



# Jac

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**Editorial Policy** *JAC* provides a forum for scholars interested in theoretical approaches to the study of rhetoric, writing, multiple literacies, and the politics of difference. As a forum for interdisciplinary inquiry, the journal features articles that explore intersections between theoretical work in rhetoric and writing studies, broadly conceived, and theoretical work in other fields. Also featured are articles on cultural studies and critical literacy; visual rhetorics, including film and media; rhetorical approaches to literary study; workplace literacies; computers and cyberculture; and the politics of higher education. *JAC* publishes articles on pedagogical theory but does not accept articles that merely describe classroom practices.

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## RELOCATING THE PERSONAL

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*Barbara Kamler*  
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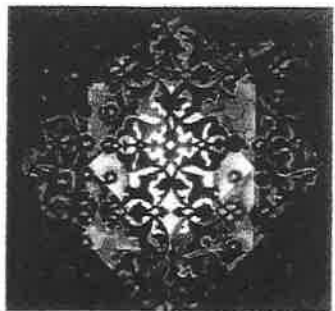
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with a foreword by Michelle Fine

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## Textual Performance: Where the Action at a Distance Is

Charles Bazerman

Rhetorical, genre, and activity approaches to writing have accomplished important work in focusing attention on what texts do *in situ* and what people do with each other through the mediation of texts.<sup>1</sup> These approaches understand persuasion, influence, and the accomplishment of acts through the transmission of texts among writers and readers. Textual influence is sometimes seen within an individual situation, as in the rhetorical analysis of specific texts with their social or political consequences; sometimes it is understood within classes of activities and situations associated with a genre; and sometimes it is seen within regularly occurring interrelations among texts and actors within activity systems. These understandings of texts as accomplishing specialized acts in context, however, have militated against examining texts as conveyers of meanings, interpretable from the signs on the page. In this essay I develop an approach to meaning mediated by texts that is consistent with situated interactional accounts of writing, to account for what a text means to its writers and readers as well as what it does.

### Meaning in Texts or Mediated by Texts?

Traditionally, theories and practices of textual interpretation have assumed meaning to be immanent in the text, and thus the meaning could be definitively extracted by skilled reading practices. Definitive meanings of scriptural, literary, legal, or philosophic texts were sought through various hermeneutic enterprises, giving rise to several text-interpreting disciplines and professions. In such hermeneutic enterprises, texts (or at least the best of texts) were treated as carefully controlled and crafted, finely-grained and well designed. The meanings of exemplary texts

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would be found to be deeply consistent, insightful, and truthful if one inquired deeply enough. Charles Peirce in the late nineteenth century, however, pointed out that every act of interpretation depends on the interpretant, who operates from his or her own perspective. Martin Heidegger further noted that meaning was created only within the reader's life-world and was dependent on subjective positions and personal contingencies of experience. The hermeneutic circle, that suggests that every interpretive meaning is based on earlier sets of interpretive meanings, implies that there is no fixed, solid position from which a single, authoritative meaning of a text could be determined. Much of modern interpretive theory has struggled with this scandal of the lack of certainty and fixity of meaning.

Viewing texts as mediating situated activity, consistent with the post-Heideggerian view of hermeneutics, places meaning within the life-world of actors. In the text-as-mediator view, meaning is embedded in the activities of the participants and their construction of the situation and activities; thus meaning is interactionally created between text and writer or reader—and ultimately between writer and reader through the skeletal mediation of the textual artifact. But although the problematics of this new view of meaning have been well explicated in literary and composition theory, the specific mechanisms and substance of meanings generally have been put aside, as we have chased after what words accomplish, how they influence, or coordinate, or construct. In this inquiry into what texts do, we have relied on meaning to be somehow transmitted so that the influence or action could be accomplished through the symbolic medium. We in literary and composition studies, however, have less often attempted to explain how meaning or the construction of shared meaning was accomplished, what function meaning served in the activity, or what those meanings would be.

The situated construction of congruent meanings has, nonetheless, been a major theme in linguistic anthropology, phenomenological sociology, and linguistic pragmatics. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of chronotopes also provides some strong directions for considering how genres frame meaning landscapes and populate them with recognizable objects, actors, and events. In "Singular Utterances," I have considered the genre-framed ontology of tax returns: what gets reported in what form; how those reportable items are situated within and accountable to other documentary systems; how they appear in specific forms that have meaning for the tax system; how these items are then made operative within the orderly sequence of the tax forms; and how the highly interest-laden rhetorical

struggle to represent meanings in personally favorable ways forms a site of local rhetorical activity through meaning-making. Although grounded in daily monetary transactions, meanings of the tax system gain disembodied abstraction as they enter into the financial calculations of the accountants and constructs such as *net taxable income* are created. Indeed much of the reading of tax forms is done not by humans but by machines that read and recalculate numbers, make intertextual checks of reported numbers, and identify reports that exceed typical parameters for various categories (for example, charitable deductions above a certain percentage of one's income).

Meanings of more conventionally read texts also gain a kind of disembodiment in the imaginative reconstruction of readers. But the imaginative reconstructions of readers are evanescent phenomena, ever evolving as we move through a text or retrospectively look back on texts previously read; it is there only as we attend to the text and only in the way we attend to the text for the moment. In such attentional processes, meaning appears to be an individual construction, triggered, but not constrained by, the text to which we attribute the meaning. The problem to be addressed here is how can mediating texts serve to coordinate writers' and readers' meaning-making processes so as to coordinate the resulting meanings as we attend to the same documents. How does attention to documents begin to insulate us from our separately experienced here and now to orient us toward shared mentally constructed spaces, resembling, but never fully becoming, the idealist world of Tlön imagined by the fiction writer Jorge Luis Borges?

### Worlds of Ideas within Embodied Material Worlds

In the story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," Borges writes that on the planet Tlön Bishop Berkeley's arguments carry sway, according to *A First Encyclopedia of Tlön volume XI Hlaer to Jangn*:

The nations of that planet are congenitally idealist. Their language, with its derivatives—religion, literature, and metaphysics—presupposes idealism. For them, the world is not a concurrence of objects in space, but a heterogeneous series of independent acts. It is serial and temporal, but not spatial. (23)

Things cease to exist when they are no longer looked at; the spatial exists only in the moment and does not persist over time. Objects in mirrors vanish when they are not looked at, as do things behind the back—though

both reappear the next time one looks. Existence is a psychological process co-occurring with attention.

On Earth most people believe that objects persist in space even when we are not looking at them, and that written texts continue to exist even when not being read. We also believe that books exist independently of the acts of imagination that construct and reconstruct meaning—ink stays on the paper and bound paper sits on the library shelf (even if we can't find a book when we need it).<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the text has no meaning, no existence as a communicative medium, until someone reads it and makes sense of it. In this respect the texts do not exist meaningfully if we do not somehow have them in mind, activated in some cognitive operation.<sup>3</sup> The meaningful text is always a performance, whether by the writer or the reader.

Rhetoric's concern for individual sense-making is expressed in such topics as the nature and role of enthymemes, the character and disposition of audiences, figures of thought, and the psychological underpinnings of arrangement. Persuasion, as a movement of the mind, depends on individual sense-making even though this dependency isn't always made explicit for analytic scrutiny. Rhetoric's attitude toward sense-making is shaped by rhetoric's origins in oral performance, which leaves no artifact (except for the occasional script or transcription that Plato has so much fun with in the *Phaedrus*). Oral rhetorical performance confronts rhetors with embodied audiences whose minds they have to move, and confronts audiences with embodied rhetors who appear to be thinking about one thing and then a moment later thinking about something else. The fleeting meaning held in the rhetor's mind communicated to the audience transfigure and unite them both momentarily, to be soon dissipated as thought and attention turn to various elsewheres. Such is the flow of life noted by the sophists.

### **Making Sense of Literate Interactions**

The earliest principled attempts to develop a literate rhetoric—in the medieval *ars dictaminis* (see Murphy)—carry that same concern for socially located sense-making, even though transmitted over distances of space and time. The *ars dictaminis* advise embedding the communication within social hierarchies and situations so that requests appear within well-defined social circumstances and relations, maximizing the reader's favorable sense-making orientation toward the letter and the letter writer. Proper modes of address invoke and respect institutional role hierarchies and evoke socially shaped benevolence. Other tactics strengthen the

benevolence of the relationship, the good will of the receiver, and the respect granted to the reader, to make more likely a favorable reading. Further, narration serves to establish the situation—building an interpretive frame by placing writer and receiver within social positions and events that construct interpretant sense-making standpoints. Finally, arrangement is presented as psychologically motivated, modified to fit the particulars of the letter situation (see Perelman; Bazerman, "Letters").

Eighteenth-century rhetorics, guiding participation in newly powerful print culture, are very much concerned with the problem of how the writer can use description to evoke sympathetic sense-making by the reader. Adam Smith, for example, caught up in the psychological conundrums posed by Locke, Hume, and Berkeley, sees sympathy at the heart of community, communication, and ethics (Bazerman, "Money"). Equally Joseph Priestley sees the force of description in sharing the experiences and perceptions of humankind so as to transcend the limitations and idiosyncracies of individual souls (Bazerman, "How"). This mid-eighteenth-century concern for evoking understanding through sympathetic reconstruction led to belleslettrism, as literature became the mechanism by which we were to understand each other's perspective, and it developed our sympathetic sense-making imagination. Much of literary criticism and literary education can be understood as attempts to increase the ability to reperform and thereby understand and appreciate the original authorial performance. This is why the intentional fallacy and reader response were such scandals, undermining the stability of the entire sense-making project and its allied vision of social order through cultivation of the individual's sensibilities. Those scandalous ideas also undermined the bases of the art of expert reading, for any paddler might share in the swan's heritage (to reverse Yeats' hierarchy in "Among School Children.")

The notion of the imaginative experience built into the literary text to be reperformed by the expert reader also carried the implication that all texts that did not embody or evoke these forms of literary imagination were less interesting, hardly requiring sense-making and certainly not expert sense-making. Nonliterary texts were considered obvious in their meanings and their interpretive procedures, if not totally transparent, requiring no serious reader with an educated imagination and sensibility.

Even the higher reaches of nonliterary or nonhumanistic disciplinary literate practices were largely treated as unimaginative. There was a minor tradition of practitioners of high prestige professions asserting their special imaginative relations with the world—the legal imagination,

the sociological imagination, the scientific imagination, the technological imagination, the mathematical imagination—but this is usually presented as something of a surprise and an argument for recognition. We rarely hear of the dentist's imagination, the accountant's imagination, the bureaucrat's imagination, or the merchandiser's imagination—except perhaps as a joke or a criticism of bourgeois life. Does this mean that these folk also don't need to work hard at re-performing the meaning of the texts they read or creating a world of meaning for their own texts?

### Sense-Making in Everyday Life

In the wake of Heidegger, Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann examined the phenomenology of everyday life—that is, how it is that people make sense of the world they live in, including the texts they read. Carolyn Miller's use of Schutz and Luckmann's phenomenological concept of social typification, for example, helped reveal genre as a mode of social action and social sense-making (“Genre”). Students of Schutz have also turned to genre as a vehicle of typification (Bergmann and Luckmann, for example).

Several parallel terms in contemporary micro-interactional studies of language-in-use point toward the typification of communicative circumstances as a basis of creating meaningful social performance, of manipulating the possible meanings to be enacted, and of providing the basis for participant understanding. Erving Goffman's concept of footing (that is, the stance a participant takes towards an utterance) points to the ways in which the nature of an event may be transformed by participants' framing of the event. Each different potential footing for an event brings to bear interpretive and participatory sets of understandings and identifies a repertoire of expressive tools that may be appropriately drawn on. Gumperz has suggested we use context cues to signal the kind of event going on, what footing we are communicating upon—and thus the dramatic frame in which we are continually improvising our actions and in which we interpret the actions of others. However, the footing or phenomenological context of a situation is not automatically established uniformly for all participants. Even from the perspective of a single participant, sense-making may be multilayered, heterogeneous, and opportunistic, using any clue at hand to work one's way to a usable set of meanings and orientations to events. Gumperz has been particularly concerned with mismatches of contextual understandings, particularly as these mismatches are culturally patterned, so that we do not recognize that the person we are talking to is engaged in a very different situational

drama than the one we imagine we are part of. As well, the conversation analytic notion of the floor (that is, the group framing of the communicative circumstances) highlights the contention or negotiation that occurs to establish any one person's control of the turn and the temporary definition of the situation. The situational definition that momentarily holds the floor provides an opportunity space or participation frame for actions and meanings (Hanks, *Language*).

New remarks not only add to and redirect the discussion, they reframe and affect the meanings for all that came before. As the conversation analysts are fond of saying, meaning is created in the uptake, or how people respond to the utterances. Thus, meaning is what people take to be the meaning and which they then react to in their further utterances and actions (Sacks). In their perlocutionary force, as Searle might say, utterances get taken as specific kinds of acts, as things having been done that then populate the intertextual landscape for ensuing utterances (see Bazerman, *Languages*; Latour and Woolgar). This emergent, retrospectively established context of things having been said and acts having been felicitously accomplished, provides an intertextual equivalent of *kairos* (see Swales; Bazerman, “Intertextual,” as well as Miller, “*Kairos*”; Bazerman, “Whose”).

What is relevantly attended to as part of the context is also at play. References in discourse index elements of context (including the framing social contexts that define the footing) and even construct the relevant physical and social places within which the talk occurs. References identify what is salient in the ambient world and what are the boundaries that organize local space—what counts as *here* or *there*, *inside* or *outside*, *us* or *them* (Hanks, *Referential*). Even such luminous and linguistically marked objects as lighted “Exit” signs vanish from view as we enter into the footing of the seminar, only to reappear if we are summoned to an emergency footing by an alarm. Relative distance, direction, and time are particularly noticeable as plastic, but indeed the whole world that is discursively held in imagination and reconstructed as the landscape of our linguistic action is constructed in the talk.

In face-to-face communication, all this adds up to a co-construction of context, reality, and meaning system, using socially typified frames and culturally laden symbols that allow each participant to make sense of a potentially “sensible” projection of meaning and the realities within which those meanings take place. This co-construction is constantly evolving through interaction that makes relevant the sense-making of all the participants. People literally collaboratively perform the world they

are making sense of, the world they attend to, the world they are acting within. The social and material world humans are aware of are constantly being remade in the changing uptakes, footings, floors, frames, and indexical references. It is within this evolving world that thought collectives emerge, working in characteristic thought styles (Fleck).<sup>4</sup>

### **The Socially-Imagined Self**

This performed world of meaningful activity is where language use supports elaborate forms of social life in pursuit of human ends, wherein roles and memory and ideas are complexly, but recognizably and reliably, produced among the various participants. Within interactionally produced worlds, we also come to see ourselves within the uptake of others. We note the sense they make of our utterances and the effect our behaviors have on others. Out of such observations we make sense of ourselves as social beings. We use this social sense of self to shape, monitor, and evaluate our own behaviors as well as to formulate a sense of identity. This theme of seeing ourselves as others see us was a major theme of the Scottish moralists and Adam Smith's moral communicative theory and even his economics, which depended on persuading all actors to pursue their impulses through the more easily intersubjectively understood symbol of money (see Bazerman, "Money"). Interestingly, Schutz's inquiries into social typification were precisely in response to trying to understand the behaviors of others in financial dealings. For him, the market prices did not provide adequate information to evaluate people's intentions and motives in the marketplace, so he needed to return to the issue of how we can reliably see ourselves and others so as to produce anticipatable outcomes of interactions (Prendergast).

The theme of forming identity and self in social interaction, by taking the part of the other, became a cornerstone of such American pragmatist philosophers and social scientists as George Herbert Mead, John Dewey, and Harry Stack Sullivan. They viewed coming to our sense of self through others' responses to be an essential part of our learning to communicate and participate effectively with others. We perform the self and come to understand the performing self as our identity. Sullivan takes this self constructed-in-social-interaction-for-the-purposes-of-interaction even further to find in it the source of our anxiety system which influences our social participations throughout life (see Bazerman, "Anxiety").

### **Places of Literate Interaction**

So much for the performance of ourselves in the face-to-face world. Written communication potentially removes our place of interaction from the here and now that we deictically construct out of our immediate physical and social environment. Over the last five thousand years, written communication, with its print and electronic elaborations, has enabled us to create nonphysical places for encountering the meanings of others, whether dead or not yet born, whether in the next seat or on the other side of the world. However, because we may escape physical co-presence, the temporally experienced shared here and now does not mean we move performativity from a constructed social space, to leave us with pure, disembodied meanings. Humans and meanings are not constructed that way. We have no sense-making mechanism apart from our orienting toward a situation and activity, using culturally available tools.

Some textually-mediated interactions clearly remain in the here and now, as when in a meeting I quietly pass a note to the person next to me, commenting on those who are publicly holding forth. Or if I were a contestant on a game show, I might have to write my answer to a spoken question on some medium to be exposed to the audience. In these cases the words are written, transmitted, and read in the co-presence of writer and audience and within a shared set of circumstances, which the comments are part of or refer to. In these cases, many of the meaning alignment processes of talk can be played out in immediate interaction. Nonetheless, the presence of the written artifact available to be reread later in different circumstances can make the utterance accountable in ways that the evanescent spoken word would not. The note may be open to malign interpretations if it fell into the wrong hands, and an answer that seems correct in the moment may be discounted on technical grounds later by contest judges.

Literate action can also intermix face-to-face with more distanced interaction. After a chat with a colleague in the hallway, I may e-mail her a further thought when I return to the semi-privacy of my office. After some further e-mail exchanges, I may walk over to her office to continue the dialogue. In schools and workplaces, numerous moments oscillate between public dialogue and semi-private writing and reading. Class discussion precedes and follows silent reading and writing. A business meeting is halted while someone seeks information from a manual or consults previous reports. Face-to-face interaction provides opportunities for people to align understandings of texts, as people over breakfast

read aloud sentences from the morning newspaper or in a meeting unpack the latest directive from management and compose policy statements together.

The situating of literate activity in face-to-face interaction is particularly important for first learning the skills and practices of reading and writing. Parents and teachers reading to children, adults guiding the hands of children learning their letters, families playing alphabet games, children reading aloud in school and home, classes discussing readings together—such immediate interactions involving written text help the literacy learner understand how to make meaning in and from texts and how to use text to mediate interaction. Yet, in contemporary practice, as people become comfortable with literacy, they are more likely to read or write in semi-privacy and even silence. Their minds turn away from immediate here and now interactions to distant interactions mediated by the text, where they have to reconstruct the relevant situation and interaction of the text through remembered or imagined non-immediate circumstances. Once one has passed beyond early stages of literacy learning, this semi-privacy of reading and writing is only sometimes punctuated by text-based face-to-face interactions that provide communal verification or elaboration of the textually mediated meaning and interaction.

### **The Difficulties of Literate Interaction**

In this semi-private reading and writing, the clues by which we reconstruct the intended performance of others are thinner and more dependent on our mental reconstruction than in face-to-face interaction. The referential space itself is a projection of the text as perceived by the reader—the chronotope activated by and populated in the read text (Bakhtin). Moreover, the forum in which author and audience meet, within which prior relevant utterances are invoked as relevant, is also a projection of the perceived text, drawing on culturally available types of distance-mediated interactions.

In non-copresent writing, we have to construct the virtual meeting space and then enact congruent meaning performances entirely out of shared social cloth. We may snip and restitch from several available social cloths, but never so much as to make the patchwork unrecognizable, for then we lose our way as writers and readers. We must create the recognizable footings and grab recognizable floors—otherwise the floor evaporates, just as much as if everyone leaves a meeting. The selves and acts we create are in constant dialogue with anticipated and actual

uptakes. In writing, though, information on how audiences respond to our utterances is typically less frequent, in circumstances far from those of the original utterance, and more attenuated than in face-to-face talk. Similarly, our reperformances of others' meanings through reading may be weak because we may use overly broad or mismatched typifications of the forum; because we may have few cues to incite our sense of the character, situation, and intentions of the text; because our attention may be less well focused without the force of another human presence; and so on.

Further, in non-copresent reading and writing, ambiguity or uncertainty of the place, purposes, and participants of social meeting may do strange things to our sense of anxiety. Engaged with texts in private, we may perceive ourselves removed from the social constraints and uncertainties of everyday face-to-face interaction. We may then explore meanings and feelings that we are afraid might cast us beyond the pale of acceptable relations with others and acceptable public identities. In reading, we can explore the taboo under a plain brown wrapper. On the other hand, the lack of immediately reassuring others may allow anxieties to numb our processes of meaning-making. In reading we become afraid of who might see our books or catch us entertaining controversial thoughts, and in writing we worry whether we can dare put our forming thoughts to paper lest potential readers condemn us for what we write. To some extent, all writing puts us on the line, asking us to perform novel selves that may have unanticipated consequences. Writing then leaves our words open to readers' interpretations and reconstructions that we might not be happy with.

The production and reception of texts are caught in a tension. In writing and reading we have the space to define situations and activities as we would see them. Yet, to make ourselves intelligible to others and to gain the wisdom of others, we have to discipline ourselves to using signs and making sense in socially intelligible ways. Through shared tools of sense-transmission, we make our separate senses, and thus define sensible differences. But those differences in turn stretch limits of linguistic sharing.

### **Socialization into Literate Worlds**

Literacy education aims to introduce students into culturally formed practices of making sense in and of texts. In schools children are taught particular tools of information gathering and idea reconstruction from texts. They are also introduced to forms of literary interpretation and

engagement. Out of schools, widely available texts, puzzles, games and other artifacts depend on and reward particular forms of sense-making and engagement, relying often on school practices of reading. Those who may be avid readers but not so trained in disciplines of schooled literacy make sense more idiosyncratically, though perhaps more interestingly. At times we all engage in creative nonstandard readings in pursuit of our own meanings and motives, but we can be held to account for more normalized readings of the texts within particular social circumstances. When we haggle over the obligations a contract has imposed, we are often forced to read a text together, with our divergent readings accountable to adjudication by the courts. When we proclaim on the basis of a news story that the latest notorious figure is guilty of criminal acts, a contentious friend may ask how we can possibly come to that conclusion from what we read.

Similarly, writing gains expressive force not by going down purely private subjective paths, but by gaining wider command of the culturally available resources and by learning how to deploy these resources to create recognizable circumstances and enactments. Again the undisciplined writer sometimes makes very interesting texts, but idiosyncratic and hard for others to orient toward in meaningful or at least consistent ways, so uptake either evaporates or rapidly wanders far from the vectors of authorial impulse. Within some genres of texts, often literary or advertising, such movement away from the socially recognizable into the personally desired is indeed encouraged. But there remains always the tension between intelligibility and personal expression. Similarly, in bringing unfamiliar or wide-ranging content to bear within typified realms, a writer is in danger of straining the sense-making of the audience, resulting in either unintelligibility or normalized, narrowed readings that miss the text's novelties.

To gain a sense of readers' meaning-making, writers have regularly sought local readers and editors to respond to their writing, particularly once writers get past the defensiveness, anxiety, and narcissism associated with writing.<sup>5</sup> Modern writing pedagogy has emphasized feedback and social uptake of texts; rapid cycling of responses by teachers; teacher sense-making roles extending beyond evaluation on purely formal grounds; peer response and evaluation; and writing for varied, real, local audiences. Writing pedagogy and writing practice have also developed procedures for reading one's own text so as to take the part of others, particularly in revision processes. Rhetorical analysis also provides tools for seeing one's verbal productions from the outside, as they might affect

others. All these techniques deepen attention to the interactional reality of the text and the meanings evoked in the minds of the readers. Through such procedures, the interaction no longer seems quite so thin, and developing writers can see enriched possibilities of meaning that can be realized by their texts.

It is through our gaining knowledge of how readers understand and respond to our writing that we gain a sense of who we are as writers and of what our writing communicates. It is also how we come to understand our relationship to our audiences. And it is how we learn the social systems mediated by texts and the ways we can effectively take part in them. We learn our roles and potential meanings with respect to schools, newspapers, business, finances, law, philosophy. We accomplish acts in each; see ourselves as having presence, power, and particular resources in each; enjoy the rewards and costs of participation in each; and partake of the meanings available in those worlds.

### The Complexity of Literate Worlds

As these intersubjective spaces of communication become more highly articulated as places for performance, they take on particular characteristics within refined social typifications. Identity, action, and meaning are enacted within complexes of footings on newly created floors, using varied ranges of resources to carry out the intentions and relations appropriate to each social-discursive space. The world performed by us together is potentially rich and complex, novel and nuanced, extensive in time and space.

I am tempted here to invoke Darwin's famous imagery at the end of the *Origin of Species* concerning the complexity of life within a tangled bank. This tangled bank of meaning, however, would be as evanescent as our mental performances and reperformances of texts—"insubstantial pageants fading" as on Prospero's island (Shakespeare). Such idealist fantasies are the consequence of starting with Borges' *Tlön*, which is a fiction within a fiction. According to Borges, the people of the Universe of Uqbar only provide accounts of lands they consider fictional, so that the *First Encyclopedia of Tlön* even within the story is a hoax, with no referents. But of course on *Tlön*, the referent would not exist except when being looked at—so the world is as interesting as our mental constructions and no more enduring.

However, on Earth our books do sit on the shelves when we don't look, and we are embodied selves walking in time through a spatial world that persists beyond our own weak accounts of our experience of it. Even



more germanely, we construct our meaning systems and resources in the course of living in that world to meet our needs as embodied creatures. Every time we read and write, we are somewhere in that spatial world, even if only nestled in our arm chair, in a middle-class home within a prosperous educated society that maintains a publishing industry that appeals to the tastes of numerous cultural strata. Thus, the meanings we mentally rehearse in relation to texts draw on our material and social experiences that reside in the same brain and are deeply intertwined with our meaning-making systems.<sup>6</sup> After all, we learned about language and how to mean with language in material and social worlds. Recent studies of the brain raise intriguing issues about the relation of object and word memory as well as the sympathetic experience of people and things outside ourselves activating some of the same circuits that map our own sensations and experience.<sup>7</sup>

Acts of literacy draw on and have consequences for how we and others act and interact in the world. Acts of literacy draw on and have consequences for how we evoke the imagination of meanings in each other. The idealist world of meanings that we perform is part of our embodied lives, is pervaded by the material even as it is ideal, is part of the inheritance of our material biological evolution that has made cultural evolution possible. These idealist worlds saturate our material existence so that we live in a built symbolic environment as much as we live in a built physical environment. That built physical environment in the modern world, moreover, is built out of plans and regulations just as it is built out of bricks and mortar. Even our relation to the received natural environment is reshaped by the symbolic world of textually mediated values, aesthetics, and science. Such observations of the mixing of the material and the ideal in human life return us to the study of activity systems and their relation to the evolving form of social organization that have emerged with the practices and circulation of literacy.<sup>8</sup>

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### Notes

1. For examples of the intersection of these approaches see Bazerman and Paradis; Russell and Bazerman; Bazerman and Russell.
2. With electronic storage, textual persistence is more tenuous, but we assume that saved files have sufficient information to reassemble human readable texts upon command if we have the right hardware and software and the

file remains uncorrupted. If we are unsure about the continuity of the textual artifact, we can initiate commands to relaunch the text, or we can initiate disk-checking routines to assure that the electronic bits are still there and in sufficient order.

3. I leave aside the knotty problem of literate operations being entirely machine-executed, untouched by a human brain; I also leave aside the other knotty issue of the cognitive potential and influence of memories of utterances in the human brain, or the continuing effect of the neurochemical path laid down in the course of a long-past and forgotten-for-all-practical-purposes reading.

4. This socio-epistemic world is not the same as the material world that keeps on going whether people are attending to it or not. This persistent spatially organized world, nonetheless, can and does intrude on the social world of belief. It provides opportunity and exigency for social attention and action. Further, many forms of direct biological experience and response to the ambient material world—and even language and our social behaviors—grow out of the problems of material being. Myriad social and cultural practices create more intense orientation toward and interaction with the material.

5. The semi-privacy of writing not only changes conditions for the enactment of the anxiety system, it creates extensive space for the blossoming of narcissism. One's identity can become bound with one's expressions, and thus it may be difficult to confront how one's written utterances are actually seen, especially when one has invested so much semi-isolated sense making within them. That our writing may not have achieved our intentions or that our writing may evoke some suggestions for improvement may painfully call to our attention the limitations of our skills and being. This pain may be so unbearable that any but the most accepting response is avoided or defended against.

6. There is strong evidence, for example, that our system for processing semantic meaning of words has evolved on top of our cognitive apparatus for visual object recognition (see Givón).

7. Particularly intriguing on this line are studies by Rizzolatti and associates that link the neural control of our own motor actions with the neural recognition of the visual perception of the motor actions of others.

8. See Goody for a detailed account of some of the earlier social consequences of literacy; see also Bazerman "Rhetoric" for a more historically extended sketch.

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## Making Contact: Experience, Representation, and Difference

Gwen Gorzelsky

"I just wanted to ask you," said a woman of East Indian descent—who'd explained that she'd been nominated by her classmates to approach me after the session—"Why did you turn our class into a race war?"<sup>1</sup> We had addressed issues of race and racial tensions when they emerged in course texts or students' research materials during previous class sessions, when I'd sometimes turned discussion away from hot issues like racial difference and back to textual analysis. During this session's very different discussion, a small group of students had tried to do the same. But by then, the conversation's momentum had gathered, and I directed the discussion toward race rather than toward the reading or writing of a text with just an "ok" and an invitation to another student waiting to speak.

As I recall this conflicted moment, it seems to me that my first-year writing students and I experienced ourselves as powerless, that we felt ourselves caught up in a social system we couldn't control or change: we were disconnected from our own roles in creating the situation, from each other, and, ultimately, from our own multiple, conflicting responses to it. In short, we were experiencing—and enacting—alienation. This particular experience of alienation has helped me to think further about how I can address class and other differences as broader social issues *and* as ongoing group dynamics in my teaching.

Using poststructuralist notions of differentiation, physiologist Karl Pribram's holographic model of the brain, and Gestalt theory, I draw on composition studies to frame an ethical praxis for dealing with alienation and difference. In the process, I show how we create the experience of alienation by physically constricting awareness of internal and external stimuli, thus constricting our perceptions of self, others, and