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Vernacular creativity in urban textual landscapes

Victoria Carrington and Clare Dowdall

Introduction

The urban landscape – the urban design, infrastructure, architecture, and social patterns of the urban spaces in which we dwell – has always been a message system that proclaims wealth, political power, and cultural values. Writing in the field of globalisation, Sassen (1998, 2007) noted that contemporary urban landscapes are shaped by – and therefore tell the story of – the cultural, racial, and spatial diversifications and contestations that occur within them. Mitchell (2000: 102), writing about the production and consumption of landscapes from the perspective of cultural geography, reminds us that ‘landscape’ is a relational process: ‘... an ongoing relationship between people and place.’ In this chapter, our interest lies in examining the ways in which texts form a key part of this relational process. We begin this chapter from the position that the urban landscape is textual, as well as architectural, characterised by the presence of the printed and visual texts that are arranged in and around these spaces, contributing in their own way to the deployment of values and identities.

While there have been linguistic mappings of various neighbourhoods (Aalbers & Rancati, 2008; Backhaus, 2007), explorations of youth geographies (Holloway & Valentine, 2000; Skelton & Valentine, 1998), studies of graffiti culture (Carrington, 2009; Moje, 2000), and some important early work on developing a semiotic framing of urban signs (Scollon & Scollon, 2003), the ways in which existing and incoming groups and individuals read, and then write themselves into, the textual landscape is not yet well documented or systematically analysed. Surveys such as those focused on linguistic diversity carried out by Backhaus (2007) in Tokyo and Ben-Raphael and colleagues (2006) in Jerusalem approach the task as a snapshot of a single layer of text or signage in time, rather than chronicle change over time, or explore the ongoing relationship between people, text, and place. This chapter and the research underpinning it have moved to explore this landscape.

Text, discourse, power, and urban space

Text as a social practice is important. Luke (1995: 13), writing in the field of critical discourse analysis, describes texts as ‘the artifacts of human subjects’ work at the production of meaning and social relations’. For Luke, texts are moments of intersubjectivity, used
by humans to make sense of their worlds, to position themselves in relation to others, and to construct identities. He argues that spoken and written texts are moments in which cultural representations, and social relations and identities, are articulated through language and other sign systems (Luke, 1995: 18). Writing as a critical discourse scholar, Luke privileged discourse and identity along with issues of power, and considers the text to be the manifestation of these social and cultural forces. Fairclough (1999: 75) similarly argues that daily life is ‘pervasively’ mediated by texts, noting that, in these circumstances, the ‘politics of representation becomes increasingly important – whose representations are these, who gains what from them, what social relations do they draw people into, what are their ideological effects, and what alternative representations are there?’ This chapter takes Fairclough at his word, and focuses on texts as they appear in and on selected urban landscapes, forming what we might call the ‘textual landscape’ (Carrington, 2005, 2009), giving consideration to how these landscapes can be read in relation to the individuals and groups travelling through them. In this context, ‘text’ is understood as a publicly visible artefact (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010) that contributes to the materiality of the urban landscape, as well as the creative communications of the individuals and groups who inhabit urban spaces. Interpreting text as a material artefact is also important in understanding how we live out our lives in communities and neighbourhoods.

Blommaert (2010) has argued that while the language practices and cultures of communities have historically been interpreted in relation to stable locations in horizontal sites and spaces, there is an increasing need to conceptualise these spaces with more nuance and complexity. Attempting to capture the increasing mobility and diversity of linguistic practices, Blommaert (2010: 5) argues that ‘every horizontal space (e.g. a neighbourhood, a region, or a country) is also a vertical space, in which all sorts of socially, culturally and politically salient distinctions occur’. Here, he describes a ‘layered and stratified space’, rather than a one-dimensional and homogenous place. Thus while every space is horizontal – in which texts are arrayed in relation to particular types of regulatory, communicative, and transgressive work – it is also a vertical and layered space, in which a range of social, cultural and political distinctions play out materially and temporally. This view is also reflected in Scollon and Scollon’s (2003) parallel work in geosemiotics. They argue that any urban space is composed of ‘semiotic aggregates’ – that is, multiple discourses competing and overlapping, amplified or silenced by their materiality and positioning. In essence, Scollon and Scollon (2003: 175–89) identified four distinct types of discourse in urban spaces: municipal regulatory discourse; municipal infrastructural discourse; commercial discourse; and transgressive discourse. Focusing on signage in place, they noted that different orthographies and fonts carry meanings differently. They also pointed out the fixed or impermanent nature of the sign itself, arguing that ‘once the sign is in place it is never isolated from other signs in its environment, embodied or disembodied’ (Scollon & Scollon, 2003: 205). Texts are therefore material contributors to the sedimented histories of each neighbourhood – located in time and place.

Taken together, Blommaert and the Scollons establish that texts are linked to complex systems of meaning and differential valuations of linguistic and cultural practice. The Scollons’ work argues for the importance of location and temporality, as well as the content of text in public urban settings, while Blommaert’s work reimagines the ways in which linguistic communities move through time and space in contemporary globalised conditions. In a study of graffiti and street art, Carrington (2009: 2) notes that, ‘in urban sites, the sanctioned and unsanctioned dwell alongside each other, jockeying for attention and space, representing the views and interests of the often quite diverse individuals and groups sharing and competing for urban spaces’. Against this background, this chapter uses data collected as part of a study
of urban textual landscapes to take up these ideas as the basis for a close consideration of text as an artefact of social practice in two urban environments. Drawing from Blommaert and the Scollons’ frameworks for considering discourse and its textual artefacts in urban spaces, we argue that it is important to map and analyse the ways in which the texts written onto, and displayed within, urban landscapes write individuals and groups into and out of the changing urban environments in which they live. The chapter reports specifically on data collected in two sites – one in the United Kingdom and another in the Netherlands – with a particular interest in the creativity displayed by the various uses of texts. Drawing on data from both sites, the chapter analyses the material evidence of diverse textual practices, focusing particularly on evidence of creativity in the textual landscape.

Notes on methodology and methods

The sites

Two urban sites were selected for exploration: one within the city of Exeter, in the United Kingdom; and the other in Amsterdam, Netherlands. Each site met a series of criteria laid out by Lynch (1960) in his study of the lived experience of the city: each area was formed around identifiable ‘paths’, such as streets, transit lines, or walkways; each had identifiable ‘edges’, such as edges of development or walls; each had distinguishable ‘districts’, or zones; each contained a node point or intersections and crossings; and each had landmarks such as key buildings, street furniture, or other external reference points. Both sites, although intrinsically different, met these criteria.

• Site 1: Exeter, Queen Street

Exeter is a small historic city located in the south-west of England. According to 2011 census data from the Office for National Statistics, it was then the sixty-first most populous built-up area in England, with a growing population that was passing 117,000 (http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/index.html). The population is predominately white British (93 per cent). Of the 6.9 per cent of the population who describe themselves as ‘minority ethnic’, 3.9 per cent describe themselves as Asian.

Queen Street in Exeter – the site of data collection – is a busy, non-residential, main thoroughfare linking Exeter High Street, the main shopping area, with Exeter Central Railway Station. Beyond the research site, but of note because of its proximity, lies Exeter College, a large, thriving tertiary college that serves a mixed population, including adults and young people, many of whom make use of Queen Street as a route to and from the college. Exeter Central Station (the third busiest railway station in Devon) is at one end of the research site. This is one of two main transport hubs located in the city. The railway station is served by local commuter services, as well as the mainline service to London Waterloo. The station’s main entrance is situated amongst the shops in a 79m curved brick building erected in 1933. At the other end of the research site is the Royal Albert Memorial Museum. Founded in 1868, at the time of the study this city museum had recently undergone extensive refurbishment. It reopened on 14 December 2011, and is a popular attraction for local residents and tourists, having been awarded the National Art Fund Prize, ‘UK Museum of the Year 2012’.

The Queen Street research site is approximately 175m long and restricted to one side of the road. This main thoroughfare to the railway station, further education college,
and high street is populated with large buildings dating from the late nineteenth century. These buildings are occupied by an eclectic variety of independent shops and civic services, including the railway station and its entrance, cafes and restaurants, hair salons, a handicraft shop, a music shop, a card shop, the entrance to some public gardens, a large solicitors’ office, County Chambers, and the Royal Albert Memorial Museum.

- **Site 2: Amsterdam, Kinkerbuurt**

Kinkerbuurt is located in Amsterdam’s Oud West district, comprising an area of 1.70km² and with a population of around 31,000, representing 177 different nationalities. A quarter of this population are of Surinamese, Turkish, and Moroccan descent, predominantly first- or second-generation migrants. This reflects the broader demographics of Amsterdam, where 45 per cent of the population has non-Dutch parents (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amsterdam#Twenty_first_century).

This mixed residential/commercial area is one of the most densely populated neighbourhoods in Amsterdam. Named after the eighteenth-century lawyer Johannes Kinker, the neighbourhood was established around 1900 when Amsterdam was experiencing rapid expansion following a period of immigration. In the 1970s, the next wave of immigration saw an influx of Moroccan and Turkish families moving into the area to occupy cheap housing estates, as simultaneously numbers of ethnic Dutch moved to other areas of the city. More recently at the time of the study, Oud West had been identified as an area ‘threatened by long-term unemployment, poverty, a growing feeling of insecurity, low average education, a homogenous housing supply of poor quality and only a few public spaces all in a poor state of repair’ (European Commission, 2001) and a series of resulting investment programmes had led to the cascading gentrification of some areas, an increasing growth in owner-occupancy, the return of small numbers of ethnic Dutch, and upgrades to public areas and housing.

Kinkerbuurt sits alongside the main transport and shopping route through the district, the Kinkerstraat, and is bounded by a set of tramlines, canals, and intersecting main streets. A number of Turkish and Surinamese restaurants, greengrocers, bakers, carpet and bric-a-brac stores, and cafes line the street, and the permanent street market that is a feature of the area provides a mix of traditional Dutch and immigrant goods and foods. Intersecting Kinkerstraat are a series of smaller streets, with a mix of residential and small commercial properties that include kitchenware, local restaurants, a pet store, shoe repair, cafes, and a newsagent. This was the site from which the Amsterdam-based data was collected.

As a geographic locator, each research zone was selected because it represented the intersection of main thoroughfares in the identified areas, meeting Lynch’s (1960) criteria. The two sites, however, have distinctive features: the Exeter site can be described as predominantly civic and commercial; the Amsterdam site is mixed residential and commercial, with a range of social housing backing onto a busy commercial and transport main road and shopping district. Despite their differences, both sites reflect the intersection of diverse groups and individuals, and provide the opportunity to focus on a range of textual landscapes in motion over time.

**Data collection**

Using a digital camera, photographic data was collected at each site using a ‘photographic mapping’ technique. As outlined by Collier and Collier (1986), ‘photographic mapping’
can act as a baseline to establish the range of textual artefacts present. This mapping was then used on subsequent site visits and repeated, in order to create a layered view of change in particular sites. The researchers visited the chosen sites five times in a three-month period between September and November 2011. In each visit, photographic data were collected to record and preserve noticeable textual artefacts, potentially making available detail that is not noticed by an observer operating in real time. This method provided ‘an absolute check of position and identification in congested and changing cultural events’ (Collier & Collier, 1986: 9), as the researchers revisited the same urban sites. For the purposes of this chapter, the focus was on capturing texts in situ in boundaries and nodes, to observe instances of sanctioned and unsanctioned text, and to identify textual nodal points and changes in text over time. Field notes were made to support observations and to raise questions that occurred at the time of each photographic mapping. Analysis of the photographic data and accompanying field notes included consideration of the key types of sign/text photographed, the features of signs/texts photographed, and time-dated shifts in the display and presence of signs/textual artefacts. Following the working process established for the study codes, categories and themes were generated out of the photographic data and observational field notes.

Textual landscapes: The data and analysis

In each site, texts were categorised and interpreted according to the categories identified by Scollon and Scollon (2003): municipal regulatory discourse, municipal infrastructural discourse, and commercial discourse, all of which form the ‘official’ texts of a location; and transgressive discourses, which are formed by vernacular ‘unofficial’ texts. Sensitive to the issues of physical placement noted by the Scollons, we have adopted these broad terms to support initial description and categorisation. Each instance of text was further categorised as monolingual or multilingual, and then categorised even further across a range of intersecting criteria that attempted to capture the complexities of urban textual landscapes in action: sanctioned–non-sanctioned; layering–sedimentation; material construction and placement; appearance–disappearance; vernacular; government–municipal; and commercial.

Exeter

In Queen Street, the first impression of the textual landscape is that of a highly regulated space. ‘Official’ municipal texts dominate and, on initial scrutiny, vernacular transgressive texts are notable by their apparent absence. Many of the official regulatory texts are particularly prominently placed. These include parking notices and restrictions, mainly relating to parking fines and warnings. They are made from metal sheets and displayed at eye level on specially erected posts or attached to existing walls. Important information is often presented in red (see Figure 26.1).

Civic/municipal texts giving information about the neighbourhood and areas of specific interest are also evident. These include maps and directions, and information about local attractions. The maps are displayed beneath laminated screens, where they cannot be defaced, on purpose-built posts and blocks. The materiality of these formal municipal infrastructural texts contributes to their official status. However, some official regulatory and infrastructural texts also appear to have been placed more opportunistically: ‘official’ stickers on lampposts are used to direct walkers towards the city centre, railway station, cycle routes, and Exeter...
Cathedral (a main tourist attraction). These provide information about routes, distances, and time to travel. A ‘no smoking’ sticker has been added to the wall of the telephone box, long after the telephone box was erected. These official texts are made from long-lasting, sticky-backed, laminated material. They have been attached to the lampposts and street furniture manually, and are designed to last – to be impermeable to the weather and to unofficial attempts to remove them. The result, however, is less slick. While these texts are professionally printed and glossy, they do not achieve the same sense of authority as the metal-formed regulatory and infrastructural texts that sit alongside them.

Commercial texts, in the form of signage and sanctioned advertising, which have been purchased and displayed on laminated hoardings, are also evident (for example signs and posters for Exeter Central Station, a coffee shop, a handicraft shop, and a coffee brand). These also vary in materiality, with some signage being painted or printed, or even chalked on boards, while the sign for the long-established ‘County Chambers’ office is carved in stone above its doorway. These commercial texts have a sense of permanence. In addition, other ‘official’ texts with less permanence are also displayed: in the telephone box, an official Samaritans leaflet has been opportunistically placed; outside the museum, temporary hardboard hoardings cover the red-brick walls as the museum undergoes refurbishment. Attached to these mainly empty hoardings is a life-sized poster of a Roman centurion and information about how to access museum activities during the refurbishment. Of note in what is clearly a larger multimodal textual landscape (Jewitt, 2013) is the absence of image-driven texts. With the exception of the poster of the Roman centurion, most of the official texts displayed in Queen Street are word-dominant.

These less-permanent ‘official’ texts sit atop the regulatory and infrastructural textual landscape. They exist as a superficial layer or sediment of the textual landscape that occupies a more temporary timescale and materiality than the permanent municipal texts. Regarded in this way, the positioning and materiality of the full range of ‘official texts’ begins to reflect Blommaert’s notion of landscape as a vertical space, in which linguistic
practices intersect, and political and social subjectivities compete for attention and authority. The range of official texts identified on initial scrutiny did not change through the duration of the study. Municipal regulatory and infrastructural texts, such as parking notices and maps to the city centre, and the permanent official signage for shops, cafes, and commercial enterprises (including lawyers, hairdressers, and card shops), remained a permanent and dominant feature of the textual landscape.

In addition to Queen Street’s dominant ‘official’ textual landscape, initial scrutiny of the district identified the presence of unofficial textual artefacts too. Graffiti, in the form of tags, is painted in the telephone box and on street furniture. Slaps – small printed stickers made by graffiti artists – are stuck to lampposts and traffic lights (Delana, undated). Independently produced posters advertising music events, and relocation information, are displayed in empty shop windows. Stickers advertising ‘spaces available for rent in nearby carpark’ are attached to parking meters, and semi-permanent stencils on the pavement advertise a competitor to Queen Street’s Exeter College.

Fighting against this trail of unofficial textual activity, some surfaces show evidence that tags or fly posters have been removed by official or unofficial clean-up operations. Some stickers have been removed roughly, leaving sticky marks; some surfaces are newly cleaned. Queen Street is a site of regeneration. At the time of data collection, the Royal Albert Memorial Museum was covered in plain hoardings while it was being refurbished, and the railway station entrance was preparing for redevelopment. Consequently, the site could have been appropriated by opportunistic fly posters and guerilla marketeers. However, what is noticeable in this textual landscape is the apparent absence of opportunistic flyposting. During the data collection period, the number of posters and slaps increased slightly, but the museum hoardings remained mainly empty and the landscape seemed largely devoid of transgressive, vernacular texts, despite its selection as a district with potential for this study. On first inspection, this landscape seems so highly regulated and sanitised that it is almost atextual in relation to the presence of unofficial vernacular texts.

However, while not initially obvious, of note in the Queen Street district was the increasing presence of slaps (small printed stickers) over time (Figure 26.2). These texts sometimes overlay municipal texts, while in other places they were attached to bollards and traffic lights, almost hidden from the view of casual passers-by. Sometimes, they are above eye level; sometimes, they are placed in quite obscure positions, for example at the back of an official sign. The slaps displayed in Queen Street are relatively unobtrusive, often much smaller than a banknote. However, while apparently inconspicuous, closer scrutiny revealed that some slaps were not merely the independent productions of graffiti artists, aiming to present themselves in the landscape; rather, these texts were functioning to publicise a brand or potent message. Distinctive, image-driven slaps for the bands ‘Gecko’ and ‘Cosmo Kings’ appeared on numerous bollards and other street furniture within the district. These repeating texts, once noticed by the passer-by, serve to create a witty, vivid logographic representation working to market products, services, or events.

Further research revealed that some apparently ‘innocent’ slaps carried complex messages. A slap portraying a comic-strip-style image and the wording ‘This was your life’ was identified as a tract from the evangelical website Chick Publications (http://www.chick.com). The slap shows the key image from Chick Publications’ most popular tract, which explains the ‘Day of Judgement’. This slap would be meaningless to uninitiated viewers, but for converts to evangelism, and this form of worship and message sharing, the graphic and text would be meaningful and significant. Another slap positioned nearby simply read
‘GORF STR’ in tag-style script. This slap is a tag for a well-known and popular street artist who apparently died early in 2011: GORF was a member of the Cardiff-based Small Time Rockers (STR) Crew (http://streetswithart.wordpress.com/2012/06/11/upfest-2012-bristol-str-crew/), whose work is recognised and admired. Whether this slap had been posted as a tribute or had existed since GORF’s active time as a street artist was uncertain, but along with the Chick Publications slap it exemplified the notion that, as textual artefacts in a textual landscape, slaps can exist to do more than merely stake a claim in the landscape. They have a backstory and intertextuality that connects them significantly to the textual landscape and the occupants in it, for whom they have meaning. Equally, these slaps exclude the uninitiated from making meaning. They are highly complex texts that serve to alienate, as well as to communicate. Vertically, they are layered over (or under) other sanctioned textual forms, yet their potential for intertextuality, and to include or exclude, suggests that these texts are highly connected and contestable by groups wishing to communicate across local and more global spaces.

The existence of Queen Street’s slaps, secreted amidst a regulated and sparse textual landscape, raises questions about the layering of texts and the behaviours of text producers in a given textual landscape. Over the duration of the study, occasional new slaps and tags appeared in Queen Street. However, their witty positioning, high on lampposts or behind the ‘official’ face of street furniture, rendered their potential for unofficial communication extraordinarily subtle. When these texts are made visible, they provide evidence in Queen Street of some contestation for space and audience using textual forms. The voices of the text producers are cleverly concealed here, perhaps to avoid attention from the official forces, who may seek to remove them.

This apparent lack of vernacular texts contrasts starkly with the landscape in Kinkerbuurt, where vernacular texts abound.
Any contemporary urban setting is the site of many overlapping and competing imagined communities (Anderson, 1991) and narratives. Many of these can be read on the textual landscape. For the Kinkerbuurt neighbourhood of Amsterdam, many of the larger stories are about immigration and change, of cooperation and tension between individuals and groups. The shared public space of the textual landscape is a location where these stories can be read and interpreted. Kinkerbuurt is a mixed economy area, with residential housing, large-scale commerce, and smaller local business rubbing up against each other. Reflecting this, there is a mix of commercial, informational, and commercial signage clearly displayed. There is also a range of vernacular and unsanctioned texts on display, contributing to the textual landscape.

Informational signage on council bins provides details on recycling and contact information. Where appropriate – for example informational text identifying the bicycle lane, parking sites, or rubbish bins – images are used. The TNT postbox located on the street corner displays a semi-permanent sign – in Dutch – outlining mail pick-up times; parking meters provide information on parking costs and directions about how to pay; residences have signage on their letterboxes that either encourage or discourage ‘junk’ mail. Commercial signage is readily visible: location, colour, and font combine to attract attention. Shop windows display a mix of commercial and informational text, advertising goods, as well as providing information on, for example, the availability of wi-fi. Council power substations have commercial advertising spaces, such as poster frames, permanently attached to their backs, while local newsagents shop windows display posters advertising council-funded cultural events.

Non-sanctioned and/or non-authorised texts abound. They exist simultaneously on and with the authorised texts visible in the landscape. Vernacular and non-sanctioned texts are often more complicated than they initially appear. For example, commercially produced promotional stickers masquerade as slaps: a sticker on the pole holding a street sign promotes the San Francisco-based indie reggae/hip hop collaborative and label ‘Audiopharmacy’; another street pole atop which is an official sign is covered in smaller hand-made stickers, which provide often opaque commentary and messages; an exchange box is the site for a ‘Hello, my name is . . . ’ sticker and some tags. Examples of sticker bombing and guerilla marketing abound. Further along, on a crossing on the main street, an anti-fur sticker combining English ‘Fur is sick, not chic’ and Dutch ‘Respect voor dieren.nl’ is attached to a street-crossing pole. Not only does the sticker mix and match English and Dutch, but it also overlays a well-known animal rights agenda with a commercially operated veterinary practice. There are small stickers promoting the Dutch DJs ‘Girls love DJs’ and the Amsterdam Student Association on multiple lampposts. In fact, it seems that, for every official text, there are multiple stickers piggybacking on the key location, materially different and speaking to a different audience. Here, the texts are sedimented in terms of placement in time, but also in terms of to which and for which audiences they speak.

Taggers have also left their mark on the neighbourhood (Figure 26.3). Shop blinds, flower markets, council bins, exchange boxes, and bicycle baskets around the neighbourhood have been tagged. The residential properties, however, appear not to have been targeted across the time frame of the data collection.

The textual landscape of this area also contains home-made, one-off signage, such as lost cat announcements, and messages taped to doors for delivery people and visitors. On one street, a construction site is cordoned off on one side by a tall wooden temporary wall that is
covered with fly posters (Figure 26.4). Colourful posters with eye-catching fonts and visual designs are on repeat display along the fence, drawing attention to DJs, gigs, clubs, and other events. Over the course of the data collection, almost all of the signs were replaced or covered up multiple times, and as a result the wall is sedimented with torn and faded posters layered one over the other. The depth of each flyer under the more recent layers signals its relative age. As each set of posters starts to wear, the older layers are revealed.

These fly posters and home-made messages are ephemeral texts, with a fragile materiality, designed to send a message that has a time limit. Interestingly, ephemerality does not always mean home-made. The fly posters are commercially produced en masse and act to attract the attention of passers-by to commercial events such as concerts, plays, and festivals. They are all, however, designed to be disposable, with a certain redundancy built in via the materiality of their design and their multiple nature. These disposable texts located in high sedimentation locations feature a mix of English signs and Dutch language. These signs – concert/event fly
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The contestation between the official and vernacular texts within the textual landscapes explored in the study was characterised temporally by the differing rates of decay and overlap of textual artefacts, and geographically by the positioning of texts. Municipal texts, predominantly created using metal sheets and poles, are designed for permanence. They reflect the anticipated longevity of civil codes and the authority that underwrites them, taking meaning from both location and materiality (see Scollon & Scollon, 2003). There are penalties for defacing, removing, or ignoring these aspects of the textual landscape and the messages that they communicate. If you litter or drive the wrong way on the cycle path, or park your car outside the area identified by authorised texts, you may be penalised.

Other less ‘official’ texts are more ephemeral, reflecting a different relationship with authority and time. These texts tend to be less robust in material terms and more layered, as artefacts that are placed on top of existing textual artefacts or surfaces, which are designed with an official function. This ephemeral layering creates sediments of shifting meaning over time. It is here, among the seemingly non-authorised and unsanctioned texts, that the most dynamism and creativity is evident: a process that we call a ‘vernacular creativity’.

This act of vernacular creativity can be complex and transgressive. In both sites, it is exploited not only by independent street and sticker artists, whose tags and slaps serve to proclaim their presence and transgress otherwise controlled environments, but also by those organisations that have traditionally produced more conventional, ‘official’ texts. These organisations have now turned to the production of slaps in what can be described as an act of counter-transgression. Their attempts to adopt guerilla marketing techniques to hijack the transgressive act of stickering and slapping is evidence of the potential of vernacular creativity to work for sanctioned and non-sanctioned text producers alike, alongside the creative leaps that textual artefacts can and do make. It also pinpoints the power of the truly vernacular texts in urban sites, acknowledging the cultural importance of these practices by the very act of co-opting them.

These vernacular texts speak to multiple layers of audience and social practice operating within the same physical space. The stickers speak to an insider audience that recognises the messages and intent – and may draw from global, as well as local, cultural references – while outsiders see merely sticker graffiti. These two groups value the texts differently. The construction of varying audiences – local and global – is a creative act that is accomplished via these texts, situated in the landscape. Interestingly, Blommaert’s (2007) descriptions of polycentricity – the multiple sources of authority in relation to which individuals and texts reference themselves – can be seen in play here as differing logics of authority and reference operate in the same physical spaces. In the Exeter site, key authorised authority and reference points appear to be supplied by municipal or commercial groups, while some
commercial and religious agencies voice their own logics of authority in the same spaces using multiple ‘slaps’. Both types of text refer to authority that sits outside the actual site: municipal authority resides in the local or district council, which itself references national legislation. Commercial texts, from the more obvious advertising billboards to the guerilla marketing slaps, reference products and activities that are predominantly accessed outside the location in which the texts are located. In the Kinkerbuurt site, in addition to municipal centres of authority, commercial organisations, indie popular culture, and individuals are referenced as sources of legitimation for texts.

There are real issues of temporality involved in the ways in which textual landscapes build over time. While the municipal and larger commercial texts have longevity in the urban landscape, the more ephemeral texts come and go as their messages outlive their purpose or audience. Vernacular creative texts often have a limited lifespan. For one thing, these ephemeral texts are materially different from the permanent authorised texts that take up dedicated spaces. Some of these vernacular texts are made of paper and attached to other surfaces, piggybacking on the space offered by the more permanent texts. Others are written in paint or ink and use the surface of buildings as spaces on which to write, ignoring whatever else is placed there and often overwriting existing forms of authorised text, all fading and weathering over time. Some of these vernacular texts are layered over each other, forming sediments and textual echoes. Some, but clearly not all, of these vernacular texts are contestational. Graffiti tags applied to existing authorised texts – on postboxes and shop shutters, for instance – may well be challenging their authority, but simultaneously they are claiming space and speaking to a particular audience (Carrington, 2009). Thus the textual landscape is formed by a juxtaposition of authorised, long-term stationary texts with the cacophony of temporary and ever-changing vernacular texts that operate at different scales and speak to fluid and mobile readers.

Geographically, the positioning and incidence of official and non-official texts is also of note. In particular, the Queen Street site, despite the opportunities provided by the regeneration of the site for flyposting and graffiti, seems almost sanitised. An aesthetic of clean urban space prevails. Official municipal texts dominate the landscape and unofficial texts are almost concealed from the unenlightened passer-by. In this relatively atextual space, little stickers and slaps work very hard to contribute to subtle webs of intertextuality that move communication from the local to the global. Here, alongside the existing forms of graffiti and tagging, new forms of counter-transgression, whereby a range of commercial and non-commercial organisations communicate complex messages using stickers and slaps, can be recognised. Insider knowledge is required to read and contribute to this urban textual landscape, which both includes and excludes. The use of space and the act of concealment contribute directly to these subtle acts of contestation.

**Concluding thoughts**

As Blommaert (2011) argued, there is an indexicality of texts in these urban textual landscapes. Every space is a layered space – socially and materially – in which different texts speak to different audiences in different ways, and invoke differing norms and authorities. As part of this, the textual landscape is a cauldron of creativity, as people and texts interact across and within these different scales and layers. In Blommaert’s terms, these differing forms of text percolate at different scales – that is, they have validity and meaning at different scale levels. A poster for a lost neighbourhood cat operates at a very local scale, which may stretch only for a few streets or even houses, while a municipal traffic sign is linked
to a broader, potentially globalised, scale by its connection to other like signs at the city, national, and international levels.

The textual landscape is a vibrant and creative space that swirls around the permanent fixtures of the urban environment. The municipal and regulatory signage acts as static and long-term structures on and around which entire ecologies of vernacular texts circulate, coming and going at different rates of decay. The messages of both forms of text are designed to pull the attention of particular audiences within particular time frames as they move through these landscapes. The municipal and regulatory texts are fixed in place, and are constructed materially to last indefinitely. Once this work is done, these texts are replaced by newer messages and texts that may speak to the same, or differing, audiences. The materiality of these ephemeral vernacular texts makes this sedimentation of meaning and moment in time possible. The limited lifespan of these texts and their often smaller size in comparison to the regulatory signage amongst which they dwell requires that they are responsive and ever-changing. This rapid layering and turnover of fleeting text fuels a vibrant and creative zone. As Anderson (1991) noted in relation to nations, cities and their various neighbourhoods are imagined communities, as well as physical spaces. They are hauled into being by the creative processes and by those who move through them. These layers of text, official and vernacular, contribute to the identities and identity practices of the individuals and groups who engage with them and to the landscapes that they occupy.

Luke’s (1995) work around the role of texts in the construction of identities, and the distribution of social and cultural power and authority, reminds us that everyday engagement with these urban textual landscapes does, in fact, matter. It matters who is represented in these texts and who is not. It matters that some individuals and groups find themselves reflected only in the ephemeral vernacular and unsanctioned texts identifiable in the landscapes around them. It matters that some centres of authority are accessible by the individuals and groups traversing this landscape, while others are not. It also matters that the temporality of these differing texts sends messages about what really counts in our social spaces. Equally of note is the sense that transgression through text production and distribution is becoming appropriated by new organisations, as the producers of pseudo-unofficial textual forms (religious and political messages), in an attempt to beguile an insider audience, use stickers and slaps to communicate their messages. The key message of this chapter is that textual landscapes are an important window into the social and cultural patterns of the communities that create and occupy them. As Luke (1995) would remind us, none of the texts in these landscapes are neutral: the seemingly immutable regulatory signage draws from local, national, and international authority, seeking to naturalise particular power distributions; the glorious cacophony of vernacular texts speaks to a range of different audiences and references numerous alternate authority sources – and yet each of them is attempting to build an imagined community.

The research made it clear that a key feature of these landscape are the texts that form, decay, and are replaced in cycles that exist outside municipal and regulatory channels. These texts and the vernacular creativity that spawns them are important barometers of everyday life in these neighbourhoods, and the ways in which individuals and groups engage with each other and the larger imagined communities (Anderson, 1991) to which they are allied. As such, they should not be overlooked nor their importance discounted.

**Related topics**

creativity and discourse analysis; language, creativity, and remix culture; literature and multimodality
Note

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Further reading


This is a key text that analyses signage in positioned locations, specifically Tokyo, to build an analysis of the dynamics of contemporary multilingual urban contexts. Backhaus constructs a detailed and fascinating analysis of contesting, overlapping, and diverse language use that shows clearly the complexities of urban linguistic landscapes.


An important text in the field of sociolinguistics, with implications for a range of other fields, Blommaert’s work addresses issues around language use and power in an era of increasing mobility, globalisation, and cultural/social change. He makes a case for the decline of traditional modernist sources of power and legitimacy for language use, arguing instead that we are now deeply embedded in an era in which new sources of legitimacy and new priorities around language use are emerging.


Kate Pahl and Jennifer Rowsell make a compelling case for looking beyond our cultural bias to written text in order to engage with the powerful discourses embedded in material culture. They propose a social semiotic, multimodal approach to understanding language and literacy practices in contemporary culture, engaging in innovative and important work.


This text was, and remains, ground-breaking, both theoretically and methodologically. Scollon and Scollon argue that public texts, such as road signs, advertising signage, logos, and municipal signage, can be understood only in their location and by seeing them in relation to the social, cultural, and physical context in which they are placed. It was one of the first theorised studies to explicitly consider the materiality of text and the ways in which it contributes to urban life.

References


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