

The Material Culture of Writing

Part 1 intro

Chap 2 "Moleskin Notebook"

PART ONE

Writing Identity

The four chapters in this section all in some way engage with the idea of *identity*, whether the identity of *writer*, *mother*, *author*, or *literate person*. They highlight the tight connection between objects and self-concept around writing, literacy, and authorship.

For us, these chapters point to an exciting area of research, the development of writing (and literate) identity as it emerges with, around, and through material culture goods. The term "identity" is picked up by different disciplines and used throughout popular culture, and we know our readers will hear varied things in the term. In its many associations in writing studies (WS), identity might evoke work on the inseparability of language and identity, especially racial or ethnic identities (e.g., SRTOL; Villanueva). It may signal discourses constructions of identity in academic work (e.g., Ivanic; Hyland) or the idea of identity as "voice" (or the critique of it) in written discourse (e.g., Hyland and Guinda; Matsuda, "Identity" and "Voice"; Matsuda and Tardy; Royster). But we mean to also signal through this term a narrower, more specialized sense.

In using the term "writing identity," we follow scholars in consumer research, the social and psychological sciences, and literacy studies who posit that just as a person might have an identity, persona, or self-concept as an athlete, musician, or scientist, people also develop an identity (or don't) as a person who writes. Deborah Brandt signaled many years ago issues around the perceived unavailability of the identity label of *writer* when she stated that while being a *reader* is something most people feel able to claim as a part of their self-concept, the same is not the case for *writer*. Peter Elbow made a similar point in 1995, in "Being a Writer." More recently, Alexis delves into the reasons for this in a *Slate* article that posits the harmful effects of (fairly recent) trends to label only fiction and poetry "creative," thereby denying access to a positive identity association as a writer to those who write professionally in technical writing, as academics, and so forth (see also Alexis and Leake).

There is much WS can learn about how, when, and with what tools children and adults step into this identity role and begin to see themselves as a person who writes. How do writing materials mediate this process? What are parents' and teachers' roles in fostering this identity? At what points do people/students begin to reject this aspect of the self-concept? How does the label of writer interact with other intersectional dimensions of individuals' "global selves" (cf. Kleine et al., below)? These are questions that might be of particular interest to scholars researching writing from a lifespan perspective (cf. Bazerman et al.).

Although we do not have space here to detail the rich cross-disciplinary research on identity and possessions, we direct readers toward work in consumer research that for some decades has theorized what it means to have an identity that is developed, maintained, and even rejected through the use of possessions. This research, for example, has established that individuals have both a "global self" and particularized selves or "role" identities (musician, athlete) that they develop and maintain with "constellations" of possessions (Kleine, Kleine and Allen; Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan; Laverie et al.). As we've noted, this research could have potential for lifespan researchers looking into how and when students at a young age begin to envision themselves as writers and how they utilize spaces and tools to effect this role. But it also could help researchers think about the various pressures, circumstances, and experiences that impact how role identities wax and wane in intensity. When writers do not have access to necessary tools or they utilize specialized tools, for example, to aid with a disability, how does this impact role performance? How does having a cohort of like-minded students help writers to maintain the writer role? How does family identity impact self-identity as well as identity role development? Just how much significance do people invest in possessions they use everyday? These are questions that consumer researchers have studied with populations other than writers, leaving open terrain for WS scholars (Belk; Epp and Price, "Family Identity" and "Storied Life").

This scholarship dovetails with research in the sciences that tracks how and when students develop and reject an identity as a scientist. Aschbacher and coauthors find that "communities of practice" play a shaping role in "career and identity development" and underscore the need for students to receive positive feedback and encouragement in order to develop and maintain a STEM identity. They write that their findings "highlight how few adults at home or school enthusiastically invite students to learn about science or engineering, to value scientific ways of knowing, or to pursue an SEM degree or career." This insight

parallels Brandt's findings that while reading is a skill and practice valued by parents and society (even valued in moralistic terms), writing is not similarly supported and—even more perniciously—is often devalued as both a practice and career by parents, teachers, and society ("Remembering Writing"). Her study participants could remember reading as a supported family activity, while writing was performed in private and was surrounded by feelings of secrecy and shame.

Research by other science-teaching scholars has looked at topics such as how students of color in science develop and maintain a science identity and persist in the field (Carlone and Johnson), how media influences children's perceptions of women in science and their possibilities of being scientists (Steinke et al.), and how media images of STEM professionals affect adolescent girls' STEM identities (Steinke). To cite one example, Carlone and Johnson developed a model of science identity to address how women of color persist and succeed in science, despite an exclusionary "culture characterized by white, masculine values and behavioral norms" (1187). Through interviews with fifteen successful women-of-color scientists, the authors document ways that these women pushed past this exclusionary culture in order to become successful despite the racism and sexism they encountered, sometimes ending up in academic science roles and sometimes taking alternative trajectories. Their model allows them to "pinpoint specific ways women of color get recognized, or fail to get recognized, as science people, highlighting the complex ways race, ethnicity, and gender complicate that recognition" (1211).

These identity research threads, read in tandem with work in MCS and parallel fields, open up endless possibilities for WS scholars. As WS and English departments, as well as writing centers, fight for their existence amidst dwindling resources and devaluation of the humanities in favor of STEM, the question of what it means to write, how accessible the identity of "writer" is for underrepresented students, how accessible the tools of writing and networks of writing support are, and how we might foster and encourage identity development around writing takes on extreme import.

The chapters in this section are each portals into specific manifestations of the ways that people come to understand themselves, and fight to be seen as writers, authors, and literate beings with and through material culture. Questions of access in relation to the availability of the role of writer and author pervade Desirée Henderson's chapter on ink and ink stains as gendered and racialized identity markers in nineteenth-century writing. She demonstrates how ink stains took on symbolic power in white women's writing, marking them as unmaternal

and immoral, as women who abandoned traditional domesticity norms. While white women sought to undermine the idea that being authors reduced their womanhood, they did so with racially charged imagery of ink and ink stains that invoked miscegenation fears related to racial purity. Henderson demonstrates how in the same period, in enslaved and recently freed literacy narratives, ink evokes the systemic denial of access to literacy for the enslaved. She shows how African American authors invoked the associations between ink, paper, and skin color in order to interrogate racism, as well as how they ultimately resist racialized associations with writing objects and challenged impediments to access through creative improvisation.

While Henderson's chapter focuses on the social and racial significations of writing instruments broadly construed, the other three chapters in this section discuss particular writing artifacts in order to show how writers construct identities around writing (Alexis and Merrigan) and around being literate (Krichevsky). In Alexis's case, writers utilize the Moleskine notebook as a "facilitating artifact" that helps them to step into and maintain the role/identity of "writer." Alexis demonstrates how people absorb cultural narratives around particular artifacts such as the Moleskine and use them to craft themselves into and practice the writer role. Similarly, Jenny Krichevsky's chapter shows how deeply bound up people's sense of themselves as literate actors is with what she terms "discursive heirlooms," objects that move with transnational migrants across historical and geographical contexts. Like Alexis, she shows how powerful cultural narratives (in her case, around Soviet history and identity) shape how people invest heirlooms (textbooks, a bookcase, a piano) with meaning.

The last chapter in this section, Emilie Merrigan's, works from a Prownian methodology (cf. the introduction to this volume) to demonstrate the riches of one artifact, an early twentieth-century baby book owned by a mother named Jessie, in revealing how (writing) artifacts such as this one help mothers to understand, develop, and perform the identity of mother through writing. Baby books exhibit a tension between scientific discourse imprinted into the book upon purchase and the "singularization" efforts of mothers, who personalize these books with their own written memories and experiences. Jessie singularizes her baby book and develops her own identity as a mother, against the backdrop of a larger cultural narrative etched onto the book's pages about what it means to be a twentieth-century mother.

Taken together, the chapters in this section encourage more research into the ways that objects—either single or constellations—help writers

to imagine, realize, perform, and practice identities as writers (and as literate people), both in personal ways and in concert with broader sociocultural narratives, norms, and material realities.

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2

THE SYMBOLIC LIFE OF THE MOLESKINE NOTEBOOK

Material Goods as a Tableau for Writing Identity Performance

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Writing is considered a sacred act and the writer a sacred cultural figure. People use objects when trying to access this desired identity. How a person approaches and uses an object is intimately connected to family, sense of self, writing history, relation to peers, media connections, social awareness, and life story. Hence, turning to objects is one way of uncovering the very complicated identities that perform the practice of writing and for understanding the writing process itself. In this essay, I turn to the Moleskine notebook, a popular writing object, to show how three writers develop, navigate, and maintain their writerly identities and writing practices through this seemingly simple object.

We may impose our identities on possessions and possessions may impose their identities on us.

—Russell W. Belk (1988)

During an interview, a writer tells me about a duffle bag the older kids carried around his high school campus. For him, this bag marked entry into a new stage of schooling; it helped him to imagine a future as a high school student. This is just one object of many that surfaced during my three-dozen "life story" (Atkinson) interviews² with people about the materiality of their writing environments, or "habitats," as I have described them elsewhere (Alexis, "The Writing Habitat"). Other participants mentioned the Trapper Keeper, a highly desired object that parents often would not purchase due to its cost and perceived superfluity. The Trapper Keeper carries middle-class identity associations, and many students I spoke to could remember whether they did or did not have one and could cite the reason why.

Memories such as these, which tie objects together with identity and schooling, resonate with the way objects hang out in writing studies

research, a field whose interest in material objects has been steadily mounting for the last decade. Objects are rarely the central focus of study in writing studies research, save some notable exceptions (Baron; Boyle and Barnett; Haas; Wyche; Wyche-Smith). Social scientists Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton note that researchers in their fields of psychology and sociology, respectively, “tend to look for the understanding of human life in the internal psychic processes of the individual or in the patterns of relationship between people; rarely do they consider the role of material objects” (1). I find that this holds, as well, for writing studies. In writing studies, we see objects accompanying writers or writers using them as sets or props for desired purposes (Emig; Prior and Shipka), providing space or a stable frame or stage for literate activities (Brandt and Clinton; Gere; Heath) and greasing the wheels toward or hampering access to literacy (Bartlett; Brandt). Objects, in fact, are referenced all over the place in writing research. Yet it’s safe to say that we do not know what objects are *doing* in writing studies. This is because writing studies scholars have not yet fully engaged with rich work by scholars of material culture studies and consumer culture research (referenced herein as consumer research, for brevity) who, for decades, have been theorizing and researching the relationship between humans and material goods and proving that even the smallest, seemingly insignificant object has a story to tell about the humans who use it (Arnould and Thompson; Belk; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton; Deetz; Epp and Price; Miller; Prown, “Mind” and “Style”; Schlereth).

We know from the possessions literature that rather than one single object, a “constellation” of relevant objects is necessary when an individual performs a particular *identity*³ or practice (such as that of “athlete,” for example) (Kleine III, Kleine, and Kernan; Reed II; Reed II et al.; Solomon). Individuals attach to particular possessions in intense ways, weaving them into self-concept as reflecting “me” (Belk; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton; Kleine, Kleine, and Allen). In other words, people use possessions to perform “purposive identity work” (Epp and Price) as well as to express a particular “social identity” (Reed II; Kleine III, Kleine, and Kernan).

Humans express their selves through possessions; they also rely on possessions to memorialize past events and identities (Belk; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton; Kleine III, Kleine, and Kernan) and attach intentionally to possessions that reflect an identity that they have achieved (Kleine III, Kleine, and Kernan) or that they wish to embody (Reed II et al.; Solomon). Individuals who have the ability to imagine “possible

selves,” or future selves performing a particular task, identity, or trade, are more likely to complete tasks successfully themselves (Markus and Nurius; Oyserman et al., “Possible” and “Socially”). Considering the demonstrated power of objects in the process of becoming possible selves, and people’s reliance on object constellations to perform identities and trades, we should be asking deeper questions about how objects assist, even shape, writers in learning, negotiating, and maintaining their writing practices and writing identities.

Elsewhere, I have remarked on the importance of material culture and possessions research to our field and explored how material writing environments impact writing practice (Alexis, “The Writing Habitat”). In this article, my goal is to take a deeper look at a particular object, the Moleskine notebook, which came up unprompted in one of my interviews and—it was impossible to miss—was exploding in popularity around me. Because of this, I solicited two more life-story interviews with users of Moleskines to better understand this notebook phenomenon. I argue here that the Moleskine notebook, a seemingly simple object, is a “facilitating artifact” for the performance of the identity of “writer” (Kleine III, Kleine, and Kernan 229). Specifically, artifacts such as the Moleskine “stimulate reflexive self-evaluations leading to self-definitions” (Laverie et al.) The Moleskine also plays complex roles in the lives of those who incorporate it into their writing practice. Moleskine users often internalize the Moleskine parent company’s branding of the object as a literati and artist notebook, which I demonstrate in the pages that follow.

In order to do this, I present a brief history of the Moleskine notebook and its emergence in popular culture. The Moleskine is a tableau onto which people project their hopes and fears about writing. In other words, it is interwoven with ideas about what it means to be a writer as well as people’s lived experience of being writers. Not all writers attach to the objects they work with or incorporate objects into their self-concept. Those who do, do so to varying degrees. Here, I present the stories of three of the writers I interviewed whose narratives about writing with Moleskines reflect three different integrations of this object into their writing lives, writing identities, and writing practices. “Biographies” of objects, Kopytoff asserts, are useful because they reveal what might otherwise resist analysis; they can also help researchers to catalogue how objects are plucked out of the commodity realm to be used in novel ways by consumers (66–68). And yet these objects, as you will see, also shape the way writers approach their craft.



Figure 2.1. Manuela Hoffmann's image of a classic Moleskine.

BECOMING A WRITER, WITH POSSESSIONS

Fiona, a graduate student in English, remembers the time when she began to journal. She was in grade school, and she was causing trouble as a result of not being scholastically challenged. At nine years of age, a teacher recommended journaling. Around this time and through this practice, her writing identity emerged:

At the time I started journaling, I would have been sharing a room with my younger sister, who wasn't engaged with reading or writing. . . . It was all a part of a process of claiming identities that were different from each other, and so by being the child who wrote, and by being the child with books and notebooks, I had an identity that was separate from the children on either side of me that hadn't identified with those things.

David, a writing program administrator, narrates a similar story. He was a freshman in college when he came across the Moleskine notebook (see fig. 2.1).

At this time, he was trying to become a writer. He began reading writers' notebooks and writing in his own, and he began to attach to and fetishize this particular material object: "Fetishize is not too heavy a word. . . . I became so fixated on them. . . . At that time I was getting into writing. I was an English major. I was reading a lot. I was sort of discovering reading, really, for the first time. I was fantasizing about being a writer. . . . I started reading writer's notebooks. . . . I started reading the notebooks of Albert Camus."

I present these two stories in support of the idea that objects help writers to do the following:

- Imagine what it means to be a writer ("I was fantasizing about being a writer")
- Carve out identities for themselves ("By being the child who wrote," "I was getting into writing," "I was . . . discovering reading"), often in relation to important others ("It was all a part of a process of claiming identities that were different from each other," "I had an identity that was separate from the children on either side of me," "I was reading the notebooks of Albert Camus")
- Compel the desire to write by imitating the object use or practices of published writers ("I started reading writers' notebooks")
- Maintain writing identities over time

In consumer research terms, individuals have a self-identity (or identities) that is both personal and social. They draw from the social world cues that help them imagine and perform that self-identity. Goods, and the media surrounding them, trigger certain identity performances and also help individuals to maintain and perform identity (Kleine III, Kleine, and Kerman; Reed II; Reed II et al.). One who writes, then, will receive cues from the material world regarding an identity and the materials that might be used to perform it. David's narrative, for example, demonstrates how people utilize objects to imagine how to "think, feel, and be like" writers (Reed II et al. 315).

Fiona and David have personal identities as writers that developed around goods. They share something else in common: They both have had intense relationships with one particular notebook, the Moleskine, which, in Dorothy Holland and Jean Lave's terms, is a cultural symbol that helps them to understand and perform the work of a writer. And they are not alone.

THE MOLESKINE PHENOMENON

By now, you are likely familiar with the classic Moleskine pictured in figure 2.1. But unless you are a dedicated Moleskine user, and even if you are one, you may not be familiar with the expansiveness of the Moleskine phenomenon, which has progressed far beyond offering the one iconic type pictured above. It is not an exaggeration to say that users constitute a sort of cult. A simple search in newspaper archives yields hundreds of articles about the Moleskine. A Google search for "Moleskine" reveals hundreds of thousands of user photographs and blog entries and detailed images and accounts of writers' and artists' (often obsessive) uses of this object. A Moleskine user created a fan blog (*Moleskineriv.com*) that achieved such popularity that the company eventually assumed

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

The words *simple*, *nameless*, *spare*, and *small* are purposefully used to convey a classic aesthetic, one that foregoes the contemporary clutter of logos, overdesign, and corporate identity so that the brand might locate itself in the cultural longing for a perceived simpler, analog time. Moleskine personifies the notebook as a “companion” and suggests that by using it to write, one might someday become a Hemingway. Despite the company’s expansiveness, it builds goodwill by conveying an image of a local artisan product.

Within this context, it is not difficult to understand why David, mentioned earlier, found the Moleskine compelling as an object that would help him to tap into the mindset and culture of being a writer. Moleskine now sees itself this way as well. In 2014, the company asserted that it is the “only brand that has successfully established itself as an identity marker starting from a notebook,” although it did not describe itself in these terms when I first started researching the company in 2009 (“Q4”). Moleskine’s identity-based branding is not unusual in today’s market, as companies often “create or (re)position products and brands to embody a particular social identity oriented lifestyle” (Reed II 286). The company has been able to market not just a product, or a constellation of products, but also a community. The company now asserts, indeed, that it “sells much more than a notebook.”⁴

What Moleskine is selling has been communicated well by journalists and bloggers who have prolifically published their thoughts on this object:

In this digital age where everything is electronic and online . . . there is an unsurprising movement towards the simple pleasures of paper notebooks . . . the tactile nature of good-quality paper and the scratch of a pen as you write on it seems to enhance, even *sanctify*, the act of writing. (Shapshak 4, emphasis added)

Writing in a Moleskine is different from writing on an ordinary piece of paper. There’s a certain respect and reverence for your thoughts and ideas. It’s not as transient as a scrap of paper, and there is nothing as disposable as a Word document . . . It doesn’t make what you’re writing special, it makes that you’re writing special. (Roderick, qtd. in Shapshak 4)

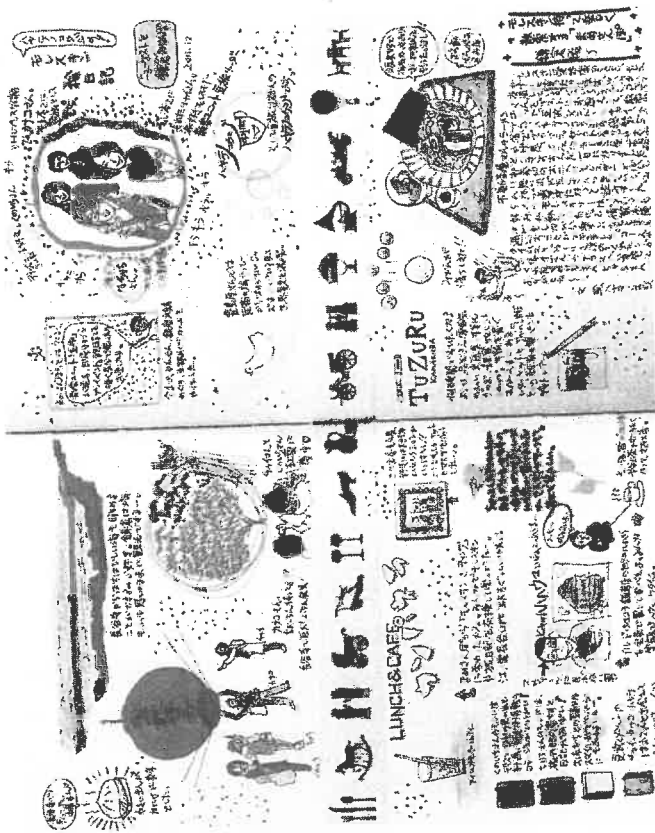


Figure 2.2. Kouji Hayateno’s Moleskine.

control and now runs the blog. On Flickr and Instagram, users upload hundreds of thousands of images, such as the one pictured in figure 2.2.

The Moleskine company manages a Flickr group called “Moleskinerie” with more than 22,000 members and 116,000 uploaded photos. In 2014, Moleskine Spa reported 98.7 million euros in sales; Moleskine anticipates its market growing to 300 million people by 2020 (“Q4” 2014). More impressive than the numbers, however, is the company’s awareness of its branding and its unmitigated success in marketing this object as an artist and literati companion. Each of the classic Moleskines are bound, covered in faux leather, held together symbolically and literally by a plastic band, and contain a pocket attached to the back cover into which is inserted a history of the notebook: “Moleskine is the legendary notebook, used by European artists and thinkers for the past two centuries, from Van Gogh to Picasso, from Ernest Hemingway to Bruce Chatwin.” This history inscribes a promise to users: that they can tap into an exoticized literary and artistic heritage created by legendary writers and artists. The original Moleskine parent company Modo & Modo branded not only its creative past but also its aesthetic present:

Moleskine has successfully connected its product with a simpler time, and the act of writing with an analog lifestyle. You can hear this in a bookstore manager's statement that "it's also nostalgic, to put your pen to paper. . . . It creates that sense of literature" (qtd. in Shapshak 4). This is ironic since the company markets digital products, such as a journal application available for both Mac and Windows platforms, and since its popularization has largely happened via the web.

Another irony casts a shadow over this whole business: the company's marketing narrative is largely spurious. "It's not even clear that Hemingway used a Moleskine at all," Joe Lavin writes. "He merely mentioned that in Paris he wrote part of a novel in a notebook that fit in his pocket." Indeed, small, anonymous, unnamed notebooks were produced by Parisian bookbinders until the 1980s. As the story goes, author Bruce Chatwin named this anonymous book the "Moleskine" upon discovering that the last family-run, artisanal bookbinder in Tours had gone out of business when its factory burned down ("Le Moleskine n'existe plus," Chatwin exclaimed in his novel *Songlines* [*Moleskinerie*]). Before this, Moleskine was a "Franglais generic term for stout waxed canvas: a waterproof cover that protected the contents of your pocket note-book from rain, spilt milk and bodily fluids" (Bywater 7). In 1997, a Milanese Italian design company, Modo & Modo, began producing the notebook we now know as the Moleskine, patented the name, and "began one of the most audacious branding exercises of recent decades" (Bywater 7).

Despite Moleskine's fabricated branding, this object has entered actual writers' lives, as David conveyed to me. After interviewing David, I conducted targeted interviews with other self-professed Moleskine users, two of whose stories I present here alongside his in order to understand how the branding played out in the lives of people who had integrated this notebook into their practices.

OBJECTS AS EXPRESSIONS OF SELF

Fiona discovered the Moleskine notebook once her journaling practice had developed and now, as an adult, she attaches quite strongly to this notebook for aesthetic and practical purposes. As a vast body of work has demonstrated, individuals cultivate, define, negotiate, and maintain their identities through attachment to goods (Belk; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton; Epp and Price; Kleine, Kleine, and Allen; Schultz et al.; Wallendorf and Arnould). Individuals generally attach to possessions over which they have a strong degree of control (Belk), that relate to parts of their selves that they value or that they admire in their social

worlds (Kleine, Kleine, and Allen; Schultz et al.), toward which they hold a strong emotional charge or "cathexis" (Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 327), and that represent past associations or current ties (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton) as well as well-established parts of one's individual personality (Kleine, Kleine, and Allen) or family identity (Epp and Price). Attachments can tell a person's life story.

I learned a lot about Fiona's story—and personal relationships with writing objects—through her attachment to the Moleskine. Since grade school, when her teacher recommended she start journaling, she has used notebooks for uninhibited personal writing, for recording thoughts and feelings. Later, the Moleskine became so incorporated into her journaling practice that she stopped using other kinds of notebooks. She calls herself a "compulsive" writer in these notebooks. Their dominant use is not for writing projects, academic writing, or even lists; she uses them to record her thoughts in stream-of-consciousness format. She cites the Moleskine as a site of "unclogging" and contrasts the writing she does there with academic writing, which causes anxiety and blockage. In class, she sits with two notebooks. She takes academic notes in a generic notebook while she simultaneously uses the Moleskine to record her thoughts and emotions. The Moleskine, then, is a record of her mental life, thoughts, and emotions—aspects of her being.

Fiona always carries a Moleskine notebook fairly close to her body. She does not carry just any type; she prefers the small navy-blue version pictured in figure 2.3, the inside of which is comprised of graph paper.

Fiona has been using this type of Moleskine for years; what you see pictured is only a fraction of the total collection. She buys purses that have Moleskine-sized pockets, so that she can keep one near, if her clothing does not accommodate carrying the notebook. Others have recognized her use of this object, frequently giving her Moleskine gifts. She told me this makes her feel badly because she will not use any type except the blue graph paper style, so she ends up giving away the gifted Moleskines.

Fiona's investment in this artifact, which is attached to her person at most times, is an example of what Belk calls "self-extension" (139). Possessions come to be revered as part of the self and in some cases literally extend the self, as is the case with some prosthetic devices. But a large component of this phenomenon is metaphorical. Belk argues that "a key to understanding what possessions mean is recognizing that, knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, we regard our possessions as parts of ourselves" (139). Indeed, after the brain and face, humans will rate possessions as much as, and sometimes more,

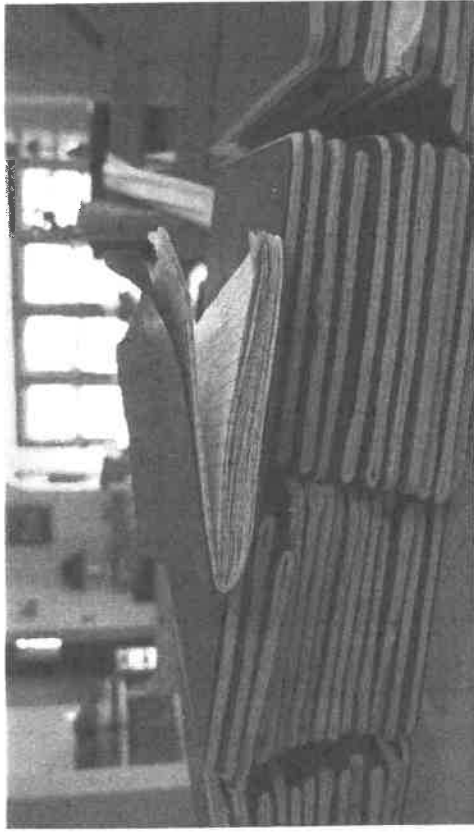


Figure 2.3. Fiona's Moleskines.

a part of their self-concept than body parts. In short, “the feeling of identity invested in material objects can be extraordinarily high” (144). It is this investment that leads Fiona to characterize her relationship to the Moleskines as “stewardship”; she feels responsible not necessarily for the writing contained in them but for the value they have as objects. Fiona has associated objects with identity work since she was young. She cultivated the identity of writer to distinguish herself from her four siblings. In my interview with her, she quickly expressed the idea that because her family was large, “self-definition was related to having and owning things. . . . [I]t was really just a way of saying, ‘I am an individual person.’” She described back-to-school shopping trips as “chaotic,” her family as “territorial,” and the home governed by an “economy of theft and exchange.” If something was left in a common area, it disappeared. At holidays, gifts of different colors were given to each child. This is an example of objects being pulled out of the commodity realm and “singularized” as they are used in the expression and maintenance of identity (Epp and Price 821).

“Singularization” is an individuated experience of making meaning from a thing and decommodifying it by integrating it into one’s life (Epp and Price 821). For Fiona, this takes the form of selecting particular Moleskines that reflect her identity and purpose. For other Moleskine users, singularization takes on even more dramatic forms. Figure 2.4, for example, shows a trend called a “hack”: user-designed customizations of objects.

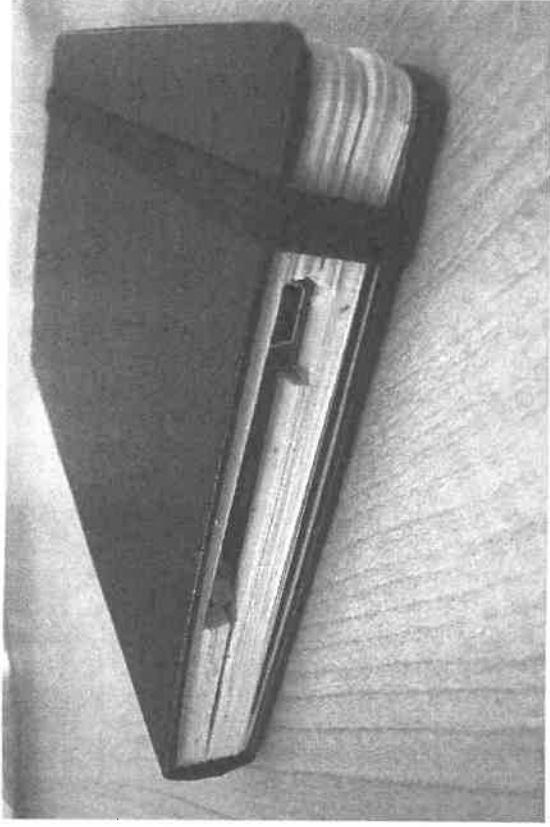


Figure 2.4. “The Geekster Moleskine,” by Sebastian Delmont.

All one has to do is type “Moleskine hack” into Google to access a vast resource for individuating one’s Moleskine (a more recent example of this phenomenon can be observed by searching with the hashtag #bulletjournal on Instagram). Figure 2.5 depicts a user’s hacked, handcrafted Moleskine; she details the process of hacking a Moleskine planner on her blog, which also contains gorgeous and elaborate Moleskine notebook artwork (Cole).

The elaborate tabbing and hacking systems discussed above can help a writer to transform and ritualize what might otherwise be seen as mundane work (such as keeping a calendar) or to organize what is perceived as already singular and as a representation of selfhood: one’s writing.

Hacking and cutting up Moleskines appears to contradict a dominant thread in the discourse around this object, which is that due to their cost,⁵ aesthetics, and cultural resonance, they have a “sacred” status that prevents them, at times, from being used. As Belk and coauthors note, “In an increasingly secular world, consumption has become a sacred act”; through consumption, people “sacralize experience” and objects are treated as “set apart, extraordinary, or sacred” (1, 2, 9–12). “I have tons of Moleskine,” one person writes, “all empty. . . . It’s terrifying to aim anything that resembles a writing implement at it. I’ve gone back to those sordid, crass pedestrian notebooks” (Dalisay). However, it is also possible that hacking the notebooks makes them more sacred, not less.

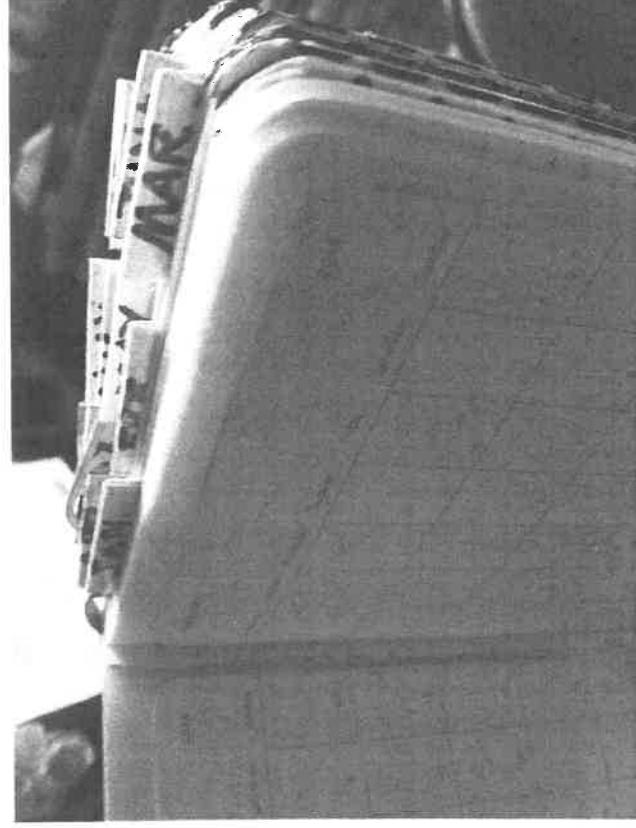
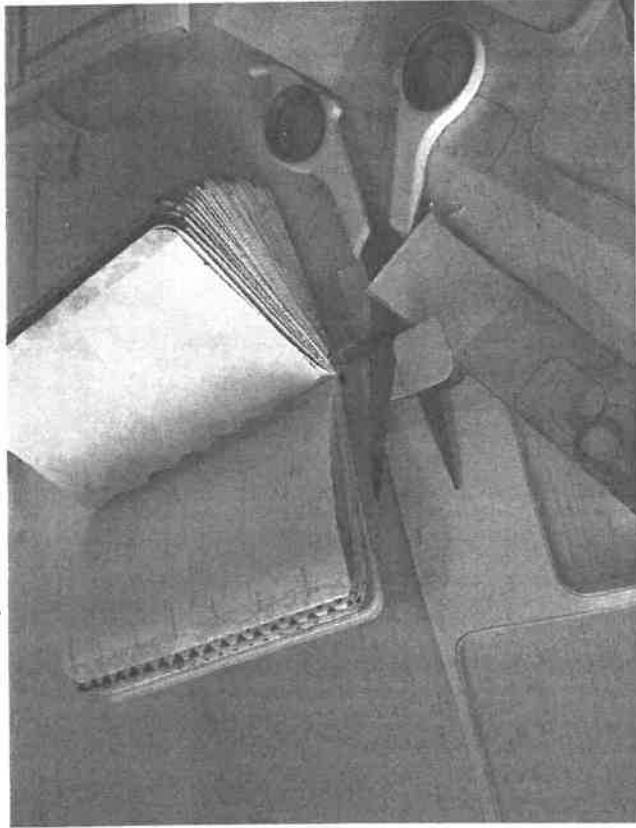


Figure 2.5. "Hacked Moleskine Planner," by Joyce Harbin Cole.

OBJECTS AND AFFILIATION

Fiona's story represents the ways that objects are used as self-expression in service of building an identity around writing. Her use of the Moleskine is also fairly uncomplicated. She performs only one type of writing in her Moleskines and avoids using them for more stressful genres. She does not appear to use her notebooks for many of the oft-cited reasons in popular discourse: to counter the digital, to achieve writerly status, or to bring gravitas to her ideas. Rather, her story exemplifies how the "strongest attachments form with things that mark a realized identity development path," in this case, as a person who journals (Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 341).

David's story raises other points: first, what happens when our narrative around an object consumes our ability to use it; second, how objects reflect our affiliations with important others, such as peers, family, and friends; and, third, how our identities (around writing) intersect with and get bound to objects in ways that make their study an important component of understanding writing practice.

Throughout my interview with David, he narrated relationships with material goods that had a sacred tone. He told me a story about a poem ("Ezekiel's Wheel" by Geoffrey Hill) that he carried around in his wallet; he did not understand the poem and this lack, for him, represented an identity conflict. In his words, "it was an object that I was carrying around as a kind of way of dealing with a larger problem, which was that I was not a poet." He folded the poem up with the desire to continue carrying it around until he could understand it. The folded-up poem became even more weighted when one day he was working at a potter's wheel in a ceramic studio and the man who normally occupied that wheel entered the shop; the man's name, he realized, was Ezekiel. And he was sitting at Ezekiel's wheel. He shared this story as a means of explaining the series of coincidences and religious intersections that occurred during this time period, as he was trying to understand and forge his identity as both a person and writer. That day, he was uncomfortable because he was a novice ceramicist sitting at an expert potter's wheel. The folded-up poem was one object onto which he had projected ideas about himself.

This tension of wanting to become something that he is not, yet witnessing it in others and trying to access it, is observable in his childhood and in what I read as the emergence of his identity as a writer, which developed with and against his siblings and peers. David grew up in a family of three and shared a room with his brother, against whom he

defined his identity. His brother was a musician whose part of the room was occupied by musical equipment. David asked his parents to buy him a desk at a young age. He was trying to claim space in a room he shared with his brother, demarcate territory, and signal his developing writerly persona (Alexis, "The Writing Habitat" 86). This resonates with Fiona's use of private, material space to claim an identity tied to writing. Possessions were not only tied to self-definition but Fiona also successfully argued for her own room because she needed space and time to write, and she was the only child of five siblings who won this private space (86). In both cases, the material (object or space) is used for self-definition, for oneself internally and against others.

David grew up close to two male friends with and against whom he defined his identity. Speaking about who influenced his writing most, he says:

The people I think of as influential were the people I was competing with more than anything. I remember two friends . . . every year or every semester there would be an award for language arts, an award for social studies, a little medal, in grade school. And the three of us always won it. . . . But it was somewhat uncomfortable because one of them was a real reader, a pathological reader and he was extremely imaginative and my mother sometimes used him as a—to try and get me to read. She'd say, "Nate reads all the time." And I'd say, "I don't want to do that." You know, it would really bug me . . .

What struck me throughout David's interview is his perception of himself in relation to others who are practicing similar activities or, put another way, the deep influence that close others have on our developing literate identities and sense of self when young. This tension between self and others ricochets throughout my interview with him, as he describes his developing persona as one who writes. His awareness of others continues in college, where David meets the woman who would later become his wife. He describes trying to doodle in his notebooks to make them interesting to her. He says, "I would spend hours a day just writing in these notebooks. I'm not an artist at all, so I was fiddling around with visual design stuff, but not effectively." Yet as he describes his fascination with his wife's artistry, he also narrates a tension with how he perceives his own use of Moleskines. Whereas he felt that his notebooks were not to be "sullied with class notes," her notebooks reflected another orientation: "That's something that kind of both upset me and fascinated me about her notebooks when I first started flipping through them. She would just write on anything and everything. She'll be writing, you know, a poem or a story and there'll be some information about a doctor's appointment and then class notes from a history class."

David's interview displays the degree to which he is conscious of how identities and orientations manifest in material goods. He narrates a story about giving a Moleskine to a cousin who was embarking on a long vacation:

Since that time he's become this compulsive journaler in these notebooks.

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

David feels angst that he is not a "real" writer, by which he means a writer of fiction and poetry; he sees himself as just writing down plain "information." He worries that he is profaning the sacred space of the Moleskine. Part of the Moleskine's sacrosanct quality for David is its design. As he says,

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

The awe he feels for the Moleskine, then, is bound up with conflict over his own identity as a writer and his relation to others who write. Although he earned high honors in his discipline and is a successful writer and administrator, he laments, "I wish I were a better writer than I am. I wish I were a scholar, but I am not. I am a writing teacher." The Moleskine seems to lodge, or at least help us to unravel, anxieties about what it means to be a creative and productive writer. There is some "identity conflict" (Reed et al. 311) between his desire to be a writer and what he "principally understands himself to be" (Schatzki 54).

The Moleskine is an object that is bound to and reveals identity negotiation. In a sense, David uses this object to understand who he is. His relationship with the Moleskine demonstrates how the triad of self, other, and possessions intertwine with identity work. It supports Kleine, Kleine, and Allen's conclusion that identity research focused only on "the self as me," and not the self in "relations with others," is incomplete (341). As they write, "Self-identifying possessions reflect who I am as a unique individual, and/or who I am as I am connected to others" (341).

At a critical moment in his development as a writer, David, like Fiona, found the Moleskine and identified in it something valuable to his self-narrative. Through this object, he tries to understand and define his

writing identity and his relation to others. At the same time, it is undeniable that the Moleskine also reveals more troubled feelings David holds about writing and his relationship to others who write. It is possible that David's sacred connection with the Moleskine has affected his ability to use the object freely. Housed in it is a tension between the writer he imagined, continues to imagine, and perceives himself to be.

INTEGRATED OBJECT USE

If Fiona's story communicates the idea of objects reflecting "who I am as a unique individual" and David's "who I am as I am connected to others," Lily, also a graduate student at the time of our interview, provides another perspective. Like Fiona and David, she could narrate the history of the Moleskine notebook, though initially she did not know or remember that the narrative is inserted in the back of the book. Unlike Fiona and David, however, Lily resists the Moleskine's narrative and is even a bit hostile to the company's association of writing with masculinity, through its references to the classic male literary canon via mentions of Picasso and Hemingway and through its use of stark black leather design motifs. She bought her first oversized bound Moleskine because she could not find another that she liked better and that had large enough pages to house her work.

What fascinated me about Lily's use of the Moleskine was, on the one hand, her lack of attachment to the object, and on the other, that her use of it was the most integrated and broad of those whom I interviewed. As you can see in figure 2.6, Lily uses the Moleskine for all types of writing: taking class notes, mapping paper ideas, and sketching PowerPoint presentations.

Lily is fond of drawing in Moleskines, as opposed to drawing on loose paper, because this keeps her drawings "contained." For her, invention, space, and the Moleskine are linked; of the Moleskine's large dimensions, she said, "I like the ideas to come out; I like that space." This example illustrates how, in purchasing products, writers link aesthetic concerns to utilitarian or process-related ones. Lily chose this design because it was big enough that her hand could rest on the page while she writes, because of its narrow rule ("wide rule is a waste of space"), its binding ("the ring on spiral-bound notebooks always gets caught on my backpack"), and its black cover, though she also dislikes that the cover is "boring" and "gendered masculine." Lily switched to the Moleskine in graduate school. Because they are bound, she states, they "have a kind of permanence that other notebooks don't." She feels her writing is being

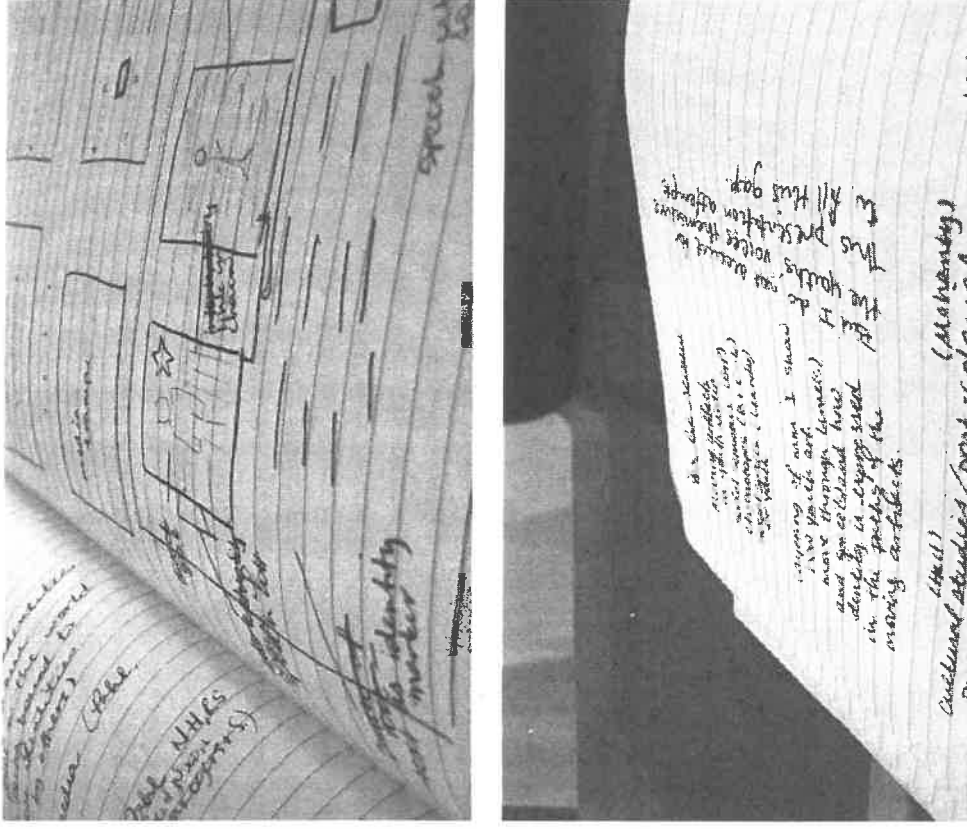


Figure 2.6. Lily's Moleskines.

"preserved." Although she seems fairly unattached to the Moleskine, she did speak about writing in strong positive tones: "I have an emotional attachment to the act of writing and keeping, my life ordered or keeping the ideas going or the creativity that can be engendered through the act of writing in this book. . . . I am emotionally attached to thinking through ideas in this way." Her reference to "attachment" highlights how one can be invested not in an object but in the practice that accompanies it. Understanding how and why writers rely on objects, even if, as in David's case, they might have a negative impact on practice, is important for our field.

Surprisingly, Lily told me that she hates writing but likes every stage of the process where she is the primary audience. When I asked her if the Moleskine helps her manage her displeasure with writing, she answered, "Yes, absolutely. . . . I enjoy writing in the Moleskine . . . because there's no risk to it . . . this stage is what gets me out of writer's block. . . . In fact, I sometimes will just take this to the coffee shop and not my computer . . . because it will help me to get over just the fear of having to actually do the writing of it." This accords with Fiona's view of the Moleskine as a site of "unlogging." Lily often keeps the Moleskine side-by-side with her computer, and she goes back and forth between taking notes and working at the computer, in the same way that Fiona utilizes two Moleskines side by side, with one reserved for stream of consciousness writing.

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

Of the writers with whom I spoke, Lily has the most untroubled history with and most integrated use of the Moleskine. Whereas Fiona has attached the Moleskine to a segmented part of her writing practice, Lily's lack of attachment allows her to use it in complex, integrated ways. Her use of the Moleskine asks us to consider whether it might be the case that writers use objects in the least segmented or restrictive ways, and for the most broad purposes, when intense and positive attachments are not present.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have attempted to understand the significance of one material object in writers' lives as a means of portraying the complexity of the relationship between writers, writing goods, and the practices and rituals that support literate performance. Rather than suggesting that all writers who use this object use it in the same way, I hope instead to point

to similar types of work performed by material objects as writers attach to them for a variety of reasons.

Fiona, David, and Lily have different relationships to the Moleskine. Fiona has found a consistent use of this notebook; as a result, her practice is compelled, not thwarted, by this object. In contrast, the Moleskine appears to be a vexed object for David, one that initially signaled possibility and now reflects his feeling that he has not embodied the identity he wished to achieve. I am careful to say "his feeling" because experience suggests that many who write on a daily basis for their work (and I'd include many academics in this category, including the majority of those whom I interviewed) do not see themselves as *writers per se*. David's internal sense of what *writing* means is a problem for writing studies, as only certain types of writing are marked off as "creative" and hence valuable, which I believe has led to the devaluing of the majority of writing performed by those who do it for their profession (for more information, see Alexis, "Stop Using"). Through the Moleskine, David will likely continue to work through his anxieties regarding his writing identity, anxieties that manifested during our various discussions of what this tiny object means in his and his family members' writing lives. David retains this object in his writing life because it was instrumental in helping him to envision a possible self as a writer, an identity that he still attempts to embody. At the same time, his competing and more easily inhabitable identity as an administrator troubles his relationship with the Moleskine since he does not see administrative writing as appropriate for this particular symbolic material possession. David's identities are in tension and motion, a liminal state that the Moleskine reveals. Yet a commonality binds David's and Fiona's narratives: The Moleskine is performing identity work, inviting an attachment, providing an entry into a desired identity or practice, and spurring internal reflection. In this way, the material object presses its own identity on writers, dictating certain types of disciplinary performance. Lily actively resists the identity components of the notebook; they do not reflect her "me." Her case compels consideration of whether attachment increases or hinders complex, broad, untroubled use of a possession.

The Moleskine notebook is just one facilitating artifact through which writers perform critical identity work that is an instrumental component in the development of a writing practice. Becoming a writer is composed of many instances in which one both imagines what writers do and performs similar acts. A chief way that this imagining occurs at a young age is through goods. Writers lean on chosen objects such as desks, pens, knick-knacks, and notebooks to begin to occupy a desired

self and to practice it alone and, perhaps more importantly, for and with others. A practice of writing, then, cannot be understood without considering the various tools and settings with and within the habitats in which writers work—beginning with the kitchen in childhood, the bedroom in adolescence, and numerous other sites, both public and private, as adults. Writers practice their craft with a strong awareness of their relation to those around them, whether it is the identities of siblings and peers or of authors in a literary canon.

Siblings, peers, family members, and others who surround us as we are developing and articulating a writing self play important roles. Hence, rather than study writers in isolation (Emig; Flower and Hayes; Prior and Shipka), we need to study them in relation to the others they write with, against, and around. Besides the institutional and structural “sponsors” who support writing work is the vast network of what one of my students termed lowercase “s” sponsors who enable and disable our access to literate resources (Brandt).⁶ These sponsors are at the very least a tableau against which we project desired selves. Writing is considered a sacred act and the writer a sacred cultural figure. People trying to access this desired identity use objects. How a person approaches and uses an object is intimately connected to that person’s family, sense of self, writing history, relation to peers, media connections, social awareness, and life story. Turning to objects, and to facilitating artifacts, is one way of uncovering the very complicated identities that perform the practice we call “writing.”

NOTES

1. This chapter first appeared in *Composition Studies* 45.2 (2017): 32–54.
2. For this project, I conducted twenty-eight interviews with people who currently or formerly wrote regularly for school or work. The majority of my participants, at the time, were undergraduate and graduate students. However, a little over a third were not. Schoolteachers made up nearly 80 percent of my study participants. I am interested in this population because teachers not only use objects in their own practices but also design writing environments for students. I also interviewed three generations of one family (two of these individuals were retired), and four individuals who identify as fiction and poetry writers or writers who work in business and administration.
3. A brief sketch of what I mean by *identity* is useful here, since writing studies has yet to treat in depth the subject of *writing identity* as a distinct type of identity with associated practices and object constellations. Cross-disciplinary research on identity has established that there is indeed a self that has some degree of control over one’s own actions (Erikson; James; Sartre), that develops in stages and emerges from some form of group belonging (Erikson), and that gets shaped over time, both due to personal interests and associations and historical and social forces that impact the individual (Holland and Lave; Holland et al.). I find compelling Holland et al.’s articulation of

identity as “a central means by which selves, and the sets of actions they organize, form and re-form over personal lifetimes and in the histories of social collectivities” (270). Holland and Lave refer to these as “personal identities” and note that they can be evoked “via cultural symbols” that help one to learn expectations for behavior in a particular realm. Additionally, Reisman notes that when constructing identities, individuals often perform identity to a desired end, often “involv[ing] their audience in ‘doing’ their identities” (5). A succinct definition of identity has been forwarded by consumer researchers Reed II et al. as “any category label to which a consumer self-associates either by choice or endowment” (312). Building on the above, I define identity as any category label or positionality to which a person self-associates either by choice or by endowment, due to identification with that label or because the performance of it will lead to some desired end. Identity is not a stable category and is not singular; hence, individuals may self-associate with more than one identity category and these identifications may shift over time.

4. Moleskine’s commentary on its own success is fascinating. About its customer base, Moleskine writes, “They are global, they share a number of basic cultural elements, they want tools to help them bridge analog and digital, they are relatively less price sensitive. And, most importantly, they live on the move, and need brands that can help them convey their identity” (“Q4”). Moleskine explains its appeal as providing “distinctive aspirational values, supported by a strong reason to believe, a unique cultural heritage, which we maintain relevance [*sic*] by constantly engaging with expressions of contemporary culture.”
5. Moleskine’s Wikipedia page indicates that there is some fan controversy over the Moleskine’s high cost in light of its production in China, a notoriously cheap labor market.
6. I am indebted to Rowan University graduate Lauren Buck for this point, which she raised in my fall 2014 section of Evaluating Writing.

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