

Chapter 8. Complicating Agency and Identity in a Moment

The previous two chapters worked out concepts from the application of a portable logic-in-use—the totality of the literate experience—that allows for the study of the lived reality of literate action development with a broad range of records and across a widely ranging amount of time. The totality, as it stands at the end of Chapter 7, has studied transformations that resonated in varying ranges, from across a unit of blog writing to across multiple decades of using a particular practice, with two productive concepts—agency and identity—emerging from it. In this chapter, I create a stress test for these concepts by studying the literate action of two writers in their 60s (Michelle) and 80s (James) through the totality. These case studies are effective sites (that is, strategic) for complicating these concepts, and for several reasons:

1. Both write frequently, and write in a range of modes for a range of audiences;
2. Both have long histories of writing; and
3. Both are at an age that is largely understudied in writing research (see Bowen, 2018).

Because both Michelle and James are highly active writers, their complex literate lives will provide a host of material for the three framings to make sense of. Their long histories of writing will cause the two concepts—agency and identity—to stretch beyond the histories examined in Chapters Six and Seven. And their age—as well as the understudied nature of that age in Writing Studies—provides a useful opportunity to test the benefit of the totality beyond increasing the field’s knowledge of lifespan literate action development. The insights that emerge from this chapter may impact positively future writing interventions for older writers.

Age Studies and Literate Action Development

Age studies is a subject of growing importance, particularly in the United States. By 2030, over 20% of the U.S. population will be over age 65 (Bowen, 2018)—a milestone in the demographic history of the country. But older writers have been a heretofore understudied population in Writing Studies. Writing researchers have often remain focused on school-aged writers, with some investigation into workplace writing (i.e., Spinuzzi, 2008). Bowen (2018) likens the situation of studying older writers as being both present in our research and absent from “overt analysis” (p. vii). In earlier work (Dippre, 2018), I signaled the importance of understanding agency in the lives of older writers, suggesting that it was a “central concern of age studies” (p. 77) and that contemporary understandings of

the agency of writers is caught up within cultural discourses—what Bowen (2011) has called a *curriculum of aging*.

Investigating the literate action development of older writers with the logic-in-use of the totality offers an interesting opportunity to study older writers with tools that enable us to sidestep the *curriculum of aging* that shapes so much contemporary thought about older writers. The totality has the potential to shed light on the complex ways in which older writers go about achieving agency through the performance of literate action. But, furthermore, the totality has the potential to show how that agency is connected to the other aspects of social order that older writers participate in. More importantly, perhaps, is the potential contribution to age studies that can be gained from looking not just for literate action in older writers, but the ways in which that literate action *develops* over time. Attending to literate action development in older writers, just as we might for college writers, upends the narrative of decline that so often comes with old age, and recasts the work of that segment of the lifespan as a potential site of transformation.

Cast Bullet Shooting, Identity, and Time: James' Newsletter

James is a retired engineer in his 80s. James' career was a widely varied one, involving military service, the interstate highway system, and academia. James' switch to academia occurred after finishing a Ph.D. at MIT and being hired by a local university. While at the university, James moved through a host of academic and administrative positions. Finding a need to express himself in retirement—in particular, by telling stories that would help his grandchildren “find out what kind of characters we were,” John enrolled in a writing course then offered by the local “senior college”—a statewide program dedicated to enriching the lives of older members of the population. James would end up self-publishing two books as a result of the writing he began in that course.

In addition to his biographical writing, James was an active member of a cast bullet shooting organization. James had been involved in the sport of cast bullet shooting for years, and in that time had developed what he referred to as a “contrarian” stance on a number of topics. When it comes to cast bullet shooting, according to James, “there’s tons of old stories about what you need to do and what you don’t need to do. About half of them are not true.” As a member of the cast bullet organization and a frequent author in their newsletter, James was provided with opportunities to build on his “contrarian” nature by acting as a “devil’s advocate” against commonly-held-but-flawed beliefs about cast bullet shooting. James believes in evidence-based work, that he needs to “[build] up a case, an argument about why we shouldn’t bother to do some of those things” when challenging commonly-held beliefs:

Take . . . cast bullets. One of the things that looks logical, is that you get a bunch of bullets that are not all identical, they’re

pretty identical, and one of the logical things is to weigh them and make sure the ones you shoot in matches weigh just the exactly the same. And I too used to do that . . . I'm a Depression baby, and I'm tight, and I cast a bunch of bullets, and the ones that were light or heavy . . . I start shooting them as well, in competition with the others. I found out they shot just as well . . . over the years I tested that again and again. So that's something that's absolute, ironclad rule is to always weigh your bullets to the nearest one tenth of a grain. And I don't weigh my bullets at all, and I sometimes beat all these guys that are weighing their bullets. So I'm kind of obnoxious about writing it down (laughs).

In this interview segment, we see James positioning himself as a contrarian within the world of cast bullet shooting, and doing so through the empirical testing of a potential hypothesis. Such work by James is nothing new—in past roles as a college professor, an administrator, and a member of his disciplinary organization, James has taken contrarian positions to generally accepted understandings to great effect.

Framing Ongoing, Joint Action

James' recounting of his cast-bullet writing can be seen as participating in several instances of ongoing, joint action. Part of this joint action begins with his writing in his office at home. Here, James participates in the ongoing work of the cast bullet association that he is involved in. As an active member of this organization, James is responsible for participating in the organization of competitions, as well as communication via a regular newsletter. The work of writing up the newsletter—up to and including his “contrarian” columns—involves a coordination of multiple people sending in new items, advertising for material and competitions, and preparing for publication. The production of the newsletter, in other words, is a recurrent phenomenon in the lives of those participating in it, including James.

The production of those columns, then, is synchronized in time, space, and focus with the broader work of the cast bullet newsletter. James, in other words, is not *only* taking a contrarian position on a topic: he is doing so amidst the production of a newsletter with particular demands of time, space, and the needs of the organization. James' work to take a contrarian stance needs to be understood as emerging from and integrating with this relationship.

Framing the Individuated Actor

James' participation in that ongoing work as a “contrarian” emerges from several

sources. At the core of this particular contrarian point of view is James' sense of himself as a "Depression baby," and his subsequent disinclination to throw away what he sees as perfectly good bullets because he is "tight." Finances are deeply intertwined with James' perception of his role as the leader of the cast bullet association. He envisions the association as needing to bring in new, young members—members who may not be able to afford to spend money making bullets that they then throw out.

This intertwining of what he perceives as the finances of potential new recruits to cast bullet shooting and his own experiences of "sometimes beat[ing] all these guys that are weighing their bullets" shapes James' individuated participation in the social action that generates the newsletter. Because James has come to see the problems with throwing away "perfectly good bullets," and because he connects those problems to recruitment barriers in the cast bullet association, James comes to see the space of his column as an opportunity to dissuade readers from these notions.

If we examine this work by James through the concepts of the totality, we can see James taking an adumbrated stance on the economy of throwing away what he sees as perfectly good cast bullets. This adumbrated perspective leaves James faced with information about *What-Comes-Next* not only in his column writing, but in this work of cast bullet shooting. In bringing his past practice of testing a hypothesis, the added information of throwing away bullets is reduced into a manageable *What-Comes-Next*, from which James can develop his column. The transformation in individuated action that becomes visible here, in other words, is the pivoting of James' work outside of his cast bullet shooting hobby to inside of it, so that such practice can now be used to make sense of the demands of his cast bullet shooting life.

Framing the Scenic Work of Uncertainty Reduction

James' work to both envision these problems and see his column as a way of getting at those problems in the ongoing production of the newsletter can be traced to the scenically available material that is at his disposal when writing. While James is at his office, he has at his disposal the data he has collected in order to investigate the claims that he has come to see as, over time, not holding up. If we examine Figure 8.1, we can see James' pattern of activity that bring him to the site of writing up his column.

In the first step, James is testing out his concern with weighing bullets, and writing down the results of his work. In the second step, James works up an analysis of his data, and in the third step, James communicates that via the newsletter. The record of James' shooting experiments is transformed into data for his analysis over time, and across several stages, so that he can eventually be at his desk and, with the results of his work at hand, produce a newsletter that allows him to proffer his "contrarian" point of view on weighing cast bullets.

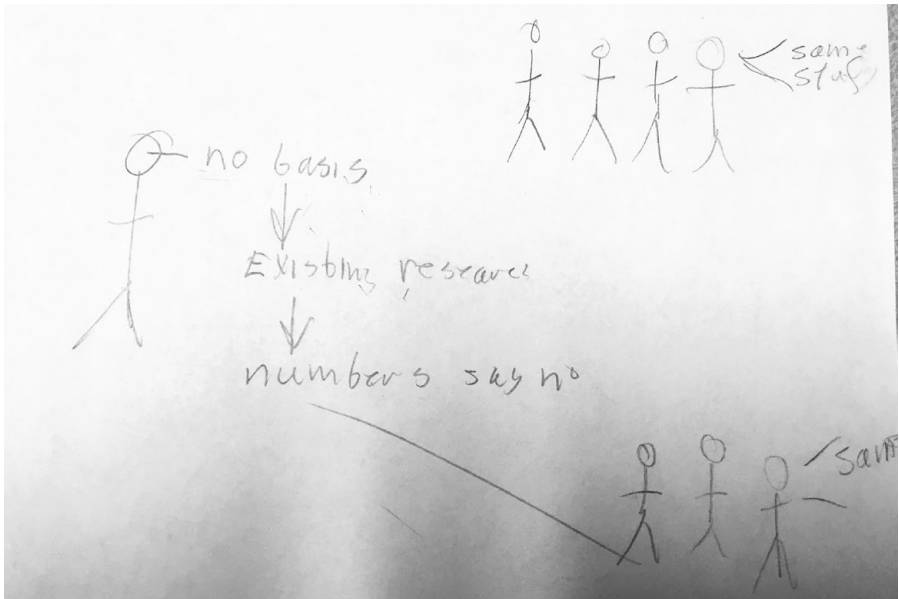


Figure 8.1. James' collection of records.

Concept in Use: The Circulation of Agency

The scenic availability of James' results when he is writing up his newsletter is the result of an ongoing circulation of agency through objects and back to him. We can think of this circulation of agency as working across a range of lifeworlds into the moment of textual production, but for the purposes of this analysis, we can trace the circulation starting with the weighing of the bullets. James begins his work with the decision *not* to throw away bullets because of weight differences. When he envisions a lack of discernable differences between his own results and the results of those that weigh their bullets, he begins to build a set of records about his results with unweighed bullets. These records become scenically available from one step to the next, moving with James as he develops further his contrarian stance.

The "contrarian stance" and the unweighed bullets seem to be, here, an intersection across multiple lifeworlds. James' history as a Depression baby and his history as being willing to buck several trends in his professional life converge on his decision not only to use unweighed bullets but to conduct research confirming his own assumptions that such a choice is practical and feasible *and* to publish that work to his association, and this convergence moves from one scene to the next with the interrelated inscriptions of records, analysis, and writing. James stacks his practices deliberately, over time, in order to shape the development of his regular column.

Concept in Use: Identity (Re)Construction

This circulation of agency, as we saw in Chapter 7, brings with it an opportunity to (re)construct—for another first time—an identity (or identities, as the case may be). In this instance, James re-constructs himself as a “contrarian” in his stance on cast bullet shooting—and, importantly, a contrarian that has supporting data. Just as he was able to muster support for his contrarian arguments as a professor and a university administrator, James was also able to show data of his shooting experiences that support his contrarian claims against weighing bullets. James is not being a contrarian for the sake of being one, but rather is pointing out an overlooked set of data that other, like-minded individuals participating in the lifeworld of cast bullet shooting are not attending to. In developing this contrarian perspective, the literate action of James’ profession and the needs of his personal hobby intersect, leading him to produce new texts for new audiences that repurpose and reconstruct an identity (“contrarian”) in response to novel circumstances.

Just as the writing identities of Tom and John, James’ identity as a contrarian is situated: it is re-constructed in a moment as part of the ongoing work of producing social order. But in tracing James’ identity throughout the review of his work with cast bullet shooting, I noticed a different trend than I did when interviewing Tom or John. Tom and John project a fragmented sense of identity construction, and give the impression of varying degrees of identity transformations over time. James, on the other hand, sees stability in his identity as a contrarian. Perhaps his stacked practices—which are not broken by boot camp, for instance—allow him to develop a more continuous sense of development over time than either Tom or John. Or perhaps James’ age—that is, the distance between the interview and his past identities-in-action—obscures the ongoing transformations of identity over time. My next case, Michelle, may provide additional insight into this.

Poetry and Bird Sanctuaries: Michelle’s Newsletters

Michelle, an active member of a number of organizations throughout the state, has led a varied and interesting life. Michelle earned her Ph.D. at Harvard University, and spent ten years on the faculty of a local school of education. She left this position in the mid-2000s, although much of the active life she had around that position continued after she left.

Writing was perhaps more necessary for Michelle than it was for some of the other participants because of the activities of which she was part. The organizations that Michelle gave her time to were, largely, far-flung. For instance, Michelle spent considerable time supporting a bird sanctuary, which rescued birds around the state through a winding network of sites and volunteers. This involved a great deal of driving, and a great deal of communicating with people at long distances.

In order to foster a sense of community, Michelle organized a weekly newsletter for the group, one that included everything from poetry to breaking news.

This provided members of the sanctuary with ways to communicate with one another, to feel as if they were part of a community even if it was a community highly separated by the surprisingly large state of Maine. The composing practices that Michelle engages in are reflective of both the need to reach such a widely-dispersed constituency and the limit demands of her writing time. Because Michelle is on the road so often, the writing that she does is often composed in her head. This mental composing later ends up in handwritten notebooks of poetry. Michelle often writes about birds, and occasionally this poetry ends up in one of her newsletters. However, much of her poetry is not directed at a particular audience. She does the writing primarily for herself, a way to capture an image, or an idea, but purely for her own benefit.

Michelle's newsletters serve as an interesting blend of what might be termed her "personal" writing (the poetry that she does for herself) and more public writing, since the newsletters can serve as a place for her to make her personal writing public. This curious blend reaches back into her early writing experiences. Michelle grew up as part of a family that had a rich history of literate activity. Michelle's parents regularly read stories and poetry to their children at night, encouraging them to memorize poems along the way. Michelle's family was also engaged with local literate culture, as Michelle's parents and siblings on several occasions wrote to the local newspaper. This kind of movement—from writing for the family to writing for the public—is similar to the movement that Michelle's poetry occasionally makes.

Framing Ongoing, Joint Action

Much like James, Michelle is involved in regular newsletter activity, although her newsletters are multiple and are published significantly more regularly—on a weekly basis, for her bird sanctuary newsletter. This work of producing a weekly newsletter is at the intersection of a far-flung network of ongoing, joint social action. Michelle's organizations are strung throughout a large, rural state: Maine has roughly the square mileage of Indiana, with about 20% of the population. The newsletters that Michelle puts together, then, are ways of stitching together the actions of people from a range of areas in the state for particular purposes: bird rescue and needlework.

The bird sanctuary in particular is dependent on the newsletter in order to keep members of the organization informed of the goings-on of the rest of the network that they may not be aware of. Since the work of the organization involves a great deal of driving, and one-on-one handoffs of rescued birds, the entire organization—or even large segments of it—are never in the same place at the same time. The newsletter, then, helps social actors locate their individual acts within a larger framework of organizational action. Their participation in the newsletter, such as sending in news items, or pictures, or poems, co-constructs this widespread communication.

Framing the Individuated Actor

At the center of this work is Michelle, who collects all of the news items that come in as a response to her call for news items. Michelle, as seen in Figure 8.2, is in her office, engaged in the work of making the newsletter real. But her work to make the newsletter real is shot through with her own materially-present histories of engagement, the ways in which she arrives at the process of writing this newsletter. Michelle articulates her individuated work of the newsletter as follows:

So basically begins with the panic attack. Shit, it's Monday, I forgot! (Laughs) No, I didn't forget, but I had been traveling and I realized oh my gosh and I'd been doing a bird run every day since we got back from our trip and sort of being there was not part of it, kind of much more in the foreground than the writing. So I talked to ____, oh what's new, what have I missed . . . you know so I'd have a little bit of news to put in the newsletter. Then I sit down and I'm checking the emails that I've gotten from people about their bird stories and whatever from the last challenge. And then I'm thinking okay now what else are they going to want to know about in this newsletter or what do I need to tell them. So then I'm very intensely writing and that's where the cats are bothering me (laughs) . . . and then once it's typed up I read it over, often I read it aloud, I don't know I just have that oral delivery that you know it has to sound right, not just look right on the page. And then I push the send button.

Michelle's organization of herself and the material around her for the action of writing the newsletter reduces the uncertainty in the *What-Comes-Next* of producing text. By locating herself within a particular time frame ("Shit, it's Monday"), and in certain co-configurations of actors to make determinations about the general content of the newsletter, Michelle creates and then takes up particular possibilities of action.

Michelle arrives at her desk to do this writing on the heels of already participating in the co-construction of the bird sanctuary in a variety of ways. One of the ways in which she participates is by bringing rescued birds from one site to another, often through long drives through rural Maine. During this process, Michelle passes the time by mentally drafting poems—often about birds, and often related to the particular bird being rescued at the time. This poetry composing and memorizing relates to her family's tradition of memorizing poems in her youth. Once out of the car, Michelle often writes these poems down for later use.

Both the poetry and the drive shape the ways in which Michelle comes to act in individuated ways during the co-construction of the newsletter. Michelle

comes to see the newsletter not just as a site for reporting news on the organization, but for celebrating the work of bird rescue and, by extension, birds themselves. Michelle creates space in the newsletter to share the poetry that she develops about birds—not just hers, but that of others who might be interested in submitting their work. Michelle’s individuated history, her patterns of interaction with language and her ways of making sense of the long rides involved with bird rescue, bring her into the work of newsletter writing with a particular, individuated approach to the uncertainty of the blank page that is the newsletter when she begins writing it.

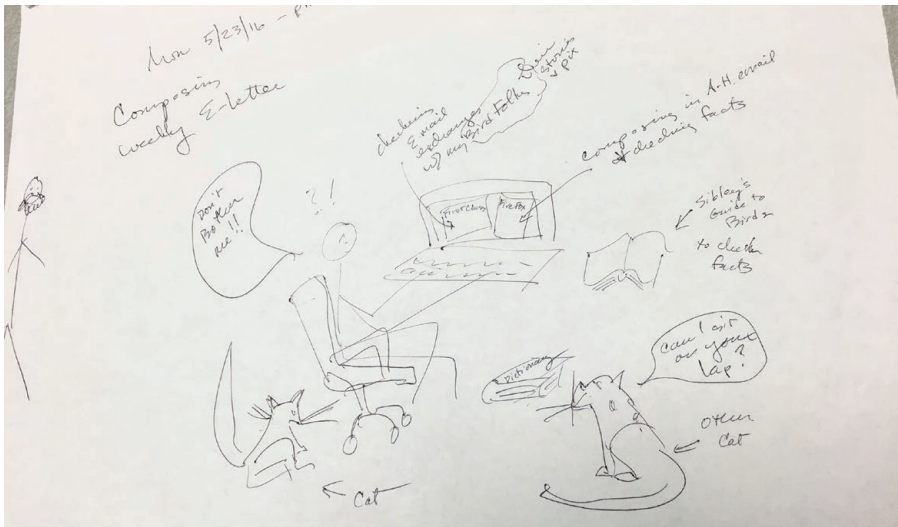


Figure 8.2. Michelle writing a newsletter.

Framing the Scenic Work of Uncertainty Reduction

Michelle’s scenic work of writing the newsletter—the pattern of activity through which the newsletter is made real—begins with her “Oh, shit!” moment, when she realizes it is Monday and that the newsletter has to go out. Figure 8.3 depicts Michelle’s 12-step process of getting to “send.” In this work, Michelle makes scenically available the news about the organization via her email, the poems available for publishing via her book of poetry writing, and the notes that she has collected throughout the week from her interactions with others. The notes, poems, and emails coalesce into a scenically available set of data that she can use to populate the space of the newsletter, allowing her to “fill in” the “Shit, it’s Monday” moment, turn by turn, until the letter is ready to be sent out.

The scenic availability of such a range of materials suggests a long-term sedimentation of literate action, beginning with the literate histories of Michelle’s family as a child, running through her professional life as a scholar and a teacher,

and situated, now, in the work of managing a complex network of bird sanctuaries through a regular newsletter. Michelle's weekly newsletter, in other words, emerges through scenically available materials that arrive at Michelle's office courtesy of long, complex, and intertwined patterns of use and engagement. This scenic complexity offers useful complications for understanding agency and its circulation throughout the course of the lifespan.

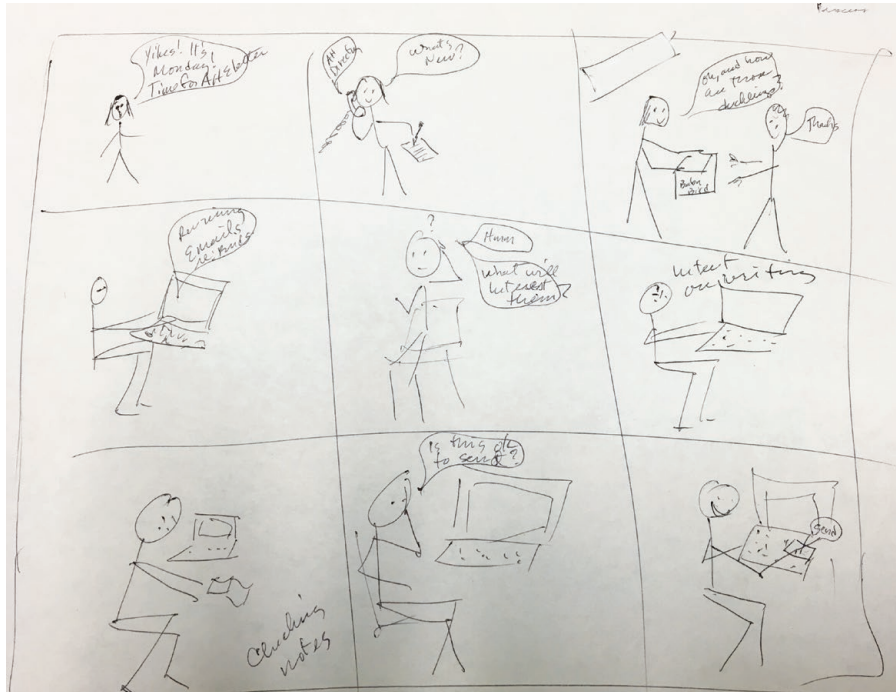


Figure 8.3. Michelle's process of writing the newsletter.

Concept in Use: The Circulation of Agency

Michelle, much like James, is able to circulate agency to her in the production of the newsletter through the chains of interactions that led her to her office and the act of writing. By coming to see the space in the car ride as an opportunity to construct poetry, Michelle has, in her office, as scenically available, material for making the newsletter. Furthermore, the availability of that poetry leads her to see part of the space of the newsletter as a space for poetry—something taken up not only by her, but by others in the organization as well. The chain of activity from mental composing in a car, to writing down the poems in a journal, to drawing on that journal as part of the scenically available tools at her disposal allow for her to have tools at her disposal for shaping the newsletter.

The work that Michelle does to keep the newsletter running suggests that the

circulation of agency might be better understood if it were to take into account the ways in which agency could accumulate to particular individuals across instances of agency's circulation. Dippre (2018) explored this accumulation of agency, referring to it as *expansive agency*, but Michelle's work with the newsletter does not suggest expansiveness. Rather, it suggests a deepening of agentive prowess that is brought to bear in particular moments of textual construction. Future research into the circulation of agency from a lifespan literate action development perspective can render more robust our language for understanding how agency grows, changes, and transforms.

Concept in Use: Identity (Re)Construction

The circulation of agency also brings with it opportunities for identity (re)construction. As Michelle composes her newsletter for a next first time, she does so in a way that takes up her existing sense of identity as a language user: one attending carefully to language, committed to "playing with words" in a variety of ways. The play with language is not limited strictly to the poetry section of the newsletter, but rather carries across the range of decisions that brings the newsletter into being: spacing, organization, and even the reporting of news items offer Michelle a chance to build on her sense of playing with words in ways that further (re)construct her identity.

Like James, Michelle's sense of identity appears far more durable than the identity (re)construction witnessed in Tom and John's cases. Michelle's participation in complex social organizations through writing—and her leadership of it, when necessary—are enacted in ways that perpetuate a sense of willingness to toy with language that stretch back to her earliest childhood memories. Michelle, however, offers some further insights on the potential causes behind this smoothing out of identity transformations. In her far-flung work with the bird sanctuary, Michelle has had a great deal of agency circulated to her: the work of the newsletter shapes not just her own understandings of the organization, but the understandings (and subsequent actions) of others participating in this organization. Perhaps this expanded ability to circulate agency to oneself provides opportunities, over time, for the more conflicted aspects of identity (re)construction to be chipped away, leading to the development of relatively smooth, or linear understandings of self.

Revised Understandings of Agency and Identity

Throughout Part II, the concepts of circulating agency and identity (re)construction have been rendered more robust—that is, they have begun to do more work in providing explanations of how literate action develops through the lifespan. Michelle and James provide some further extensions and complications of both of these concepts. Below, I summarize the new insights that Michelle and James

provide, and I articulate a revised understanding of these concepts that future research can take up and further develop.

In Chapter 7, the concept of circulating agency was complicated by degradations in the take-up of objects with the re-use of a particular practice: when Tom could not remember the full jokes, for instance, or when John forgot definitions (or that he wrote down the definition of a word earlier). These degradations brought up the question of what barriers arise to the circulation of agency? How does agency, when circulated through objects in one instance back to oneself in a future instance, become problematic?

The cases of Michelle and James demonstrate that the issue is not one of time—that is, the distance in time between the initial circulation and take-up of an object for agentive action does not necessarily, and by itself, have a bearing on how the possibilities of that object are recognized. James, for instance, circulates agency to himself through a long history of engagement with cast bullet shooting and participation in a cast bullet shooting organization. James is able to avoid the degradation of agency circulation through more and more deeply interconnected objects: that is, the work he does to circulate agency to himself in one moment stretches out through time and space not with one object but with a constellation of them, so that his return to writing in a future moment has multiple avenues for agentive uptake. Michelle performs similar work with her own constellation of objects for writing her weekly newsletter. The uncertainty of *What-Comes-Next* is reduced not by a particular object but by the mutually-definitional work of her cats, her computer, her dictionary, her notebook, and other objects in her office.

Amid this circulation of agency, the individuated actors studied in Part II demonstrate multiple moments of identity (re)construction. But the identity work of Michelle and James are notably different from that of Tom and John. Tom and John locate themselves within competing lifeworlds, both co-present and situated along complex pasts. Michelle and James, on the other hand, articulate their positions within a broader, more consistent trajectory of selfhood. James sees himself as a contrarian in his cast bullet writing, but sees that as yet another instantiation of locating himself as a contrarian in yet another social situation. Michelle's poetry writing—the process of memorizing, writing down, and publishing in a newsletter her poems about particular birds—is a continuation of her sense of herself as one who plays with words. This smoothing out of identity (re)construction in relation to past moments of literate action suggests a complexity to recognizing one's identity within a range of histories of lifeworld engagement that would shape the lived reality of a given moment of literate action and, subsequently, the rambling path of development that can follow from that moment. These increasingly sensitive understandings of agency circulation and identity (re)construction offer productive ways of building accounts of literate action development throughout the lifespan. Agency circulation and identity (re)construction, as concepts, have become more robust as they were studied

across spans of five or six decades, and can be complicated further with future studies of writers at other ages and in different social, economic, and literate circumstances.

Evaluating the Totality of the Literate Experience

The concept of the totality of the literate experience has helped us trace the literate action of Michelle and James across a wide swath of lifeworlds and through a long history. It did so while also interpreting heretofore unexplained phenomena in the lives of older writers. Finally, in the course of its use, the totality uncovered additional characteristics of the concepts of identity and agency that will benefit future lifespan-oriented research into these concepts. It would seem, then, that the totality of the literate experience is a flexible framework, adaptable to the study of literate action at a variety of scales, from the moment-to-moment to the year-to-year. It provides useful insight into both specific segments of the lifespan and large swaths of years. In the next chapter, I expand more fully on the consequences of treating the totality as a logic-in-use, as an infrastructure upon which a complex, yet coherent theory of literate action development through the lifespan can eventually emerge.