ANN-CATRINE EDLUND

The Songbook and The Peasant Diary
As Participants in the Construction of the Modern Self

ABSTRACT. During the first stage of mass literacy, the written word became an increasingly vital part in everyday life of ordinary people in Sweden, as elsewhere in the Western world. Two literacy practices were commonly used in a Swedish-speaking context: copying texts in songbooks and diary writing. These practices evolved by the mid-1800s and lasted until the mid-1900s. Diary writing and blogging are nowadays considered practices explicitly related to identity construction. The link to identity construction is less apparent in the vernacular literacy practices of the songbook and the diary. In this article I discuss the ways these vernacular literacy practices participated in the discursive construction of the modern self for ordinary people. The theoretical basis lies in the New Literacy theory and the Actor-Network theory, in which literacy is seen as a social activity and literacy artefacts, such as the songbook and the diary, as participants in the discursive construction of identity. Discourse is here understood as the mediating mechanism in the social construction of identity. A case study focusing on songbooks and diaries of a young woman from a rural area in Sweden illustrates different aspects of the construction of the modern self within these vernacular literacy practices.

KEYWORDS: the modern self, identity construction, songbooks, peasant diaries, vernacular literacy practices, stable mobiles, actor-network theory
A Textually Mediated Social World

There is no doubt that most people in different parts of the world are presently living in a social world permeated with writing activities of various kinds. For example, text messaging, Facebook and Twitter have become increasingly prominent in everyday life. David Barton and Carmen Lee state that “we live in a textually mediated social world, where texts are part of the glue of social life” (Barton & Lee 2013:27). Deborah Brandt describes the phenomenon as “the turn to writing as a mass daily experience” (2014:16; 2015:3). However, the present-day scene is not so distant from the situation in the Western world during the first stage of mass literacy, which took form during the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Thanks to literacy campaigns many people possessed functional literacy skills that enabled them to engage in both established and evolving literacy practices. Letter writing was so common that it is even possible to say that a shift from oral culture to scribal culture had taken place during this period (Lyons 2013:246; Liljewall 2007:185). Writing postcards, diaries, autobiographies and songbooks represented evolving literacy practices – practices that took part in varying social contexts. One might say that already by the end of the nineteenth century, the social world was becoming textually mediated for the public at large in the Western world.

The democratisation of writing and its impact on the lives of ordinary people can be regarded as a hallmark of modernity (Lyons 2007:29). Another hallmark is the emergence of the modern self. Anthony Giddens argues that the late modern self should be seen as a reflexive project, built up by biographical narratives that need to be coherent, although they are constantly revised (Giddens 1991:5). The narratives form the basis of the subjective identity of the individual, i.e. both self-understanding and individual feel-

---

1 The idea of the social world as textually mediated was originally introduced by the sociologist Dorothy Smith (1990).

2 According to Deborah Brandt who has studied literacy learning in the United States, mass literacy can be defined in the following way: “mass literacy refers to the nearly universal participation in meaning-making based on encoded symbols (i.e., alphabets or characters) as well as the systems and expectations that grow up around this phenomenon. Mass literacy is stratified in terms of access and reward and various in practice, value and impact” (Brandt 2009:55). Brandt also discerns two stages in mass literacy, the first stage during the nineteenth century and the second stage beginning at the latter part of the twentieth century (Brandt 2009:70, 2014:15ff.). Issues of literacy learning are here concerned with both changes in technology and distribution of knowledge (see also Vincent 2000).
The literacy practice of postcards was widespread in Sweden in the beginning of the twentieth century, as in the rest of Western Europe (Hall & Gillen 2007:101). For example, as many as 43 million postcards were sent from 1903 to 1904 in Sweden (Edlund A.-C. 2012:138). The 1909 photograph, “Writing of postcards”, is from the national exhibition of applied arts in Stockholm. Photo: Anton Blomberg, Stockholm City Museum.

Participation in literacy practices is one distinct way of construing narratives of identity. Thanks to improved literacy skills, emergent writers could take part in autobiographical, epistolary or other vernacular literacy practices where various narratives unfolded. One can thus say that the evolving notion of the modern self was also becoming textually mediated for the public at large. Until recently, historical research on literacy and identity construction has focused on the reading practices of privileged people (Lyons 2010:2; Howard 2012:1). However, in recent years, studies of

3 The concept of subjective identity indicates that the identity of individuals depends on different discourses and differing social contexts (cf. Scott 1999:44; Edlund A.-C. 2007:252 note 25). According to philosopher Seyla Benhabib, narratives bring continuity to the self (1997:126). The construction of self-identity in the form of different narratives in the late modern era is also discussed by psychologists (Freeman 1993; Bruner 2003:85f.). See also David Gerber’s research on immigrant letters where the narrative construction of the self in immigrant correspondence is discussed (Gerber 2006:67).

4 How literacy practices of ordinary people may have been overlooked can be seen in the case of compiling a bibliography of autobiographical texts written by Swedish women 1650–1989: Laconic diaries were not included in the bibliography, which led to the exclusion of ordinary women, because their diaries often consisted of short entries (Hættner Aurelius et al. 1991:12).

Aim and Outline
In this article I wish to demonstrate how two vernacular literacy practices, the peasant diary and the songbook, engage in the discursive construction of the modern self, in the Swedish context. These practices evolved by the mid-1800s and lasted until the mid-1900s. My focus is on the following questions: 1) How are the writing practices related to the modern self? and 2) What forms of social agency are enabled by the literacy artefacts?

I shall start out by introducing two central concepts: vernacular literacy practices and stable mobiles and by presenting the two literacy artefacts, the songbook and the peasant diary. A case study focusing on songbooks and diaries of an ordinary young woman from rural Sweden in the 1930s and 1940s illustrates different aspects of the construction of the modern self within these literacy practices. The paper ends with a concluding section in which I discuss the social agency enabled by the literacy artefacts – and the extent to which the artefacts may have participated in the discursive construction of the modern self.

The songbook of Maiden Wallström (1906–1967) dating from 1921. The literacy practice of songbooks was common among young people in Sweden at the beginning of the twentieth century (SVA: H1431). Photo: Ann-Catrine Edlund.
Vernacular Literacy Artefacts as Stable Mobiles

The theoretical basis lies in the New Literacy theory and the actor-network theory, in which literacy is seen as a social activity, and literacy artefacts, such as the songbook and the diary, as participants in the discursive construction of identity. Diary writing and copying texts in songbooks are examples of literacy practices, a key concept within New Literacy Studies that defines all use of writing as a social act, and hence emphasises the activity of the participants involved (Barton 2009). To participate in a literacy practice, it is not sufficient just to have formal reading and writing skills; knowledge of the actual practice is also required, since the practices are constantly embedded in differing social structures.

I utilise the concepts vernacular literacy practices and stable mobiles in exploring the ways the literacy artefacts such as the songbook and the diary participate in the discursive construction of the modern self. Discourse is here understood as the mediating mechanisms in the social construction of identity (Ivanič 1997). Vernacular literacy practice is a useful concept when discussing the writing practices of the songbook and the diary. Vernacular

---

5 For a critical discussion of the concept of the literacy practice see Ivanič 2009 and Gustafsson 2013.
literacy practices are strongly linked to everyday activities, since they are “rooted in everyday experiences and serve everyday purposes” (Barton & Lee 2013:138). They are self-generated and voluntary and not framed by the needs of social institutions (e.g. school or church). As there is no institutional training linked to the practices, learning and practice are intertwined. Vernacular literacy practices are also a source of creativity, invention and originality since they are relatively unregulated, and therefore particularly dynamic (Barton & Hamilton 205:22; Barton & Lee 2013:138f.). Linguistic norms may therefore vary in different practices, depending on the social and cultural context. The practices might also “provide a voice for groups and individuals who may otherwise not be heard” (Barton & Lee 2013:139).

The use of the term vernacular in the concept of vernacular literacy practices is neither restricted to either vernacular language (i.e. dialects) nor used a synonym for non-elite people. In this article I shall concentrate on two vernacular literacy practices performed by ordinary people – where vernacular language is involved to a small extent. By ordinary people I refer to “those with little or no formal education from the lower strata of society” (Kuismin & Driscoll 2013:8).

In order to emphasise the material dimensions of literacy I draw on actor-network theory (ANT) developed by the sociologist Bruno Latour.
(2005). ANT suggests that agency can reside in artefacts, because aspects of human agency can be delegated to objects. It has been claimed that literacy artefacts are especially efficient social agents when it comes to making links across different contexts, since they have the capacity to build and sustain stable connections and networks across both time and space (Barton & Hamilton 2005:30; Brandt & Clinton 2002:344ff.; Bartlett 2008). Examples of literacy artefacts include note books, writing desks and pens. The artefacts can be regarded as stable mobiles, “representations of aspects of the world that are portable and thus can be accumulated and combined in new ways at a distance [...]” (Barton & Hamilton 2005:29).

The notion of stable signals the fact that the artefacts are durable: they represent different aspects of reality and give the experiences a sustainable form, while mobile signals that the artefacts are portable and can travel between contexts.

Writing Practices of the Songbook and the Diary

My case study focuses on the songbooks and diaries of Linnéa Johansson, born in 1917 in the north of Sweden. Linnéa learned how to read and write at school, although she attended school for only four semesters: living far out in the countryside and having a seriously ill mother who needed care she only had access to an ambulatory primary school.

These artefacts are instances of two common vernacular literacy practices in Sweden – practices that evolved during the latter part of the 1800s and persisted in the first part of 1900s. Little is known, however, about the social contexts of the songbooks and their function – the field is largely uninvestigated. The songbooks of Linnéa can be framed within the songbook practice that seems to have been most common among young people, where texts were copied and collected. Besides songs and poems, notes about expenses, recipes and diary entries can also be found under the same cover (Ekrem 2002:122ff.; Edlund A.-C. 2003, 2007:175ff.; Ternhag (ed.) 2008). The songbooks were also engaged in collaborative practices: notebooks were passed on to friends who wrote down song texts, poems, greetings or just their autograph. Songbooks were kept by women and men. Young women wrote in their songbook before they married, while it was common for

6 The concept of stable mobiles is inspired by a concept from actor-network theory, immutable mobiles (Latour 1987:227ff.).

7 Linnéa also participated in other vernacular literacy practices such as book-keeping and letter writing. We know from her cash book that she spent both time and money on letter writing. During a six-month period she could spend half a month’s salary on stamps.

8 Compulsory schooling was introduced in Sweden in 1842, when the Primary School Act was enacted (Lindmark 2004:20).
men to keep a songbook when they worked far away from home as sailors, construction workers or soldiers (Nordström 1995:8). Although these books mainly consist of copied songs, they had not necessarily been taking part in singing practices. It seems that the primary function of the songbook was related to literacy practices (Nordström 1995:16). The songbook resembles the so-called commonplace books in which early modern Englishmen wrote down extracts from texts they were reading, among other things (Darnton 2009:149).

The songbook of Gunnar Alexis Kronheffer (1899–1994) dates from 1922 when he was working as a navvy at the construction of a railroad in Sweden (Inlandsbanan). Kronheffer had copied popular songs, poems and a great deal of socialist texts in his notebook (SVA 1311). Photo: Ann-Catrine Edlund.

The diaries of Linnéa Johansson can be framed within the literacy practices of the peasant diary, a fairly common practice in Swedish agrarian society from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century. The Swedish term bondedagbok (peasant diary) has been given a fairly broad definition: the diary keeper must be active in an agrarian environment and make a living in connection with farming, and he or she must also belong to the category of the ordinary or common people (Liljewall 1995:34). One might think that there is a more obvious link between the diaries and the making of the self in comparison to the songbooks – but not necessarily, since the diary notes

---

9 That songbooks were relatively common during the early 1900s is indicated by the some 700 songbooks that have been preserved by the Centre for Swedish Folk Music and Jazz Research (Svenskt Visarkiv) and other archives in Sweden. The tradition of writing in a songbook seems to have more or less died out in the 1950s, judging from the collections of songbooks that have been made (Nordström 1995:16).

10 Peasant diaries have also been the focus of scholarly attention in other parts of northwest Europe (Ottenjann & Wiegelmann (eds.) 1982; Lorenzen-Schmidt & Poulsen (eds.) 1992; Larsson & Myrdal 1995; Lorenzen-Schmidt & Poulsen (eds.) 2002). It has been difficult to agree on a common term for the diaries, however, since the socio-economic conditions vary to a substantial degree between different places and over time in Europe (Liljewall 1995:34).
normally consist of short records without any reflections. Most peasant diaries consist of short entries about the weather and work done at the farm, but they can also include accounts and annual reports of crop yields (Larsson 1992:7). The origin of the peasant diaries is due to the modern age where time and the individual had become salient concepts. There are, among others, two main sources of inspiration for this vernacular writing in Sweden: the Almanac published by the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences and the instructions from the authorities, conveyed at the agricultural schools (Storå 1985:83; Larsson 1992:8).

The Writing Practices of Linnéa Johansson's Songbooks
During the years 1931 to 1937, when she was 14–20 years old, Linnéa Johansson copied a total of 164 texts covering 288 hand-written pages in two songbooks. Popular songs dominate, which is no wonder, because the songbooks were written during “The Golden Age of Schlager” (popular music). Other copied texts are spirituals and religious songs, temperance songs and poems from poetry albums. There are also quite a few diary entries at the end of the copied texts. They are frequently written in brackets, which perhaps indicates that diary entries diverge from the usual practice in songbooks. The copied texts are written in standard Swedish while Linnéa spoke a dialect that differed substantially lexically and syntactically. The act of copying is therefore also a practice in writing standard Swedish. Most of the texts are duplicated from her mother’s songbook, from journals or from the songbooks of her friends (Edlund A.-C. 2003:38f.; cf. Nordström 1995:16). A significant textual feature in Linnéa’s songbooks is that every single text ends with a closing signature composed of her autograph, the date, and often the location, too: “Linnéa Johansson, Stavsjö (the location) the 23 of August 1931.” This signature is a structural element in the songbook practice (Nordström 1995:17; Rehnberg 1967:216). Through the signing, the copied texts are

---

11 The Almanac had a wide circulation in Sweden and is one of the most widely read books in older times, besides the Bible, the Catechism and the Hymn Book. By the end of the eighteenth century the circulation figures were as high as 300,000 (Melander 1999).
13 See Dahlstedt & Ågren 1980 for a brief introduction to the dialect of Linnéa Johansson (the dialect of the province of Ångermanland).
14 Nowadays, this written standard Swedish has a similar spoken variety, mainly spoken on radio and television. But in the early 1900s the first encounter with the standard language was normally in school. Apart from learning how to write according to the standard norms, pupils were also introduced to a reading pronunciation (Teleman 2003:406). It has sometimes been referred to as “spoken Swedish by the book” (boksvenska) and could also be heard when people read printed texts aloud in church or at religious meetings (Widmark 1991; Edlund L.-E. 2013:364).
Linnéa on her confirmation day (July 1931) with her father and one of her elder sisters. Confirmation classes seem to have been the starting point for Linnéa’s songbook practice.
connected to a certain person, a certain time and space – the texts are given both an individual and a deictic reference. Linnéa is not the sole participant in the songbook writing practice: her friends have also written down songs and some of them have only written their autograph.

The Writing Practices of Linnéa Johansson's Diary

It seems that the regularly recurring literacy event of copying texts in the songbooks formed the basis for the subsequent diary writing of Linnéa Johansson. At the time she stopped writing in the songbook she began to jot down diary entries more regularly. This literacy practice was to continue throughout her life (Edlund A.-C. 2007; 2013). From the age of 17 to 25 she worked as a maid for 18 employers, both in agrarian and middle-class environments. Working as a maid in Sweden in the 1930s meant that one had to live in the employer’s household, often sleeping in the kitchen, with no access to any private space.

Unlike in the songbook practice, Linnéa Johansson is the sole writer in her diary. The entries are mainly short records of weather and work. The practice is a daily activity, and she also writes in her diary on several occasions in a single day (Edlund A.-C. 2007:192f.). She uses a pencil and small notebooks, which makes it easy to write at different locations within the household.

There is an interesting change in the focus of Linnea's diary practice. At first the activities at the farm are in the foreground, and the master of the farm seems to be the main character. Linnéa herself is barely visible. But when she leaves the agrarian environment and starts to work as a maid in a city in 1937, Linnéa turns into the protagonist. Now her chores, her spare
time, her joys and sorrows are depicted in the diary. In this new and unfamiliar environment in which she feels alone and vulnerable, she initiates a literacy practice where she is more of a subject. Her middle-class employers rarely pay attention to her chores as long as she fulfils them, but in the diary notes they are highlighted, especially the regular housework of cleaning and washing up. On 14 March 1938, there is a list of all the textiles she washed up: 33 sheets, 80 towels, 29 napkins, 7 tablecloths, 50 handkerchiefs and 21 potholders. The diary also includes complaints about the hardship of her work. When Linnéa has hung the laundry, she writes that her hands hurt so much that she can barely use them (“så ont i mina händer så jag kan knappt ta i nånting”). The new turn in her writing practice also makes it possible for her to question her own social position (Edlund A.-C. 2007:229). On Christmas Eve 1937, she presents a list of the members of the household leaving for church, introducing them by their respective titles. The diary note ends with a short description of her own duties: “I stayed at home cleaning the sweat off my brow” (“jag var hemma och städa i mitt anletes svett”).

Linnéa Johansson's diaries, 1934–42. Photo: Maria Sundström.
There is a common structural element in Linnéa’s songbooks and diaries: she repeatedly ends her entries with her autograph, date and location. There are at least 30 variations of her signature. During one period (1939–1940) Linnéa occasionally writes her last name as Robertsson rather than Johansson. She has explained that she longed for this change of name, but it was unthinkable as she has told me in an interview. Only in the diary can she assume the name of Linnéa Robertsson.

Linnéa Johansson worked as a maid in a bourgeois environment in the town of Umeå 1937–38. The plan shows the design of the building where Linnéa did the laundry. (Municipal archive of Umeå.)

Linnéa Johansson’s signature on 30 april 1938 includes her full name, the address in Umeå, and even the telephone number: Frida Linnéa Johanson, Östermalm 3, Umeå. Rt 179. (Photo: Maria Sundström)
Although Linnéa Johansson's schooling was short, it is obvious from her writing that she learned the spelling norms of standard Swedish. She is a writer who is conscious of following the norms of the written language. There are some features in her writing that could be called non-standard, but they are marked graphically. For example, when the potato harvest is finished, she uses the dialect word “pären” for potatoes, placing it between quotation marks, instead of the standard form potatisar. This use of graphic notation for many of the dialect features indicates the fact that Linnéa is very aware of the standardised written language and has the ambition to comply with these norms in her diary writing.¹⁵

The Songbook, the Diary and the Self
The songbooks and diaries of Linnéa Johansson can be regarded as stable mobiles that provided a space for writing practices. The artefacts brought together her individual experiences and gave them a visible and permanent form – a stable form. The songbooks and diaries were mobile in the sense that they could easily travel with Linnéa when she was moving from one employer to another.

The writing practices in which the songbook and diary engage share the characteristics of vernacular literacy practices: they are self-generated and voluntary; it is Linnéa Johansson herself who has initiated them and she is performing them out of her own interest. The language in the diaries

¹⁵ Different studies show that ordinary people seem to strive to comply with the written norms in their writing (e.g. Edlund L.-E. 2005:331; Nordlund 2007).
is mostly standard written language; in this way the artefacts also provide a
site where she can practice writing in the standard variety of Swedish. The
most obvious difference between the two literacy practices with regard to
identity issues is that there are participants other than Linnéa taking a vital
part in the songbook practice – and hereby the songbooks are involved not
only in subjective identity issues but also in social identity issues, such as
establishing and strengthening social bonds.

In the songbook, collecting texts is a way of making sense of the world,
like the commonplace books studied by Robert Darnton who sees collecting
as “a semi-conscious process of ordering experience” (2009:169). The act of
collecting texts may also be related to an idea of the modern self (Ternhag
2013). When compiling texts in a book of her own, Linnéa Johansson de
velops a sharper sense of herself as an autonomous individual.

In the diary, the moment’s fleeting experience is given a permanent
form. The daily literacy event of writing in a diary gives continuity and con
stancy to the self – linking diary writing with identity. The diary practice
also allowed Linnéa to acknowledge her professional activity as a maid. Fur
thermore it gave her a somewhat increased room for manoeuvre related to
a private sphere and made it possible for her to challenge or question her
employer’s social position. The diary practice also gave Linnéa a chance to
explore and try out a new identity – how it would feel to bear the name of
Robertsson. Only in the written space could she assume the name of Linnéa
Robertsson.16

The autograph of Linnéa, repeatedly written in the two artefacts, is
moreover a strong articulation of the self and a mark of individuality. The
songbook and the diary both provided a space for biographical narratives
where the self was articulated in different ways. One space for text col
lecting that was semi-official, and another space for diary entries that was
more private. The artefacts also made it possible for Linnéa to act as a mod
ern member of society in a textually mediated social world. To participate
in these vernacular literacy practices is to change the meaning of the self
(cf. Howard 2012:306). It can be assumed that the writing practices had a
strengthening effect on the subjective identity of Linnéa.

Literacy Artefacts as Social Agents
I have illustrated the way literacy artefacts such as the songbook and the
diary participated as social agents in the discursive construction of the
modern self. My case study shows how these artefacts provided a space for

16 The use of different autographs and identity issues is also discussed in a study of a young
writing practices and were related to the modern self in two distinct ways. Firstly, the artefacts are attributes for the members of modern society. Secondly, they enable a space where the notion of the modern self can be textually mediated.

To be a member of modern society requires both literacy skills and competences in standard language. Either formal or functional writing competence is required – i.e. either a more formal and passive competence for copying texts or a more functional and active competence that enables participation in different literacy practices (Liljewall 2013:33). In the specific Swedish social and cultural context, the songbooks and diaries provided a space where the competence in standard written language taught at school could be practised, since there was a large gap between the dialects spoken by the people and the Swedish standard written language. As attributes for the modern citizen, the artefacts demonstrated that the owner of the notebooks had the necessary skills for participating in writing practices. This applies especially to the songbook that took part in collaborative literacy practices. As attributes the artefacts enact the modern citizen in demonstrating the literacy and language skills of the owner.

The artefacts I have presented also enabled a space where the modern self could be textually mediated. When writing in the songbook and diary, the writer takes part in modernity. Furthermore the act of writing provides an opportunity for the writer to articulate and develop a notion of the modern self. The writer takes the position of an actor in a social world that is textually mediated – whether the act of writing consists of compiling texts in songbooks or producing daily diary entries that form a narrative about the passage of time. The artefacts connect different representations of the writer’s world view, whether it is individual collection of texts in the songbooks, or daily diary notes of individual experiences. As stable mobiles the artefacts stabilise and reify the experiences of the writer by giving them a permanent form. The stable mobiles have the capacity to stabilise meaning – and therefore they also may have the capacity to articulate and stabilise the identity of the writer – or the self (Barton & Hamilton 2005:32). They also provide possibilities to explore alternative identity positions. One might say that there is a strong link between the act of writing and the evolving notion of the modern self for ordinary people (cf. Howard 2012:107). The writing practices are of course situated in both time and space, and their relation to the making of the modern self may vary in several respects depending on differing social and cultural contexts.
Conclusions

Vernacular literacy practices in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, in which the songbook and the peasant diary took part, gave an opportunity for ordinary people to participate in a textually mediated social world. These literacy practices, arising from the first stage of mass literacy, probably had a great impact on how ordinary people conceived of themselves. The songbook and diary both provided space for narratives of identity, whether it was the act of collecting texts or writing diary entries. The literacy artefacts were also attributes for the members of modern society which demonstrated the literacy skills of the owner of the artefacts. The songbook and the peasant diary can hence be regarded as participants in the discursive construction of the modern self.

Apart from the notion of the modern self, the literacy artefacts can also be said to reify different categories of social identity. I hope that this brief sketch of mine will further the study of the songbook and the ways it relates to the discursive construction of identity. For example, one can postulate that the practices of the songbook reify the social category of youth since there were mainly young people who engaged in this practice. Further discursive analysis of the texts in the songbooks will undoubtedly reveal their connections to different categories of social identity, such as age, gender, heteronormativity, religion, national and regional identity.

SOURCES AND LITERATURE

Archival sources
SVA = The Centre for Swedish Folk Music and Jazz Research (Svenskt Visarkiv).

Literature


Howard, Ursula 2012. Literacy and the Practice of Writing in the 19th Century. Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.


