Celebrity, Literacy, the Alter Ego

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Recently I came across a series of images spotlighting celebrities posing with books for an American Library Association (ALA) advertising campaign. Entitled “Celebrity READ,” the campaign features various well known media personalities admiring or reading books with the word READ spelled out in large letters behind or around the personalities.¹ The campaign’s purpose, it seems, is to encourage literacy (via reading) by demonstrating the acceptability of reading to young readers through the example that celebrities, too, read. Some of the celebrities are, like Oprah Winfrey, obvious choices for the public commitment to reading. Others, however, like L.L. Cool J, Weird Al Yankovic, or The Rock, seem odd for their placement within this publicity campaign. No doubt these individuals read. But do they represent reading the way Oprah Winfrey does through her televised book club? Why does it matter that L.L. Cool J reads? Or are these ads asking us not to read but rather to identify with the celebrity images we view?

“Everyone is a celebrity when they READ!” the campaign’s promotional material declares, making me believe that the point of this campaign is not reading at all, nor is the point, therefore, literacy acquisition as it is traditionally understood.² Instead, ALA attempts to evoke the personalities of these specific popular culture figures for what appears to be the rhetorical effect of identification. “Any classification you read,” Roland Barthes notes in Roland Barthes, his provocative discussion of identification, “provokes a desire in you to put yourself into it somewhere” (143). Reading the ALA advertisements, one is expected to put one’s self

into the place of the celebrity, who, in turn, also reads. And as one reads as a celebrity reads, one somehow embodies the celebrity position in order to do what reading normally allows a reader to accomplish: understand a text's meaning. As Harvey Graff notes, the importance of reading to literacy acquisition historically stems "from two equally revealing sources. Despite—or because of—some schooling and self-reported literacy, individuals needed to be taught, or at least, reminded, how to read; they also needed to be told the importance of exercising their literacy" (295). While it's not uncommon for advertising to appropriate celebrity imagery in order to remind consumers to purchase products, I want to consider the ALA advertisements in order to question how the rhetoric of the celebrity image promotes not only consumerism, but rather a specific type of reminder for how to exercise literacy. Are we, in fact, talking about literacy when we note celebrity usage for rhetorical purposes? Or are we witnessing a different kind of meaning-making system?

Before I declare the ALA's usage of celebrity an anomaly, I'm reminded of two other instances of celebrity imagery I have come across and that have affected me in, what I initially understand as, some kind of literate way. During a recent trip to downtown Detroit, a flyer was left on my car window promoting an appearance of Louis Farrakhan, who was scheduled to speak on the topic of reparations. Farrakhan, however, was not scheduled to speak in Detroit, but instead would appear by satellite as part of an event known as "Saviours' Day." His representation on this flyer was meant to draw in crowds for a local gathering who would watch the satellite transmission; thus, Farrakhan was being used for information technology purposes. The other instance comes from a moment in a media studies class I once taught at the University of Florida. During a part of the course in which students worked with the notion of iconicity, one student, encouraged by my own use of James Brown as an example, brought me a brochure from his Miami synagogue advertising Shabbat services. "Put some soul back into your shabbos!" the cover of the brochure reads. Next to this call is positioned the image of James Brown.
In these three instances of celebrity imagery, I find a distinct pattern demonstrating the role celebrity plays in generating meaning. "Celebrity culture," Chris Rojek writes, "is, in fact, overwhelmingly a culture of surface relations" (46). Despite Rojek’s critique, and despite the many other negative views of celebrity often heralded, the ALA choices, Farrakhan and Brown’s images, and other similar acts highlight how celebrity imagery can be used in order to produce meaning. I am drawn to these rhetorical usages of celebrity because they are anything but surface level. They are affective; celebrity imagery appeals to individual desires, identification, and knowledge. I am not alone in my observation. In *Dead Elvis*, Greil Marcus finds a similar relationship between celebrity and rhetoric as he inventories multiple textual and visual references to Elvis Presley. By presenting Elvis references with little or no commentary, Marcus shows that Elvis has come to mean more than a figure who lived and died a musical legend. Instead, the references Marcus assembles reveal Elvis as a form of language, a grammar we use to create knowledge and meaning about our lives. I want to expand upon Marcus’ project by using my three initial moments of celebrity application to theorize a new method of knowledge production, a way to make meaning that, I contend, challenges our preconceived ideas regarding literacy and literacy acquisition.

In *Internet Invention*, Gregory Ulmer teaches students learning to write for digital environments that celebrity (recognized by the "star" persona) serves as a focal point of electronic writing. "This writerly personality featured in star texts prefigures the subject formation of every citizen in electracy, just as selfhood, prefigured in Socrates, became the subject formation of literacy" (169). Ulmer notes that as we move from literacy to electracy, Ulmer’s neologism for electronic meaning making, we devise various strategies for producing knowledge based on our association with institutions of learning: school, work, family, and entertainment. What literacy was to print, Ulmer argues, electracy is to the digital. Within electracy, entertainment and celebrity play dominant roles in how we construct notions of selfhood and how we produce ideas.
Thus, when Madonna adopted the Jewish mystical belief in Kabbalah, the popular response was to ridicule this as a frivolous, superficial understanding of religion; this response, however, fails to see how Madonna as knowledge producer becomes possible within the terms of electracy. An article in the online journal *Israel 21C* describes Madonna's 2004 visit to Israel as a kind of electrate moment:

In recent years, celebrities like Madonna, Britney Spears and Demi Moore have embraced Kabbalah, increasing its profile within a non-Jewish framework and making the mysterious branch of Judaism more accessible to the public. ("Madonna")

Madonna has created a type of knowledge whose basis is not found in the meaning system of Kabbalah itself, but in Madonna. That her visit to Israel to discuss her version of Kabbalah took place in Tel Aviv (a metropolitan city of techno music, hip bars, and trendy gathering places like Sheinkin Street) and not in Safed (home of mysticism in Israel) is important because it demonstrates how popular culture embodied in the ever-present mode of celebrity status shifts our places of learning. Digital culture doesn't have to go to Safed to learn Kabbalah; it can turn, instead, to Madonna.

Electracy, it seems to me, allows for variations and extensions of meaning making in ways print does not. To make that claim is not to dismiss print culture's continued relevance, but to recognize new kinds of meaning gestures. "The invention of printing," Marshall McLuhan noted, "did away with anonymity, fostering ideas of literary fame and the habit of considering intellectual effort as private property" (*Book 348*). McLuhan draws attention to how print invented the literary celebrity through the reproduction of both name and image. The digital expands McLuhan's point about private selfhood. The mass reproduction of image exceeds print's capabilities to invent celebrity through the more extensive network apparatus of print, media, sound, and image. Because the electronic shapes our relationship to fame in dramatic fashion, I situate my own interest in celebrity and literacy as belonging within the
broader category of electracy. My interest follows Ulmer's argument that entertainment functions as one of several discourses individuals use to create meaning. Electracy does not replace literacy or its conventions, but instead it extends literacy so that other sites of meaning, like entertainment, earn attention.

My desire is to continue the work Ulmer begins by adding to literacy studies a concept which foregrounds the importance of celebrity. The ALA's decision to pose celebrities in various acts of reading signifies the importance of celebrity to meaning construction. Readers of these ads are expected to form an identification with the celebrity's action and thus perform likewise. If Brittany Spears reads, the imagined target group might think, then I can too! This process reflects what Louis Althusser named *interpelation*; images and texts call out to us in ways that force levels of identification. The importance of interpellation to advertising has long been recognized for its rhetorical power of persuasion. Not yet recognized is how the interpellative usage of celebrity contributes to an identification that creates compositional knowledge as well. When Kenneth Burke writes that "'belonging' in this sense is rhetorical," we can understand this sense of interpellative belonging as intertwined with literacy practices (Rhetoric 28). Indeed, celebrity marks a variation of what Deborah Brandt calls a "sponsor" of literacy. Sponsors of literacy, Brandt writes, are "delivery systems for the economies of literacy, the means by which these forces present themselves to—and through—individual learners. They also represent the causes into which people's literacy usually gets recruited" ("Sponsors" 167). Brandt's discussion focuses on how work situations, ethnic background, and class all sponsor an individual's movement through various stages of literacy acquisition. To Brandt's argument, I add celebrity culture.

**Celebrity**

To define what celebrity means for literacy, I first must structure my definition within the larger discussions regarding technology and
literacy. Celebrity broadens traditional definitions of literacy by framing meaning making in terms of how digital culture is affected by entertainment. Literacy, Brandt writes, is "a lubricant for consumer desire; a means for integrating corporate markets" ("Sponsors" 166). I take Brandt's comment as recognition of the role entertainment plays within literacy. Juxtaposing literacy acquisition with commercial culture, Brandt calls the forces that shape these activities sponsors. "Sponsors, as I have come to think of them, are any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way" (166). According to Brandt, sponsors may be influential people (supervisors, relatives), or they may be commercial agents (magazine contests, radio advertisements) (167–68). Sponsors ideologically shape how individuals participate in various economies of meaning production. The way to understand the influence of sponsors, Brandt demonstrates, is by studying the narratives of individuals who have shared like and unlike experiences learning to read and write. Personal stories reveal literate practices. In this sense, literacy, as Robert Yagelski argues, "represents a kind of power to participate in extraordinary complex ways in the social, cultural and political discourse that shape people's lives" (6).

Studying sponsors of literacy, therefore, means studying the ways individuals use tools for communication. Those forces that sponsor the move from literacy to "literacies," Stuart Selber argues in *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*, generate a "multiliteracy," the ability to use a computer—or some kind of media—for critical and self reflexive purposes. The "ideal multiliterate student" as Selber describes her, possesses functional, critical, and rhetorical literacies applicable to computer applications (22, 35). Selber structures a broad framework from which to advocate critical awareness when teaching with technology, a plan that notes the complexity of multiliteracy thinking and writing. Often, this critical awareness, or this general sense of multiliteracy, utilizes Brandt's method of recording personal stories by adopting the personal narrative as window into how multiliteracies are acquired and how they func-
Thus, when Danielle Devoss, Joseph Johansen, Cynthia Selfe, and John Williams ask how writing instruction should work with "students habituated to reading and composing the kinds of new media texts that have come to characterize contemporary computer-based environments," they produce literacy narratives of the writers coming to terms with owning or using a computer (157). In "Students Who Teach Us: A Case Study of a New Media Text Designer," Cynthia Selfe extends this observation through a description of one student named "David." Selfe focuses on the student's work with computers, making webpages, and learning multimedia applications. David can produce ideas on the computer with images better than he can write in his writing course, and with this point, Selfe finds a warning sign. Because this student, like many others, is literate through his computer work, the writing curriculum, Selfe argues, should be expanded in order to accommodate "a full range of literacies, especially those literacies associated with new media texts" (56). The evaluation of current literacy issues, like the importance of visual composition, is determined via a personal narrative.

As productive as the literacy narrative is for understanding literacy—or multiliteracy—practices, it depends greatly on the notion that literacy is shaped by direct usage of tools, like computers, and one's awareness of such usage. Literacy and electracy-based practices, however, may be shaped by technology outside of direct usage of a computer. Thinking of literacy-based practices as only shaped by explicit interaction with communicative tools reflects what Anne Wysocki and Johndan Johnson-Eilola call "a bundle of stories we have accumulated about what literacy is and does" (350). As Walter Ong, Jack Goody, Marshall McLuhan, Eric Havelock, and Gregory Ulmer write, literacy (or versions of what we understand as literacy) affect individuals whether or not those individuals use tools for writing. The overall apparatus one works, studies, and lives within is shaped by literacy conventions as much as the individual's ability to use a tool to produce meaning. Ownership or usage of a computer plays a role in an individual's literacy acquisition; however, technology still shapes that individual's
literacy whether that person uses a computer or not. By saying that, I am not being deterministic; rather, I am recognizing a basic tenet of literacy studies that Brian Street advocates, despite his own critique of Jack Goody’s similar ideas:

But literacy, of course, is more than just the “technology” in which it is manifest. No one material feature serves to define literacy itself. It is a social process, in which particular socially constructed technologies are used within particular institutional frameworks for specific social purposes. We cannot predict the social concomitants of a given literacy practice from a description of the particular technological concomitants. (97; emphasis added)

On its own, a personal narrative, therefore, is limited in explaining or describing cultural influence or a given social process. When Selfe, for instance, argues for a broader understanding of “how meaning is being made in the new multi-modal communication contexts,” the poignant remark unfortunately is still shaped by personal story telling (this happened to me when I used X application) and not by additional factors that affect meaning production (57). In other words, David is proficient in using a computer, but other computer-influenced factors shape David’s understandings of technology. Entertainment, as Brandt suggests, is one such factor, whether or not David says it is.

I make this point in order to highlight how electracy, and its investment in star personas, is produced through technology in general and not only personal computer knowledge or usage. In fact, celebrity as a concept, Elizabeth Eisenstein explains, as McLuhan does, resulted from the proliferation of printed texts and thus was created outside of any one individual’s experience with learning how to write. Print, Eisenstein claims, invented celebrity because the title page of the newly created printed book made authorial status recognizable to a reading public. Rather than index or search for a book by title (as manuscript culture allowed for), readers could locate books by authorial name (or even image in some cases). The mass production of books circulated authorial
names in a way unprecedented previously. In the age of mechanical reproduction, as Walter Benjamin phrased the twentieth century, this circulation increases dramatically as the "copy" becomes an organizing principle of knowledge construction. Celebrity becomes copied and disseminated in unintended ways (via video, email, the Web, mass printing), ways no longer bound by a single text or writing tool. Madonna emphasizes that point as she circulates Kabbalah via her image; James Brown now announces Shabbat (as the pamphlet a student once game me shows). Neither are working with technology or computers; but the meaning they generate exists only through technological dissemination of their image.

Celebrity disseminates via media identification. In the 1960s, Andy Warhol, an unlikely "literacy" theorist, applied Benjamin's concept by mass producing silk screen reproductions of Jackie Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe, and Elvis Presley. That there exist "4" Marilyns or "Double" Elvis is important; replication of iconic imagery creates the rhetorical effect Kenneth Burke called identification. Identification, Burke writes, stems from the "collective, social role" corporate bodies generate (Attitudes 266). The corporate body indicates a collective (an institutional framework such as school or family) as well as an economic force (corporations). "Identity is not individual," Burke argues. "A man 'identifies himself' with all sorts of manifestations beyond himself" (Attitudes 263). Through such manifestations, persuasion occurs (including self-persuasion) by way of what Burke calls "a general body of identifications that owe their convincingness much more to trivial repetition and dull daily reinforcement than to exceptional rhetorical skill" (Rhetoric 26). I extend Burke's definition of identification to also include the daily reinforcement that media—and, consequently, entertainment—produce as a corporeal body. Roland Barthes, too, recognized identification as an implicit result of media's corporeal body, a point Barthes first raised in Mythologies and later explored in texts like Empire of Signs and Camera Lucida. In the quasi-autobiographical Roland Barthes, Barthes complicates identification by questioning the shifting corporeal states identification
takes place within. "Where is your authentic body? You are the only one who can never see yourself except as an image" (Roland 36). Warhol recognized that a dominant image "we" see ourselves in is entertainment. Barthes, following Burke, situates that image as the rhetoric of identity. "Can one—or at least could one ever," Barthes asks, "begin to write without taking oneself for another?" (Roland 99)

Yet, this gesture of identifying with celebrity/entertainment does not mean that individuals yield to celebrity culture in order to efface any other identification they may form, nor does it mean wanting to be the celebrity. Barthes' alphabetic categorization he calls an autobiography, for instance, does not negate his role as a critical theorist or as a teacher, but it does show that a number of conflicting identifications occur simultaneously: "I am captivated to the point of fascination by the socialized body, the mythological body, the artificial body" (Roland 61). A paradox exists in this process of identification, one that merges social, mythological, and constructed images. I understand Barthes' "mythological body," in particular, as framing the importance of media and entertainment culture to meaning. Warhol's Elvis and Monroe are mythological reproductions from media culture; they are "myths" as Barthes defines the term, "a system of communication, that it is a message" (Mythologies 109). Cinematic technology in the 1950s, for Barthes, makes Garbo's face "an ideal," but within contemporary technological influence, this mythology exists in the Madonna example I presented earlier (57). I (in a generic sense) don't want to be Madonna, but I come to identify with the mythology that Madonna (or any other figure) generates through her star persona regardless (through Kabbalah or some other issue via some other celebrity). As Burke notes, identification is based on these kinds of divisions and contradictions, and not on unifications:

Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity. (Rhetoric 22)
In the Madonna division or the divisions Warhol made famous (Elvis/Monroe and the reader who recognizes identification in the Elvis/Monroe image), the media-oriented reading and writing individual broadens the referentiality attributed to literacy to also include celebrity. Whereas literacy, as Jack Goody notes, created the notion of referentiality (this marking signifies another experience) and consequently selfhood (this narrative signifies me), celebrity implies an alternative selfhood whose referentiality is not just the self, but also includes the entertainment figure. In this sense, Warhol discovered the limitation of self-referential narratives and showcased what McLuhan calls the desire in the electronic age to lead "roles." "The young today," McLuhan remarks, "reject goals. They want roles—R-O-L-E-S" (Medium 100). These roles, as the ALA advertisements make clear, include living out multiple narratives via celebrity in complex ways, not only for purposes of emulation but for purposes connected to literacy acquisition. "One copies a role, then, by metonymy, an art: I begin producing by reproducing the person I want to be" (Roland 99).

Often forgotten in McLuhan's speculations on media is his interest in literacy, and that is a point I want to highlight as I introduce his concept of roles. Roles for McLuhan do not necessarily mean wanting to play a role (that is, play the part of a specific figure like an Elvis impersonator does). Instead, roles involve the conflation of media culture with narrative identifications. "With TV, the viewer is the screen," McLuhan contends, because specific media like television engage a sensory involvement in ways other media could not (Understanding 272). This involvement of all of our senses at once—like Barthes' fascination with multiple bodies—sponsors expression, lifestyle, and other habits differently than how the sponsorship of traditional literacy acquisition is understood. To say that is not to condemn literacy, but to integrate into literacy the study of how media-induced roles involve multiple sensory experiences, what McLuhan calls the electronic influenced mode of "involvement":
In ten years, the new tastes of America in clothes, in food, in housing, in entertainment, and in vehicles express the new pattern of interrelation of forms and do-it-yourself involvement fostered by the TV image. (*Understanding* 279)

In terms of the role celebrity plays in literacy acquisition, TV stands for one part of media influence. “The TV image, that is to say, even more than the icon, is an extension of the sense of touch” (*Understanding* 291–92). McLuhan’s pun on tactility, touch as in “keeping in touch,” illustrates a connection between entertainment, roles, and meaning. To keep in touch with the media image, to be involved within its narrative, is to blur the boundaries between sponsors and selfhood.

What McLuhan claims TV does for the invention of roles (by fostering involvement), school, Harvey Graff maintains, does for the invention of the “educated” or “literate” person by maintaining a different type of mythology, the job. “The social and cultural hegemonic functions of schooling,” Graff writes, “were closely tied to the carefully designed transmission of literacy and to the transformation of society” (19). School, Graff observes, creates another type of mythological selfhood dictated by a different kind of commercialism than what McLuhan describes, one whose sense of involvement is less intense. Literate education, Graff notes, does not necessarily involve economic success. In the nineteenth century, Graff writes,

> Industry, skills, and wealth could be obtained by the individual with no schooling; education, nevertheless, was viewed as fundamental to the development and the maintenance of the economic system, as it was to the social order. (200)

Graff contends that this “literacy myth” has been used to convince individuals of their ability to participate in a unified economic system, to become wage earners and consumers like anyone else, but to maintain a distinct identity from the process of consumption that they help produce. McLuhan, however, shows less interest in how individuals become consumers, opting instead for reflection
on how consumption itself shapes literacy. Consumption and literacy, therefore, are for McLuhan two parts of the same process.

TV fosters many preferences that are quite at variance with literate uniformity and repeatability. It has sent Americans questing for every sort of oddment and quaintness in objects from out of their storied past. Many Americans will now spare no pains or expense to get to taste some new wine or food. The uniform and repeatable now must yield to the uniquely askew, a fact that is increasingly the despair and confusion of our entire standardized economy. (*Understanding* 282–83)

And even as I recognize McLuhan’s tendency to be hyperbolic in his declarations, I still find insightful his observation that a medium like television “involves all of our senses in depth interplay”; in media, we discover “synesthesia, or tactual depth of TV experience, that dislocates [students] from their usual attitudes of passivity and detachment” (293). That total involvement is mythological; it creates learning where the connection between the learner and the media image, the “tactual depth” McLuhan writes of, becomes created. This depth generates a narrative unlike the personal narrative or the literate narrative of success.

I learn from both Graff and McLuhan that consumer culture plays a vital role in literacy production and its narratives. But what is a myth for Graff is *mythic* for McLuhan and for Barthes, and in that difference, I find another way of exploring the personal narrative. Rather than adopt the unified narrative of literacy acquisition popularized in literacy studies, I want to develop this dual understanding of myth in terms of identification. And because Burke defines identification as a division, I note that the alter ego (the division of different self-images generated by media) is a place to begin that work.

**You’ve Got Person(ality)**

One example of the role alter egos play in literacy acquisition can be found in Bill Zehme’s book *The Way You Wear Your Hat*. Like
Marcus' book on Elvis, Zehme’s book about Frank Sinatra is not a biography of the singer. Instead, Zehme uses Sinatra’s life as a guidebook for how readers can live their lives as well. How to drink, deal with women, eat out at night, and other social activities are explained through Sinatra’s handling of each item. Indeed, there is more than one Sinatra, Zehme shows, to learn from: Sinatra the singer, Sinatra the lover, Sinatra the father. Sinatra serves as a generic alter ego for a variety of writing purposes. The lesson Zehme’s book poses, then, is that celebrity lives can be fetishized to such a point as to produce replicable behavior and mannerisms (roles). The rhetorical gesture Sinatra teaches, for instance, can be used for a variety of situations; one need not be a celebrity to embrace celebrity-oriented rhetoric. One does not even have to want to be Frank Sinatra. Zehme’s book teaches that when this rhetorical move transfers over into digital culture, we witness a completely different kind of literacy than the personal narrative tends to describe.

The Zehme example demonstrates that celebrity as literacy extends beyond personal narratives, for there is more to Frank Sinatra rhetorically than his life history. I emphasize this point because I am searching for a way to generalize Zehme’s idea to literacy studies, or what I hope will be an expansion of literacy studies into digital culture, and consequently, an extension of electracy. The initial problem involves accounting for the personal narrative and replacing it with the mythic role. As I have noted, literacy utilizes personal narratives as a primary means for explaining how individuals learn to consume and produce ideas. Popularized in texts like Mike Rose’s Lives on the Boundary, Malcolm X’s The Autobiography of Malcolm X, Deborah Brandt’s Literacy in American Lives, and Richard Hoggart’s The Uses of Literacy, the personal narrative often describes how the individual rises from a state of economic deprivation to a higher state of intellectual development while encountering various hardships and life learning experiences along the way. In Rose’s case, literacy is the result of learning how the school system prevents members of specific classes and races from class progression. For Malcolm X, literacy
derives from the very print-oriented experience of reading the dictionary and learning every word's meaning. Deborah Brandt summarizes the power of such narratives when she recites tales of those who come from working class and ethnic backgrounds and who later acquire the ability to participate in various work and professional discourses. Brandt writes about "how changes in individual literacy experiences relate to larger scale transformations" ("Sponsors" 182).

As compelling as these narratives' progressions are, they tend not to explain the social apparatus within which the individual functioned and that Zehme foregrounds as the major organizing principle of knowledge production (for Frank Sinatra, popular culture is the apparatus). Thus, when I read over these traditional literacy narratives, I'm more interested in Malcolm X's anecdote about working side by side with (who would become) Red Foxx in a speakeasy in Harlem than with his canonical tale of reading the dictionary. I realize that this brief anecdote maintains relevance for Malcolm X years later because the person he worked with eventually became a celebrity (a famous comedian and television star). Unlike the textbook anthologized anecdotes from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* regarding reading as an empowering force, in this passage, Malcolm X briefly identifies with celebrity and uses this moment to empower his own rise to celebrity status as well as the ways he and Alex Haley composed his story. Whereas the Sinatra lifestyle serves Zehme's guide, Foxx serves Malcolm X.

The Malcolm X moment, then, stands for how literacy narratives can be re-conceived. Indeed, Malcolm X's anecdote signifies the role personality plays in the age of technology, for technology creates a specific type of personality structure. As McLuhan argued about a new type of literate fascination with popular figures, it is the reproducibility of the Red Foxx image on television, in film, and on records, that makes its mention so important to Malcolm X. Traditional literacy narratives overemphasize the individual self who learned to read and write. In the electronic, the lone self—created by print's invention of private reading and writing prac-
tices—yields to the information overloaded self that digital culture creates (like the multiple Red Foxxs we encounter in various media: drug addict, TV father, comedian, junk yard dealer, misogynist, and so on). The multi-viewing experiences represented by cable television, the basic homepage, digital music, and even browser configuration have led to the invention of a compositional self, a point poststructuralism codified for academic study in the 1970s and 1980s but that literacy studies still struggles with. Compositional selves produce fragmented and multiple personalities at once; and as part of that process, they can lead to alter egos. As Katherine Hayles describes the effects of digitality on subjectivity, "Perhaps now it is time to think about what kinds of textuality a dispersed, fragmented, and heterogeneous view of the subject might imply" (106). Hayles suggests that digital writing and the acts of meaning making that surround digital writing be seen as "processes" in the Deleuze and Guattari sense; that is, as flows of desire. When a personal narrative, like that of Malcolm X's, is complicated so that it reflects desires (like the Red Foxx example), a different kind of literacy emerges. This position asks literacy studies to consider itself as compositional as well as its practitioners as compositional, and thus subjected to the influence of the composition of roles and alter egos, of what Foucault calls an "awareness of that whole realm of unaccounted-for experiences in which man does not recognize himself" (323). Thus, those who work within a celebrity-based literacy may or may not be aware of technological influence. In this sense, alter egos don't necessarily generate what Yagelski labels "a self within ever-shifting discourses in order to participate in those discourses" (9). Instead of the discourse shifting, the self shifts and becomes compositional. And it often does so via celebrity and the alter ego. Indeed, Malcolm X is himself an alter ego, a twentieth century electronic response to the racist culture surrounding the original figure born in Nebraska, Malcolm Little. That Malcolm X eventually, too, became a celebrity further complicates the process and the shifts that take place.
My Name Is

My point is not a psychological one, but rather a push for English studies (and consequently rhetorical theory and literacy studies) to recognize how celebrity generates one type of organizing principle of writing; the usage of alter egos as rhetorical gesture. Thus, I want to generalize from the broader issues regarding celebrity and literacy by localizing one specific type of digital-literate practice whose power resides in naming and whose pedagogical potential for English studies is significant. In addition to the importance of economic development, Graff recognized that nineteenth century interest in literacy is based on a Christian desire for universal morality (learning morality through reading and writing), a point Brandt raises as well. "Not an end in itself, literacy was a useful mechanism for religious initiation and nation building, a means to assimilate people into dominant modes of conduct and beliefs" (Literacy 189)

These learned moral codes stressed conformity and homogenization of behavior and discourse. In the digital, as McLuhan notes, the quest for uniformity (religious, national, or otherwise) yields to the invention of the diverse individual.

Without moralizing, it can be said that the electric age, by involving all men deeply in one another, will come to reject such mechanical solutions. It is more difficult to provide uniqueness and diversity than it is to impose the uniform patterns of mass education; but it is such uniqueness and diversity that can be fostered under electric conditions as never before. (Understanding 276)

One offshoot of this "uniqueness," I contend, is the alter ego. The literacy myth Graff highlights emphasizes the commonality reading and writing practices are meant to perpetuate, like believing in Christian or capitalist systems of thought or individual selves negotiating their ways through such set-ups. The alter ego, as it is framed by celebrity, gives me a place to reimagine this myth as it is played out in literacy, or its Ulmerian update, electracy.
As Richard Hoggart indicated, popular culture can serve literacy studies by localizing the points where knowledge is produced in individuals' daily lives. In particular, Hoggart drew attention to popular music. “Some features of songs and singing among the working class,” Hoggart writes, “illustrate better than anything else both their contact with older traditions and their capacity for assimilating and modifying new material to their established interests” (149). Following Hoggart's work, and in order to offer a model for a pedagogy of celebrity that modifies literacy conventions, I choose to focus briefly on popular music and specifically funk and hip hop, which have become the stage where celebrity and digital culture frequently come together.

This pedagogical model is more implicit than explicit; it is a general nod toward teaching and not a set of prescribed assignments for a given writing course. In saying that, I note that rapper Eminem's song “My Name Is” begins in a classroom setting. In the song's early bars, Eminem, already an alter ego name that substitutes for Marshall Mathers, introduces himself as Slim Shady to a classroom of school children. The lesson, it appears, involves an understanding of his “name.”

Ahem... excuse me!
Can I have the attention of the class
for one second? (“My Name Is”)

Is this Eminem or Slim Shady calling the class to attention? In an earlier song, “The Real Slim Shady,” Eminem performs the name game as well; he favors Eminem (“Feminist women love Eminem”) over the way others feel about Slim Shady (“I'm sick of him”). Who is who? Which identity produces the composition we hear? Who is “the real Slim Shady,” as Eminem often asks? And which identity directly shapes the composition's content, structure, form, and delivery; which identity provokes the charges of misogyny or homophobia Eminem often is credited with? Are any of these attributable to Eminem, or are they the products of his composing alter egos, of his involvement in a digital culture that encourages such manifestations?
The Eminem example generalizes to a great deal of hip hop and funk culture. Artists like George Clinton (Dr. Funkenstein, Mr. Wiggles, Sir Noisedevoidoffunk), Kool Keith (Dr. Octagon, Black Elvis), Eminem (the Slim Shady and 012), and Madlib (Jaylib—with Jay Dee—Quasimoto by himself) use the alter ego to engage a composing process in which one identifies with a body of entertainment. Clinton, appearing as Dr. Funkenstein on the album *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein*, attempts to clone the funk so that “specially-designed Afronauts” can reproduce Dr. Funkenstein’s “funkatizing” concepts on earth (“Prelude”). Clinton, and funk itself, are posed as an alter ego project with far reaching rhetorical goals; to discuss or understand the funk, one must become it in the way McLuhan’s viewer is the TV screen.

As bizarre as this scenario may appear, Clinton reconceptualizes literate practices so that literacy is enhanced by funk (funkatizing standing in for the dissemination of reading and writing practices). Clinton does not become empowered because he is suddenly “literate” or because he has learned to drive a spaceship (the Mothership), play the piano or guitar, or even write music, but rather because the organizing structure of funk allows him to juxtapose technology, race, and musical composition in order to generate a new kind of meaning system. This process hinges entirely on the alter ego Clinton adopts. Without the alter ego, no part of this process will occur:

Whoa!
They say the bigger the headache, the bigger the pill, baby
Call me the big pill
Dr. Funkenstein
The disco fiend with the monster sound
The cool ghoul with the bump transplant.
("Dr. Funkenstein")

This is a vision of knowledge that broadens literacy studies’ emphasis on the individual as learner as well as the traditional collaborative approach to learning, which maintains that individuals work together but sustain their separate identities. This kind of
knowledge production embraces what Kodwo Eshun calls "the Funkenstein voice," which

Is filtered until it becomes a flux "burning, churning, and turning" along the sensorial spectrum between mad and glad. A snickering, sped-up gremlin voice mocks Funkenstein into "burning you on your neutron, expanding your molecules" until the voice breaks through into hysterical babble. Babble is the voice plunged into vocalization, phono bubbles without an object, bursting in causeless exuberance. (Eshun146)

In other words, what personalized identity and economic progress are to the individual in literacy, "babble" is to the alter ego within funk. I contrast Clinton's alter ego of composing—which consists of babbling, burning, and churning—with Robert Yagelski advocating the teaching of literacy as guiding an individual toward the discovery of one's place in the world:

I want my students to begin to see their connection to the broader discourses and social forces that shape their lives and to understand how the ideas they present in their essays are inextricably linked to those discourses and forces. But I also want to emphasize the self in a way that I think many cultural studies and critical pedagogy proponents don't. (180)

Yagelski highlights students' investigations of gender, race, and class (the cultural studies triad he simultaneously brackets) as the central forces at work in this kind of literacy-oriented pedagogy. But what happens when race, culture, class, and technology forge something that isn't this unified self, that doesn't identify with race, class, or gender, and that can't be explained in a personal narrative? The Clinton example reveals, instead of the individual self, the funkatizing, multi-self. This multi-self offers "multi-literacies," a space where divergent writing situations situated within electronic culture come together at the point of the star persona. In place of personal narrative to explain the star persona, the writer generates a mythic narrative (like funkatizing the galaxy). "The 'self' was a
Socratic discovery,” Eric Havelock writes. “The Socratic dialectic depended upon the previous isolation of language in its written form as something separate from the person who uttered it” (114). Literacy studies has depended, to a great extent, on this meaning of selfhood and knowledge formation which claims that my identity is not my writing. The Eminem and Clinton examples demonstrate how writing and identity are not separate in the electronic sphere. Rather, they are mixed, and they create mixes. These mixes structure entirely new writerly personas, what Eshun terms “psychopathogenetics,” a name for the mix of self and sound generated by the technological apparatus, and what I name here—borrowing from Barthes, Graff, and McLuhan—as mythic. “All writing is pseudonymous,” write Myka Vielstimmig (the alter ego of Kathleen Blake Yancey and Michael Spooner). “The digital venue welcomes collective personae” (97). Celebrity, generalized here to the role of the alter ego, allows this activity to occur through mythic narrative.

The Signed Self

I have no doubt that the ALA, who I began this essay with, did not intend to invoke the alter ego writing practices of George Clinton or Eminem when they devised their celebrity-based promotional campaign. That lack of intention reflects the difficulties literacy studies faces when it neglects the technological apparatus within which we construct meaning. My intent has been to encourage literacy studies to imagine how celebrity informs writing practices beyond the mere identification with a celebrity’s reading and writing habits. To practice a celebrity based literacy involves more than reading or writing. It involves a persona shift within the digital apparatus. This shift complicates interactions with celebrity culture, pushing writers past admiration and pleasure to the absorption of celebrity rhetorical rules and gestures, to how one signs and composes signs in a celebrity-based economy of meaning. The persona that is created composes within a popular obsession
generally associated with entertainment, like that linked with
signature collecting in Zadie Smith’s *The Autograph Man*. The
penultimate autograph man of Smith’s novel, Alex-Li Tandem,
organizes his life around that of one-time starlet Kitty Alexander
while he peddles the signatures of other famous people:

The greatest portion of Alex’s work is done from home, but on
the occasions when he leaves the house he uses the bag. He
puts it on the desk now, opens it, and into the may folds and
pockets he slips Elizabeth Taylors and Veronica Lakes,
Gene Tierneys and James Masons, Rosemary Clooneys and
Jules Munshins, back to back, separated by sheaths of
plastic. (51)

These signatures embody Tandem’s life; they provide him with
meaning systems within which he understands and responds to
the world. Some are authentic; others forged by Tandem himself
and thus conflating who signs the celebrity identity. The difference
is minimal to Tandem. The signature, Derrida’s rhetorical nod
toward identification and writing, encompasses the apparatus of
celebrity based literacy by mixing selfhood with writing itself, much
as Smith’s character does. “You will not be able to decide whether
the thing or the person I am speaking of is one, or what it is or who
it is,” Derrida writes (10). In a celebrity based literacy, the signa-
tures we sign to indicate an engagement with some variation of
what has come to be called literacy are no longer one, unified,
individual, or alone. They are all. The Smith excerpt speaks to how
one may sign Veronica Lake as quickly as one signs one’s own
name. One may sign Slim Shady, Eminem, and Marshall Mathers
simultaneously or independently. Pedagogically, the implications
of this gesture mean that instructors and students see the work
they do as tied to a variety of identifications (and not just “student”
or “teacher”), all of which are shaped by the corporeal identification
with entertainment. This realization alters composition practices,
encouraging mythic narratives over personal ones.

What I have attempted to show via these last few examples is
how this usage of celebrity updates the popular literacy narrative
regarding selfhood for the electronic environment. Even when extended to technology, the literacy narrative is already too intertwined with literacy itself:

When we say "computer literacy," for example, what part of this relationship to the book are we asking ourselves or our students to establish with, within, and through computers? Why aren't we instead working to come up with other terms and understandings—other more complex expressions—of our relationship with and within technologies? (Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola 360)

My exploration of celebrity, therefore, is meant to follow Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola in proposing another "term" or "understanding" of how meaning construction functions in the digital. To encourage the alter ego as condition of a new type of literacy would be to move away from the unified self dominant in composition studies, whether in expressivist pedagogy or the literacy narrative. A pedagogy that recognizes that we compose from a variety of identities, and that those identities are formed within popular culture, and that those identities shape writing itself, is a pedagogy that does not look to uncover dominant systems of meaning, cultural bias, or any related cultural studies theme absorbed by writing instruction. Instead, this kind of pedagogy I loosely propose here is based with popular culture itself. A novel idea, no doubt, for many, but a rhetoric, nevertheless, we cannot ignore.

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Notes

1. See http://www.alastore.ala.org/SiteSolution.taf?_sn=catalog&_pn=product_detail&_op=236.
2. See http://www.alastore.ala.org/SiteSolution.taf?_sn=catalog&_pn=product_detail&_op=1304.


