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Memory, Memoir, and Memorabilia: A Generative Exercise

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Memory, Memoir, and Memorabilia:

A Generative Exercise

Alys Culhane

I'm traveling in a school bus, putting down the Alcan Highway, moving from my old place of residence, Butte, Montana, to my new place of residence, Palmer, Alaska. All my possessions, minus the 97 boxes of books that I mailed northward two weeks previously, are stashed someplace in this, the vehicle dubbed the Mothership, or back in the rear of the Toyota pickup named Sputnik. To pull forth any container, even something as innocuous as a battered tool box, is to open a cache replete with memories. For example, in the metal box under my seat is the yellow-handled screwdriver that I took with me on my first cross-country bicycle trip. Back in 1980 there were no multi-use tools, so I carried a bulging nylon sack full of repair items . . .

The above is a journal write, one in which I again attempted, in essay form, to implicitly begin making the connections between the terms *memory*, *memorabilia*, and *memoir*. I say "again attempted" because I didn't get very far. Midsentence, my partner Pete Praetorius and I arrived at the American/Canadian border, where a burly customs official informed us that in order for our bus to be street legal in Alaska, we'd have to paint it a non-school bus color—that is, anything but its existent bright orange. No, he said in response to our query, putting metallic tape over the word *SCHOOL* wouldn't cut it. When finally we assured the official that we'd soon take care of the matter he let us go. Having lost my train of thought, I'd closed my journal and stuffed it into my backpack. When, three hours later, I pulled forth and reopened my journal, it was with the intention of compiling a grocery list.

The journal write brought to mind the thought that *memorabilia* can be used to trigger *memories*, thoughts that we often draw on when writing *memoirs*. It's true, I surmised, that numerous writers have made implicit connections among these terms. However, none that I knew of had made these connections explicit. If I did this, say by providing a theoretical rationale for a practical teaching exercise, I'd add credence to the growing belief that memoir writing is a valid form of scholarly discourse, particularly when employed in the teaching of graduate and undergraduate writing courses.

Bump, bump, bump bounced the bus, a 1983 Bluebird, over the **[End Page 310]** exposed bedrock of a two-mile-long construction site. I glanced up, then waved when the flagperson, a tall blond-haired woman, pointed questioningly at the five sea kayaks that were strapped to the bus's roof rack. Unbeknownst to her, I was now mulling over the adage "once a teacher, always a teacher." Although I wasn't planning to teach in the fall, I suspected that in due time I'd teach again.

Yes, once a teacher—I'd previously taught undergraduate courses in creative nonfiction writing, editing and publishing, and journalism. And yes, always a teacher—I could envision putting together a course titled "Memory, Memoir, and Memorabilia."

I began considering the theoretical substrata. My belief that the three Ms are intrinsically related is one that fiction writer Tim O'Brien was conveying when he wrote *The Things They Carried* (1990), a series of Vietnam-based vignettes in which objects (such as malaria tablets, mine detectors, dog tags, love letters, and illustrated Bibles) trigger past memories. And this was the premise of poet Richard Hugo's *Triggering Town* (1979), a book in which the former bombardier's return to a pre-World War II Italy triggers poetic insights. Nonfiction writer Beryl Markham in *West with the Night* (1983), a series of essays about her coming of age in eastern Africa in the 1930s, also followed the notion that memorabilia, memory, and memoir work together.

None of my books were handy; however, I'd previously memorized the first paragraph of Markham's text. She begins by asking both...

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