

Introduction. The Intersections of the Personal, the Political, the Academic, and Place

My life partner for 55 years titles this endeavor, “collecting, re-collecting, and re-collecting.” She is not wrong. For me and for the two of us together, preparing this account is a focused and ordered interdisciplinary “trip down memory lane” that includes sharing and comparing memories, mementos, old photos, and the contents of files and drawers unopened for years, many before hard disks or the cloud.

Until summer 2021, I did not expect drafting a historical, contextual, and intellectual memoir to occupy a place in my time or among my books. My previous personal writing addressed specific works and occasions. For example, my major books on the history of literacy, children and youth, Dallas, and interdisciplinarity led to some short, first-person essays and interviews in which I mentioned personal experiences as they were relevant. I had opportunities to publish retrospective reflections on all my major subjects but seldom on the personal, social, political, and institutional contexts of their production. My career-long public history and public humanities contributions seldom involved the personal dimensions. Little of those particular uses of my literacy appeared, by choice and by occasion.

The circumstances of my retirement and several years of adjustment to a new niche role for myself in what I call “public education” and “teaching outside the box” prepared the way (for details, see my 2021–2024 reflective essays in the Appendix). Recovery from a series of illnesses from late 2016 through 2019 left me with a fuller, more active memory reaching back to early childhood and a new search to understand critical, life-shaping relationships and influences. The almost two years of isolation during the first waves of the Covid-19 pandemic also laid the foundation.

During this period of three to four years, I achieved a clearer focus on both overarching and underlying patterns that connected my development and lived experience from childhood to my early- to mid-70s. I call this a *new intersectionality*. Put simply—as this book explores—these are the inextricable interconnections of *personal* experiences and relationships; the *political*, broadly defined to include life-shaping contexts and historical events, influences, values, commitments, and experiences; the social, intellectual, and political dimensions of *academics and scholarship*—a life of learning (to borrow the American Council of Learned Society’s phrase used for its Charles Homer Haskins Prize Lecture—see <https://www.acls.org/resources/occasional-papers/>) and using literacy and literacies; and the circumstances of *living in six major cities* from age one to the present and *studying and then teaching in five universities* (for more details, see citations to my 2021–2024 essays under Retirement as “Public Education,”

Universities, Disciplines and Interdisciplines, Literacy and Communications, Media and Communications, Book Banning, Critical Race Theory and Education, Ohio State University, Columbus Past and Present, Ohio Issues, National Issues, and Personal).

The *political* embraces my experiences from childhood through the 1960 John F. Kennedy presidential campaign; the 1965–1970 grape boycott led by Cesar Chavez for the United Farm Workers; the civil rights movements from the early to mid-1960s; the anti-Vietnam War movement; student movements from the mid-1960s; women’s rights, feminism, and movements for equality, equity, affirmative action, and choice for underrepresented people; Eugene McCarthy’s 1968 presidential campaign; and much more (among an ungainly and uneven literature on the time period involved, see Kevin Boyle, 2021, and the literature cited therein).

These experiences include five years in Canada in graduate school during the Vietnam War at a time of political awakening in the northern nation. They encompass entering the academic job market at one of its lowest ebbs and at the time that affirmative action and equal opportunity were first raised. This prompted reaffirming my lifelong commitments to equity, equality, mutuality, and respect. At each major intersection, I reconfirmed my role as an egalitarian and a connector of people, learning, and issues past, present, and future in teaching, scholarship, and living. My lived experience and my active learning are inseparable from my formal education and professional historical and pedagogical practice.

The years from the mid-1960s through the 1970s were also a formative transitional period in *cross- and interdisciplinary scholarship*, especially in the humanities and social sciences but also in the natural sciences. Several “new histories” developed when I was an undergraduate and graduate student. Some of my most influential professors were innovators and leaders. The fields that laid the ground for my nearly 50 years of scholarly research and writing are the “new” social history, quantitative history, history of social structure, history of education and culture and especially literacy, history of children and families, history of women and gender, urban history, historical demography, theory and method in the humanities and social sciences, and interdisciplinarity itself.

Over decades, often resisting institutional as well as disciplinary pressures and divides, I strove to interrelate these fields, methods and approaches, and theoretical perspectives. I straddled departments, colleges, and other boundaries, more and less comfortably. For far too many, then and more recently, both inside and outside universities, this critical history is forgotten (for one introduction to the literature, see my *Undisciplining Knowledge*, 2015a; see also my *Looking Backward and Looking Forward* with Leslie Page Moch and Philip McMichael, 2005, and essays and books on new histories and literacy studies in the Appendix and References).

These four factors are collectively determinative. They do not stand alone. They are instructive not only for me but also for understanding the historical times from the 1950s into the 2020s, conditions of life, educational institutions, and

geographical places. Together they bear examination and narration to others who may be interested in the history, individual factors including agency and relationships, academic institutions and professional life, and physical and institutional places. No one factor is independently powerful. Their intersections are complex and dynamic, sometimes contradictory and conflictual. That is among the lessons this book unveils. Together, they ground a “life course” perspective in regularly shifting times and spaces (for more on life course, see Glen H. Elder, Jr., 1974/1999; see also Elder, Monica Kirkpatrick Johnson, and Robert Crosnoe, 2003).

The surrounding, shaping context is the critical history of this era that spans the early Cold War and Eisenhower presidency through the tumultuous—and for me, life-orienting—1960s; the rise and fall of the Cold War; civil rights and voting struggles especially for Black people and members of other underrepresented racial groups, women, and LGBTQ people; the semi-normality of the 1980s and 1990s; and the startling ups and downs of the first decades of the 21st century. The period is encapsulated by the distance between Ike and the 45th president, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, between the 1960s social movements and the right-wing counterrevolution of the 2010s and 2020s, as well as popular movements including the new progressivism, Black Lives Matter, and environmentalism. These are, were, and will continue to be shaping currents.

For me, the key intersections begin with the post-World War II romance of my parents, who were born and grew up primarily as children of immigrant parents in working-class mill towns on opposite sides of the then steel capital, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The first college graduate in his small business-class family, my father served in noncombatant roles in World War II’s South Pacific theatre. My mother attended college for one year.

Upon marriage in 1947, they settled in the small town of Greensburg, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh, where they purchased a house, and where my father opened a jewelry store. I was born in a Pittsburgh hospital less than two years later, on Father’s Day, in 1949, Juneteenth before Juneteenth was generally recognized. After my first birthday, my father was diagnosed with tuberculosis and committed to a Veterans’ Administration hospital in Pittsburgh. My parents sold their house and business, and my mother and I moved into my grandmother’s small apartment near Highland Park in the East Liberty neighborhood of Pittsburgh. My earliest memories are etched in that apartment and occasional visits to see my father in the visitors’ room at the hospital.

Following my father’s recovery, we moved into a two-bedroom apartment in the Squirrel Hill section of Pittsburgh. My father joined his brother-in-law’s Braddock, Pennsylvania, jewelry business, working effectively as the manager of the Main Street store for almost the next four decades before joining a nephew’s delicatessen and catering company as manager. For the next four years, we lived in a medium-sized apartment complex on the Homestead side of the city. I began nursery school at age three and kindergarten at five, rebelling against my early classroom immersion. At that time, I was a subject in both the Salk and

Sabin polio vaccine trials that originated in the University of Pittsburgh's medical school. I was and remain resolutely pro-vaccine.

When I turned six and entered first grade in 1955, we moved into a larger two-bedroom unit in a four-plex on the other side of Squirrel Hill, one block from Linden Elementary School, which housed kindergarten through eighth grade. I spent the next eight years there, changing schools when I entered high school. Adlai Stevenson's 1956 and JFK's 1960 presidential campaigns influenced me, as did my parents' moderate Democratic liberalism. Our Conservative Jewish synagogue, the now famous Tree of Life, site of an antisemitic mass murder in 2018, was nearby. In 1963, my parents purchased a small house not far from the public high school I attended.

I graduated from Taylor Allderdice High School in 1967 with honors, National Merit and advanced mathematics commendations, and a full year's worth of Advanced Placement college credits. J. Bruce Forry, who taught me advanced-track world history in 10th grade and AP European history in 12th grade, was a fundamental influence, as was my experience on the debate team. So, too, were the campaign of Cesar Chavez for the rights of the National Farm Workers Association with its grape boycott, the civil rights movement, the student free speech movement, and the beginning of the anti-Vietnam War and the women's movement actions.

After working for the summer in a steel mill in Homestead across the river from Pittsburgh, I entered Northwestern University on scholarships and loans with second-year standing. Chicago was a special attraction. With the presidency of my first-year dormitory, my high school political activism expanded in the turbulent second half of the 1960s. The civil rights and anti-war movements were most prominent, but student-stimulated curriculum reforms and Eugene McCarthy's 1968 presidential campaign also galvanized me.

I majored in history with a minor in sociology. Meeting my future wife in 1968–1969, I decided to enter graduate studies in history rather than law school as my parents long urged. I had a cloudy vision of a future academic career. I drove a taxicab in Evanston and Chicago the summer following graduation and before beginning graduate school.

Vicki Wells and I moved to Toronto and the University of Toronto in August 1970. I began a master's degree in British and European history while Vicki pursued her remaining two years of university, shifting from anthropology to a major in geography, a popular option in Canada. We first lived in a tenement apartment in the center of the city above a convenience store not far from the university.

We fell in love with our new city. Not only was Toronto a beautiful, affordable, and inviting place, it welcomed anti-Vietnam War Americans with left-liberal politics. Ontario's Progressive Conservative Party instituted universal health care, and we became landed immigrants, not resident aliens as we would have been known had we moved to the United States from another country.

As I will discuss in Chapter Five, at the end of my first semester I shifted from studying modern British history to studying United States, Canadian, and

comparative social history after I met a young, field-transforming professor, Michael B. Katz. That association changed my life and set the course for my professional career. It laid the seeds for my future book projects and course offerings on the history of literacy and education, children and families, cities, theory and method, and interdisciplinarity. Vicki followed her Bachelor of Arts degree with a one-year Bachelor of Education degree and taught geography in a private girls' school for two years.

When I completed my dissertation in 1975, I confronted one of the worst academic job markets in American history—now forgotten. Although we wished to remain in Canada, a wave of Canadian nationalism (as well as the overhiring of too often mediocre American professors during the rapid expansion of universities in the 1960s) effectively prevented universities from hiring U.S. citizens. There was also ignorant opposition to the new quantitative social history among many Canadian historians. The most attractive job offer came from the new, avowedly interdisciplinary campus of the University of Texas at Dallas (UTD).

Hired following a Toronto airport interview, our shocking first sight of the infamous JFK assassination site city and the suburban university under construction came upon our arrival in August 1975. We rented a townhouse facing an expressway and the largest Texas Instruments facility not far from the campus that is “near”—not “at”—Dallas. Thus began a difficult transition to a professional career for me and a comfortable life for both of us.

Neither Big D, as Dallas is known, nor UTD were welcoming personally, socially, culturally, or intellectually. I encountered face-to-face antisemitism for the first time in Texas, Dallas, and UTD. These experiences have contemporary parallels but are dramatically different than 21st century currents.

UTD was interdisciplinary only in promotional rhetoric and nonessentials. In many ways, the absence of disciplinary departments had more to do with cutting expenses, including staff and administrators, than with serious intellectual activities. The extraordinary quality of the junior members of the largely novice faculty, especially those of us with multiple homes in the Schools of Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences, and General Studies, far exceeded that of the small number of tenured faculty and administrators. The majority of faculty, in other words, far outshone the minority who held superior, tenured positions. Almost none of the faculty came from Texas, the South, or the Southwest, another challenge and miscalculation.

After four years, completion and printing of my first book *The Literacy Myth* (1979c), and denial of early tenure, a National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship year at Chicago's Newberry Library provided a necessary respite, indeed an escape from what had proven to be a negative human and intellectual environment for many of the founding younger faculty. With that move came a return to a more satisfying and stable intellectual, social, cultural, and political environment. Chicago was always our “second city.”

A Spencer Fellowship, employment at the Newberry in the then pioneering Family and Community History Center for Vicki, and a one-course visiting

appointment at Loyola University allowed a second year away from UTD. Our mental, intellectual, and social life all renewed with a roster of old and new friends, marches in downtown Chicago, ethnic cuisine and deep-dish pizza, jazz and classical music, and parks and lake shore. Unfortunately, the sudden bankruptcy of the state of Massachusetts canceled the offer of an attractive alternative position at the University of Massachusetts-Boston and propelled us back to Dallas.

Returning to Dallas in August 1981, we renegotiated our relationships with the university and the city. We relocated to Old East Dallas, an older, more landscaped historic neighborhood. In defiance of Texas custom, I formed a carpool with other faculty and graduate students and went to UTD only on teaching and meeting days. We acquired a wonderful cairn terrier who we named Harrison who was part of our family for the next 16 years.

I secured tenure despite jealousies and ethnic prejudice, published several edited books, and completed *The Legacies of Literacy* (1987b) in the next few years. We purchased our first house in Old East Dallas. Combined with enlarging our social circle across and beyond the university, life became more comfortable. I created the Dallas (area) Social History Group and also worked with several local institutions and organizations, expanding the public dimensions of my scholarly and intellectual life.

My group of graduate students and close colleagues grew. Vicki developed several careers in education, public relations, architectural marketing, and communications, culminating in a long stint as manager of editorial and media production at the American Heart Association.

We wisely chose to have a family of about a dozen cats and three dogs, two of them for more than 15 years each. Although we love young children, we decided not to raise our own. We have had many loving relationships with young relatives and the children of friends and students. In retirement, we spend time with our growing body of “surrogate” grandchildren who give us some hope for the future.

Although I faced numerous challenges at UTD, I managed my relationship with it until a different intellectual and professional challenge presented itself in 1998. An offer to become director—like a deanship—of the Division of Behavioral and Cultural Studies (BCS) at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) emerged. This was another supposedly interdisciplinary grouping of programs embracing American studies, anthropology and archeology, history, and psychology in a new, suburban branch campus of a large state university. I replaced a long-serving psychologist. What I failed to anticipate was the immediate opposition and obstructionism of the numerically preponderant experimental psychologists and the purported needs of their labs—needs that seemed to trump other options for developing the division.

Happily settled in a century-old Victorian house in a central-city historic district called Monte Vista far from the suburban campus, with a new West Highland white terrier who was born in Norway with the name McDonald, with both personal difficulty and tremendous support, I weathered the storm

and resigned the directorship after less than one year. My flirtation with administration was brief.

Unlike Dallas, we thoroughly enjoyed the history, beauty, and charm of the Alamo City. We quickly built our network of friends in fair measure outside UTSA and on campus outside BCS. I supervised doctoral students in Literacy, Language, and Linguistics in the College of Education and in the English department as well as master's students in history. I also taught in the Urban Studies department where my graduate courses were cross-listed. I also developed relationships with historians at Trinity University. We continue friendships with my former physician, neighbors, and a few colleagues.

We were comfortable with our lives in the city. Vicki worked remotely for the American Heart Association, supported by a computer and telephone connected with Dallas. During our six-year tenure, I had the distinction of being elected president of the Social Science History Association (SSHA) for its 25th anniversary year in 2000 and the next year was awarded an honorary Doctor of Philosophy degree from Sweden's Linköping University for my "contributions to knowledge." It was a surprise when, late in 2003, Ohio State University's (OSU) English department asked if I were interested in their new, endowed, Ohio Eminent Scholar in Literacy Studies position.

We were not actively looking to relocate and had never considered Columbus or Ohio. But I knew that UTSA had not turned out to be an ideal intellectual home for me. OSU's all-but-certain offer was attractive professionally and a new challenge. A joint appointment in history as well as English was proposed immediately, with history voting even more quickly than English on my appointment. The intellectual opportunity for developing a university-wide literacy studies program with genuine support was simply too attractive.

I agreed to visit OSU early in 2004, present a public lecture, meet prospective colleagues, and briefly tour the city. As an old friend from both the Newberry Library and the SSHA in the department of history emailed me, "the position is yours to lose." The visit was mutually satisfying, and I accepted the position after routine negotiations.

Another August, another major relocation, this time with two moving vans for our furniture and my books and the transition of McDonald, our Westie. He adapted quickly to his new historic house in the attractive University District, a 10-minute walk to my English department office, and the more temperate climate. By September, I began a new and final institutional adventure.

The 13 years spent at OSU before my unexpected retirement were challenging. The history department was outwardly welcoming but practically distant, except for a modest number of old friends, some new colleagues, and graduate students. Some of the latter were quite interested in literacy's history. My courses were cross-listed—some with the education department—and I developed a graduate student population from English, history, education, dance, and the arts, among other areas.

The English department as a whole never really accepted a card-carrying interdisciplinary historian into its ranks. For the most part, the rhetoric and composition group, to which literacy and I were added as the new “L” to “RC,” did not warm to my scholarship and my positioning outside of “rhet/comp.” As with other large English departments, the lines between literature, criticism, rhetoric and composition, and creative writing were rough. With a few important exceptions, most of my closest intellectual relationships and friendships came from the literature faculty and, outside the department, from literacy studies or university-wide, senior scholar committees and campus reform efforts.

Beyond maintaining my scholarly production and supervising a new generation of graduate students across disciplines, my greatest achievement in that period was the creation and direction of LiteracyStudies@OSU, a university-wide—and sometimes external—interdisciplinary initiative. With the irreplaceable contribution of my assistant for 13 years, Susan Hanson, I managed to do what colleagues and administrators deemed impossible. Between successes amid different and variable structures, it was the intellectual and institutional culmination of a lengthy career and my life with literacy.

We involved hundreds of faculty, graduate students, staff, some undergraduates, and others from the community in a variety of working groups, workshops, forums, presentations, lectures, and conferences including a landmark international conference for graduate students organized by graduate students. We brought dozens of guest lecturers from North and South America and Europe to OSU. We engaged individuals from almost every college and most departments in the massive university—from the arts, humanities, and social sciences to engineering, veterinary science, agriculture, and many from medicine, health sciences, and the natural sciences.

Among our most successful programs were the GradSem, a graduate student monthly seminar, and multiple-year topical working groups on literacy in translation, literacy in science and medicine, literacy in dance, and history of the book. I am proud of the number of students who came together from across the university, led by but not limited to English, education, history, and the arts. I worked with doctoral students broadly across campus not restricted to those in my primary areas. I learned from all of them. I remain in close contact with many of them. LiteracyStudies@OSU gained national and international attention.

LiteracyStudies@OSU ended in 2016-2017 when the university reneged on promised funding for our program’s indispensable associate director and our basic activities. That was the final stone in a crumbling wall that willfully contradicted OSU’s slogans about advancing interdisciplinarity and cross-campus initiatives. This reversal led to my retiring several years earlier than I had anticipated doing. Not surprisingly, a few years later, there is no active element of literacy studies within the English department. Even the name of my endowed chair was changed (without the permission of the state funding agency).

In retirement, after a transitional period, I now occupy a new niche in what I call “public” rather than university-based education. In ways that will become clear, this book is an outgrowth of that niche and my surprising memory recall in the face of aging.

As I discuss in the first chapter, my retirement activities focus on writing for larger publics in general through targeted letters to editors and opinion essays on a variety of topics including but not limited to my scholarly areas; speaking (virtually) on NPR and in-person in public forums locally, nationally, and internationally; advising newspaper reporters and NPR stations on key issues; counseling elected representatives in Columbus, Ohio, and Washington, DC; consulting with Columbus city councilors; assisting members of the state board of education and various advocacy groups; and continuing to work with other scholars and students. I delight in cross-generational relationships with high school and undergraduate students without classroom or gradebook involvement.

I continue to publish scholarly books and articles but reach out to a larger audience in part through open-access publishing. Drawing directly on my expertise in literacy, children and youth, cities, education, and interdisciplinarity, I have developed special foci on the nondebate over critical race theory, opposition to book bans, and urban issues, as well as a range of university-related topics. I am using my skills and knowledge without dealing with universities directly. My life with literacy continues apace but in new spaces.

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This book is a self-conscious experiment in critical memory and its related literacy(ies) and their historical contextualization. Intersectionality and interdisciplinarity stand out among its watch words (for more on these terms, see Jaume Aurell, 2015, and the literature cited there—Aurell’s comments are relevant, but his notion of “interventional” differs from my constructions and applications, and I do not see “paradox,” “refashioning,” or “iconoclastic” where he does; see also Carolyn Steedman, 1992; Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Barbara Laslett, 2008; and Sigurdur Gylfi Magnússon, 2021, with an excellent bibliography).

My Life With Literacy differs from other recent academic autobiographies. I think, for example, of two noted 1960s-centered accounts, one by Mickey Flacks and Dick Flacks (2018), *Making History/Making Blintzes: How Two Red Diaper Babies Found Each Other and Discovered America*, and one by Paul Lauter (2020), *Our Sixties: An Activist’s History*. Both of those important accounts pivot closely around their authors’ experience as 1960s activists and the lasting impact of those engagements.

I intend no slight in contrasting my book with these works or with others that center lives around one complex set of experiences as a single pivot point. The Flacks’ (2018) passionate book—told alternatively by each of them in each chapter—is a family history: it’s about their families of origin and their own romance and marriage set in a dynamic political context. It is a political romance. Lauter

(2020) focused more closely on his 1960s experiences and the ways in which they shaped his future as a professor and a citizen. The Flacks and Lauter are my seniors by a decade.

Lewis H. Siegelbaum's (2019) *Stuck on Communism: Memoir of a Russian Historian* takes an instructively different approach. *Stuck on Communism* is an impressive intellectual biography of a scholarly journey into and through Russian communist history, not a full autobiography. Siegelbaum and I are the same age, with similar adolescent and university experiences but not similar families of origin or fields of study.

In Siegelbaum's (2019) words, *Stuck on Communism* is a biography of Soviet history written by Anglophones. Equally importantly, it is an illustration that "no matter what historians take as their subject, they are always writing about themselves." That realization is only occasionally recognized by scholars in memoirs or other writings. It is even less often fully assimilated. These autobiographies take that acknowledgment as their point of orientation. So do I (for other relevant examples of academic autobiography, see Linda Mercadante, 2006, and David Martin, 2013; see also Bruce F. Pauley, 2016, who combined two centuries of family and personal history with the history of Volga Germans).

My Life With Literacy: The Continuing Education of a Historian is different. It spans 75 years and encompasses five universities and six cities. The 1960s are part of my story, along with earlier and later, continuously shaping and reshaping periods. So are my scholarly periods of being "stuck" on the histories of literacy, children and youth, cities, theory and method, interdisciplinarity, and now "public education" and "teaching outside the box."

This book searches for and explicates intersections and their consequences in multiple, complex, connective relationships across my full life span. A life course perspective, learned during my research, teaching, and writing about "growing up," guides my understanding (see my *Conflicting Paths*, 1995a). So does my understanding of how literacy changes over time and across individuals and cultures. From age 22 to the present, I have been a pioneering scholar in the history of literacy and literacy studies as a field (see later chapters for references to my writings in these areas).

My years as an urbanist also shape my understandings. They begin with growing up in a city, Pittsburgh, a place in dramatic transition from "steel town" to a never fully realized "new city"; then living in the Chicago suburb of Evanston but frequenting the city while studying at Northwestern University; living in Toronto while in graduate school at the central-city University of Toronto; and then teaching at three public universities in Dallas and San Antonio, Texas, and Columbus, Ohio.

This book's explorations derive from and reflect retrospectively on my first book *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth-Century City* (1979c), then *Undisciplining Knowledge: Interdisciplinarity in the Twentieth Century* (2015a), and finally *Searching for Literacy: The Social and Intellectual Origins of Literacy Studies* (2022e). My own paths connect them.

My Life With Literacy explicates and interrelates the simple and the complex, the straightforward and the contradictory in the shaping of a life over more than 70 years. The principal factors, which become clearer to me almost every passing day, are the *personal* from my family of origin to friendships and collegial relationships and my 55 years with Vicki Graff; the *political* broadly defined to include experience, practice, ideology, and theory; the *academic*, including the institutional, pedagogical, and scholarly; and the crucial roles of *places* in which I have lived and worked.

The book begins with its final phase. My retirement thus far is an outcome of the following chapters and the forces discussed there. From an ending still in composition, I follow chronologically from early childhood through my six cities, two universities as a student, and three universities where I long served in a variety of capacities. I end with reflections from my final book on literacy, *Searching for Literacy: The Social and Intellectual Origins of Literacy Studies* (2022e).