The Inscribed City

Directions

We are surrounded by texts. Proscriptions, prescriptions, inscriptions, descriptions. The world is full of signs, and nowhere more so than the city — for the city is a place inhabited and traversed by strangers. No-one belongs in the city. People may be from a neighborhood, a district, a block they know so well they don’t think about it, but they leave it to work, to shop, and in another part of the city they are strangers. If no one ever left the neighborhood it would be a village in an urban setting, a village where everyone knew each other, knew where they were, traded according to relationships rather than rule — but such a neighborhood is a dream; the neighborhoods of a city are interpermeable. In the city, people do not know who or what they might encounter. And so there are signs, to give us directions — in both senses of the word. Signs tell us where we are, establishing property. They tell us how to act, establishing propriety, reflecting local norms of behavior, shaping the motions of our bodies through space.

Circulation

Signs tell us what to do, when and how to do it. They tell us where we should be, and when, and for how long. They tell us what we should have, and then how to get rid of it. Signs are placed to structure the circulation of people and things in and through the space around them. Signs direct the flow: one way, no entry, no outlet, slow, no stopping, loading only, do not block intersection, 15 minutes, don’t walk, yield, no trespassing (fig. 1).

A tremendous number of public texts are about acquisition of commodities and the disposal of trash, the consumption of food and the proper habits of excretion. In order for commerce to
flow the waste must be flushed away before it can impede circulation. People must get rid of stuff so they can acquire more. Signs mark directions for restrooms, mark trashcans and recycling bins, strictly forbid incorrect disposal of waste (fig. 2 & 3).

The question of waste is spatial — where should it go? — there is a limited number of places to which disposers must be directed. But the question of consumption is selective — what should be bought? — and there seems to be an endless number of venues. Texts treating waste are authoritative, while those about consumption take a more persuasive tone, or a neutral one, simply listing the possibilities. Storefronts are covered with lists of things, which we have learned to read as invitations.

Increasingly, commodities textually announce themselves, presumably encouraging further consumption. As brands, text travels on its own referents. Consumers become inscribed with the names of their commodities. They take on the symbol of their suppliers.

Commodities in circulation are marked by price tags — among the smallest public texts — which not only indicate their exchange value, but index the social relationship of commerce. Schivelbusch (1986:189-190) describes the historical change in custom from a time when buyers and sellers knew each other and negotiated value as part of a socially emplaced interaction. With the advent of department stores in nineteenth century Paris this relationship was displaced as the buyer was distanced from the seller, and the price tag became a marker of this abstraction of value. Today we can go to the market (or the library) and get something by scanning our cards through an automatic reader (a kind of inverted textual relationship, in which we are read), without needing to have human contact at all.

Placenames

Schivelbusch’s analysis of price tags comes out of an essays about trains, and the point he is making is that price tags serve the same function as the signs on train station platforms. These placenames index the relationship of traveler and place that trains created, making it possible for someone arrive somewhere without social negotiation, not knowing where they were. “The localities were no longer spatially individual or autonomous: they were points in the circulation
of traffic that made them accessible…. From that time on, places visited by the traveller became increasingly similar to the commodities that were part of the same circulation system” (Schivelbusch 1986:197). Placenames become brands.

Genus & species

Standing near the kiosk in Manoa Marketplace, in Honolulu, Hawai‘i, and shifting slightly back and forth, it is possible to see the word Manoa seven times, not counting the index on the kiosk. There are Manoa Sushi, Manoa Yoga, Manoa BBQ, Manoa Nails, Manoa Postal Unit, Manoa Laundry, and Bakery Manoa. (None of these signs inscribes Mānoa with its kahakō, or macron, which is now the standard Hawaiian usage, a point which will be returned to later). It is hard to escape the impression that the viewer may be standing in Mānoa Valley.

These names look like a list of scientific binomials, sharing a common genus, Manoa, followed by various specific names. But they can also be read the other way. The second parts of these names are themselves generic — the Sushi deli, the Yoga studio, the Laundry, etc. — to which Manoa is prefixed as a local specific descriptor. This reading depends upon and constructs a larger world full of similar venues. Placenames build the greater world as they distinguish themselves from it.

Entrances

While some places are abundantly branded with their identity — inescapably so in Manoa Marketplace — some, including other neighborhoods of Honolulu, are less obvious. Knowing where we are in these places often depends upon arriving there. Markers at air or bus terminals, highway exits, or along the roadside — a large sign in Nu’uanu being exemplary — tell us that we are entering a particular place. Sometimes we arrive from a neighboring place, sometimes we arrive from a transitory space — the airplane, the highway — that fits Foucault’s (1986) description of a heterotopia, a space that is no place. Large signs mark exits from the heterotopic freeway that are entrances into particular places.

These signs at the border evoke a spirit of place, a reified historical fantasy, which possess the viewer upon entry and order the activity expected there. Entrances are entrancements.
There are places within places. Throughout the world miniatures of countries are appearing. As immigrants settle neighborhoods crop up: Little India, Chinatown, Koreatown, Little Italy. These are named for nationalities if the inhabitants are from across a country with many cities, or might take the name of a dominant urban center instead: Little Addis for Little Ethiopia, Little Tokyo for Japantown. The unofficial Little Persia neighborhood of Los Angeles is also known as Tehrangeles. In nearby Orange County, Cambodian immigrants have alternately used Little Cambodia or Little Phnom Penh; while most come from rural Cambodia, the latter designation makes sense because their Southern California space is fundamentally urban. There is no Little Vietnam but there are numerous Little Saigons, indexing a particular part of the country, or in another sense, a country that exists now only in these microcosms (fig. 4).

Recognition is bestowed by signs. Los Angeles has blessed three little communities and four ethnic towns — Little Armenia, Little Ethiopia, Little Tokyo, Chinatown, Thaitown, Koreatown and Historic Filipinotown — with official Blue Signs (LA City Nerd 2006). These signs mark not only ethnicity but politics. The largest ethnic group residing in LA’s Koreatown is Latino, but Latinos, like Caucasians, are ubiquitous and unmarked, though in a different class position. While the elites are predominantly Caucasian, the labor class is largely Latino (which is not to say that most Caucasians are elites nor Latinos laborers), so that in the Korean businesses it is common to find Latino workers. In Koreatown Spanish signs are found on some local stores, but Korean is used on most larger businesses, and gives its name to the district. The Blue Sign marks the commercial identity of the location.

The effort to receive official recognition for Little Cambodia/Little Phnom Penh has met resistance from some who feel that it segregates one group out from a common multicultural identity. This may be partly a question of whether territories can be interpermeable (a la Wise 2000) or are conceptualized as exclusive (Johnston 1995). On another front this debate is expressed as a question of language, whether multiple language use should be encouraged or a single language used in common.
**Heterographia**

While English Only movements may push for official policies of monolingualism, the city signscape has become inextricably polylingual. Signs in cities appear in dozens of languages and probably as many combinations, serving shifting populations. Signs invite and exclude according to the fluencies of their readers. Signs written in Chinese may use traditional characters — commonly used by Hong Kong, Taiwanese and overseas Chinese — or the simplified characters used on the Chinese mainland since post-revolution literacy campaigns, or one of several romanized scripts. The ability to write one language more than one way has been called *digraphia*, so the writing of multiple languages in varied forms might well be called *heterographia*, especially since texts drawing on a number of these elements are heteroglossic in Bakhtin’s sense of mixing together multiple connotative and contextual meanings. It is not uncommon in multicultural areas to find signs code-switching between more than one language in the same phrase (fig. 5).

Not all code-switching indicates more than one speech community, however. Hill (1995), using signs and other texts, found that Spanish elements can be used in English contexts to produce a discourse of covert racism she labels “Mock Spanish.” Instances range from movie quotations like “Hasta la vista, baby” to public signs that incorporate widely known words like *adios* or *nada*, typically drawing on stereotypes and marked by incorrect pronunciation or grammar. This discourse is generally not used by Spanish speakers (although she notes that mock-Yiddish is used by Yiddish speakers), but is part of English usage, and a means of maintaining the hegemony of that language in public space (Hill 1998).

**Orthographies**

Hegemonic relationships may be discerned not just in what is written but also in how it is written. As noted earlier signs in areas of Hawai‘i like Mānoa Valley tend to omit the kahakō. The missing ‘okina & kahakō are reminders that if the current order has borrowed words from Hawaiian it has not, in effect, returned them. As part of the Hawaiian Renaissance, efforts are
being made to return Hawaiian diacritics to official street signs, but most business signs have not followed this trend.

On the other hand, diacritics can be used as markers of exoticism, sometimes gratuitously, as the umlaut in Haägen Dazs. In California Spanish diacritics are largely absent from signage, but it is common for businesses using French to include the French accents. This may be partly because French is uncommon in California while Spanish is not, but is probably also because French is a prestige language and accents on signs add allure (Hill 1995).

Another orthographic marker of exoticism can be the selection of font. Various tourist businesses in Chinatowns use a brushstroke font that evokes orientalist romance, producing a visual Mock Asian. The appearance of text can tell as much as its content.

**Transgressive texts**

Writing styles may also index rejection of hegemonic orders, especially in the case of graffiti, a genre of text both public and illegal. Graffiti is marked not just by its placement and content, but also by distinctive writing styles, some of which are opaque to the untrained reader. It uses a range of semiotic devices, from referential language to codes, icons and images. Graffiti may provide commentary on other signs (see e.g. Posener 2006), on the location, or on current events. Graffiti can also mark the territories of unofficial polities (gangs) and of individual writers, territories which may or may not be exclusive or contested. The particular literacy which these writings require means that, like heterographic texts, they shape the social space of certain audiences while others pass by unaware.

Graffiti is one example of how public texts embody tactics of resistance as much as they do strategies of spatial order, in de Certeau’s (1984) terms. Scollon & Scollon (2003) have called such texts transgressive discourses. Other examples include posters, stickers and notices. These appropriate used or unused public spaces, claiming these spaces for unofficial use, in itself contesting the official order even if the content is uncontroversial.

Heterographia itself is another contestation of spatial order, for the plurality of languages means there will always be some signs we cannot read. There is no one to whom the textual
order is transparent in all places, hence no single coherent order, but rather an overlapping array. Each public text establishes a milieu, and these milieus resonate with others (Wise 2000), but any aggregation contains so many kinds of meanings that they remain open to ongoing interpretation.

Signs may be intentionally ambiguous, playing with language to engage the reader or draw in a richer complex of associated meaning. They may also unintentionally become unclear, or acquire other meanings from unforeseen configurations. One of the “street signs” painted on the Café de la Presse (which claims a historical “French Quarter” at the edge of San Francisco’s Chinatown (fig. 6)), says “Rue Bush,” which can now be read as a political sentiment — probably greater in that city than almost any other part of the country — an accident dependent both on the different meanings of rue in French and English and on the happenstance that a politician has the same name as the street.

Even where they are not intentional gestures of rebellion, signs reveal tensions and contradictions in the official order. Signs compete with one another, blocking each other out. Enticements to shop cause eddies in the regulated flow of traffic, encourage people to loiter, to park too long. Signs are layered on top of older defunct signs as businesses change. A bargain store replaces a bank but the graven letters of the former remain. Signs decay, losing letters, at times to humorous effect, eventually becoming difficult to read, joining other texts whose meanings remain obscure.

**Traces**

There are other texts scrawled across the city streets, etched in the sidewalks, embossed on fire hydrants, imprinted in covers set into buildings or pavement. Mostly these are unnoticed by the passersby, and if noticed, indecipherable, written in secret shorthand. They are arcana, the codes of city workers, who reproduce — disassembling, reassembling — the city every day. Some of these may denote the boundaries of workers’ jurisdictions and so shape territories for those who can read them, just as official signs or graffiti do.
Traces of labor and of play remain in the streets and curbs themselves, dates stamped or scrawled, footprints of dogs or children, names written into the cement as it hardened. We pass them over. The space we inhabit is a theater set in which social relationships are played out; for the play to work, we must forget that the set is constructed. We take the world as given, and forget how it is made.

**The production of signs**

What labor is less acknowledged by public texts than their own production? Signs which claim authority are naturalized, as though they arose chthonically to express some essential quality immanent in their place. Placenames reify their locations. What is true for language is true for public text: that the arbitrariness of the sign must be forgotten for it to have meaning. Because we are used to taking signs as given, there is a fascination with signs in transition, in disrepair, in transport, with marquees being changed. The material construction of meaning appears nakedly on display in sign shops.

In sign shops the labor of the textual world is visible, and disparate places converge, juxtaposed, represented in their texts. Bar signs, parking instructions, shop signs, warnings, enticements — thrown together like strips of paper in a Dadaist’s hat. Sign shops are textual heterotopias and remind us that the actual meaning of a sign comes from its particular emplacement in the world.

Signs have unequal distributions in space. They appear at corners, congregate along commercial streets, pop up along thoroughfares. Part of the meaning of a sign comes from the fact of its existence. A sign marks the need for a sign, the lack of something taken for granted, a trace of what was there before (fig. 7). Signs take meaning from their relationship to other signs, forming textualized landscapes, spaces marked by signs, by the very fact of signs.

Public signs have contextual meanings that are neither determined nor independent from the intentions of their makers, interpreted with limited freedom by their readers. In each reading they produce the relationship between signmaker and reader. In Lefebvre’s (1991) terms, signs
are a spatial practice in perceived space, which mediate and produce the conceived space of
signmakers and the lived vernacular space of the reader, anew each time.

What signs produce is space: both spatial order and contestation over space. Public texts
reveal and construct both strategies of order and tactics of resistance. Signs instruct and locate
us, but they too are necessarily oriented. They are planar in a three dimensional world, facing
one perpendicular direction, unable to be read from all sides. Texts address their audiences
spatially. There is always some space outside their field — which is a space they produce as
well:

As I went walking, I saw a sign there
And on that sign it said "No Trespassing"
But on the other side, it didn't say nothing
That side was made for you and me

— Woody Guthrie, “This Land is Your Land”

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Some signs

Fig. 1. Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. Sign evokes readers sign-literacy to structure relationships.

Figs. 2 & 3. San Francisco, Clement street. Control of waste. Fig. 3 shows traces of city worker arcana on the curb.

Fig. 4. Ho Chi Minh City. “Little Saigon” translated in English, French and Vietnamese. This is the only instance I’ve seen of a Little Place located in that place, perhaps evoking a past spatial order.

Fig. 5. Los Angeles Koreatown. Codeswitching but no Korean. Evocation of distant places (Alps, Oaxaca).

Fig. 6. San Francisco, corner of Grant and Bush. Bilingual city street sign, marking Chinatown. The Café on the corner plays on this with French street names. Directions to touristic Italian neighborhood marked by map icon.

Fig. 7. Kunming. An old street destroyed to make room for Kunming Old Street.