotypic clues emerge from the fact that the few scrapbooks we uncovered from male informants usually centered around competitive activities

in which they participated (i.e. debate, sports, hunting) or—more rarely—actual public events. For all this, there is the fact that this smaller number of males still *do* keep scrapbooks. Many fraternities keep them also. While the themes of males' scrapbooks and the memorabilia they contain may be different, we feel it would be premature to dismiss these intrusive counter-examples as exceptions that prove the rule. We must have recourse, then, to a scholarly convention; our data on the question of gender are still preliminary and inconclusive.

Most scrapbooks are chronologically organized and classified according to the period they cover in the individual's life: grade-school scrapbook, camp scrapbook, highschool scrapbook are typical cases. Another major type is the travel scrapbook kept by both younger and older persons, notably by those who have discontinued their ongoing scrapbook activities. A further type of scrapbook occasionally kept by younger persons tends to focus upon a single theme, person, or topic as an anchor for identification. Examples include a particular sport, a celebrity figure, or a particular public event, in which the owner feels a great deal of emotional investment. Thus we have encountered several cases of persons whose scrapbooks were filled with newspaper clippings concerned with Kennedy's assassination, or the first landing on the moon. But regardless of the potential for variation among scrapbook types, it should be apparent that the very meaning of what emerges as an artifact must depend upon the scrapbook's rhetorical qualities as an epideictic form.

Traditionally, epideictic was the most conventionally aesthetic of rhetorical genres, being concerned with the praising and blaming of virtues and vices in what were called ceremonial occasions. The function of epideictic discourse was to locate qualities of persons and events for demonstration, display, and tribute or condemnation. Through epideictic, it also becomes possible to witness and appreciate distant qualities and experiences in a concrete, present sense. As Perelman writes:

Presence acts directly upon our sensibility. The presentation of an object. . . . But there is more. The techniques of presentation which create presence are essential above all when it is a question of evoking realities that are distant in time and space. This is why it is important not to identify presence as we conceive it, which is presence to consciousness, with effective presence . . . the tie which is established between the presence to consciousness of certain elements and the importance we give them has allowed us to see in rhetoric alone the art of creating this presence, thanks to the technique of presentation.¹⁸

But what are these rules and techniques? We will try to elucidate them for those scrapbooks of a clearly autobiographical character—i.e., those privileged and reflexive accounts for which the 'narrator' and the central figure in the narrative are explicitly the same. We have found that the practice of scrapbook keeping is comprised of three component activities, each of which implies different forms and phases of engagement. These three activities are:

Saving: Selecting of the memory items to be included in the scrapbook for future appreciation.

Organizing: 'Working on' the scrapbook, which involves the production of visible order through the spatial placement and arrangement of items in the scrapbook's pages.

Contemplating and Sharing: Looking at or showing the scrapbook to selected others either at their request or at the owner's own initiative.

An inclusive understanding of the *practice* of scrapbook keeping should, therefore, consider the interrelationship of all three activities: from the phase of saving, through the activity of 'putting together' the items to be included, to various encounter contexts of contemplation and display. The body of our study undertakes this fuller consideration of scrapbook making. Clearly, each of the three phases has its own rules of form and enactment; and it is only by considering them together that we may begin to appreciate what the cultural activity of making a scrapbook means to its makers.

Saving

Things designated for one's scrapbook can be said to be 'saved' in more than one sense. They are first of all delivered from their ephemeral existence as transient objects in the world, objects which turn into rubbish with the erosion of their use-value.¹⁹ Instead of such an untimely though routinized demise, scrapbook designates are redeemed as elements within a new text: the life-story recounted in words and objects. But they are also saved in a second sense in that they are 'stored away' by the scrapbook owner, who awaits a proper time to reassemble them in a more permanent form within her scrapbook. Interestingly, a number of our informants identified themselves as 'saver types.' Some even claimed that attachment to objects was a family trait, saying: "We are a family of savers. We don't throw away anything." Yet even if the impulse to hold on to visible tokens of life events is a family trait, related to the desire to track one's life in more systematic fashion, the fact is that not all items find their way into a person's scrapbook. Indeed, there appear to be some broad but consistent constraints and preferences governing the inclusion of items.

Just as we might consult the language conventions that are used in the recounting of life-narratives to uncover "the prevailing theories about 'possible lives' that are part of one's culture,"²⁰ so also an appreciation of the kinds of items included in scrapbooks can lead to a better understanding of what 'a life' in a modern culture might be.²¹ A closer look at the kinds of items scrapbooks typically contain—essentially, memorabilia of good moments and precious times—immediately suggests that they represent not just a possible or potential life, but also a sense of the life as *perfected*, as 'well-lived.'²² The selectivity inherent in any life performance is as clearly marked here as it is in the case of photo-albums, which serve a similar function as triggers of good memories and feelings of happiness and pride.

The items typically saved for inclusion in one's scrapbook are visible traces of events in the owner's ongoing life, even as they mark a clear focus on the owner's person. They include such things as photographs, invitations, programs, notes, ticket stubs, newspaper clippings with (favorable) reference to the owner or some organization/events with which she has been associated. In brief, one's scrapbook is a metonymic assemblage of one's social self. Its maker and protagon-

nist not only occupies center stage in the depiction of past events, but is also constructed in highly particular ways. A consideration of the items routinely found in scrapbooks provides a clue as to what are considered memorable moments and episodes to be cherished and woven into the fabric of one's remembered life-story. In a culture that values sensitivity, the very act of saving items for future reflective contemplation is generally regarded as a sign of recognition or 'caring.' There was a general feeling among informants that the practice of keeping a scrapbook was usually to be found among the 'best' or 'happiest' families. One informant explained it as follows:

One is to keep the scrapbook in this way. Because there is very public acknowledgment that what you do is of interest. . . . Like things that you bring home from school—grade-wise and art-wise . . . that there's a lot of value. One, that they get put up on the refrigerator, but two, that they get kept. And it's all noted down.

Perhaps the most salient shared feature of these items is that—through the assembly of recognizable tokens—they designate positive moments of participation in various social arenas. Very often, the social activities and ties thus acknowledged involve what Turner has called "liminoid" contexts of leisure and entertainment: domains of experience removed from the mainstream, production-oriented arenas of economic and political life.²³

Thus far, we have been able to identify four major categories of items that were routinely included in our informants' scrapbooks:

(1) Tokens of participation as spectator/consumer in occasions of entertainment and leisure, such as artistic performances and travel.

(2) Tokens of social or civic recognition received for accomplishments in one's chosen pursuits as voluntary performer (e.g. in sports, hobbies, or vocations), as indicated in newspaper clippings, letters of recognition, awards, and the like.

(3) Tokens of social bonds and affiliation such as get-well notes, greeting cards, friends' photographs, institutional emblems, and so forth.

(4) Traces of ritualized events which punctuate the individual's life-cycle such as birthdays, graduation parties, award ceremonies, proms, group outings, and the like.

'Fun' moments of all sorts are probably the most frequently represented occasions whose tangible traces may be found in the pages of a typical scrapbook. Whereas the sense of satisfaction one derives from the contemplation of past achievements is easily understandable from reference to notions of pride and self-esteem current in Western cultural idioms, this lingering over past occasions of fun seems to be more specifically related to the 'fun morality' which has characterized major cultural trends in 20th century America. As Wolfenstein describes this cultural development, play and fun have become increasingly divested of their puritanical associations of wickedness and have, moreover, assumed an almost obligatory aspect: "Not having fun is not merely an occasion for regret but involves a loss of self-esteem. I ask myself: What is wrong with me that I am not having fun? To admit that one did not have fun when one was expected to arouses feelings of shame."²⁴ Conversely, to remember and reminisce about one's moments of fun arouses feelings of satisfaction and pride. To

the question "Did I have enough fun when I was supposed to?" the scrapbook owner has prepared a tangible answer.

There is, we believe, reason enough to be disturbed by the hedonism of a 'permanent childhood,' at least as it now inflicts itself upon contemporary culture. One particularly vile bumper sticker reads: "The one who dies with the most toys wins." And a rosy-colored pin sold as a collectible assures us: "It is never too late to have a happy childhood." In this harsh light, the hedonism of scrapbook-assembly seems to us to be rather benign and transitional. It is closer to a condensed life review of what is *worth* remembering, the traditional model of the flourishing life,²⁵ than to the narcissistic preoccupation with pleasure for its own sake.

For all this, the pleasure-principle of scrapbook-assembly is highly choreographed and obsessed with propriety. Scrapbook coverage thus suggests the times and places in a person's lifetime in which one expects to have fun. These include all the growing-up years until the end of college. Later, what frequently get depicted are 'unusual times,' durations of time delivered from the boredom of routine adult existence—for instance, recreational travel, family reunions, and so forth. Scrapbooks, indeed, construct the experience of growing up as a fun-filled journey through episodic time, subordinating most memories of pain and tribulation that might characterize a more comprehensive depiction of the growing-up process. These artifacts are a one-sided argument for the joys of maturation. In the words of one informant: "My scrapbook is chucked [*sic*] full of all kinds of wonderful memories; memories of when I was in highschool, and the cards that people sent me for graduation and from, uh, birthday cards, thank you notes; I have a ticket stub in here. Wonderful memories that relate to when you were growing up and experiences that you had. Letters from colleges when you were accepted to different schools."

In short, in the scrapbook version of 'the seasons of a life,' the period from childhood until young adulthood is very much where the action is. In later life, the cultural form of a scrapbook finds only limited scope as a record of those aspects of life in which one's social self becomes most visible and most deeply invested. Thus, an informant's stated desire "to remember what a good time I had," or another's delight in contemplating mementos from a bull-fight she had gone to with friends on a trip to Spain as "one of the most fun things I've ever done in my life," are culturally intelligible and sanctioned ways of constructing and making sense of one's life story.

As the opening citation from an informant's account suggests, the act of saving is both retrospectively and prospectively oriented. It is a gesture towards the past, an attempt to salvage some aspects of one's 'lived past' from the ravages of human forgetfulness, but with an eye to a future for which this constructed past can be a meaningful antecedent. As in Bakhtin's sense of the "chronotope," this is the spatio-temporal orientation of an historically situated character.²⁶ More than a neutral or dispassionate orientation, the scrapbook predisposes its keeper to regard certain moments in life's episodes as "memorable." One of our informants said: "Why do I keep it? I don't know, it was just an important thing to do then. I just felt that someday I will want to remember it. . . . The couple of

times I've shown it to friends they say 'Aw gee, I wish I would have done that.' You know, 'I wish I'd have had the foresight to do it.' "

Despite the future orientation inherent in putting together a scrapbook, the decision to include or exclude an item is based upon the owner's judgment of significance at the time of compilation. In this respect scrapbooks are a celebration of subjectivity: the cumulative product of a series of decisions by a unique individual, with a unique life-history and, therefore, personally inflected valuations and emotional preferences. This is also the reason why the moment of selection or saving is so highly respected by scrapbook owners; it articulates an authentic value judgment at the very time of inclusion. Indeed, the idea of removing items once included in one's scrapbook was rejected outright. What is retained in it are not the items as such, but the items as significant tokens, as concrete indices of meaningful contexts, even if those contexts can be recaptured only in a fragmentary way.

An informant thus likened scrapbook-making and contemplating to storytelling, saying: "There's a cumulation of things, things. And then you get themes. And then you have themes in your life that are concrete. You can *see* all the report cards. You can *see* all the corsages. You can see, you can see, it's of value. And making decisions about what goes in, that you're having that kind of dialogue, which the subtext is: what's important to you?"

The contexts of narration and of reminiscing underlie the dual temporal orientation of the scrapbook experience; and although they are brought into close contact, they are never collapsed. An informant described this temporal dialectic, and its subtle interweaving of a sense of continuity and change, in the following way:

You just remember that part of your life and wish, gee, would I do it over again the same way? Would I just continue on with my life and grow? Can't ever go back, that's why you save scrapbooks. Then you can look at it and reflect back, but you can't go back. You can't do it over again. So now, I can sit and look at this and say, gee, that was a happy time at the dance. I really had a good time, and I remember the people that I was with. I wonder where they are today. Or the letters that you got from college. What would have happened if I decided to go to that school rather than this school? Or the special birthday cards, reading the messages and saying: 'Gee, they still feel the same way today.'

In their temporal orientation, then, scrapbooks—like diaries—are commemorative texts, and are similarly designed for self-consumption, with the maker's projected "self" serving as the primary future audience, at least in contexts of solitary contemplation. One informant said: "Maybe I'll, you know, maybe someday I'll look at it and get some sense of who I was, I guess. Sometimes I think it's hard to believe I did all this stuff."

Scrapbooks, however, are also designed for sharing and display. Indeed, as noted, the final saving phase is usually divided into two parts: items are first heaped up in a drawer, a shoebox, or, for some informants, hung up on a bulletin board or on a wall. In the latter case, display predates the inclusion of items in a scrapbook, where the display continues in more systematic fashion, leaving the bulletin board free for further potential scrapbook items. We infer

from these practical variations that scrapbooks are public territory, to be shared with those one believes would care enough to delve into them.

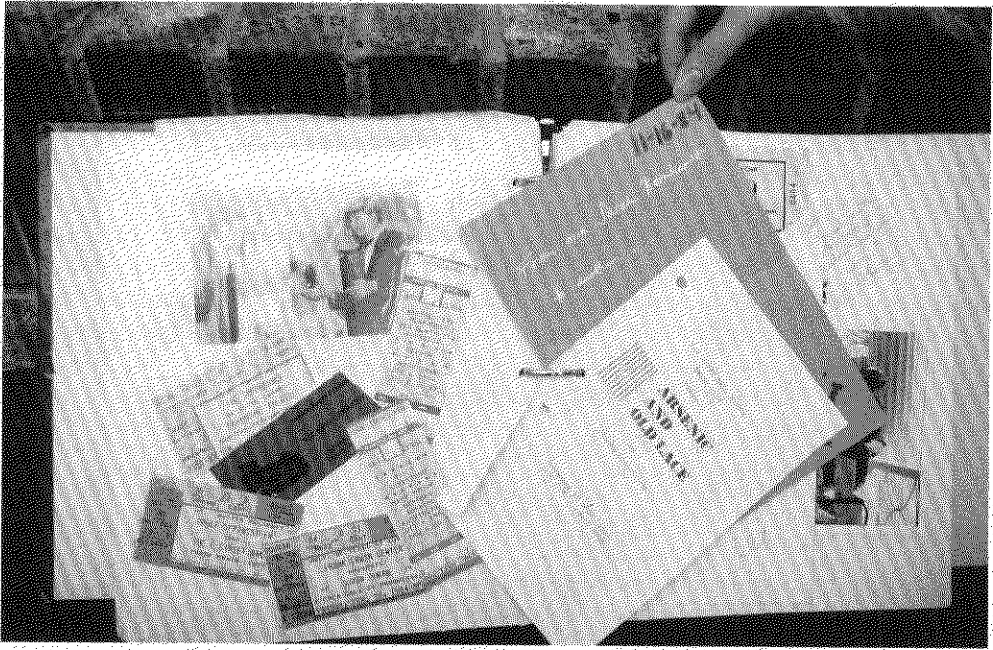
Quite a number of informants indicated that they kept both scrapbooks and diaries, sometimes simultaneously, at different points in their lives. These two media provide different contexts and forms of self-narration. Diaries are introspective, full-fledged, openly interpretive verbal accounts of one's inner life. One informant called it "things about myself, or things that happened to me that I have digested, with all the thoughts and feelings that go with them." The items selected for inclusion in a scrapbook, on the other hand, provide a look at the self from the outside, as it were. Events are recorded, but not elaborated upon from the experiencing subject's point of view. Therefore, while diaries can serve as self-contained texts, scrapbooks are only skeletal texts, which come fully into life only in the presence and through the living commentary of their owners and protagonists. In other words, while diaries may be read, scrapbooks need to be performed.

Organizing

Whereas the decisive moment within the saving phase is that of selection, the organizing phase is dominated by the impulse towards ordering. An informant explained her motivation for keeping a scrapbook in the following way: "Why? Because I'm one of those people that loves to save things and have memories. And I think that there's only one way to remember all these things, and that's to put it in some kind of fashion of order. So that when you're ready to go back over them, like you're asking me to do this evening on this tape recorder, that I can go back and smile and say: 'Gee, I remember when.'"

Items saved for one's scrapbook are typically not added to a scrapbook in a casual way. People take time out to work on their scrapbook, often spending more time than they had intended, promoting various items from their temporary place in a shoebox or drawer, on the bulletin board or refrigerator, onto the pages of the scrapbook itself. Placed between the pages of the scrapbook the memory items are both protected from collecting dust and easily retrievable. They are made useful by being incorporated into a new 'text,' which has a place and function in the owner's present life. By putting it all together, the scrapbook owner gains a kind of provisional authorship over his or her life history, laying down the scaffolding for its future tellings and re-tellings. Working on a scrapbook is an investment in time and energy. Those who make the effort come to cherish their scrapbook for "all the time I put into it"; those who don't often regret it, as did an informant who said, "I really wish that I would find the time and find the energy to really make it into a scrapbook rather than just keep it all in a box. It would be much better to have everything down. And after I saw my friend's scrapbook, I was a little: 'Yeah! I gotta do this! I gotta do this!' I'm just not sure if I have the time."

Memory items are generally organized in scrapbooks in recognizable ways. Three overall principles of visual organization can be discerned: 1) Items relating to a particular event or occasion tend to be clustered together. 2) Items are organized in such a way as to depict the chronology of life-events. 3) Items, or clusters of them, are 'patched' together, visually creating a collage-like effect.



At times, the pictures and objects included in the scrapbook are accompanied by some written caption or commentary. But even then the 'story' they tell is never complete; it might be meaningful to outsiders in a generic sense as an account of 'a possible life,' with the items serving as tokens of culturally shared types of events or experiences: a graduation party, a first dance, an important football game, and so on. However, as Agee and Evans discovered generations ago in their own research,²⁷ there is a kind of private poignance to all these artifacts that seems to invite and yet defy the onlooker's gaze. The ways these potentially meaningful occasions were individuated in significance for the *particular person* cannot be directly discerned from just leafing through the scrapbook. In a manner similar to Derrida's notion of an "attending discourse,"²⁸ the owner's active mediation between this skeletal text and its occasional reader is necessary as a bridge. This bridge seems to bring together the onlooker's general cultural knowledge of the genre and an appreciation of the owner's subjective experience which her presence infuses into each of its tokens. Thus, whereas the scrapbook's coherence is grounded in general cultural assumptions, the particularized meaning and significance of each scrapbook lies in the privileged eye of its maker and protagonist. As Bruner has pointed out, the reflexive quality of the story of one's own life, a story in which one is both narrator and central figure, makes it a privileged yet essentially 'troubled narrative.'²⁹

The essential reflexivity of the self-told life becomes submerged, however, through the employment of a collage aesthetic in the construction, presentation, and celebration of one's life and self. Collage aesthetic always involves the transfer of materials from one context to another so that the objects are given a double reading: the fragment as perceived in relation to its context of origin on

the one hand, and as incorporated into a new whole on the other. In Perloff's words, every fragment "refers to an external reality even as its compositional thrust is to undercut the very referentiality it seems to assert."³⁰ Moreover, the figure/ground relationships associated with conventional narrative are subverted through the juxtaposition of 'real' items. Perloff, in her discussion of the collage aesthetic, has also pointed out its subversion of the individual authorial voice, saying: "As the mode of detachment and readherence, of graft and citation, collage inevitably undermines the authority of the individual self, the 'signature' of the poet or painter."³¹ Somewhat paradoxically, then, it is through the playful, equalizing juxtaposition of semantically heterogeneous fragments that a real-life version of a storied self is conjured up, a self metonymically constructed out of the materials of 'life,' which appears as real (and as richly textured) as life itself.

The arrangement of items in a scrapbook, though talked about as 'work,' often takes on the flavor of a pleasurable artistic enterprise. An informant said: "Yeah, it *can* be a lot of work. I mean I know . . . it's a lot of work to go through and organize and sort through this, but it's *fun*. It's not really work. It's like something I do to relax. It's a diversion."

Informants said they would spend much time arranging and rearranging items on a page, and—once the task was completed—they would feel a sense of accomplishment. In varying degrees, they spoke about the work of arrangement in aesthetic terms, underlining the careful planning that goes into the visual creation of a scrapbook page. One talked about

how I would set up a specific page, you know what I mean? I don't just stick a picture on there, I always arrange them a certain way, or you know, and usually put a certain number, you know like a few pictures and then other things mixed in. You know like a program and two pictures or something like that. Sometimes I think I have this instinct, kind of an advertising type thing, you know what I mean? Just pleasing to look at or like I like things to be set up a certain way. So I think about what goes on each page.

Arranging items in a pleasing visual order appears to be a sort of meditative experience, very much like the 'flow' experience of collectors engaged in the care or arrangement of their collection.³² The visual ordering of items on a scrapbook page is accompanied by a soothing feeling of things being 'in their proper place' in more than a literal sense. An informant thus described her feeling after having put together her scrapbook upon her return from her year in college: "I felt so much more settled after I had done my scrapbook when I got home. I had all these, like then, once I sat down it took maybe two hours and just, um, you know, arranged them and taped them down, you know, and then I felt a lot better."

Contemplating and Sharing

For some people, contemplating their scrapbook is a very private affair; for others it is definitely a social one. Most people, however, seem to use their scrapbooks both as instruments of private contemplation and as tools of self-display and social bonding. Thus, some college freshmen who had brought their

highschool scrapbooks along on their first arrival to college stressed both the therapeutic value of looking through it in moments of loneliness and its usefulness as a way of telling their new friends "who I am and what my life's been like," as one of them put it.

At the more contemplative end, scrapbooks serve as self-addressed mnemonic devices, enjoyed for the opportunity they provide to re-create for oneself 'fun times,' to re-live significant—often emotionally charged—moments. A repository of 'good feelings,' they serve to re-invoke them in treasured moments of solitary or shared contemplation: "Happiness. I'm looking at it now and it's just happiness," an informant said.

A college freshmen who was keeping a diary as well as a scrapbook considered the latter to be semi-public property, saying she would put in it "nothing that I wouldn't want anyone else to see." She nevertheless described very private and solitary uses of her scrapbook, which, at the same time, provided an emotional bridge to her social world: "If I'm feeling nostalgic or if I don't or if I'm feeling pressure, I'll pull some of these old things out and go through them and read them. And just look at it. I don't know. I guess I do share them with friends but I'm afraid that I'll bore them. It's almost more like grandparents are the ones who you sit down and look at this stuff with." At another point she stressed the therapeutic value of looking through the scrapbook:

Yes, and I remember, like when you're a pre-adolescent, like 12 or like 13, and you're kind of like going through emotional changes and you're trying to figure out who you are, and I remember looking at this and uhm, like reading. Like, you know, if I'd be having problems with my parents or something. I remember reading stuff like this. Pulling it out by myself—a personal thing I'd done on my own—pulling it out and then just like crying, reading stuff that my Mom had written to me like if I were mad at my Mom, and I'd pull it out and see these darling pictures and things that my Mom had written that were so meaningful and so special to her and then, how could I be mad at her, you know, these sweet people. It shows how important everything's been to my mom. She records things in such detail.

The theme of caring thus permeates the 'scrapbook experience': the very making of the scrapbook is an indication of 'caring' about oneself, about significant others, and about the very shape of one's life. A parent's efforts on behalf of his or her children's scrapbooks are perceived as a grand indication of caring as well. Scrapbooks require 'care' in making as well as in keeping, at the level of item-selection, of aesthetic organization, as well as simply at the technical level. Indeed, scrapbook owners, like many artists, are highly preoccupied with the technical aspects of their craft: the quality of pages, manners of pasting, and so on, which are involved in the long-time care of their books.⁵⁵

The theme of 'caring' comes up also in relation to the act of sharing the scrapbook with others. Scrapbooks tend to be shared in two broad types of interpersonal contexts: Insiders and Outsiders:

1) *Insiders*. They are shared with people who are 'in it,' people who shared some past significant times with the owner (and often appear in the pictures included), and who can engage in *shared reminiscing*. Going over the scrapbook together serves as a kind of intensification ritual, re-validating interpersonal bonds, and mutually enriching participants' perspectives on past events. An

informant said she had just taken out her highschool scrapbook so she could share it with a childhood friend she was going to see for the first time in twenty years, saying:

You grow apart from people, like my sister and I grew apart, and my friend Julie and I haven't seen each other for 20 years. And we come back to these things, it brings back stuff that we don't know that we know. And it builds all kinds of commonalities. And one of the things I think that is really lovely about old friends and relatives is sort of this triangulation of views. That you were at the same place at the same time, and I saw it from this angle and you saw it from this angle. And to have a mnemonic that pulls that up . . . and to be able to share those views is so enlightening. And it makes things shift around and fall into place.

Several informants also mentioned coming upon an old scrapbook when moving from one place to another and finding themselves, "sitting there with all these boxes around me," as one person said, "just remembering things I've forgotten about, one page after another, in the middle of all this." The re-experiencing of the scrapbook in such a context seems to have had an almost magical effect, transforming an often stressful and chaotic event into a moment of grace.

2) *Outsiders*. Scrapbooks are also shared with people who did not share with the owner the past times covered in the scrapbook. In such cases, reminiscing is oriented toward self-display through the recounting of stories and anecdotes about the owner's past life for an interested audience. For that audience it becomes a form of self presentation.³⁴ This form of scrapbook sharing can thus serve as a bonding ritual, providing a means and a context for sharing personal information among new friends and for safe affective display both by the scrapbook owner who is prepared to share her life and by the 'other' invited to indicate that she cares enough to learn about it in such an emotionally charged context. A similar bonding function is played by scrapbook sharing when, for instance, college students take their college scrapbooks home to show to their families and old friends "what's been going on in my life," as an antidote to the actual and emotional distance created by absence. The sharing of travel scrapbooks with those who have stayed home plays a similar role. In all these cases, the major ground rule for scrapbook sharing relates to the audience's perceived level of interest (interpreted as 'caring'). Scrapbook owners indicated that they might feel hesitant about sharing the scrapbook with a particular audience if they weren't quite sure that the other person was really interested, if the other person might be bored. There is a general assumption that 'insiders' will be interested in shared reminiscing, and that significant others, one's family and close friends, will be interested in the details of one's life. So far as 'outsiders' are concerned—for instance, new acquaintances in a college dorm—the degree of mutual interest, and hence the likelihood of scrapbook sharing, is a matter for subtle negotiation. In such cases as these, the mutual interest is less a firm precondition for scrapbook sharing than it is an uncertain outcome of the sharing practice. Here the mutuality of relationship becomes a fragile rhetorical invention.

Interestingly, scrapbook owners indicated that they found it difficult to let anyone look at their scrapbooks entirely in solitude. When asked by a friend for

permission to look at one's scrapbook (a courtesy that is generally extended), the owner would "stop anything I was doing at that moment," as one of our young woman informants put it, and join in, "to tell them about the things that were in it." This irresistible urge to add one's voice to the moment of scrapbook appreciation is intelligible in terms of our discussion of the collage aesthetic which dominates scrapbook organization. For by itself, the text stands as an incomplete narrative, and it is only in contexts of silent contemplation and inner dialogue or social sharing that it becomes a fully storied version of a life. Its life as text lies in the possibility and actuality of its performance—either to self as *audience* or to a more public audience of potentially significant others.

III. CONCLUSION: AN AMERICAN ART OF MEMORY

Scrapbooks can be described as 'portable' secular rituals,³⁵ as a social integration of the self available to members of contemporary, mainstream American culture. As a cultural genre, they represent what Bourdieu has called "the officialization of a private representation of one's life."³⁶ Like other forms of biography or autobiography, scrapbooks derive their credence from cultural presumptions that permit the experience of life as a coherent and significant totality. However, they differ in their logic of construction from the verbal narratives encountered in life-histories of all kinds. Although there is an overall movement of chronological progression along the scrapbook pages, the dominant logic is a logic of subjectivity, which underlies the assembly and random pasting of life-fragments on each collaged page. The narrative presumptions of the continuity and directedness of life events thus become attenuated, and, as their fragmentary nature comes into view, both the claim to life's integrity (i.e. the way it 'fits together') and also the constructedness of one's life story are highlighted.

It appears, then, that scrapbook-making as a ritualized, order-inducing gesture is both an acknowledgement of and a response to the heightened sense of fragmentation which has attended the experience of modernity. For those who view the subject as *decentered* or non-existent, life as incoherent, textuality as pervasive, and authors as deceased, the scrapbook could be viewed as a further and somewhat irrelevant fetishism, a masking of autonomy amid the pretenses of a commodified age. However, repeated and highly personal exposure to the artifice and rhetoric of scrapbook making and use has taught us that it may be considerably more than this. Scrapbooks, as a practice, seem to mediate reflectively the shards and byproducts of commodification in service of a higher aim: the unity and coherence of life for a developing character. The peak experiences of such a life may represent a consciousness that seems whimsically self-absorbed. But in the very reflection upon such experience, a more mature 'later-life' audience is projected as an imagined possibility. As a practice, then, scrapbook-making tends to inculcate a manner of life-review in which caring, reflection, and reciprocity of concern are valued traits of character. Even in the best of times, these would seem to be qualities worth taking seriously.

This practice also suggests, within its very manner of making life 'cohere,' an important link between the individual and the collective. As noted earlier, scrapbooks mediate the personal and the communal. Each scrapbook is a

personal inflection of a cultural genre, representing the concrete actualization of a 'possible life,' a life constituted of the selective cumulation and reification of past events. The particular versions of life-stories typically found in scrapbooks take as their focus the individual, recording his or her experiences as participant in various social arenas where social recognition for quality of performance can be expected. Clearly, other versions of self-telling are available to cultural members, such as the more personal diary or the more public *curriculum vitae*. Scrapbooks thus constitute one of several textual genres in which the 'rhetoric of self' finds its articulation in contemporary American discourse. The kinds of stories they typically tell, their interlacing of particular traces of 'good times' in a macro-text conveying a sense of the coherence, the wholeness, and the significance of the individual life, all suggest a distinctly American notion of what 'the good life' and the telling of it ought to be. This telling is dominated by the impulse to record and reify, to produce durability out of life's ephemeral moments. To this extent, scrapbooks do play the role a cynical culture critique might ascribe to them, serving as vehicles for the commodification of experience in American culture ('life' turned into a book). But the scrapbook-artist also participates in the self-conscious reproduction of these worldly appearances to an extent not fully consistent with the plight of the repressed laborer. And perhaps for those soon to be repressed, there is a liberating or Utopian moment in the preservation of good memories as well as bad.³⁷

Indeed, through the artistry of her practice, the scrapbook-maker helps to refigure the world into a place of belonging, a *home* in the manner of *homo faber*, as described by Hannah Arendt. She wrote:

Life in its non-biological sense, the span of time each man has between birth and death, manifests itself in action and speech, both of which share with life its essential futility. The 'doing of great deeds and the speaking of great words' will leave no trace, no product that might endure after the moment of action and the spoken word has passed . . . acting and speaking men need the help of *homo faber* in his highest capacity, that is, the help of the artist, of poets and historiographers, of monument-builders or writers, because without them, the only product of their activity, the story they enact and tell, would not survive at all.³⁸

The cultural world of the scrapbook maker is one in which every life is felt to be worthy of commemoration and amenable to selective reshaping. Given the generic possibility of keeping a scrapbook, and the prospective planning it tends to induce, the life as lived and the life as retrospectively fabricated become inseparably intertwined. The sense of control and mastery attending the creation of this tangible life-account is, therefore, both retrospective and prospective, so that both the fluidities of past experiences and the uncertainties of future ones are given recognizable form, thus helping to turn the world into a home.

ENDNOTES

¹ From an interview with a woman in her early twenties. Most interviewees were in their twenties and thirties. Some of them were university students. All were of middle-class backgrounds. All but three were white.

² James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941), 13.

³ Cf. Kristin M. Langellier, "Personal Narratives: Perspectives on Theory and Research," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 9 (1989): 243-246. For a theoretical and critical consideration of the personal narrative literature, see also James Olney, *Metaphors of Self: the Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1972); Lawrence C.

Watson and Maria-Barbara Watson-Franke, *Interpreting Life Histories: An Anthropological Inquiry* (New Brunswick: Rutgers U P, 1985); Elliot Oring, "Generating Lives: the Construction of an Autobiography," *Journal of Folklore Research* 24 (1987): 241-62; Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Authoring Lives," paper presented at the Conference on Life History as Cultural Construction/Performance, Budapest, August, 1987; Robert Elbaz, *The Changing Nature of the Self: A Case Study of Autobiographic Discourse* (London: Croom Helm, 1988).

¹Oring, 258.

²In talking about 'American culture' we do not wish to ignore cultural differences in the United States. We are referring, in an admittedly vague way, to mainstream, middle-class American culture. It is the America studied in such works, for example, as Herve Varenne, *Americans Together: Structured Diversity in a Midwestern Town* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1977) and Herve Varenne, ed., *Symbolizing America* (U of Nebraska P, 1986). It was the American an informant of Italian extraction had in mind when she said she was surprised as a child that her mother had started her on a scrapbook, as this was a practice she had not seen in her home, and concluded: "I guess she thought it was an American thing to do."

³Cf. John Shotter and Kenneth J. Gergen, eds., *Texts of Identity* (London: Sage Publications, 1989).

⁴The conception of 'performance' appealed to here is one current in folklore and communication research. Cf. Elizabeth Fine and Jean Haskell Speer, "A New Look at Performance," *Communication Monographs* 44 (1977): 374-389; and more recently, Richard Bauman, "American Folklore Studies and Social Transformation: A Performance-Centered Perspective," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 9 (1989): 175-184. For the sense of *rhetoric* appealed to here, it is difficult to improve upon the newly rediscovered Classical tradition epitomized by Aristotle, *Rhetoric* (now available, with commentary, in several translations).

⁵Cf. Dell Hymes, *Foundations in Sociolinguistics* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1974); John Gumperz and Dell Hymes, *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication* (N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1972); Richard Bauman and Joel Sherzer, eds., *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking* (London: Cambridge U P, 1974).

⁶Cf. Mary Hufford, Marjorie Hunt, and Steven Zeitlin, *The Grand Generation: Memory, Mastery, Legacy* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institute, 1987); Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins U P, 1984); Richard Chalfen, *Snapshot Versions of Life* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1987); Brenda Danet and Tamar Katriel, "No-Two-Alike: Play and Aesthetics in Collecting," *Play and Culture* 3 (1989): 253-277.

⁷Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Introduction to Hufford, Hunt and Zeitlin, 1987, 15.

⁸Cf. Marjorie Perloff, "The Invention of Collage," in *The Futurist Movement: Avant-Garde, Avant-Guerre and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1987).

⁹Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1358b.

¹⁰The fieldwork for this study was conducted during T. K.'s stay in Evanston in the summer and fall of 1987, and complemented by interviews with Americans either visiting or living in Israel during the months that followed. Additional follow-up interviews were conducted in Evanston and Texas in subsequent periods. Interviews by students who participated in T. K.'s ethnography of communication class in the fall of 1987 provided valuable resource material for our analysis. We are very grateful to them for permitting the use of this material and for stimulating discussions with them. The students were: Mark Bloom, Nicki Brock, Laura Haegle, Maggie La Ware, Andrew Leslie, Christopher Maier, Maryl Rosen, and Vicki Unger.

¹¹In considering scrapbooks in relation to the life-cycle, it is noteworthy that most people do not continue to make scrapbooks beyond their young adulthood, although they keep the scrapbooks they have made through life, going back to them from time to time. We have, however, encountered older adults who are still "into scrapbooks." Many adults turn from their own to their children's scrapbooks once they become parents.

¹²Only four of our incidental sample were male. This does not seem to be accidental, as most informants, both male and female, felt that scrapbook-making was gender related—and far more females practiced this form of 'memory work.'

¹³Woman informant, 1988.

¹⁴Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1958), 48-50.

¹⁵Chaim Perelman, *The Realm of Rhetoric*, trans. by William Kluback (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1982), 35.

¹⁶Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1979).

¹⁷Bruner, "Life as Narrative," *Social Research* 54 (1986): 15.

¹⁸Pierre Bourdieu, "The Biographical Illusion," *Working Papers and Proceedings of the Center for Psychosocial Studies*, No. 14, 1987.

¹⁹The relevant classical *telos*, a master-trope for the perfection of character, is the notion of *eudomonia*, or the flourishing life. Aristotle is adamant that not everyone is capable of or situated for such higher-order accomplishments. A similar selective process is found in home photography—only good moments and happy times can be appropriately set to film (cf. Chalfen 1987).

²⁰Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performance Arts Journal Publications, 1982). Other forms of keeping a life-record, such as c.v.s, resumés, and artists' portfolios, are focused on the work-aspect of life rather than on the 'fun.' Indeed, our next exploration into contemporary American genres of self-narration will focus on these.

¹⁴Martha Wolfenstein, "Fun Morality: An Analysis of Recent American Childhood Training Literature." In Margaret Mead and Martha Wolfenstein, eds., *Childhood in Contemporary Cultures* (Chicago: Chicago U P, 1955), 174.

¹⁵Aristotle, *Rhetoric*.

¹⁶Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. N. Bakhtin*, trans. by C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin: U of Texas, 1981), 84–104.

¹⁷Agee and Evans, 100–114.

¹⁸Jacques Derrida, *Disseminations* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981), 324–330.

¹⁹Bruner, 13.

²⁰Perloff, 49.

²¹Perloff, 76.

²²Danet and Katriel.

²³This concern with craftsmanship is evident in a letter sent by Mark Twain to a prospective producer in his effort to promote his invention of a self-adhesive scrapbook (an example of which is found in the Special Collections section of Northwestern University Library). It runs:

Dear Mr. Slote,

I have invented and patented a new Scrap Book, not to make money out of it, but to economize the profanity of this country. You know that when the average man wants to put something in his scrapbook he can't find his paste—then he swears; or if he finds it, it is dried so hard that it is only fit to eat—then he swears; if he uses mucilage it mingles with the ink, and next year he can't read his scrap—the result is barrels and barrels of profanity. This can all be saved and devoted to other irritating things, where it will do more real and lasting good, simply by substituting my self-pasting Scrap Book for the old fashioned one.

If Messrs. Slote, Woodman & Co. wish to publish this Scrap Book of mine, I shall be willing. You see by the above paragraph that it is a sound moral work, and this will commend it to editors and clergymen, and in fact to all right-feeling people. One of the most refined and cultivated young ladies in Hartford (daughter of a clergyman) told me herself, with grateful tears standing in her eyes, that since she began using my Scrap Book she has not sworn a single oath.

Truly Yours,
Mark Twaine.

The scrapbook was patented in England, France and the United States, but did not turn out a commercial success.

²⁴Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

²⁵Cf. Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff, eds., *Secular Ritual* (Amsterdam: Van Grocum, 1977).

²⁶Bourdieu, 4.

²⁷Roy Allen, "Fetishism," *Man* 23:2 (1988): 213–235 offers a reexamination of 'fetishism' (commonly known as the over-attachment to material objects or commodities) along with the mental processes associated with 'fetishization.' Allen argues that they involve all aspects of thinking, rather than representing a warped pathology of thought and attitude. See also Russell W. Belk, "Possessions and the Extended Self," *Journal of Consumer Research* 15 (1988). Herbert Marcuse would doubtless consider much of the appreciative 'fun' of scrapbook-making to be a classic case of repressive desublimation. It was the later Marcuse, however, in *The Aesthetic Dimension* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), who defended the power of art through its ability to preserve the Utopian content of "bad memories." Perhaps scrapbooks, like the best of art, take issue with the proposition that "all reification is a forgetting" (78).

²⁸Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition: A Study of the Central Dilemmas Facing Modern Man* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), 153.

