Beyond the Mnemonic with Ephemeral Shopping Lists
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I find them scattered about the grocery store parking lot, stuck to the bottom of my shopping cart, and blowing in the wind down the sidewalks where I walk. I stoop to pick them up, study them, and then wonder at their sameness and differences. Precious jottings, shopping lists are cherished and then, once used, abandoned as so many spent fuel cells once powering task-minded shopping adventures.

Boneless Pork Chops
Milk
Red Potatoes
Dessert

appears at the top of a discarded green PostIt (figure 1), as if the author of this list had planned to list many more items but ran out of ideas upon reaching "dessert."

Rosemary bread or something Seya would like
Small bananas — 3 ish
Fat free — acidophilus

begins another much longer list (figure 2). I found this one at the cooperative natural health foods store where I used to shop in Seattle, and am not surprised to see that "Tofu" is the last word on this list or that the author used stationary from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

We compose ephemera every day in the form of disposable to-do lists, directions to unvisited destinations, notes to people we know or have never met, and shopping lists of this kind. This kind of writing powers our ordered experiences, as ephemeral texts chart encounters before being rendered useless. Collected, disposable shopping lists create an archive of everyday artifacts that we can peruse for traces of the everyday. Why not more ephemera in our sanctioned collections? Reading through my own collection of found shopping lists, what surfaces are an understudied group of literate practices and conventions, hinting at how disposable writing is itself structured in order to initiate itself upon the structures of daily living. It is by producing the short-lived that our day-to-day becomes comprised of structured but forgettable and repeatable spurts. Puzzling through the importance of graffiti in early-modern London, Max Thomas writes "Graffiti gets eradicated ... But this lacunae is not due to some failure or refusal of historical imagination whereby it does not occur to anyone to preserve such writing for future scrutiny. Rather it is an integral function of the text's instrumentality. Like much broadcast media, they
serve a phatic purpose, and not simply a communicative one.\textsuperscript{1} The instrumentality of shopping lists is equally ephemeral, and this is no accident: it is part of the genre's logic.

To examine the regulatory, patterning, self-disciplining functions of textual ephemera, I am limiting this discussion to a small collection of found shopping lists. It is not that I don't see value in (and find and collect) other types of notes and lists, but shopping lists are particularly provocative ephemera. It is not unreasonable to say that found shopping lists perpetuate and repeat the pervasive extent to which, as Lefebvre writes, we "purchase the ability to feel good about ourselves."\textsuperscript{2} In addition, I want to suggest that found shopping lists remember, too, practices of self-imposed regimentation enacted through vernacular writing. While found to-do lists (figure 3) can archive certain intensities of task-mindedness, among other things, and found interpersonal notes (figure 4) can preserve the sometimes ephemeral nature of high-stakes communication, I want to focus on shopping lists in part because we generally think we know how they function already. Shopping lists are not only mnemonic, though that is how we imagine their import.

Considering vernacular shopping lists as ephemera makes available for analysis the significance of conventional and patterned discourse features in the lists. I read the shopping lists I have recovered as not only mnemonic texts, but as structuring the everyday, foreclosing encounters favored by such curators of the unanticipated as the Situationist and more contemporary randomized forms of experiencing urban landscapes embodied in such practices as skateboarding\textsuperscript{3} and multidirectional, task-less internet surfing. By setting aside, for the moment, the many other genres of handwritten ephemera—handwritten directions and interpersonal notes, sidewalk art and graffiti—I intend to augment the predominant interpretation of shopping lists as mnemonic aids in order to then explain why I think we see shopping lists as only doing one thing: helping us remember. By acknowledging the mnemonic capacity while insisting there is more to this kind of writing, I want to learn what such ephemera foreclose through maintaining short lived predictable experiences.

\textsuperscript{1} Thomas, Max W. "Urban Semiosis in Early Modern London." \textit{Genre}, no. 30 (1997): 11.
Sue Walker's book, *Typography and Everyday Life*,\(^4\) demonstrates that even the most mundane texts—signage, public notices, announcements—adhere to genre conventions and have elaborate histories with relationships to prescriptivism. Walker claims that layout, design, and typographic elements can and should be considered significant within a critical linguistic framework, as critical linguistics attends to both systematic structures and social context. Vernacular texts we encounter on the street or in a marketplace are not separate from their published and institutionally sanctioned counterparts. For Walker, preserving and analyzing texts in their original form is also essential: to retype a found note or swatch of graffiti for analysis is, for her, to deprive it of vital aspects of its expressive content that exist inextricably in the original. This is a way of looking at ephemera in which graphic traits make a text, as does the particularity of paper and other forms of materiality.\(^5\) I see this in every shopping list that I find.

Because of the internalized nature of genre knowledge, we don't have to "think twice" about how to compose a simple shopping list or wonder what work such a text will do in the world once it is written. In the past twenty years, rhetoricians in particular have expanding the understanding of genre as merely taxonomic, or as consisting of discernible text types, to theorizing genre as consisting of "social action" in typified rhetorical situations.\(^6\) In the case of shopping lists, the conventionalized aspects of the genre (or the *rhetoric* comprising the genre) is variable. However, the *action* of the genre, as I will go on to describe, is unified. This is why, though shopping lists do not all look alike, they perform similar feats of social action—not all of it obvious.

To first explore the rhetorical features of the shopping lists that I have found (figures 1-16), I will list some of the conventions in the genre. Said another way, these are the habits of mind authors adopt in order to create their textual and experiential ephemera. Debra Hawhee defines learning as more than a mere acquisition of skills, but the adoption of "a dispositional


\(^5\) Material specific analysis (MSA) is described by Catherine Hayles in *Writing Machines* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

\(^6\) The first significant rethinking of genre in current rhetorical theory was by Carolyn R. Miller with her article "Genre as Social Action." Along with additional theorizations of genre, Miller's article appears in *Genre and the New Rhetoric*, Aviva Freedman and Peter Medway, eds. (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994).
capacity for iteration,"^{7}$ and it is the iterative list-making disposition$^{8}$ that is encoded in every shopping list through the recirculation of conventional elements.

How to Make a Shopping List

Begin by repurposing a scrap of previously used paper. Alternately, use a Post-it® note or smallish pad. Small pieces of paper are preferred over larger ones, as shopping lists should materially signify their transitory nature. It is only a list. Calligraphic or otherwise ornate handwriting is un-conventional in this genre for similar reasons. Write quickly in pencil or pen; approximate spellings are acceptable. It is not necessary to title your list, though a header such as "Grocery List" is not un-conventional. Knowing how this genre circulates (its "social action") should make this obvious, as the writer is often though not always the only reader of a shopping list. On the list, compile the names of content items, such as the "Boneless Pork Chops" or "Tequila." This should be a compilation of purchasable desires. On occasion, content items can be organized by type, under sub-headers such as "food" or "music." Grouping list items by type is not necessary. List items are to be displayed in vertical lists, with each content or agenda item on a separate line. This convention is not negotiable. Placement of a dash ($-$) or equivalent bullet-marker before each list item is common but not ubiquitous. It is common for authors in this genre to capitalize each word on the list, though this is not strictly required. Capitalization is an emphasis marker while helping to indicate the absence of grammatical word order in what are lists of titles, not sentences. Thorough scratch-outs, where to list-item is entirely effaced, indicate a change of mind; cross-outs that leave a list item intelligible indicate accomplishment and successful procurement. Odd jottings and scribble-art are encouraged in this form, but not required. Terminal question and exclamation marks are conventional in the genre to associate listed items with doubt (in figure 7: "cheese?"; in figure 16: "Hank Williams III?") or certainty, respectively.

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This is ephemera as streams of consciously articulated desire, as lists of available satisfaction, as structured ways of signifying accomplishment, as compulsivity nurtured, made instrumental, and then disposed of.

Shopping lists are by no means the only form of everyday disposable writing that is (if only loosely) rule governed and conventional. Creators of garage sale posters follow basic conventions within that genre (placing the signs on well-traveled routes, employing arrows, indicating dates and duration of the sale); lost dog posters include "missing since" data, names, descriptions, and have the added element of an appeal to sympathy, enacted both visually and using narrative; and the elaborate and information rich QSL cards exchanged internationally by ham radio operators have their own includables, design features, and shared elements. In all of these genres, given a general absence of regulation by a central authority figure invested with power (like a teacher or boss), conventionality is loosely interpreted by composers individually rendering their texts. In another everyday genre, dialogic restroom graffiti, multiple participants collaboratively compose detailed exchanges between one another using patterned conventions. Participants in dialogic restroom graffiti exchanges conventionally cite previous utterances using connecting lines or strategic placement, for instance, and display a range of effacement maneuvers to help dialogic exchanges make meaning in their context. That all of this ephemeral everyday writing is conventional on multiple levels and is composed with the knowledge that the writing will have a short life span is particularly poignant given the uniqueness of the documents and individuality of design. What is ultimately discarded can be highly personal, even beautiful.

Shopping lists involve writers in the production of documents that not only list elements, but frequently do so with style and flair. All of this is soon disposed of. In figure 6, we see plans for a feast ("P. Farm Cookies, Pizza Hut Supreme Combo or Peproni") accompanied by a doodled bouquet. In figure 5, there is not only a list of consumables but a sequenced reminder of how to put the items to use in "Tequila —> Limes —> Ice —> Salt."

We tell ourselves that shopping lists are aids to memory that keep us from going home from the store with the "Stove Top" but no "chicken boobs" (figure 7) or the "Boboli" without

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the "Pizza Sauce" (figure 8). I would be silly to claim that shopping lists do not help us remember what we want, but I am asserting that in doing this they do more, and it is through examining the genre's additional functions (or the "social action" associated with the genre) that we can see the importance of ephemera of this kind. By "remembering what we want" this ephemera contains and renders static desire. Not only does such textual ephemera regulate, but by being disposable the genre denies its own regulatory significance in structuring the everyday.

By keeping us "on track" leading up to, during, and throughout consumer encounters, shopping lists curtail meandering engagements of the kind celebrated by Baudelaire and other advocates of desire-swept urban experiences. Baudelaire's flâneur moves about town following momentary intrigues and stimulations on the senses and intellect, and it is not that shopping lists entirely short circuit flâneur-consumerism, as the sway they have over us is seldom totalizing, but bullet lists certainly nudge us toward task-minded shopping and experience. The Situationists revive Baudelaire's celebration of the incidental in their political and artistic campaigns of the 1950s and '60s, again calling for concomitant interactions with the city and creation of texts that abandon predetermination, regimentation, and predictability. The Situationist's dérive, most often translated as "the drift" or "drifting," involves taking subtle readings of and being swept along by ambiance and what is immediately appealing. Shopping lists agitate against such ruminating, unpredictable movements and encounters, instead monitoring the wanderer out in a landscape that poses certain consumer perils. The monitoring is, of course, self imposed and self created, at least partially. In a sense, what is ephemeral in found shopping lists is twofold: there are the lists themselves that are discarded, and then there are the list-minded and list-orchestrated consumer adventures that are, as experiences, ephemeral and encoded in the notes as they pass out of active use and circulation. Shopping lists work to rein in the randomized encounter, the solicitation of present desires, and the potential for non-acquisitive readings of consumer landscapes. List in hand, the habitué in Target is unlikely to experience Target as a museum, as a place of color swatches and soundscapes, as a place to be repelled from or drawn into and cast about in.

There are many times throughout the course of daily living when we defer to texts to guide us, but seldom are those texts of our own creation. We defer to the manual when fixing our

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11 Discussed by Craig Dworkin in Reading the Illegible (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press) 3-30.
and instructions when assembling a new desk or chair. Cooks frequently rely on cookbooks, gardeners on gardening books, and outdoor enthusiasts on such texts as field guides and maps. And as we all know, the proscriptions found in these genres are as often adhered to as they are flouted, loosely interpreted, or ignored. Some follow recipes, other use them only to the extent that they diverge from the regulatory text in the creation of something innovative and personally meaningful. Some of the more patterned experiences in the everyday rely on texts more than others, however, and at the most fundamental level it is this adoption of a reference orientation in daily practice that is remaindered, signaled, and left behind as a residue in ephemeral shopping lists. Cast aside as meaningless, discarded, this reference orientation—a disposition that divests users of authority and decision making—remains in every shopping list despite our insistence in throwing every used list away. In their dispersal, shopping lists become ephemera that chart fine contours of task-mindedness enacted through the use of conventions in one of the many genres we curate and maintain.