

## More Than a Marker for the Passage of Time

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As a child, creating greeting cards was my way of expressing an amorphous, complex emotion, tangibly. Ever since I was four years old, I crafted hand written greeting cards for my family. As I grew older, the greeting cards grew more complex and elaborate - not only in design but in message. The greeting card's ability to connect people and create/extend relationships was its explicit purpose. Its implicit power, however, lay in the genre's ability to tell stories and give the creator license to go beyond words to communicate and express. Those stories left a powerful impression of who I am, and who those I have communicated with through that medium are. To a great extent, these interactional experiences still shape those impressions today. Exploring this kind of writing changed my perspective on the literacy of art as dialog, and how writing is not limited to alphabetic script. It opened my eyes to just how big of an impact greeting cards have had on the crafting of my own self-image. In the following analysis, I will examine my development of the literacy of greeting cards and in what ways it has changed over the years, including individuals, events, and environments that contributed to it, positively and negatively. This will be followed by a discussion that takes into account the impact of that activity on my literacy more broadly.

### 1. Early Development

Greeting cards were something we all exchanged on important dates: birthdays, anniversaries, holidays. As a child, I got greeting cards myself and "signed" ones for others. My siblings, who were older than I was, always gave me handwritten ones. My parents would remark how valuable those were in comparison to store-bought ones. They meant something more than marking a date. I liked how store-bought cards looked because they had pictures and statements that were unexpected and different - not the type of words or pictures we (family members) would

think of drawing or writing. It was a different, unfamiliar style of message. Despite that, I still cherished the handwritten ones more. It could be because my parents valued them more, but it also seemed more personal; containing little stick figure drawings of me and my siblings. That was something one could not find in a store. I could barely write but as soon as I could, I created my own greeting cards (see figures 1 and 2). They were austere: stick-figures; toddler scribbles and spelling; heart and flower shapes. They always had the customary line: "To . . . with Love—Komysa." I had my name down and that genre-creating line. I thought every card that was

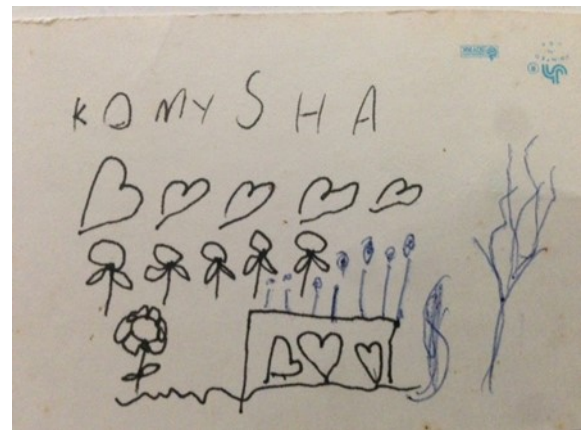


Figure 1, Composed at around the age of 5

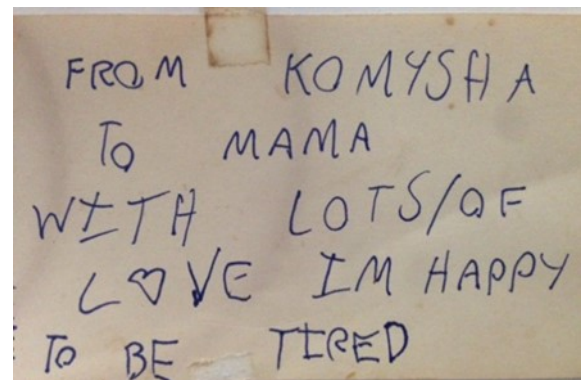


Figure 2, Back of the card

a card would have that line; that's what transformed it from a piece of paper with scribbles to a greeting card with meaning.

My mother would always create beautiful, crafted cards for us (my siblings and I). She was mindful of her audience, using construction paper, few words, big pictures, and collage - things young children can appreciate. Come to think of it, I didn't just cherish and value them, I thought of them as a gift and a memento, each with an individual meaning that said something about the story in my mother's head at that time. Even today, as I look back, those cards remind me of events and mental states - a documentary of transitions for both author and recipient. I didn't have any of these words then, but I did know the feeling the greeting card evoked and I wanted to replicate it with my own - that was the effect I wanted my cards to have on their recipients, too. That's where the impetus came for greater elaboration and better art. Writing came easily to me, even as a child, but this was a genre where writing was hard. There was so much to say—how do you express a lifetime's appreciation for your parents or siblings?—but with very little words that could express them, and they always seemed mundane and repetitive. I love you, indeed, but any different than last year? I wanted to tell a story that I didn't yet have the words for and art was a medium for that. I honed my skills at drawing, collage, and scissors-work almost exclusively through and for greeting cards. I also kept working at my writing, trying to find new words to express sentiments in a more complex and concise way.

The talk that surrounded greeting cards was also essential in the creation of the literacy. Literacy researcher and scholar, David Barton, speaks of literacy as “socially situated” (40), using the metaphor of “ecology.” That lens is very apt for imagining the nature of this literacy. The way my father spoke of receiving a card with such value and distinction, or how my mother recounted the story of an old friend, highlighted by the fact that she “never forgot” to send a card, reinforced its value for me and defined it as important punctuation between relationships. That was the “ecological niche” that Barton suggests “sustain[s] and nurture[s]” particular literacies (39). How my father always cherished the cards my siblings and I would give him, and would read them aloud with everyone gathered around, created a life for them. My parents would quiet everyone down, because “this is something your sister created especially for you - on her own” and, that it “came from the heart.” This didn't just reinforce sentiment but defined for me the difference between genuine feelings and checking off a chore, and the value each individual added to the collective. The fact that everyone had a right to share in the conversation, to be heard, and to be given full attention.

Of course, for my parents, this communal behavior manifested in other things besides greeting card exchanges, but it taught me that each person's time was valuable and, when expressed genuinely, their feelings would be acknowledged. It also taught me that money was not the true marker of value. A \$4.00 greeting card was clearly worth much less than one I had spent no money at all on, but rather spent on my time and attention. Those concepts were clear to me, even when I had few other reference points. Certainly, the attitudes and values surrounding this activity lent it power. Greeting cards were one of the few mediums where my communication was personal. For the most part, when I put something on paper it was impersonal, school or news related. Barton extends his ecological metaphor with the idea of “literacy of thought,” suggesting that literacy “has a role in the ecology of the mind” (44). What he defines this as resonated with me profoundly: “Literacy is a symbolic system used for representing the world to ourselves. Literacy is part of our thinking. It is part of the technology of thought” (35). Unbeknownst to myself, those early stages of literacy development were building blocks for my self-image, manifested more clearly as I matured.

## 2. Maturation

By the time I was nine or ten years old, the fundamental concept of the greeting card was well established. It had certain conventions that were always followed: it must be folded to open up, contain art, say a particular statement, and be signed. Since I wrote mine in both English and Arabic, each language had its own side in the card and the signature was always in both languages (see figures 3 and 4).

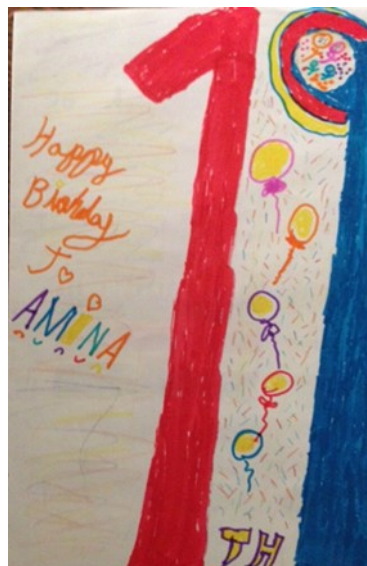


Figure 3, *Composed at around the age of 9*

Feeling confident about the content and my mastery of the genre, I shifted from simply reproducing the genre to manipulating it. Now, they began to take different shapes and forms, cut to resemble flowers or teapots. Words were reduced, both in size and in quantity, taking shapes of their own. They became an artistic form in themselves to accentuate certain features and elements, in addition to communicating the



message. The process continued to evolve for me, becoming more and more elaborate and carefully chosen; the art, more subtle and meaningful. By the time I was 13 or 14, I started to use the forms themselves to tell stories, capture feelings, and distill moments (see figures 5 and 6). They were an “external representation or outcome of internal cognitive processes” (Barton 45). When my sister’s birthday coincided with an important sporting event for example, the card took on the theme and color scheme that reflected our mutual love of the sport, while also capturing an inside joke between us through the player I chose to embody her in the greeting. This most recent phase in my maturation process marked another important shift in the evolution of this particular literacy. Now, I was bringing other conversations, ideas and symbols into the fray. Barton posits that “Literacy is an ideal topic for linking the psychological and the social” (44). In no other medium is that more evident.

During the maturation process, the shifts in literacy development show a recursive process of growth. It starts with an emphasis on art - simple drawings - becoming more text-heavy and verbally expressive, then shifting back to a more visual, albeit refined, artifact. Throughout this process, the message continues to become more complex, the cues subtler, even implicit, the words more carefully chosen. It could be thought of as “progression,” expressive of the growth process where thoughts, interaction, and relationships become more and more complicated and overlapping from childhood to adulthood.

What also is at play, however, is the use of the greeting card as a medium of communication and self-representation. Inasmuch as it is a way to represent the world to myself (and see myself in that world), this literacy is a way for me to represent *my* world to others (Barton 42). It is a communicative tool that is “dynamic and interactive,” providing a means to “extend the functions of language” (Barton 43). In this space, I

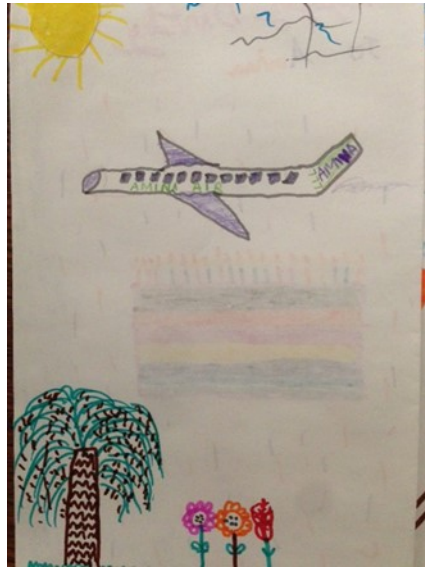


Figure 4, Back of card



Figure 5, Composed at around the age of 14



Figure 6, Back of card

had carved a self-image that was shaped by the ecology of that literate activity: the greeting card. Most recently, the kinds of greeting cards I have made have shifted once more, to an almost entirely text focused artifact. Mostly, those texts are inspirational quotes or proverbs. I also make an effort to create my own quotes and lines or find obscure authors with back stories themselves. This is a conscious move on my part to keep the greeting card as personal as possible, denying entry to others which might distract from that.

### 3. Spheres of Influence

Now that I have opted to personalize commercial greeting cards (mostly), rather than create ones from scratch, other spheres of influence have come into the fore. These spheres of influence exist within “domains of literacy” (Barton 36). For Barton, these domains, such as work or home, give rise to different versions of literacy and different ways of acting, being, and doing within them (39). He makes distinctions between “imposed” and “self-generated;” “indigenous” versus “imported;” “creative” or “constrained” (38). As I moved through the phases of maturation for my literacy, I shifted from one typology within a specific domain, to another. For example, the shift from reproducing an “imposed” model of the greeting card, to a creative, “self-generated” one. The domains within which this literacy developed, as far as my parents were concerned, also carved their certain perception of it, expressing it to their children. My family’s multicultural background brings in the notion of indigenous versus imported literacies, and the extent where value was ascribed to the card in this culture, versus the cultures that my family are a part of. The social domain within which my parents existed, and the certain practices exhibited in the domains of work and home, ascribed a specific social value to the greeting card. I, as my siblings, applied other layers from our own experiences of greeting cards through the varied domains we existed, adding other perceptions and values to it.

The introduction of school as a major domain of literacy, changed the practicality of creating those greeting cards from scratch, as well as the applied need for it. Between the domains of school and home, Barton points out that “The same event might be valued very differently in the two places and have very different meaning to the participants” (39). To those I might give greeting cards to in the school setting, they are unaware of my personal practice of creating them from scratch. The value of the card is not diminished by its commerciality, per se, but perhaps exponentiated if it were personal. Despite that, it did not change the value I had established for the practice of personalization. Even if I bought the card, I still needed to make it my own and to demonstrate myself through it. The “individual history” of that literacy was such that its practice was too closely tied to how I portrayed myself, and what I wanted to portray to others (Barton 46).

#### 4. Conclusion

The history of the greeting card is, apparently, long and well-established. If the accounting of the “Greeting Card Association,” or GCA, an organization that represents itself as “serving the...social expressions industry” since 1941, is to be believed (“History”); it is a practice that dates back to the ancient Chinese and Egyptians. They count 1856 as the beginning of “America’s greeting card industry” with the coming of Louis Prang, the father of the Christmas card (“History”). This literacy has evolved over the years, through different domains and refinements of form and function, leading to what we use today. At its core, the greeting card is a medium through which to communicate a sentiment and mark the passing of time. For each individual, however, the way in which that medium is manipulated and accessed can make a profound difference. Barton looks at literacy as not merely a reading and writing activity, but as a “set of social practices associated with particular symbol systems and their related technologies” (32). Foregrounding it as social practices first, indicates where literacy arises and how language—symbol systems—is merely a mechanism for its expression. Literacy becomes a means to the development of self and, recursively, the sharing of that self with others.

That all this complexity and self-reflection arose from the humble greeting card, boggles my mind. Understanding literacy as both a created and a creative force is important to deciphering the power and diversity of writing activity. Writing is so much more than a way to record thoughts and communicate them. It is a means to create thoughts from whence they had not existed.

#### Works Cited

- Barton, David. *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language*. Blackwell, 1994.
- “The History of Greeting Cards.” *Greeting Card Association*, 9 Feb. 2017, [www.greetingcard.org/industry-resources/history/](http://www.greetingcard.org/industry-resources/history/). Accessed 26 Sept. 2017.

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