

## Tilburg University

### Ariadne's thread

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*Publication date:*  
2013

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Kell, C. (2013). *Ariadne's thread: Literacy, scale and meaning making across space and time*. (Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies; No. 81).

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# Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies

## Paper 81

### **Ariadne's thread: Literacy, scale and meaning making across space and time**

by

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© November 2013

# **Ariadne's thread: Literacy, scale and meaning making across space and time**

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This paper will appear as:

Kell, C. (in press) 'Ariadne's thread: Literacy, scale and meaning making across time and space.' In Stroud, C. and Prinsloo, M. *Language, literacy and diversity: Moving Words*. Routledge: London and New York.

## **Introduction**

Ariadne's thread is a metaphor used by Latour (1987) to illustrate what he calls "networks of practices and instruments, of documents and translations" ... "*that would allow us to pass with continuity from the local to the global*" [my emphasis]. In Greek mythology the goddess, Ariadne, gave a ball of fleece to Theseus to unwind as he entered into the labyrinth and followed its maze of paths. With this, Theseus was able to kill the minotaur and then follow the thread back to find his way out again. Gretel and Hansel had the same idea. In this chapter, I explore the concepts of "networks of practices and instruments, documents and translations", exploring whether or how it is that these may "allow us pass from the local to the global". The metaphor allows us to envisage Theseus unwinding the thread as he goes in, tracing a horizontal path along the ground on which the labyrinth is built.

In Kell (2011) I worked with the idea of the "traffic of texts", the small-scale to-ing and fro-ing of written text-artefacts in trajectories that cumulatively assemble the structures and processes of people's daily lives, in many cases contributing to more durable and less reversible forms of meaning making. Whether the Ariadne's thread metaphor, however, can "allow" for the passing "from the local to the global", with the vertical jumps and the scale-shifts implied, is the question that is at the heart of this chapter. What exactly is scale and if vertical scale-jumps are achieved, exactly how are they achieved? Although it has been argued by Lempert (2012, 139, quoting Latour 2005, 220) that Latour himself "would have us be indifferent to the scale of interaction, not because scale is illusory but because he does not want to settle scale in advance", my view is that *not* settling scale in advance requires us precisely to *not* be indifferent to scale.

The chapter therefore addresses the question of the role of scale in attempts to theorise the relation between the local and the global and the movement between these. The issues of voice and the centrality of texts in this movement are concepts at the heart of this chapter. Across a range of disciplines including sociology, anthropology, sociolinguistics, social geography, political studies, scholars have taken up debates about the relation between the local and the

global, with the concepts of spatial and temporal scales becoming important in these debates. In my view, a crucial lacuna in these debates is the lack of focus on how exactly communication occurs across time and space - the actual mechanics of it and the methodologies available to study it. Alphabetic literacy and its many recent add-ons, its relation to other modes of communication, as well as the tools and technologies which people use to project their meanings via literacy, I argue, should form up an important part of the central efforts in addressing this lacuna.

The chapter situates these concerns in the contexts of the theoretical fields of the New Literacy Studies (NLS), sociolinguistics and social geography. It outlines the ways in which scale has made an appearance in these fields, especially with regard to micro/macro theorising, indexicality, implicit weighting of scales and horizontal versus vertical metaphors of scale. It then puts forward the idea of a language of description for studying the recontextualisation of meaning making through the tracing of text trajectories as a framework for examining the validity of scalar forms of analysis. With this framework in place, 'moving words' can be studied in fine detail, with attention paid to the affordances of modes, technologies and capacities; the text artefacts thus produced for meaning making, and the recontextualisation or projection of these text-artefacts across time, space and debatably scale. In arguing for this approach I propose that the concepts central to the theoretical framework of the NLS, literacy events, literacy practices and domains, need careful scrutiny and perhaps rethinking in contexts of mobility characterised by digitally-mediated forms of communication.

### **The local/global in New Literacy Studies and in sociolinguistics**

Behind the concerns and questions outlined above is the debate that has taken place within the New Literacy Studies over the past decade about whether or not its theoretical framework limits research and analysis of literacy to "the local" (Brandt and Clinton, 2002; Street, 2003a; Kell, 2011). A key theme in Brandt and Clinton's critique focused on the ways in which the 'global' reaches into the local via literacy - a perspective of 'looking down'. Street's rebuttal was to argue that Brandt and Clinton's concept of 'distant literacies' was akin to his autonomous model and therefore questionable. What "might be seen as distant or autonomous literacy needs to be seen as always and everywhere ideological"; as always instantiated (Kell, 2009b, 80). What Street argued was necessary was a framework and conceptual tools that can characterise the relation between local and distant. He has continued to argue that the concepts of literacy events and literacy practices enable this to be done. There is no doubt that rethinking literacy studies in a way that views the 'situatedness' of literacy in social practices has been the central achievement of the NLS. However, I have critiqued the adequacy of the framework in detail in Kell (2009a, 254 - 258; 2009b, 80-83; 2011). In what follows I bring this critique into a closer engagement with theorisations of scale.

Coming at the issue of literacy and the relation between the global and the local in a less instrumental way than Brandt and Clinton and drawing on sociolinguistics frameworks, Blommaert (2005) takes a different approach. Instead of thinking about 'distant' and more powerful literacies pressing down

into the local, the directionality can be turned around and people's projecting of their texts beyond the local can be studied. He provides a study of this in his *Grassroots Literacy* (Blommaert, 2008). Central to his argument, however, is the fact that discourse forms can lose function as they are moved into different environments. Looking through a south–north lens, Blommaert maps this feature of loss of function against worldwide inequalities conceptualised as centre-periphery models outlined in World Systems Analysis (Wallerstein, 2000), a perspective of 'looking up'. His arguments suggest that as discourse forms move across spaces, they are subject to changed sets of evaluative criteria, which are part of stratified economies of literacy. These different criteria position 'grassroots' texts as sub-standard, and convert communicative difference into communicative inequality. At a more micro level the study of the trajectory of an asylum seeker's application for asylum in Belgium (Blommaert, 2001) provides further perspectives on the inequalities that come into play as texts move across contexts.

In recent years the argument has been made that sociolinguistic theory and research have been dominated by a paradigm which views language as the property of groups defined by their fixedness in space and time. This can be seen in the prominence of concepts like "speech community", language variation and so on, which involve what Rampton (2000) terms the "production of meanings within" contexts which are single and bounded. Blommaert (2007) calls this the paradigm of "language in place" and draws attention to what he calls its "superficial" conceptual analysis of "space and time". Hanks (2005) sees this as a common sense conception of context: language is produced and studied in context, and resources for meaning making exist and are drawn on within contexts.

This paradigm is in deep crisis currently. This crisis is brought about by rapid communications and new forms of connectivity in contemporary information and networked societies, in a world of intensified mobility and ceaseless flows of people, objects, ideas and information across spaces and boundaries, and also, in a more abstract sense, across domains and scales. An emerging, alternative paradigm articulated by Rampton and Blommaert (2011) challenges this notion of language in place arguing that what is needed is a paradigm of language in motion, that conceptualizes "projection across" contexts (Rampton, 2000). There are further arguments this new paradigm needs to produce a new theoretical apparatus to address the phenomenon of "superdiversity" (Vertovec, 2007; Blommaert and Rampton, 2011).

A growing body of research is taking up these themes with reference to language, learning, literacy and mobility as the studies in this collection demonstrate<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of these concerns have been echoed in Leander, Phillips and Headrick Taylor's (2010) recent review of what they call "Mapping new mobilities" with reference to "the changing social spaces of learning". They argue that in the recent past and the present, much work on learning has been characterized by a "dominant discourse" involving a spatial framing of the "classroom-as-container" (p329). This framing can be called "learning-in-place", but their review provides two further framings for recent work on learning – those of "trajectories and networks" (p330).

With particular reference to the theoretical framework of the New Literacy Studies (Kell, 2005, 2006, 2009b) I have revisited my own previous work where, while acknowledging the crucial premise of the always 'situated nature' of literacy as social practice, I had felt limited by the framing of 'language in place' that I felt was transmitted by the theoretical apparatus of the NLS, in particular the concepts of literacy events and practices. In Kell (2011) I presented this critique in the form of propositions for re-thinking aspects of the NLS, which I felt were not lending themselves readily to the study or theorizing of the fluidity of meaning making processes in everyday life, and their multimodal nature.

Implied in the above discussion, and always lurking in the background, is the question of how to move from the micro to the macro, how to make that analytical move in order to be able to explain larger and more abstracted phenomena, from the basis of data of unique instances of communication. Blommaert (2007), together with Collins, Slembrouck and Baynham (2009), argues that scale is a concept that can play a role in linking the micro with the macro. In their wider arguments for a model of sociolinguistics that is theoretically adequate for addressing phenomena of globalisation, they call for a spatialisation of sociolinguistics. In this, the concept of scale would be valuable in linking localised productions of meaning with larger scale orderings. They also argue for the value of the concepts of indexicality and deixis as enabling such linkages to be made across what Blommaert calls orders of indexicality. Blommaert (2009) provides a simple vignette to demonstrate how this can work in one unique instance of communication. He describes how a student discussing the outline of her thesis with her tutor may say:

S: I'll start my dissertation with a chapter reporting on my fieldwork.

The tutor in response says:

T: We start our dissertations with a literature review chapter here.

With this example, Blommaert argues that the tutor performs a *scale-jump* here from the local to the translocal invoking practices that have normative validity, and he suggests that this indexes a higher scale. Baynham (2009, 138) provides a further example in which a Moroccan father positions his son by addressing him in Standard Arabic, and argues that this is an example of what he calls *upscaling*. With this example, Baynham suggests that invoking standard languages in order to do this can involve a form of symbolic violence.

In each case more generalised and abstracted phenomena (in Blommaert's case institutional norms and rules, and in Baynham's case, the notion of the standard language] are invoked in the particularities of the micro-interactive instance. Neither of these examples actually involve 'moving words', but they involve movement in the sense of indexing orders which are not empirically 'present' in the moment, but which may be viewed as higher scale phenomena. Both of these

examples therefore invoke vertical metaphors, which the authors suggest, link the micro-interaction with the macro forces that are instantiated within it.

Moving to social geography, Lampert (2012, 138) takes issue with the view that interaction has to be conceptualised at the micro level and then “placed in some reconstructed surround” (153), (which could be at the level of “institutional site, sociocultural matrix, state regime, global flows”) which “ferries in contextual information to participants, making the interaction meaningful and pragmatically consequential” (139). He states that some scholars and researchers:

...marvel at what they take to be the scalar hybridity and heterogeneity of discursive interaction, like the way resources and materials associated with distinct spatial and temporal scales converge and are melded in the crucible of face-to-face encounters. In face-to-face interaction they discover sherds of larger structures – discourses, language ideologies, categories of identity, master tropes and narratives. (138)

In invoking metaphors of scale in the above two examples, I believe that Blommaert and Baynham are asserting that these “sherds” are there, thus performing themselves an analytical scale-jump from what they have each observed in these two fleeting interactions to claims about language, power and symbolic violence. However, I would argue that claims of such nature have to be ‘read out’ from the observed data than ‘read into’ it, and in what follows I will explain what I mean by this and provide examples of how this can be done. But before I do that I will take a detour into scale debates from the field of human geography.

### **Discussions of scale from human geography**

Debates about scale in human geography can be helpful in interrogating the idea of vertical metaphors suggested in Blommaert and Baynham’s examples. In addressing this I will first draw on a heuristic offered by geographer, Doreen Massey (1993, 60 - 64), for thinking about globalisation and the concept of scale.

Massey asks us to imagine being on a satellite moving outwards, looking back on planet earth. In looking we see all the movement and tune into all the communication that is going on. We see the aeroplanes, the long haul from London to Tokyo, the hop from San Salvador to Guatemala City. Some of this is people moving, some of it is physical trade; some of it is media broadcasting. There are faxes, email, film-distribution networks, financial flows and transactions. Look in closer and there are ships and trains, steam trains slogging laboriously up hills somewhere in Asia. Closer still and there are lorries and cars and on down further, somewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, there’s a woman, on foot. Amongst many women, she still spends hours a day collecting water.

Massey discusses the “power geometry of space-time compression” (ibid, 64), by which she means the way in which different groups and individuals are placed in very distinct and differentiated ways in relation to these flows and

interconnections. She suggests that some are more in charge of it; some are able even to initiate flows and movement, while some flow and move with little control and some are effectively imprisoned by it. She asks us to then go back to our satellite and look back, not at the actual movement of the vehicles and the invisible communications, but rather at the social relations (involving this power geometry of space-time compression), which are increasingly stretched over space. Each set of these social relations has “internal structures of domination and subordination” (Massey, *ibid*, 65) and “the local’s relationship to the global is premised on a politics of connectivity – ‘power geometries’ – that recognizes and exploits webs of relations and practices that construct places, but also connect them to other sites” (Marston, Jones and Woodward, 2005, 419).

In their seminal paper “Human Geography without scale” Marston, Jones and Woodward (2005) state that in the context of a vociferous debate about scale within geography, there are three choices for thinking about scale. The first involves affirming hierarchical scale; the second involves models that integrate vertical and horizontal understandings of socio-spatial processes; the third involves abandoning scale in its entirety. Their choice is for the third option - the abandonment of the concept of scale.

Amongst their reasons for this are the following. First, they argue that there is a “confusion and conflation between scale as size (extensiveness or scope on the horizontal plane)” and “scale as level (vertically imagined and nested hierarchical ordering of space” (Howitt 2002, 305 in Marston et al, 2005, 420)). Second, they see scale as deeply entangled with the micro-macro distinction in social analysis and “its army of affiliated binaries” (421). This makes sense, they argue, because the local/global distinction is merely the spatial version of the micro/macro, and “smuggled in” alongside may be agency/structure as well. They surmise that correspondingly, other oppositions are easily invoked - static/dynamic, concrete/abstract, sectarian/cosmopolitan. For those familiar with Great Divide thinking between orality and literacy, deconstructed by scholars in the New Literacy Studies (Street, 1992; Gee, 1992 amongst others), the smuggling in of such binaries is all too familiar. Third, the authors suggest that once scaled layers are presupposed it is “difficult not to think in terms of social relations and institutional arrangements that somehow fit their contours”. Research projects assume the hierarchy in advance and are set up *a priori* to obey its conventions. They also view hierarchical scale as “bound to methodological perspectivalism”, the “God’s eye view” ..., “implying a transcendent position for the researcher”.

Along similar lines, Moore (2008) discusses what he calls “scale conceptual slippage” and the analytical confusion thus generated. Quoting Agnew (1993, 258, italics in original), Moore (2008, 205) explains how labelling a scale gives rise to a problem where “one can start out using spatial concepts as shorthand for complex sociological processes but slip easily into *substituting* the spatial concepts for the more complex argument”. Moore points out: “accounts of geographic scale... are flawed by an unreflexive conflation of scale as an everyday category of practice with their treatment of scale as a substantial category of analysis.” Moore quotes Brubaker and Cooper’s (drawing on

Bourdieu) argument that the former would be “categories of everyday experience, developed and deployed by ordinary social actors” while the latter would be “experience-distant categories used by social scientists”. Brubaker and Cooper make an example of the conflation of nationalism as a category of practice with it as a category of analysis, arguing that many of the terms we use (such as nation) form the basis of the “common-sense folk sociologies by which we make sense of the world”. They then become “reified in social thought as essential and natural entities and these reified understandings are often uncritically adopted by social scientists as categories of analysis” (Moore, 206). In doing this “we take a category inherent in the practice of nationalism – the realist, reifying conceptions of nation as real communities – and make this category central to the theory of nationalism” (Brubaker and Cooper quoted in Moore, *ibid*, 207). Moore argues that the role of social scientists is to seek to “explain the processes in which national ‘group-ness’ crystallises...not reproduce them in our own accounts” and suggests that the same problem applies to geographical scales (‘local’, ‘national’, ‘global’). While the concept of scale is not yet a common sense folk sociology, the concepts of local and global and, particularly, glocal, capture the imagination of general publics more and more.

Marston et al’s proposition about abandoning scale leaves them to propose what they call a “flat ontology”, which draws upon actor network theory and focuses on specific sites of interaction. These they see as always emergent, contextual milieus, continuously transformed through unfolding network connections with more extensive spaces. Moore, on the other hand, rejects the idea of the abandonment of scale. He suggests instead that avoiding the reifying social science practices which these authors critique would involve paying much “closer attention to how scale operates as a category of practice” and “paying attention to the scalar dimensions of practices, rather than practices occurring at different scales”.

Turning back to Massey’s heuristic: We can view this as both vertical and hierarchical, although it does enable us to perceive and describe situatedness (ethnographically) while simultaneously invoking those larger scale orderings. However, as an ethnographer and from an ontological standpoint I want to question it, by asking us to consider the notion of what Bourdieu calls the “intellectualist bias” in which “the world is treated as a set of significations...in this sense the ‘knowing subject’, in taking up a point of view of the action, withdrawing from it in order to observe it from above and from a distance – constitutes practical activity as an object of observation and analysis, a representation.”

While many of us (as academics/researchers) are more in charge of the flows and interconnections that Massey talks about, and indeed in a position to initiate flows, we cannot literally sail out on our satellite to see the world objectively in all its nested contexts at their different scales. We are still “natives” (Silverstein and Urban, 1996) at whatever scale we may operate on and control. And many of us, particularly as ethnographers, work with those who simply flow and move, or even might be seen as effectively imprisoned by these “power geometries”. These natives, as much as they might themselves traverse spaces and borders,

are perhaps less likely to imagine/appreciate these orderings in Massey's vertical way, as to experience events unfolding over time across contexts, in moment-to-moment struggles for survival. At the same time we would wish to explore the way in which they creatively exercise agency and craft responses to their situations.

What does this mean for literacy studies, the phenomenon of mobility and the relation between the local and the global? I think that there are two answers to this question. The first is that claims related to verticality in relation to scale and power should be derived from the analysis of empirical data. Studying crossings across physical places/contexts may be revealing in this regard, as they involve the discipline of remaining at the emic, and being highly reflexive when leaving the plane of the emic. I will discuss this further below. The second is that mobility is not necessarily only connected with people moving, but with the semiotic resources they have to project their meanings across contexts, in which case it is the texts they create and project that are mobile. This means that the phenomenon of voice and the conditions for its production and projection become central issues for analysis.

The problem with much of the writing on scale is that it remains at the theoretical level and is thinly empirical. Both Marston et al, and Moore's work are notable for their absence of empirical data. They both cite Massey's work, which again, while at times deeply empirical, does not provide examples of the kinds of connectivities she argues can link different scales. While research in sociolinguistics almost always contains empirical data, little of it is drawn from longer ethnographies. Studies tend to be characterised by a kind of myopia around literacy and its role in stretching communication and interaction beyond locales, at the same time as it instantiates activity in each situated moment. While Rampton has called for a focus on "text projectiles", there is little work that demonstrates this. The recent attention on "Linguistic Landscapes" offers a way of spatialising sociolinguistic research (Blommaert, ftc; Stroud and Mpendukana, 2011), but it seldom extends to the ethnographic study of the uptake of spatial signs in placed interactions and practices. And Literacy Studies, I have argued (Kell, 2011), has been constrained by its theoretical framework which focuses on the study of literacy events and practices "in place" rather than "across places".

Working within a New Literacy Studies framework, but in an attempt to refine and extend its theoretical framework, I have taken up a focus on the ways in which people "make things happen" (Kell, 2008; 2009) through projecting meaning making across space and time<sup>2</sup>. Literally moving their words, they recontextualise meanings by carrying or sending them into new contexts. Their efforts to make things happen are the thread, which at times becomes 'fixed' or 'realised' in texts, which then carry the thread across and into new participation

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<sup>2</sup> I say "people making things happen" as I drew on Activity Theory (AT) rather than Actor Network Theory (ANT), in positioning human actors and their agency at the centre, rather than viewing their text-artefacts or other non-human objects as having agency. There is room for further exploration around the question of the agency of objects in text trajectories and the interaction between AT and ANT.

frameworks. While most of this projection occurs through written texts, some of it also draws on other modes of communication, so that visual texts, and forms of embodied or gestural communication, also transmit and amplify meanings across contexts and become entwined with the linguistic, at the same time as they link up with material objects, for example, concrete blocks in house building processes. I called these “meaning making trajectories”, following on Silverstein and Urban’s (1996) “text trajectories”.

To do this I developed a “language of description ”(LoD) for studying meaning making across space and time (Kell, 2006; 2011)<sup>3</sup>. This LoD was developed to address problems I had identified in the theoretical framework of the New Literacy Studies, and the associated need to shift to new theoretical premises. These are as follows:

1. The need to shift from the study of single instance data (as captured in the concept of literacy events) to meaning making as it flows or is recontextualised across time in sequences of events. The unit of analysis proposed as an alternative is that of trajectories, which can be broken down into strips and nodes.
2. The need to shift from the study of bounded contexts/groups about which inferences could be made about the literacy practices in these contexts. The unit of analysis proposed here instead is that of ‘event-spaces’ which are moments or stages in the trajectory. These event-spaces are conceptualised as participant frameworks consisting of actors who try to achieve purposes and make things happen by projecting their meanings into subsequent event-spaces with different participation frameworks. In this way the focus is not on ‘contexts as containers’, but on the process of contextualisation. This is achieved through the use of texts as ‘joins’, which can be more or less successful in sustaining the projection of the meanings across contexts.
3. The need to shift to a view of literacy as one amongst many mediational means whereby actors within particular event-spaces realise their purposes, using the range of semiotic resources available to them in that place at that time. These would include modes of communication like spoken and written language, visual and embodied/gestural forms of communication, technologies and tools for communicating (like pencils or computers in the linguistic mode), and artefacts which may be actual written texts and necessarily material ones (e.g. reporting templates), as well as physical objects like concrete blocks or flags. The concept of ‘mediational means’ also includes the capability of the actor to recognise the aptness of a mode, tool or artefact for expressing and producing meaning, as well as their capacity to realise or materialise the meaning they wish to express.

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<sup>3</sup> Here I drew on Bernstein’s (1996: 135-41) theory in which he outlines the need for a language of description (LoD), which “constructs what is to count as an empirical referent, how such referents relate to each other to produce a specific text and translates those referential relations into theoretical objects”. In my case the LoD was developed in order to translate between the phenomena that I was observing on what I called the emic plane, and what I was finally able to construct as an argument on the etic plane, which I saw as a form of theoretical refinement (Burawoy 1998: 17) of the theoretical apparatus of the New Literacy Studies.

With this set of concepts in place I will present two text trajectories which demonstrate the usefulness of the LoD in throwing light on issues of scale.

### **Following the thread (1): A text recontextualised**

The first example of the recontextualisation of a written text is an “Incident Report Form” that was produced by a supervisor, George, working in a big construction company in New Zealand, in a regional plant in SmalltownNZ, about 400 kilometres away from the Head Office in Auckland. The report had been sent to Lino, the national Health and Safety (H&S) officer, on her Blackberry by the local H&S officer, Wayne, a few minutes before I did the interview<sup>4</sup>. As we started discussing her work, Lino said she had a good example of the literacy difficulties faced by the workers she was dealing with. Lino was Samoan and the workers were generally Pacific Islanders who had come to work in New Zealand. She took her Blackberry and scrolled down on the screen to the bottom of the message where she read:

Lino, is this okay? Note the incident date. Have told George to hold fire.

She then scrolled quickly back up to the top of the message and read out line by line (the text is reproduced verbatim including spelling and grammatical errors):

Name: George Lambert

Date: 21/02/09

Place: Yard

Accident: Loader overballance close to tipping over. came to rest on block wall

Incident: Near miss

While scrolling further down rapidly with her thumb she said: “If you scroll down to see if there’s any actions...’Dangerous ramp too steep. Vehicle falling or roll over. Hazard: identifiable over. Corrected action: remodel ponds”.

She started talking while still scrolling through the message:

So you can see there’s not enough description, it’s repetitive. What happens is, because it’s automatic, this poor supervisor - his email gets read by everyone in the company. He could be a target in terms of how he’s written it....You see, it goes through levels, the regional manager, the national H&S, and then to our CEO and then you get a call from the CEO, saying ‘Please Explain!’. ...So what Wayne is doing, he’s pre-empting these guys and at the moment I’ve coached him to say: ‘Listen whatever you do, do not get the guys to put information in the system yet. Get them to draw the picture, to draw what happened; tell them if they can’t write it, tell them to explain it through to you so that you can put it in for them, so that

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<sup>4</sup> There was great concern in the company about Health and Safety since there had been a recent death on site.

they don't feel'... Because when this goes out, they'll all go: 'Oh this guy, this George, from SmalltownNZ, he's a bit of a wally'.

By saying "it's automatic" Lino meant that the message had to fit into a pre-formatted web-based template which, once sent, would be read simultaneously by staff at different levels in the company and in different parts of the country. Here is the full message as it appeared on the screen:

Name: George Lambert  
Date: 21/02/09  
Place: Yard  
Accident: Loader overballance close to tipping over. came to rest on block wall  
Incident: Near miss  
Incident causes: Dangerous ramp too steep vehicle falling or roll over  
Hazard: identifiable over  
Corrected action: remodel ponds

Lino, is this okay? Note the incident date. Have told George to hold fire.

She explained that she would tell Wayne to tell George to "put the incident on hold so it doesn't go further" but she was worried that information had already "been input", and therefore was already visible and what the effects of that would be.

In this way, Lino was intervening in a way that perhaps went way beyond her job description, in order to protect the workers from the effects of what could be seen as literacy inequalities. She was also drawing attention to the modes of communication that could mitigate such literacy inequalities and that would enable the workers and supervisor to communicate such messages, through asking them to explain exactly what happened and asking them to draw it. She took me through how they could draw such an incident saying: "So they're painting a picture." She said she'd prefer them to scan the diagram and attach it to the report together with a photo, and then action would be taken to rectify the problem. So that way:

I get more information...when that message goes across the road and then this poor man that put it together gets targeted because of insufficient information, they have this perception, they think "oh he's an idiot - what a silly thing to put down."

### *The Incident Report as a text trajectory*

The recontextualisation of George's Incident report across space and time requires close examination in the effort to illuminate and explicate the concept of scale and the relation between the local and global, while at the same time avoiding the "substituting of spatial concepts for complex sociological processes". At the same time such examination can cast light on the theoretical frameworks that are needed if literacy studies is to engage with the concept of mobility while at the same time avoid the "intellectualist bias".

The trajectory starts the moment of the actual incident in the workplace, as this is the material (constructed through the movement of trucks, loaders on roads next to ponds) that requires entextualisation. While correctional action is being taken, George would presumably have realised, perhaps in discussion with Wayne, the H&S officer, that he needed to submit the report on it. It is likely that he, perhaps with Wayne, goes to the computer at the site office and downloads the pre-set template for reporting. The rules would specify that George, as supervisor, submit the form rather than anyone else. However, the form clearly presents George with some challenges. He has the capability (mediational means) to manage downloading it, filling in the place, date and time. Choosing the options in the drop down boxes, would be difficult (“near miss” doesn’t seem to make sense). The format disallows precisely the types of descriptions and visual representations, which Lino had said were necessary for H&S problems to be rectified and which could allow for more effective modes of communication by the workers concerned. But George carries on to fill in the free form part of the report as we saw above. He tries to follow the impersonal, staccato, bullet point language of the truncated report-genre, suggested by the options in the drop down box, including no descriptions of the direct agent of any of the actions. But he presumably does not realise that the report as he has written it is not at all explanatory. He then emails it to the Health and Safety Officer, Wayne, in an office “across the road”, as Lino explained. George then goes back to work, in the same moment as his text starts to travel the miles.

In this new event-space, the text is recontextualised into a different participation framework. Wayne receives the report and checks it out. As Lino has told him to do, and following her rules, he does not send it on to Head Office, but first to her so that she can see if it is filled in adequately. He does not however make changes to the actual form presumably, as he is following company rules that the supervisor should fill it in. He simply forwards it to Lino to ask if it is OK. Wayne can manage the technology to the extent that he presumably has emailed the report in ‘draft’ to Lino (although Lino is worried that it may already have been ‘input’ into the system and immediately visible to everyone).

Because Lino has set up this *detour* in the trajectory in order to ‘protect’ the workers from the effects of literacy inequalities, the report goes to her (instead of to the Regional Manager who would be the next sequence along the way). A fraction of a second later, Lino, therefore, is sitting about 400 kilometres away in a traffic jam, on her way to an interview with me, when her Blackberry beeps with the report. She carries it with her (on her phone) into this new participation framework, where she explains to me her role and how health, safety and literacy processes work at the company. The text is clear in her mind and she is still clearly pondering what the best course of action will be with it. Presumably, back at the office, she gets in touch with Wayne (either verbally or through sms) and asks for more detail and changes to the choice of options in the drop down box. She may even have got Wayne and George to construct a report with a diagram and photos, as she ponders the fact that the visual mode of communication would provide both a better representation of the incident and

less space for George to be labelled a “wally”<sup>5</sup>. Lino’s role as mediator is a complex, but powerful one<sup>6</sup>.

Once Lino has intervened, the report is either sent back to George or Wayne for more detail, or it is “input” into the system which then allows for it to be viewed instantaneously (or within milliseconds) at the Regional Office, the National Office in Auckland and the Parent Company in Australia. It is likely that the report will be read (as Lino explained) and judgements will be made about ‘poor old George in SmalltownNZ who couldn’t fill the form in correctly’. This is where the text trajectory ends, in the sense that the actual text-artefact of ‘Incident Report’ travels no further. However, it will be ‘mined’ for data and information (at a more granular level) which are likely to be entered into a database of health and safety records, which are then translated and abstracted into standardised reports on Health and Safety in the company, which can then be measured against a network of similar such reports in other companies in other countries. It is likely that the company develops its “Health and Safety Record” on the basis of such reporting mechanisms.

This is an example of a highly scripted process, which has to operate according to pre-specified templates in the domain of strict health and safety procedures. In this case, the text is instantaneously recontextualised into higher levels of the organisation and across space into multiple contexts - moving words indeed.

Before I discuss issues of scale in this text trajectory, I will present one further text trajectory, which has both similarities and differences.

### **Following the thread (2): A text trajectory**

This trajectory was drawn from a lengthy ethnography in a settlement in Cape Town, South Africa, where people who were living in back-yard shacks were accessing government funds to build their own brick houses. From amongst the mass of ethnographic data that I had collected I identified four trajectories which occurred during the house building project. The four were chosen not because they were typical, but because I had sufficiently detailed data to reconstruct most of the sequences in the trajectory, and in fact I had been present in almost all of the event-spaces thus described. The trajectories were:

- Ordering building materials
- Accommodating on oversized house
- Recording members’ ‘activeness’ to ensure they qualified for building sites
- ‘Writing a Wrong’

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<sup>5</sup> Lino explained, interestingly, that the problem would not have been with grammar and spelling, as those would have been ignored. The problem was with the form of explanation and the clarity of the representation of the accident.

<sup>6</sup> In the language of description this point could have acted as a ‘node’ if Lino had introduced a new mode of communication, like the visual.

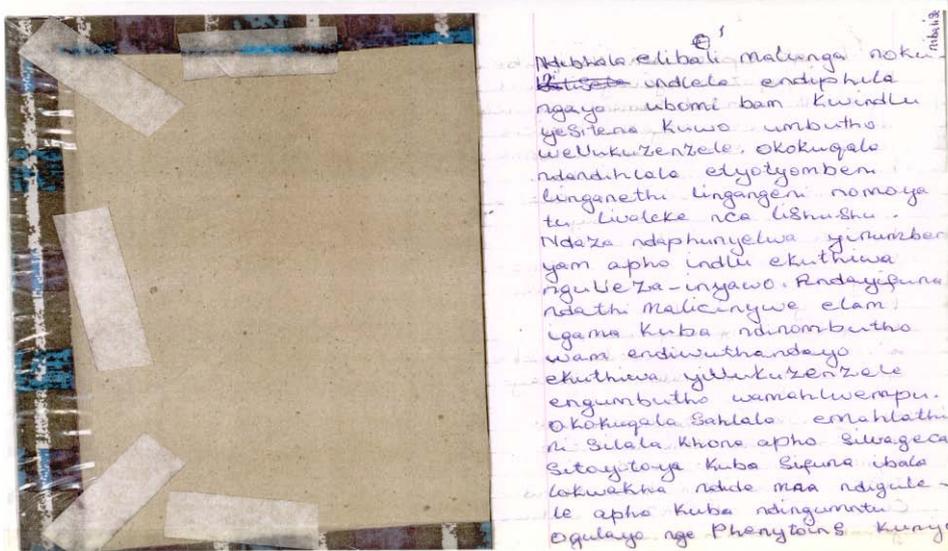
I have discussed the “Writing a Wrong” trajectory in a number of previous publications (Kell, 2006; 2009). In what follows I will revisit these descriptions and in the following section I will focus in on the issue of scale through the lens of the problems raised by Marston et al (2005) and Moore (2008), with regard to conceptualisations of scale.

In this trajectory, a woman called Nomathamsanqa, had been allocated a house as a result of her disability, rather than having to build her own house. There were serious construction problems with the house and Noma tried her utmost to get these addressed.



*Fig. 1: Noma's house with some of the problems visible, area above the wall and below the roof not filled in, no ridge piece, bad workmanship above door and window.*

Noma unsuccessfully raised the problems verbally numerous times in community meetings. At this point she wrote a narrative about her experiences in her language of isiXhosa, in a child's exercise book (this was part of a writing project that I had initiated in the community). This 'story' became the focus of tremendous attention in the community and much more widely, and the decision was made that she should take it and read it aloud at a meeting of the national organisation in an adjacent area. An intervening meeting took place with a provincial level structure, and the story was read out, after which she again presented it verbally at the national meeting. An immediate decision was made that a general collection of money should be made in order to get new materials and a builder to put the house right. The process started when she moved into the problem house and it ended when she moved back into the rebuilt house. Altogether this took about six months and shifted across organisational structures, participant groups, neighbourhoods and buildings.



*Fig. 2: First page of Noma's story*

I applied the language of description to this trajectory (in fact, I first developed it in the process of reconstructing the events almost all of which were observed during field work in a longitudinal ethnography). Over the six-month period from the time Noma first started raising her problems verbally in meetings, through to the time that the builders started working on the rebuilding of the house I divided up the different sequences of events into strips. These divisions occurred according to whether the recontextualisation of Noma's meaning making process entered into new participation frameworks or not. So the series of meetings where Noma verbally tried to raise the problem to no avail was a strip with the same participation framework, even though there were a number of different meetings that took place. But when Noma took part in the meeting I initiated about writing stories, a new strip emerged and this was characterised by a new mode of communication – writing (I called this moment a 'node'). Noma then grasped this and a further new strip emerged, which was the numerous small events when neighbours and others came from far and wide to read the story<sup>7</sup>. A new strip started when it was suggested that she take it to the national meeting and read it out. So the movement across strips, the recontextualisation of Noma's text, in this case, literally coincided with the switch of mode of communication (the verbal to the written, to the 'read', and back to the verbal with the book in hand). In each shift the mode of communication enabled the text to gain function, even as it transferred across contexts.

In contrast with George's projection of his text, which I have characterised as a highly 'scripted' trajectory, the trajectory of Noma's attempt to get her house fixed is a highly 'emergent' trajectory in a field of fluid and unstable social arrangements and institutional patterns.

### **Debating scale through tracing text trajectories**

<sup>7</sup> I was told that people had not thought that Noma could read and write, but "now they can". Noma told me that "now they can see my problem". The irony was that she had been telling them verbally about her problem for months but no one had taken any notice.

I have chosen these two trajectories because, while exhibiting both similarities and differences, they demonstrate the value of the unit of analysis being text trajectories rather than literacy practices. At the same time they highlight the importance of a fine-grained analysis of space and time differentiations. I will weave in a discussion of these two points as I analyse the two text trajectories in line with the ideas raised by Massey's heuristic as outlined above.

The discussion that follows is premised on Massey's argument that while some of us (in the world) are in command positions in relation to these power geometries and in charge of the flows out of which they are constituted; others are effectively imprisoned by them. It would be easy to say that Noma and George are imprisoned by these power geometries and not in charge of "flows". Certainly, when one looks in closely, as Massey suggests, we see that Noma and George are probably amongst the poorest of the poor in each of their respective countries. Neither spoke English as a first language and each struggled with writing in their own way. Noma, however, through her participation in the NGO, had managed to move out of a backyard shack in a South African township where she would have been subjected to exploitative rentals, accessing water from a public tap and using shared ablution facilities. She had allegedly been subjected to violence and was disabled. Surviving on her disability grant and with two young children and no other means of support, she would be seen as part of what is now called the "precariat". However, she had now moved to a new 'development', had a house of her own and no longer used shared services. George was most likely a migrant worker in New Zealand, from a Pacific Island, like Samoa or Fiji, working as a supervisor in a construction company at a cement plant. Each had experienced some social mobility, and had managed to make things happen – Noma had managed to get a stake in the new 'development' and a house built for her, empowered through writing her story and projecting it to other contexts; George had managed to become a supervisor, potentially disabled by the visibility of his own writing as he was obliged to project it.

Massey argues that there are sets of social relations (premised on these power geometries of space-time compression) that are stretched over space, and that each set of social relations has internal structures of domination and subordination. What is meant exactly by "internal structures" is not clear, but it was very clear in Noma's case that officials of a very local structure (the branch of the organisation functioning within Khayaletu) were exercising exceeding domination, with their refusal to acknowledge the problem with the house, allegedly ridiculing and hurting Noma. Once Noma projected her text beyond the local, however, to the regional and national meetings, her problem was 'heard' and she was able to get redress. The form of her text gained function.

There are two points to note here: firstly, the language used in the text did not by itself invoke more generalised and abstracted phenomena as it moved. In fact, the genre she used did the opposite, 'freezing' her autobiographical narrative-as-witness text, and exporting it 'as-is'. The appearance and performance of the story, however, evoked the necessary sense of responsibility and guilt for the problem to be rectified. In this sense there was a reification of the 'story'.

Secondly, the regional and national structures were basically meeting in a space about 100 metres away and just over the railway line. The text trajectory did not really stretch over space, but it stretched out over time and it made a small scale-jump into organisational structures which had wider reach. What exactly is at stake in this scale-jump? Does the text then invoke the 'translocal'? I would refrain here from using a term like 'translocal', with its implications of higher levels or macro themes, instead arguing that the text simply entered a new event-space, which afforded better potential for its recognition and acknowledgement. The implications of this will be discussed further below.

George, on the other hand, sitting in a company in SmalltownNZ, was not overtly subject to "domination and subordination" in what Massey calls the "internal structures", other than somehow knowing that he had to fill in the Incident Report Form in the pre-specified company template. The template did not lend itself easily to what needed to be communicated. Wayne, the H&S Officer, was obviously keen to assist George and make sure that he did not make himself look stupid. George however was obliged to project his text beyond the local - to the regional, national and international offices with his text most likely to lose function as it travelled. It stretched across space in that it was recontextualised into those different levels. However, it did not stretch across time as Noma's trajectory did, as the digital affordances of the technologies ensured its instantaneous recontextualisation. Unless, as Lino had done, a detour was set up for the trajectory, George's text would be visible to all, with all the possibilities for symbolic violence.

Here we need to examine closely the symbolic violence potentially inherent in the pre-specified template, which did not permit George to fill it in, in such a way that the words he inserted (as his way of reporting) represented the accident sufficiently. At the same time we need to look at his attempt to construct a report using bullet points and impersonal grammatical constructions. George needed to fill this template with his text - his text needed to be exported into the stratified semiotic economies it entered into. But as it was recontextualised, the instantaneity of its projection meant that there was little space for it to be negotiated. This was in contrast with Noma's text which had plenty of time to be negotiated and to 'gather' weight as it travelled across contexts, was touched by many hands and was read in conjunction with that which it indexed (the broken house).

Latour suggests the Ariadne's thread "of networks and practices and instruments, of documents and translations" enables us "to pass with continuity from the local to the global". Both trajectories were subject to processes of translation but the forms of these translations were very different. In Noma's case the national organisation decided on an immediate collection of money to contribute to the fixing of Noma's house. So the verbal discussion of her 'story' in the meeting became translated into a sum of money and then into a rebuilt house - a further traffic of small texts came into play in these two processes as well, no doubt involving lists of names, calculations, receipts for building materials and so on. At each stage, meaning making became 'fixed' and less negotiable, at the same time the process became more durable and irreversible as it proceeded.

In George's case, there would have been a translation from his written report into data, which would then have been entered into standardised records of health and safety. These processes would be undertaken by people with the specialised skills and knowledge of data entry - abstracting the actual incident into figures and rendering it as a report far away from the actual site and particularities of the incident. The form of the report is intended to gain function as it enters into this translation process, but without Lino's intervention, George's report would certainly have lost function.

In both cases the translations into numbers (money and numbers of H&S incidents) invoke generalised orderings which can be seen as tokens, abstracted away from the real interactions and histories which they represent. In Noma's case this was re-translated back into the material objects (bricks, stones and roof sheets) as well as the labour required for the house to be rebuilt – all very local phenomena. In George's case there was no further re-translation – the abstractions stood in the form of the H&S records, enabling translocal comparisons to be made.

Each of these trajectories is premised on “a politics of connectivity”, which cannot happen without literacy and numeracy, but we see how variable this is in both the production and uptake or reception. Noma's occurred around the turn of the century (in the year 2000 to be exact), before computers were commonplace and mobile phones were just coming onto the scene. Connectivity occurred through the way in which her text acted as a join between contexts as her trajectory threaded its way through the neighbourhood, across the railway line, into the garage where meetings were held. This involved horizontal sequential movement, but as it entered into the regional and national structures we can say it jumped scale, involving vertical movement. Altogether the process took about six months. When we traced George's trajectory we noted that it also threaded its way across the road, across the country, back to the local office, then to the regional office, back across the country and possibly across the continents. All of this happened, however, within milliseconds.

To return to some of the specific problems with scale discussed above. First, with regard to the problem of scale identified by Marston et al (2005) as one of confusion and conflation between scale as size and scale as level, the two trajectories can be illuminating. Noma's story entered into higher levels of the organisation as she took it to the regional and the national meetings. In these contexts, decisions could be taken on the basis of the representivity of the delegates to these meetings. The question of weighting of this higher level does therefore become salient. As George's text travelled to, let's take the national Head Office in Auckland, it entered a context in which its readers had an overview of H&S issues across all branches and could assess risks, make comparisons and perhaps issue instructions which could override local actions. So power issues come into play in the space across the levels of the local and the national. The concept of scale is therefore weighted in accordance with the levels at which interaction occurs. At the same time, and furthermore, the issue of size (which can also be thought of as reach) comes into play, as having oversight of

H&S issues from a national perspective of a number of branches, more useful comparisons and assessments can be made, and standardisations can be invoked.

Second, with regard to the entanglement of the issue of scale with the micro-macro distinction and other binaries: I have refrained from arguing that more generalised and abstracted phenomena are invoked in the micro-interactive event-spaces of each recontextualisation. This would be equivalent to making an argument that the micro somehow magically turns into the macro. As the trajectories unfolded across space and time they did however, involve translations which gave them greater exchangeability or fungibility, in Noma's case, money; in George's case, numbers that represented a count of incidents. These translations do, I suggest, involve greater levels of abstraction which potentially can be seen as involving analysis and comparisons across contexts and therefore at least translocal, if not global or macro.

Third, with regard to the problem of making analysis fit *a priori* scale sizes or levels: it is important here to distinguish between size and level. In the first point above it was noted that level played an important role in the translations that occurred in the trajectories, but that size was less important. By tracing the trajectory into further contexts it is possible to avoid making *a priori* assumptions about the relative weighting of sizes and levels.

Fourth, with regard to the issue of "methodological perspectivalism" by which is meant the question of whether or not the analyst is using "a God's eye view" when drawing on scale as a category of analysis: this is where Bourdieu's "intellectualist bias" can so easily come into play. It is all too easy for researchers and analysts to adopt the nested scales view sketched by Massey, in which levels are pre-set and come to structure each level as they go down. But if we turn this heuristic around and start from the bottom up, the ways in which people are able or are not able to project their meanings vertically, becomes ever more visible. What also becomes more visible is that assumptions cannot be made.

On the basis of this analysis, while being strongly drawn to Marston et al's idea of a "flat ontology" in which the concept of scale is abandoned, I argue that their second option is the more viable one if the scalar dimensions of practices are to be traced as suggested by Moore (2008). This involves the linking of the vertical with the horizontal as Marston et al (2005) suggest. As I reconstructed the sequences in the trajectory across spaces, I followed what I saw as a horizontal thread, refraining from making assumptions about the vertical. But as I traced what happened in the translations in the trajectory from context to context I was obliged to make vertical moves. This is what I refer to as "reading out" from the data rather than "reading in".

Finally, to return to Moore's useful distinction between the use of scale as a category of practice or as a category of analysis, as well as his insistence that we pay attention to the scalar dimensions of practices as opposed to practices at different scales: I have attempted to trace the trajectory as it was projected into higher levels, which I identified as weighted. I refrained from making

assumptions about what happened with practices at different scales, since the unit of analysis involved tracing across contexts which are not necessarily tied to scales. I believe this can count as an example of Moore suggests is necessary.

### **Analysing moving words: literacy practices or text trajectories?**

It was only after being present in many of the event-spaces in Noma's trajectory and the reconstructing of the sequence of events that I began to realise the power of this unit of analysis and the contrast it offered with the NLS framework of literacy events and practices that I had previously been using. If I had only been focusing on literacy events and practices as I observed these processes, I would not necessarily have noticed the difficulties Noma was having in raising her problem verbally in the earlier strip. I may also not necessarily have noticed how her one particular text was having effects as it was projected into different participation frameworks in the new event-spaces. I could perhaps have taken an approach where I studied her text itself, and searched it for the "sherds" of the larger structures of domination that were exerting themselves on her problem, and that were invoked in her text. But by literally following the trajectory ethnographically across at least some of its sequences I could follow the horizontal path.

Further, the method of reconstructing text trajectories allowed me to free up my analysis from a focus on literacy, and enabled me to 'relativise literacy in relation to other modes of communication. Here I am drawing on a long-standing debate about whether texts refer to the use of written language exclusively or not, but I am making the choice to view texts in the sense that Kress identifies them: "moments in the punctuation of semiosis", moments in which meaning is sufficiently 'fixed' for it to be carried over and projected into further contexts. In Noma's case, the focus initially was away from literacy and to the verbal, but in other cases the language of description that I developed enabled me to consider the physical occupation of a building as a mode of communication analogous with the written.

### **Conclusion**

It may turn out that the text trajectory approach only lends itself to fairly limited areas of research, for example, workplaces, development work, community organising, institutional processes and so on. It has been suggested that it may be useful in the educational arena as well (Baynham, 2012), and it may also be useful in studying voice in the media and mediatisation (Agha, 2010). But as it gets taken up it becomes apparent that more and more processes in everyday life involve sequences of events that are joined together through texts.

In previous work I have explored whether it can be argued that trajectories are either highly scripted (like George's) or completely emergent (like Noma's). Along with this exploration goes the possibility that trajectories contribute to processes that have more irreversibility and greater durability. It is my hope that this chapter can contribute to raising the possibility that literacy needs to be

seen as a central part of such processes and the profile of texts (of whatever type) acting as joins, in building up infrastructures in the world at large.

A further meaning of the term scripted could be as follows: scripted trajectories follow tracks like rivers carving out well worn paths on the sub-structure of the environment. Such paths can be conceptualised as 'infrastructure', when they become intertwined with physical objects and spatial patterns.

I have argued that New Literacy Studies has up to now been framed within a discourse of literacy-in-place. While the theoretical framework of the NLS has enabled tremendous advances in understandings of literacy, when applied to the study of literacy in the sites from which the above two trajectories are drawn I suggest that new theoretical tools may be helpful in studying the role of literacy in meaning making across space and time. Rather than replacing the concept of literacy-in-place, these can build on the concept. By viewing literacy as enabling the instantiation of meaning making within participation frameworks in event-spaces, that situated view can be maintained. By adding the concept of recontextualisation within the wider framework of text trajectories, texts can be traced along spatial and temporal lines, as meaning making moves from the local.

As trajectories traverse time and space, at differing speeds and with different degrees of traction, they sometimes intersect and interact as they thread their way through a multiplicity of event-spaces. It is possible to conceive of multiple trajectories forming networks. These networks are composed of the strands of connectivity which, as demonstrated in the above two examples of text trajectories, are largely constituted from the traffic of texts. Each text in this traffic has people behind and around it, busy making things happen at the same time as they make and remake their worlds.

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