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Research Note

Watching Valuation Coevolve with Production

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Abstract

This research note uses interviews and observations of anthology editors to explore how valuation practices shift depending on the stage of anthology construction. In the textual environment described here, editors tended to value texts related to their own lives during the early stages of construction. Later on in the process, editors sought texts related to the texts they had already gathered. In this later stage, editors performed "constant comparison," scanning texts for concepts related to concepts identified in previously acquired texts. The research note also describes the complex relationship between editors' valuation and writers' production. Valuation trends became known to writers, who then shifted their production practices, which became known to editors, who then shifted their editorial practices, which became known to writers, and so on. The note concludes with speculative commentary on implications for other fields such as art collecting.

Key words: editing; circulation; writing; texts; teaching; anthologizing

Each semester at Queensborough Community College, the students in my introductory writing classes construct anthologies from their classmates' impromptu writing, which puts me in a good position to witness texts being produced, categorized, hidden, translated, circulated, interpreted, traded, and finally displayed in a table of contents. Watching editors edit is fun and long before I sensed the research opportunity, I consumed it as a spectacle (see Muniesa and

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Helgesson 2013). Like the audience of *The Price is Right* watching contestants guess the price of refrigerators, I like watching editors scrutinize the texts they encounter. And like viewers who yell at the TV while watching *Love Connection*, I get frustrated by "mistakes" in valuation.

I had one student named Layla,[1] for example, who produced fascinating impromptu writing that I looked forward to reading. Her hastily-written texts cursed, complained, and lashed out at real and imaginary foes, before walking it all back and blaming herself, then finishing things off with a nihilistic punch line. In the absence of prescribed genre conventions, Layla invented her own. Whenever her writing became available for acquisition by her classmates, I expected a bidding war to ensue. Her texts had that relatability that editors said they were looking for. Good penmanship, too, almost artistic. But I came to realize that just because her writing was valuable to me didn't mean it would be valuable to her peers, and more often than not her texts would languish on the surplus pile, underappreciated.

Moments like these sparked me to investigate why texts move when and where they do, so in 2016, I began to track student texts as they moved in and out of edited collections. Two main sources help me to track the texts: (1) introductory prefaces written by students after they finish the anthologies; and (2) "editor logs" written by students as the process unfolds. The latter are especially revealing because they offer fresh accounts from editors as they keep certain texts and trade away others.

Case Study: Editors Editing

My approach derives from "new materialist" methods elaborated by scholars like Brennan Breed (2014) and Laurie Gries (2015), both of whom highlight material dimensions of texts (what texts do and what is done to them) while downplaying representational dimensions (what texts mean). To access the material dimensions, both Breed and Gries zoom out from the scale of individual texts to larger scales where texts form alliances with other objects, weave in and out of rhetorical formations, and become transformed in the process. Breed, a biblical scholar, tracks the transformation of Job 19:25–27 during its encounters with different regions of the world; depending on circumstances, the passage will experience translation, elaboration, redaction, and/or preservation. He compares his tracking of Job 19:25–27 to research performed by nomadologists who study the cultures of nomadic people. "One must follow the tracks through the steppe," he writes, "and watch for patterns of movement and action that always change over time and space" (Breed 2014: 203). Gries, for her part, concentrates on the "multitude of activities" that visual

[1] Students' names have been changed.

rhetoric participates in "when it circulates and engages in a multiplicity of associations" (Gries 2015: 101–102). In order to elaborate a technique she calls "iconographic tracking," Gries followed the Obama Hope image as it circulated with great velocity and consequence during the 2008 election season.

Unlike Job 19:25–27 and the Obama Hope image, the texts that circulate in my class typically resemble the tomatoes studied by Heuts and Mol (2013) in that they are "neither exotic nor politically hot" (2013: 127). At the end of every class period, I ask my students (often tired and hungry students with varying skill and enthusiasm) to anonymously write at least half a page on any topic they want. I collect these texts as they walk out the door and whoever makes it on time to the following class is rewarded with a random text written by an anonymous classmate.[2] These random texts can be kept if they want them or traded away if they don't. To facilitate the trading of texts, I oversee a simple market with "fake" money as the medium of exchange.[3] By the end of the semester, punctual students accumulate around 25 texts, they arrange those texts in a table of contents, and they write an introductory preface that explains their selection criteria.

One editor, for instance, noticed "First World Problems" recurring in the texts he encountered. Even though he "got kind of annoyed by my classmates' complaints," he was interested enough to keep pursuing it, partly because "I do the same thing sometimes." Eventually, he assembled a collection of texts that "complain about the weather, not doing good on a test, not finding the television remote, stuff like that." Another editor named Kathy said that when she began to gather texts from her classmates, she "had no idea what theme I would try to develop." She felt "very lost" but "by the time I gathered around five texts, I noticed that people like to write about emotion." After that, she began to "check the texts very carefully for ideas about emotion and eventually found fifteen, which I divided into 3 subsections: personal emotions, emotions related to family, and emotions related to love."

For Kathy and her fellow editors, timing is everything. *When* they encounter a text is often just as important as *what* the text says. Two distinct phases of editorial valuation stand out in their logs.

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[2] To my great relief, this actually works in terms of getting students to come on time to class. Students at this branch of City University of New York often have multiple obligations competing with school—jobs, kids, elderly parents—so attendance problems are unrelenting.

[3] More on the market: If Jerry is building a collection of texts called "Romantic Entanglements," but he receives a text about agriculture, he can use the market to trade away his agriculture text in exchange for "cash" which then can be used to purchase a text closer to his romantic entanglements theme.

- In phase 1, editors sought texts that related to their own lives.
- In phase 2, editors sought texts related to the texts they had already gathered.

In phase 1, early on in the semester, editors felt unsure of what kind of collection they wanted to build and therefore found it difficult to place value on texts. Some succumbed to paralysis, including one editor named Isaiah who refused to part with any texts during this time because he "was worried about losing valuable pieces that have tons of potential which I haven't seen yet." He didn't want to make the mistake made by a classmate who said that she "traded away, for some reason, this beautifully-worded story of a person remembering lost love." Exaggerating somewhat, she wrote, "My heart never mended, as if I gave away my firstborn."

In the absence of reference points to guide assembly of classmates' writing, most editors sought "relatable" texts that seemed connected to *their own lives*. For example, Matthew reported:

> Some texts were special, ones that I knew for sure will never be traded. Like the text that showed me I wasn't the only one feeling uneasy about our school environment with so many people who keep to themselves. Like me, my classmate feels lost in a new environment with new people. Back in my native country, it was easy to make friends because we speak the same language and share the same cultural background. Migrating to the United States has changed everything. I'm not sure if this has made me shy but I find it more difficult to talk to new people and often I just remain silent.

Matthew treasured his classmates' text because it confirmed what was already on his mind. Other editors, such as Diana, placed value on texts that reminded them what they forgot: "Whoever wrote 'Choose Now' sparked an awakening in me because I have been so focused on college, what I want, and stress about bills that I forgot God is taking care of me." In both cases uptake and retention centered around the relationship between a particular text and the editor's own life.

Midway through the semester, one student named Johanna noticed how abundant these "relatable" texts had become and wondered if it was her own example that went viral.

> Throughout the semester, in my freewriting pieces, I wrote about my day and my feelings in hope of influencing others to do the same. I am not sure if I am the one who started the journaling trend but halfway through the semester I realized that the majority of pieces I encountered seemed like diary or journal entries.

Sensing that our mini-society was miniature enough for her to mold, Johanna intentionally produced and circulated the types of texts she wanted to be surrounded by, and by her account, succeeded. Her speculation on the power of her own example evokes the findings of

Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1988), who wrote about the accumulation of social power by influential artworks. According to Herrnstein Smith, a canonical text does not merely survive and stay relevant, it acts to "shape and create the culture in which its value is produced and transmitted and for that very reason to perpetuate the conditions of its own flourishing" (1988: 50). Johanna speculates that her own writing could ascend to canonical power at the miniature scale of our classroom.

Another possibility is that alert writers sensed how valuable these "relatable" texts had become to editors and then shifted their style accordingly. A student named Katrina, for instance, noticed that her abstract, philosophical writing was "still being exchanged between classmates" during our bimonthly markets. Her impromptu writing could not find a home in any of her classmates' collections and it bugged her. "This freewriting clearly isn't my strong suit," she wrote, "but I'll try." The rest of the piece describes her adoption of a cat with special needs: "I love the fact that I'm adopting a special needs animal. They are always the least adopted when they could be happy living such simple lives." I happen to prefer her more abstract writing from earlier in the semester, but her warm and fuzzy "wobbly cat" reflection was probably quickly acquired.

Not all writers were as cooperative as Katrina. One ironic contrarian named Gary began to produce cold, "unrelatable" texts so he could later retrieve them from the proverbial ash heap:

> I noticed that when I write about something boring or something people can't relate to, it always filters back into the surplus pile. So I started writing boring, unrelatable texts such that I might easily come across them in the surplus pile. Hopefully this very text I am writing right now gets returned to the surplus pile so I can add it to my growing pile of my own writing.

Although Gary rebelled against the emergent value system, most did not and the sheer volume of "relatable" texts posed a problem for editors who resist that form of appeal. One curmudgeonly editor describes his defenses being broken down:

> As I amass a pile of writings, it's evident that my peers really like to talk about themselves. At first, I would roll my eyes when I'd get another story about someone's day. My initial reaction was to trade them in, get rid of them as soon as possible. But they've started to make me smile. Especially the ones about a small pug named "Chestnut," which the writer received as a gift from a family member. As my classmate trains "Chestnut," she exclaims, "I think my pug puppy and I could not only be family but also friends!" This warmed my heart in a way because I know what it is like to train a puppy.

Here we see an editor's selection criteria coevolving with the production practices of writers. To contend with the available

resources, he calls upon a more sentimental side of himself. Just as the decisions made by editors filter down to the production practices of writers, decisions made by writers filter up to the editorial practices of editors.

Phase 2: Constant Comparison

As I mentioned above, "relatable" texts lost some of their appeal as the semester neared its end. With the due date approaching, editors focused less on finding texts they could relate to and more on fleshing out subthemes within their tables of content. Instead of seeking texts related to their own lives, they sought texts related to *the texts they had already gathered*. In other words, they practiced "constant comparison," a term I borrow from social science research, particularly grounded theory.

Constant comparison refers to an inductive process whereby researchers code incoming data with attention to data they have already coded (Charmaz 2014: 342). Sifting through a set of transcribed interviews, "grounded theorists" will code each passage in terms of themes that they have previously identified. In the latter stages of building their collections, editors in my class do the same thing. When I randomly hand them a text at the beginning of class, they immediately scan it for connections to the themes they have previously identified. I don't have to tell them to do it; it is simply the obvious thing to do.

Zyanna nicely captured the shift to constant comparison: "Instead of just accumulating a whole bunch of texts that I like, I want to start trading them in for texts that's about my topic and what I am interested in finding out about." Another editor named Stefan explained how his perspective changed between "phase 1" and "phase 2":

> At the beginning, I didn't know what texts to keep because my direction was hazy, so I mostly went with texts that I could relate to. Now, though, relatability isn't quite as big an issue. Yes, I enjoy my classmates' writing when it shows their perspectives, devotions, and ways of thinking. But even when I enjoy it, I trade it away if it doesn't fit into one of my categories.

The shift in values described by Stefan is consistent, again, with the findings of Herrnstein Smith, who explained that different features of a text become more visible to readers as their interests and resources change. As new features become visible, readers respond with new valuations (Smith 1988: 48). Indeed, as the valuation landscape shifted, editors traded away texts that they once deemed valuable. "After the patterns have presented themselves," Shameka wrote, "you have to eliminate the odd ones."

As in phase 1, alert writers caught on to the shifting rubrics of their classmates, and they began to target subcategories in their classmates'

tables of content. For example, one altruistic student named Norma noticed that her friend had a really thin collection of texts because of her poor attendance. To help her friend, Norma started writing about her friend's subthemes every day, even writing multiple texts at the end of class instead of just one. She asked me if she could bypass the normal distribution channels and give the texts directly to her friend, so that other editors couldn't intercept. (I agreed. Why thwart generosity?)

Another altruistic writer named Marcy similarly targeted a subtheme of her classmate's collection. Upon hearing that a classmate sought texts about "connections," Marcy wrote something that would fit right in with that and even called out to the editor in question: "I am writing this for the person trying to expand her category called 'Connections.' School is the biggest connection machine because so many people leave their familiar homes for faraway places just to go to school." The text goes on from there, developing her point about school as a connector. In addition to supporting the editor who aspired to saturate her "Connections" section, this strategy benefitted Marcy as well—it feels good to know your writing will probably find a good home.

Conclusion: Constant Comparison by Established Collectors

What could possibly compel a man to kill for art? This disturbing question provides the basis for a 2010 episode of *White Collar*, a middle-brow television program about the surprisingly sexy world of financial crime. The episode opens with two handsome detectives (who could not be more different) puzzling over this mystery: unconnected owners of identical elephant sculptures have been murdered. Long story short: the detectives come to realize that the killer sought to round out his collection of "jade elephant" sculptures. He owned three of the five in the set and was willing to kill to get the other two.

Anthologists, art collectors, archivists, and social scientists assess new material based partly on what they have already acquired. This valuation practice, while recognized by the imaginative writing team at *White Collar*, is not always appreciated by experts on the art market. For example, in his authoritative book titled *The Value of Art,* Michael Findlay (2014) argues that there are five attributes that make a specific artwork valuable: provenance, condition, authenticity, exposure, and quality (2014: 36–48). Findlay's argument is largely persuasive, except for the fact that his list completely ignores constant comparison—the importance of what a collector has already acquired.

Although my research site involves somewhat eccentric circumstances (inexperienced editors working with hastily-written texts), I hope it "builds on and resonates" with the findings of Findlay,

Heuts, Mol, and Herrnstein Smith, "while adding its own specificities," thus leaving scholars better equipped "to study valuing (valuation, evaluation, valorisation, etc.) in the next site" (Heuts and Mol 2013: 139–140). While Herrnstein Smith (1988) has written extensively about coevolving valuation and production in the context of literary canon formation, circulation of texts, at that scale, occurs among institutions as much as it does among individuals. At the more "human-sized" scale of anthology construction and collection building, researchers like myself can easily ask participants what's going on.

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